

Unit Ten – Revision and Assessment

June

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking precisely 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, we put our thoughts onto paper. We can stick them in our pocket. We can come back to them later. We can reread our first thoughts and see gaps in them. We can look again and see connections between two different sets of ideas. Through rereading and revision, writing becomes a tool for thinking. A commitment to revision is part and parcel of a commitment to teach writing as a process.

Watch a child at work making something—anything—and one sees revision. The child pats a ball of clay into a pancake to make a duck pond, and then revises the duck pond by creating a fingertip rainstorm that dapples the water’s surface. Young children revise block castles to add protected hiding spots for archers, and they revise pictures of spaceships to add explosions. They revise clay rabbits to make one ear droop. Young children can revise their writing with equal ease and enthusiasm—as long as we don’t expect their revisions to look like those a grown-up would make. First graders can revise—as long as we expect their six-year-old best! The beauty of this unit comes when our students see how their writing gets stronger because of the many ways they learn to revise.

Keep in mind that with a year of writing workshop behind them, your children will inevitably already know a lot about revision by June. This unit is an opportunity for children to reflect on all they have learned as writers and to marvel at their growth. You may decide to begin by asking children, “What do you know about revision?” as an informal assessment of what your class knows about the process of revision. If your students say, “You use tape and post-its and add paper at the bottom of the page,” then they are demonstrating knowledge of the materials and tools writers use to revise. If they don’t list these, then that is an important place to begin. Perhaps children know to add more to their writing and make changes, but they are not sure how. This, too, is helpful information to guide your unit. Keep in mind that you and your colleagues may notice different things so it is important to personalize this unit to meet the needs of your class. Another possibility is to begin this unit by having your students do another on-demand piece so that you can assess what they are doing independently.

Materials and tools always seem to be an issue when it comes to revision. Tell children that part of the fun is using their very own special tools! Giving children a revision folder and a colored pen usually motivates them to bring zealous energy to the job of revising writing. You will want to be sure that children have access to strips of paper to add sentences and sections into the middle of their writing, flaps of paper to tape over neglected parts of the story, and single sheets of paper to staple onto the end or the middle parts of their stories. You may also want your children to have access to post-it notes, tape, staplers and scissors during writing workshop.

Teaching Revision Strategies

At the beginning of this unit, children learn that revision is a compliment to good writing. The unit will begin with children selecting their best pieces from the fall, putting these in a special revision folder, then revising each one further. Children will ask themselves, “How can I revise this piece? Can I make it even better than it is?”

To do this work, children will need to learn some revision strategies, including cutting, stapling, adding into the middle of a page, and re-sequencing. Of course, it is important to teach children not only the physical work of revision, but also the reasons for altering a draft. Remind them that writers put our work into the world for other people to read and so we want to make sure it’s clear to readers, that it says what we want it to say, that it jumps off the page for readers, making them laugh, smile, nod in agreement, sigh.

Certainly, you will want to teach children that they can add more to both their pictures and their words. This is especially helpful in parts that describe setting. A child who has written about jumping waves with her dad might notice that she can say more about how the sun sparkled on the water, or how seagulls were flying overhead in v-formation or how her mom and baby sister looked like tiny dots from where she and her dad were standing.

You can also teach children to add feelings into their pieces. Early writers often say what happened but forget to include their responses. Children can reread their writing, asking themselves, “What did I feel when this happened? Was I happy? Sad? Scared?”

In addition, children can add actions. They can think about exactly what their bodies were doing in their stories (maybe their arms were flapping or their feet were tapping, or they were curled up in a ball) and what the people or animals or things around them were doing too. For example, in *Sheila Rae’s Peppermint Stick* by Kevin Henkes, Sheila Rae *stumbled*, the books *fell*, the stool *tipped* and the peppermint stick *broke*. We can really picture what is happening here. This is a nice place to remind children of the envisioning work we do in reading. We picture what is happening when we read and so we need to create a picture for our reader when we write. This is the building block for show not tell through actions.

Adding details is an important part of revision. Show children how to reread their pieces thinking about which part is the most important. Often, this part will be the very thing that made them want to tell their story in the first place. If kids are having a hard time figuring out the most important part of a story, they might ask themselves, “Where in my story do I have the biggest feelings?” This is the part we want children to stretch out with details that spotlight what makes this moment so essential. For example, a child rereading a story he wrote about cooking *arroz con pollo* with Grandma on Saturday might realize that the most important part happened when he and his grandmother smelled something burning. This, then, is the part of the story he will want to further develop, adding in dialogue and small actions that show his feelings. You can always, of course, remind your writers of previous revision strategies they used in “Small Moments: Writing for Readers and Authors as Mentors” in *Primary Writing Units of Study* (Heinemann, 2003)

As they revise for details, some kids may discover that the stories they've written during the fall units are really not small moment stories. This is a great opportunity for children to practice zooming in on the important part, and then telling more about that. Some children may revise by separating a 3 page story and only keeping the first page, stapling on two or three blank pages so that they can rewrite the middle and end with more details. They may have to ask themselves, "What is my story really about?" and then say more about that story – this can help with focus and elaboration.

You may also want to teach students to add new beginnings or endings. Show children that they can try writing a few different versions of any part of their story, and then think about which version works best. One way to have them try out new beginnings or endings is to study some mentor texts the class has read. Being able to name what the writer did in his or her beginning or ending can be useful steps for young writers who are working on their own beginnings and endings. For example, children might reread the ending of *Fireflies* and recognize that Brinckloe ends the piece with a strong feeling. They could then try this in their own piece. They might notice that another author starts off her writing by describing the setting and still other authors begin with dialogue.

Above all, encourage children to reread. They will have already learned the importance of this from earlier units, and now you have the opportunity to spotlight it again. Teach children not only to reread entire stories, but short sections too, asking themselves if what they've written is clear, if a reader would understand it, if they've written exactly what they intended to say. Remind children to notice both how the writing sounds and how it looks: are there spaces between words? Punctuation? Do the words look right? Children can work in partnerships, showing each other places they revised and helping each other plan possible revision strategies. They can act out stories together to make sure they can picture what is happening, and to find places to add more actions or dialogue or feeling or thinking. Children can read and reread their stories to their partners, using a checklist to name what revision strategy they might try today (the checklist is created with the teacher as a class) and together thinking more deeply about their pieces.

Rethinking Revision: Growing Our Writing into Different Genres and Revising as We Write

One surefire way to ignite new energy for revision is to let children know that writers sometimes revise by looking at our material and thinking, "What else could I make of this?" In addition to revising narratives, teachers may decide to have students revise their writing in other genres too. Just as Degas revised his drawings of ballet dancers to etchings, pastels, paintings and sculpture, children can revise one of their narratives to a poem, a letter, a how-to, or a fictional story. Just because you haven't taught a genre doesn't mean children have no sense of it. You'll be amazed at how much children have picked up about many of these genres just from living shoulder-to-shoulder with them. Children learn about genres from each other and from texts they admire. If you have examples in the classroom, they can go to these to get the gist of what a genre might be like.

Although children will be revising and trying many revision strategies on one piece, this may not sustain them for an entire workshop every day. Keep in mind that children will also be starting new stories and the intention is that the revision strategies that they are trying in their old pieces become internalized so that they don't wait for revision to add dialogue, but rather include dialogue as they write new stories. If most of your children aren't grasping this, you may want to spotlight the work of a child who is. "Oh my goodness!" you might say, "Look at what Justin is doing. He's begun a story on losing his first tooth and he's included a bit of dialogue that he had with his mother about placing his tooth under his pillow. Listen:

"Mom," I said, "How will the tooth fairy get to my tooth under my pillow if I sleep on it?"

"Isn't it smart of Justin to notice that he can include dialogue as he's writing? Later, he might decide to change that bit of dialogue or to make it longer, but he's doing what writers do automatically: he's using one of the things he knows about making writing better as he writes! You all can do that too."

Celebrate Your Revised Writing and the Year's End

This unit and year ends with a celebration of the many ways children have learned to revise, and with the knowledge that these revision strategies will continue to help children as they write forever and ever. Perhaps you'll invite your children's families or the younger students and other teachers in the school to listen to a reading by your children of their best stories. Or you could celebrate just as a class. Whatever you decide, be sure to make a big deal out of your first graders' fancied up writing and the skills they've honed over the year. Tell them they're ready for second grade now and even more complex writing work.

Suggestion for Compiling a Book List For This Unit

Teachers, we imagine that you will revisit your favorite mentor texts you used from across this school year depending on the genres your students will revise their writing into. For example, if a writer chooses to revise her small moment into a poem, you may want to refer to your poetry mentor texts as a way to refresh the skills and strategies that were taught inside the unit.