

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project  
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009  
DRAFT

**Unit Nine – Revision**

*June*

Now I see revision as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. It means you don't have to be perfect for the first time. What a relief!

-Naomi Shihab Nye

By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this.

-Roald Dahl

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking because when we write, we can take fleeting and intangible memories, insights and images, and make them concrete. When we talk, our thoughts float away. When we write, our thoughts stay with us, on the page. But another power of writing lies in the possibility of reconsidering previous work, of changing our words so they match our latest and best ideas to the best of our abilities as writers. We all wish we could do that as we're speaking: take something back, or go back in time to say something another way; in writing, we have this power. We can reread our first thoughts and see gaps in them. Through rereading and revision, writing becomes a tool for making our thinking better.

Many students view revision as a quick fix in the writing process – a place only to change a word here, or add a sentence there. While revision does exist on the word or sentence level, we want our writers, as they become more proficient, to see revision as reworking or revisiting entire parts, and ultimately, the whole of a piece. Revision allows students to stop and reflect on the larger meaning of what they've written. We can show writers that stepping back, and looking at a piece, asking "What is it I want my piece to show?" or "What does this moment say about my life?" can allow them to find a deeper importance, maybe one they didn't realize was there. Revision is also an opportunity to practice what we know as writers, to use craft to create the effects we desire. We encourage this thinking during any writing cycle, but sometimes it's hard to truly "step back" from a piece that we are currently writing, especially if a publishing date is looming just over the horizon.

Our middle school students tend to see their work as decontextualized, partly because they move from classroom to classroom, and partly because they change so dramatically from week to week (physically and emotionally). It is common for them to see each writing project as a separate "assignment" which ends at the publishing party and is never thought about again. To combat this attitude, which breeds disengagement, it is critical for us to offer students chances to look more holistically at themselves and their work. A unit on revision makes clear that the work of the year has been building on itself, and that

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there is value in what they did earlier in the year. By helping students see how they've grown as writers, we help them appreciate the work they've actually done and to see it as a renewable resource. We also encourage our students to rethink themselves through rethinking the meaning of their work. Given that our 6<sup>th</sup> graders will be acting and feeling more like 7<sup>th</sup> graders by June, it is probable that what they care about, what they dream about, what they write about has shifted across the 10 months of school. We honor these changes by inviting our writers to revise with their new hearts to make new meaning.

In this unit, then, instead of going back into their notebooks to collect ideas, choose seed ideas, and draft, students will look back at the pieces of writing they have created so far, starting with their first on demand piece from September, and begin by reflecting on all the ways in which they have grown as writers. Inevitably, they will also bring to their reflection the ways in which they have grown personally. This will open up the possibility of more radical and transformative revision: they will be more accomplished writers, and they will be different people. These changes in themselves will help them make significant changes in their previous writing. Students will revise their on demand piece and then choose a second piece to revise, redraft, edit and publish.

Teach the Importance of Carrying Forward All We've Learned:  
Students Revise Their First On Demand Narrative Writing

At the beginning of this unit, we help students see that they have grown as writers, that they know more now about writing than they did in the beginning of the year. We ask them to look back at the first on demand writing that they wrote in September, and we teach them to see with their June eyes how their writing could improve. They will spend several days trying different revision strategies to make this first piece of writing read like an end-of-the-year piece.

We began the year with assessment of on demand writing; we return to assessment now, but give this power to the students. You may invite them to look with a critical eye at their work, using past charts for strategies in that genre, past rubrics, and their own writer's notebooks to decide what works in their on demand and what could be better. Especially if the narrative continuum played a role in your teaching of narrative writing throughout the year, now is the time to return to this as a way to help students see where their writing is and where it could be. In all of our teaching, but especially in this unit of study, it is critical to help students apply all they've learned about revision during the year. We want their work in this month to reflect the cumulative nature of workshop teaching. We can begin by having students recall revision strategies they've practiced throughout the year.

Students learn to reconsider the sequence of their stories, thinking about where to build suspense, where to start, and where to end. You may decide to teach more sophisticated sequence structures, such as flashback or parallel narratives, either to a whole group of writers who are ready, or to small groups of writers ready for a challenge. They then

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learn revision strategies for re-sequencing, including cutting and stapling. Adding details is an important part of revision. Students can reread their pieces and think about which part of pieces are the most important sections, and they can elaborate upon those sections. If writers are having a hard time figuring out the most important part of a story, they might ask themselves, “Where in my story do I convey the biggest feelings or the most important ideas?” For example, a student rereading a story he wrote about a crucial basketball game could realize that the most important part happened when he decided to pass the ball instead of running it himself. He will then decide to develop this part of the story, adding in dialogue and small actions that show his feelings. You can teach strategies for adding more details to the text using strips of paper in the middle of sections. It is important to teach students the reasons for altering a draft, as well as the physical work of revision.

You may also want to teach students to review their leads and endings. Show kids that they can try writing a few different versions of any part of their story, and then think about which version works best. In order to write new leads or endings, students can study mentor texts the class has read, naming what the writer did that the student might emulate. For example, students might reread the ending of *Everything Will Be Okay* and recognize that James Howe ended the piece with a new realization. They could then try to write similarly in their own pieces. They might notice that an author started off her writing by describing the setting and try to write similarly.

By the end of a few days, the students will have made major changes to their early work. The point of this first round is to give them a feeling of strength as revisers: they know so much more now than they did earlier in the year, and they should feel it as they prepare to choose a piece to revise and republish.

Teach the Purposes of Revision, Recalling All We Know About Good Writing, and Some New Revision Strategies

A key point in this unit is that revision is a complement to good work, not only a way to fix up work that needs help. We now ask students to look back at the writing pieces they have published across the year and ask, “Which piece feels worthy of revision?”

Generally, the pieces students select should be meaningful (this may or may not be evident in the writing yet). The least successful writing pieces may not be worth deep revision, even if it seems there is much to revise in them, since these pieces may not feel significant to the writer. Students will place the pieces they select in a special revision folder to revise. They may begin their revision work by writing long in their notebooks about why they want to revise this piece and what they want to change about it.

At this point it will be helpful if students are in clubs for revision within particular genres. So if there are three students who have chosen to revise their historical fiction stories, they should be in a club for that genre. If four students are revising their personal essays, they should be in a club for essay. This way you can tailor your conferences to groups of students writing in the same genre who will be likely to encounter similar problems. Students can also support each other in this work. (See below: peer revision)

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In every stage of the writing cycle, purpose is key. This holds true tenfold for revision. Students need reasons to change their writing. At the beginning of this unit, we can teach them to think purposefully about revision, and to decide why they want to change their writing before jumping into the craft moves that will help them change it successfully.

There are many reasons why writers change their writing, and we can offer these as possible revision purposes for students. Sometimes, writers realize that the way they wrote something doesn't match what they really intended to say. In narrative writing, this often happens if a scene doesn't quite come alive in full detail for the reader, or if the heart of the story doesn't seem important enough. In essay writing, this can happen if the thesis statement is not clear or is not supported throughout the whole of the essay. Sometimes, writers decide that they've changed their thinking about the piece. In narrative writing, secondary characters may seem more important upon rereading, and need more elaboration. Essay writers may have new evidence to support their ideas from earlier in the year; or they may have shifted their thinking about the subject and need to modify their thesis. You will want to model for students how you think through some of these possible reasons to revise, using pieces you've written with them earlier in the year.

Audience is another real reason to revise: we revise when we have in mind a particular person or group of people that we know will be reading our work, keeping in mind the effect we want the piece to have on that particular person or group. You may give the students an audience for their newly revised pieces by stating from the outset that all the pieces will go immediately to their new teacher as an introduction to their writing, or by planning a celebration where they present their work to the incoming sixth grade class. You may give students the opportunity to choose an audience for their piece, either in addition to or instead of the whole-class publishing, thereby letting them decide who they want to read their piece and why.

Many middle school students are apprehensive about revision because they "like it the way it is." We can immerse students in examples of revision by showing them how we revise stories from previous units of study, how past students revised (by showing a sample of a former student's work) and by revising class stories together. If you wrote a class story or two in the first few units on chart paper or a transparency, you can have students join you in revising the class story using a variety of strategies.

You will want to add to your students' revision toolbox during this unit. Consider teaching revision strategies that are somewhat dramatic, and some strategies that appear to be subtle, but are still effective. Dramatic revision includes cutting to the bone, rereading a piece and asking after every sentence: is this necessary? Another possible revision for narrative writing is to think like a movie director and decide where to pan out for a wider view, and where to really zoom in on a tiny detail. There may be places where a sweeping view of the whole of a scene might be particularly effective, like looking across the entire lunch room and noticing all the tables crammed with kids laughing and eating, and other places where the close-up of a trembling hand might tell the story best. More sophisticated writers may be ready to consider using symbolism in

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their narrative writing: you can teach them to find an object or a setting that stands for something larger than itself, and to repeat that image a few times throughout the piece as a way to give it significance. For example, in that same basketball story, the writer may decide that he will use the red jerseys of the opposing team to represent the fear that the character felt during the game. At crucial moments, when the character was feeling afraid, the writer will return to a view of the red jerseys: “I knew I had to make a choice. Run or pass. Run or pass. The red shirts in front of me bobbed around. What should I do?”

Some writers may need to read their work out loud, and they may try revising by first changing the tone of voice they read with, then changing the writing to match the tone they like the best. In both narrative and essay writing, it’s worth considering the use of repetition by both trying out the repeated use of particular words or phrases and by making sure that there is not unplanned repetition of nonessential words or phrases. For more ideas on new revision strategies, you may wish to consult Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi’s books on revision, *Craft Lessons* and *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, as well as Georgia Heard’s *The Revision Toolbox* (Not just for poetry...) For your own reference, you may also be interested in Roy Peter Clark’s *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*.

Create a Writing Center that Supports Revision

Materials and tools always seem to be an issue when it comes to revision. Tell students that part of the work involved in revision is not only deciding what you want to revise, but how you will revise and the tools that will support that work. For this reason giving students opportunities to use varied revision tools can help energize and encourage independence. Giving writers a revision folder and a color pen usually motivates them to bring zealous energy to the job of revising writing. You will want to be sure that students have access to a variety of tools including perhaps strips of paper to add sentences and sections into the middle of their writing, flaps of paper to tape over neglected parts of their stories, and single sheets of paper to staple onto the end or the middle parts. You may also want your students to have access to post-it notes, tape, staplers and scissors during writing workshop.

You may want to create a chart for the writing center that lists the tools, what they can be used for, and what revision strategies they support. For example, you might list the tool “strips of paper,” and then describe a use of paper strips—to add details. You can describe strategies for how you can add dialogue, internal thinking, or physical description when adding details with the strips so students use them for specific reasons. This will help shift the focus to the strips and towards revision strategies. We also recommend that students be encouraged to create their own revision tools and possible usages.

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Use Partnerships and Writing Clubs to Support Revision

This unit is a great opportunity to strengthen your writing community and teach students how to give each other constructive feedback. You may teach strategies for revision in a minilesson and send kids off to work with a partner on how they could try those strategies before they begin independent writing. In this case, partner conferences are used prior to writing as a way of planning for revision. Or you can teach a revision strategy, send students off to write independently, and then give partnerships time to meet at the end of the workshop. This allows students to share how the strategies are helping the piece or to ask each other for further suggestions. You'll want to remind students that they don't need to take all of their partners' suggestions and that a suggestion is just that, not a command. Partners can read and reread their stories together, thinking more deeply about their pieces.

If students are organized into clubs based on the genre of their writing, give them time at the end of a work session to talk in their clubs about what they tried, what worked, and what they're still having trouble with. You can support the focus of the club talk by requiring that they "workshop" one writer's piece each day. So Writer 1 will share out his work on Monday; Writer 2 on Tuesday, etc. This way there is a sense that the whole club will focus on one writer's piece, and there is an understanding that every writer is expected to open up her work to the club.

Clubs may want to choose a mentor text in their genre to serve as a guidepost for their revisions and talks about their writing. Students may choose from touchstone texts that you've read as a class, from the narrative continuum if they're in narrative writing, or from other sources which you may have available to them in folders organized by genre. During the first days of club work, the clubs may spend their time at the end of writing workshop reading the mentor text as writers to come up with some of their own language for what they want to try in their writing, based on their mentor author's work.

While many teachers give students revision checklists, it is often more helpful to list revision strategies in step-by-step ways on a chart. These charts can be typed up, given to students, stored in their revision folders, and used during partner conferences or club talks. In this way clubs can discuss strategies such as adding setting by creating a movie in their minds, remembering where the characters were and what was around them and then adding description. We want to push writers to not just say, "I am going to add setting here," but to say, "I am going to describe the kitchen by adding, "A round white table sat in the middle of the room with five wooden chairs around it..." By discussing the specific revisions they could make, students are more apt to follow through with what they said.

Celebrate the Process and the Published Pieces

This unit ends with a celebration of the many ways students have learned to revise, and with the knowledge that these revision strategies will continue to help students as they write during the remaining units of study. Some teachers copy students' original pieces and then (during the celebrations) students share and discuss how they revised the piece specifically. Other teachers have students write a brief reflection of their revision process

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and how this helped the published piece of writing grow better but also how they grew as a writer. When sharing the pieces, some students choose to share one part of the story before and after revisions were made and to share why they chose those revisions to make the piece better.

Word Study in Third Grade to Support Writing Workshop

Across the year, you've encouraged kids to give tricky words their best try, to move on, to use spelling patterns from word study to spell tricky words, and to use the word wall to help them learn commonly misspelled high frequency words. You've nudged kids to use big fancy vocabulary, even when they aren't sure of the exact spelling, and you've been studying words throughout the day, during word study, read aloud, and other times of the day.

Now is the time of year to bring it all together. Dust off all the old charts if you've still got them, and teach kids to use it all, all the time. In this unit, you may want to teach kids that they can create their own, personal editing checklists by looking across their own writing to notice the kinds of things they need reminders for. Writers notice their own spelling challenges so that they can be on the lookout. Anybody who writes knows their own weaknesses. Teach kids to search their writing to see if they are the kind of writer who misspells certain high frequency words every time. Or maybe they are the kind of writer who always forgets a particular spelling pattern, or do they forget to reread their writing to check it over? Teach kids that everybody has something, or even a bunch of things, that are patterns in their writing. Finding those patterns and knowing to double check for them is incredibly useful.