

# MAKING MEANING: EFFECTIVE AND PRACTICAL REVISION INSTRUCTION

**Brandie Bohney**  
**Guest Editor**  
**Bowling Green State University**

When I was teaching ninth-grade English, I had a bulletin board dedicated to revision. It took up the whole back wall of my classroom and had multiple drafts of four different genres: a reading response for a graduate course, a blog post about sports, the first chapter of a YA novel, and the lede for a newspaper story about education. My hope was that by providing concrete examples of the significant changes in “real” writing from first draft to final draft, students would begin to understand that revision is not a punishment or evidence of incompetence, but just the opposite: revision is an opportunity and evidence of writing prowess.

Students frequently interpret significant revision—elimination or addition of content, essay reorganization, development of new ideas or evidence—as unnecessary added work, if they consider it at all (Sommers). They often think, “I already wrote the paper; I don’t want to re-write the paper!” or perceive copy-editing as revision. It is challenging to coax students away from their one-and-done assumptions about writing processes—especially in an educational environment that focuses on timed essays—but it is critical to their development as writers. Our contributors to this issue’s Teacher to Teacher column tackle this tricky issue: pushing students to revise for improved meaning rather than merely proofreading for correctness.

First, Katie Nagrotsky walks us through an imitation exercise and student-driven mentor text collection developed out of her

desire to shift students from answer-getting to problem-solving thinking during writing workshops. Although imitation has a rich history in rhetorical instruction (Abbott, Marrou), its usefulness in the classroom is sometimes overshadowed by concerns that it may be too formulaic or traditional to be effective (Butler). But in “Beyond ‘Is This Good?’: Rethinking Revision to Forge a Community of Writers,” Nagrotsky capitalizes on the creative affordances of imitation and solves an issue of students looking to her for “answers” about their writing.

Anna Daley then explores six common problems of the student-writer revision process that stand in the way of meaningful revision in her piece, “Playing with a Healthy Revision Process in the Classroom.” Daley considers issues such as feedback and student commitment to their writing, and throughout her practical approaches to all the issues she focuses on shifting student thinking from always proofreading for correctness to first revising for meaning.

In “Show Them How: Revision in the High School Classroom,” Paula Uriarte looks to the ubiquitous but often-criticized practice of peer review as a site for developing strong revision skills in student writers. Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong have noted the importance of explicitly teaching peer review skills in order to encourage meaningful feedback among student review groups, and Uriarte’s article explicates a means for doing just that. Her approach focuses on high school students but could be adapted for students of nearly any age group.

Finally, Mark Latta takes a creative approach in pushing students to reread their own and each other’s work in “Blackout Revision: A Strategy for Playful De/Construction of Student Drafts.” Using the popular model of blackout poetry, Latta suggests a peer review exercise that has students blacking out one another’s texts as a means of close reading and interpretation. This unusual strategy challenges students to seek out core concepts and meaning in an unexpected but powerful way.

### Works Cited

- Abbott, D. P. "Rhetoric and Writing in the Renaissance." *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, 2nd ed., J. J. Murphy (Ed.), Hermagoras Press, 2001, pp. 145-72.
- Butler, Paul. "Imitation as Freedom: (Re)forming Student Writing." *The Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2002, pp. 25-32. Retrieved from [www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/361](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/361).
- Marrou, H. I. *A History of Education in Antiquity*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1956.
- Paulson, Eric J., Jonathan Alexander, and Sonya Paulson. "Peer Review Re-Viewed: Investigating the Juxtaposition of Composition Students' Eye Movements and Peer-Review Processes." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 41, no. 3, Feb. 2007, pp. 304-35.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*. NCTE, 2011, pp. 43-54.



## **Beyond “Is This Good?”: Rethinking Revision to Forge a Community**

Katie Nagrotsky

“I don’t know what to do. Can you see if this is good?” Leah (all names are pseudonyms) made her way across the classroom to the conference table. Her eyes were desperate. I was about to respond when another student appeared with her notebook.

“Me too. Can you check this,” Rebecca begged.

Leah and Rebecca’s requests unsettled the fragile focus of the workshop. I could feel it.

I have always believed in the power of conferring with students, but this was different.

In the first few weeks of school I realized that independent writing time could all too quickly devolve into a “deli line,” with students dependently waiting for me to review their writing.

Somewhere along the way, my sixth-grade students had come to see writing as arriving at an answer. They were not used to generating their own ideas. They expected me to tell them what to write and perceived writing conferences as an opportunity to have their work checked.

In what follows, I will describe two structures I tried that helped to reframe students’ attitudes towards writing as a recursive problem-solving process (Rief 31) and push us towards real revision.

### **Mining the Relationship between Talk and Writing**

The first thing I did was try to help students see that they could grow and change their ideas through talk. There was a connection, I realized, between the dependency in writer’s workshop and the “popcorn” conversations I kept hearing in book clubs. In these conversations a student would raise a question and instead of responding to that idea, another student would jump right to another topic entirely. These conversations quickly lost all dialogic quality and quickly became a chorus of disparate voices.

I had to change my teaching if students were going to learn how to hear one another and “extend and revise their thinking in the

company of others” (Santman 21). To help facilitate this rhythm, I asked students to pause after each of their book club meetings. This quickwrite reflection allowed them to consider how further reading, watching, or listening confirmed or added to their original thinking:

- What did you hear during the conversation?
- What are you thinking now?
- How did what you heard add to, change, or confirm your thinking?

A few students resisted this kind of thinking and reflection. After sharing an initial idea, they did not focus much on what other classmates said or how what was being said connected to or talked back to their own ideas.

I wasn’t trying to force students to change their minds, but I did expect that they listened closely to one another. If they were learning to be open to the concept of talking to grow and change ideas, then they might eventually start to see how writing was thinking and that revision was part of the iterative process of developing ideas. These quickwrites helped build the foundation for writing as thinking and essay as “a journey of thought” (Bomer 178). I modeled how my own thinking evolved multiple times, and eventually I started to see a difference. Students were starting to talk *to* one another instead of *at* one another.

### **Using Mentor Texts to Fuel Revision**

As the unit drew to a close, students began pulling from notebook entries to develop an idea into an essay. Once they had a draft, I decided to encourage revision in a new way. I gathered a group of students who were struggling with their introductions for a small group lesson on using mentor texts to guide their revision.

I handed them the first paragraph of an essay that we had read as a class. After I read the introduction aloud to refresh their memory, I asked them to imitate the writing but with their own book club book character in mind.

They took a few minutes to write out an imitation of the mentor paragraph on small white boards (see Figure 1). Suddenly, they all had richly descriptive paragraphs about their characters. As they went back to their essay drafts, I suggested that they read aloud to a partner to see if this new writing meshed with what they'd already written.

If it didn't match yet—more revision. Sometimes you have to add a new piece or stimulus to resee a draft and write into it from another angle. I started a binder full of mentor texts so students could use them as models for improving their own drafts.

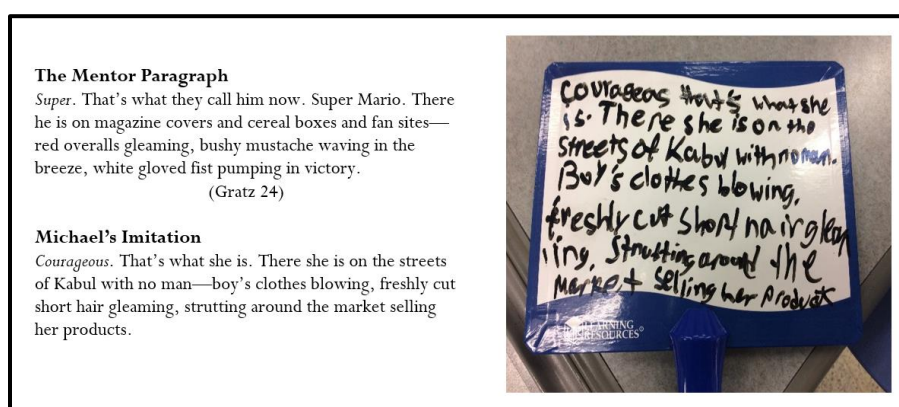


Figure 1: Michael's Imitation

But my best teaching ideas always come from students. One day during independent writing time, Natalie called me over.

"I made another mentor text binder," she exclaimed.

She showed me the cover page (see Figure 2) and opened the binder. She had imitated my directions, instructing her classmates to add to the collection with a poem, and asking them to write a short note about what they loved about what the writer did. She had added "Thumbprint," a poem by Eve Merriam that we had read a few weeks ago.

Why hadn't I thought of this?

Natalie's idea took off. Students started bringing in texts to add to her binder. By the spring, we had a library of six full binders full

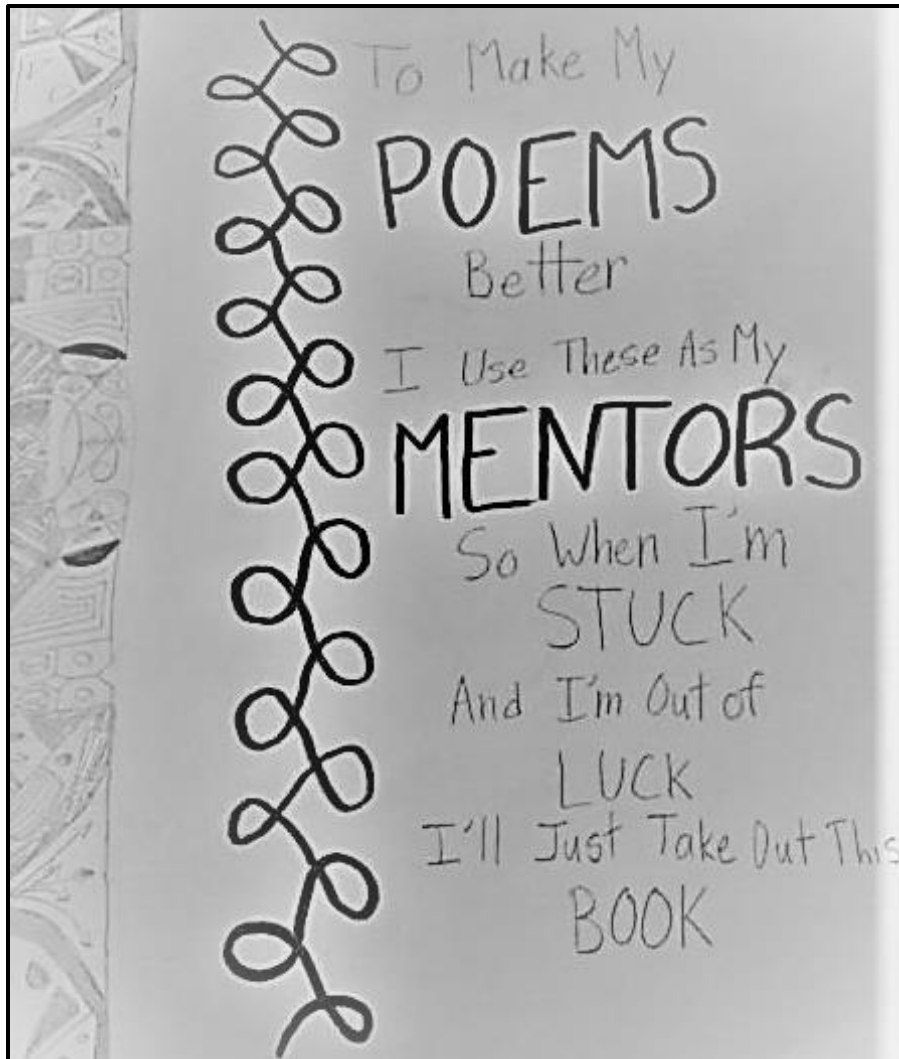


Figure 2: Natalie's Poetry Mentor Text Binder

of poems, articles, and short stories. I taught a few minilessons where we practiced writing off a line or borrowing the writer's idea or structure. After imitating some of the shortest pieces, students seemed more comfortable seeing these authors as guides.

They often grabbed a piece out a binder for inspiration when they had writer's block or revision block. As Marchetti and O'Dell note, mentor texts "can inspire students and teach them how to write . . .



mentor texts enable independence” (3). As a school we moved to Google classroom, and students posted mentor texts online so that they had a bank of mentor texts to access from home.

There were still some moments of frustration because writing and revising is difficult and messy work. But the “deli line” almost completely disappeared. Eventually, my students stopped following me around the room for help getting an idea and started consulting the mentor texts and one another when they wanted to figure out a way forward in their writing.

### Works Cited

- Bomer, Randy. *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*. Heinemann, 1995.
- Gratz, Alan. “It’s On Like Donkey Kong.” *Breakfast on Mars and 37 Other Delectable Essays*, edited by Rebecca Stern and Brad Wolfe, Roaring Brook Press, 2013, pp. 24-25.
- Marchetti, Allison, and Rebekah O’Dell. *Writing with Mentors: How to Reach Every Writer in the Room Using Current, Engaging Mentor Texts*. Heinemann, 2015.
- Rief, Linda. “What’s Next in Writing Must Be What Was in Writing.” *Voices from the Middle*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2019, pp. 31-34.
- Santman, Donna. *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*. Heinemann, 2005.

## Playing a Healthy Revision Process in the Classroom

Anna Daley

Those of us who teach writing to young people are intensely familiar with the struggles students experience in our classes. But we also know the transformative power of writing, of re-examining what we think and communicating that thinking to others, and of owning our stories and using our voices. So how do we apprentice our students to move beyond the “one and done” routine of cranking out a first draft, editing it, and turning it in? How do we cultivate a rich practice of process-oriented writing, with students returning to their writing to dig into their meaning, reorganizing purposefully and editing for effect, not just correctness? Although I currently teach dual credit, college composition to seniors, I’ve used the following strategies with grades 9 through 12.

First, a necessary preface: we cannot induct students into a rich thinking and writing process if they do not feel safe and respected. Creating the classroom culture may be a topic for another time, but without this context, many students will find it next to impossible to write meaningfully, a condition of a healthy revision process.

Here are common problems I face after students have a first or second draft, and the solutions I’ve developed in response.

### **The Problem: Students can’t break out of the formula because the formula is easy, reliable, and they just don’t know other ways to compose.**

My Classroom Solution: Schedule for a hearty revision process in your lesson plans. I used to plan for about three days of revision—during this time in my career, revision was something students did as a homework assignment. But I quickly realized that without rich feedback and suggestions, students didn’t know what to do besides edit and use the thesaurus. Now, I allot roughly two weeks of lesson plans for every writing project for students to re-see, re-think, and revise.

During these two weeks, we conduct writing workshops in class. I can monitor the feedback they are giving to each other and add my own suggestions. Students still revise at home as a homework assignment, but they have helpful feedback to take home with them which leads to global revisions as opposed to the editing I used to see.

**The Problem: How do we keep revision or workshop activities fresh and useful while teaching students how to develop helpful feedback for each other?**

My Classroom Solution: I've developed a variety of activities that fall under two major types of workshops. "Working Workshops" guide students to re-see, re-think, dive deeper into, develop, flesh out, analyze, re-organize, or try a new approach. Students operate on their own draft right there during class time, developing their writing as I'm giving them step by step instructions. It feels a lot like coaching.

I have "Working Workshops" that help students develop content, try different ways of organizing that content, and play with local language revisions. One such workshop is called "Explode a Moment." Students have an early draft on their table; I coach them to find a single moment in their writing that most illustrates the point they are trying to make. Once they've identified this spot in their draft, we conduct a five-minute "quickwrite" to develop sensory details, add internal monologue, dialogue and other "fiction" techniques. These details slow down the pace, much like when the camera "zooms in" on a scene in a movie, which tips readers off that this moment is important. It's a great strategy when students are blending narrative with arguments or when they are trying an implied or delayed thesis.

"Feedback Workshops" are guided group protocol designed to help students develop useful feedback for each other. These workshops ask students to read each other's work, talk about each paper as a group, develop written feedback (so the student author can use it at home) and prioritize that feedback. We prioritize global issues (developing a topic, content, and organizational structure) before local issues (spelling, grammar, and local language issues like syntax, word

choice, etc). This is not to say that global issues are *more important*, but I believe global writing issues are a *prerequisite* to improving local issues.

One Feedback Workshop I've developed asks writers (operating on an early draft) to identify three lists: "What I Know" about my draft, "What I Don't Know" about my draft, and "My Specific Point of Feedback." Students list all the things they already know (*I know my intro paragraph is no good, I know I need to add more evidence, etc.*), what they don't know (*I know how to hook a reader into the essay, I know if my point is clear, etc.*) and their specific feedback request (*I need ideas to engage my reader and keep them engaged*).

I've used ideas from Bruce Ballenger, Barry Lane, Jeffrey Wilhelm, Michael Smith, William Zinsser, to name a few, as well as the brilliant public school teachers I've had the honor of collaborating with in developing these revision activities and workshop protocol. I've developed my own protocol when I see a specific need. Some of the protocol are similar in purpose or in nature, but it's important to keep things fresh for students and offer them many processes to figure out what works best for them. By the time they are conducting workshops for the final portfolio, students *choose* which workshop protocol will work best for their needs.

**The Problem: Writing is an inherently creative process and that is hard to grade.**

My Classroom Solution: Find an appropriate balance between rewarding effort (participating in the process) and providing realistic, objective assessments of the qualities in their writing. Both are crucial. Students can't get in the game if every step, every draft, every workshop is graded for quality. Like any other creative endeavor, it has to be fun and safe to try.

For example, I took a week-long music camp this summer as a novice mandolin player. If my teacher had corrected every mistake or pointed out each of my deficiencies, I would have wanted to quit. I might get the idea fixed in my head that I'm just not a musician. It certainly would hurt my growth mindset and stunt my learning process.

“Playing” with writing is crucial, so be sure to reward students plenty for just getting in the game. On the other hand, students deserve to have enough objective feedback leading up to a summative performance that they are not surprised by their grade. I will often give students full points for, say, a fourth draft if it’s complete and they can show me the changes they made from the third draft. In addition to the grade that goes in the gradebook, I might also mark a score on a 5-point scale, giving writers some targeted feedback on a particular skill we are developing in this unit. I teach college composition to seniors; I weight classwork and participation in revision activities (completion grades) 50% because I know if they get in the game and participate, they will grow as writers; the summative writing portfolio is weighted 50% and is graded objectively against my learning objectives and standards.

**The Problem: It feels like there is not enough time in the day to provide feedback to individual students.**

My Classroom Solution: Individual feedback is a key practice to assist students in their development as thinkers and writers. Provide specific, individual feedback to every student early in the year, particularly as you are training the class to develop the language to talk about writing, an eye to spot good ideas and beautiful language, and the tools to couch their critiques gently and helpfully. Don’t feel obligated to comment on *every* paper throughout the year, though. We should gradually release responsibility to them. I give students options in their feedback, which cuts down on my time. For example, I let students choose between comments on Google Doc, comments in a letter, a personal conference, or a 3x5 card. Some students just want the 3x5 card because it’s limited and straightforward. During those weeks of workshops, keep track of which tables you sit at each day so you can at least see every student’s project and provide feedback in person; be sure to check in on the quality of the workshop group, and monitor and adjust as needed. Later in the school year, release responsibility to students to provide feedback. Try to avoid only providing rubric feedback or group feedback. Students are individuals and deserve to be treated as such.

**The Problem: Students don't want to risk being critiqued for something they care about, so they write about things they don't actually care about.**

My Classroom Solution: Set the right conditions for a creative process. Community building early and regularly is essential because you will be asking students to open up, be vulnerable, show their “crappy” first drafts to each other and give and receive feedback. This requires a safe environment that supports risk taking. Build writing groups, preferably at tables shared by 3-5 students rather than at individual desks. Groups should shuffle regularly but not randomly; I always allow students to choose their first group of the year and I give students some measure of choice in who they are with or who they need to avoid. Students need to feel safe to write meaningfully, and every educator should understand how motivating choice is for students. Emphasize what professional writer Anne Lamott calls a “shitty rough draft,” what many teachers call quickwrites, freewrites, or completion assignments. Allow students to take the pressure off a first (or second or third) draft having to be “correct” or even immediately receive feedback. Let them “write their way into” things. In other words, reward effort. I give my students “full points” for completed assignments in my instructional sequences so they feel they can take risks, try a new approach, explore a tangent, or get ideas down without having to wonder if their teacher thinks those ideas or attempts are “correct.” Ask student groups to read each other’s writing and name what *is* working. At the end of that small group reading, ask every group to “nominate up” a composition from their table that was interesting, different, beautiful or provocative. Invite a few nominees to share their writing and then invite the group to name what they appreciated about the composition. This process cultivates the habit of noticing and naming what works in writing, builds confidence in young writers, cultivates a positive classroom community, all while apprenticing students in discussion about writing.

**The Problem: Students just don't care about their writing.**

My Classroom Solution: When we find that our students are producing writing they really don't care about, then we know they are writing toward a product (a paper that will receive a good grade) rather than a process of developing meaningful ideas. Teach through inquiry pedagogy.

Frame instructional units and individual lessons with open ended "essential questions" that invite students into the unit of study. My first unit essential question is "Who are you as a thinker or writer?" This question often prompts students to consider how often they have written for a grade, or written things they don't really think in a timed-write setting. This unit also helps students consider the type of writing that is most often honored in schools (short fast thinking) and the ways in which they fit or don't fit that model.

Guide and assist students in developing their topic, substance, and form. Gradually release responsibility to students along the way. End the unit with a culminating writing project in which students develop their own response to the framing question (or address some aspect that fits under the Essential Question). Using inquiry methods also means that we assist students in *developing ideas that they care about*.

Let's be honest, timed writes and formula writing have taught a generation of students that their first idea is the only idea to pursue. My students really struggle with developing original ideas that they care about. But I know how painful it will be when they are revising an essay they don't really care about for the 6<sup>th</sup> time. Help them develop ideas through group discussion, group brainstorming, and plenty of freewriting. I use a process I call the hotseat, in which each student names the topic they are thinking of writing about in a whole class discussion. I can coach them on their topics right then and there; additionally, every other student is able to hear dozens of example topics. I encourage them to shamelessly steal good ideas that resonate as true for them. Remind students *often* that the most important thing they can do to improve their writing is to write what they care about, no matter whether the writing task is personal or academic.

## **Show Them How: Peer Review as Part of Process**

Paula Uriarte

The writing process is often taught as linear because there are so many students in a high school classroom. It is easier to lockstep through together than to acknowledge that each student's process is unique and often messy. In Idaho, we even had a multiple choice question on one of our standardized state assessments that asked what the steps of the writing process were—in order. Traditional approaches to writing instruction as a process that looks something like assign a writing project, return to the student with comments, and then ask students to revise by a deadline eliminates the very powerful learning that can happen in peer review.

Introducing peer review requires a teacher to slow down and make process explicit for students. In my classroom, we spend a lot of writing time thinking through ideas in a variety of ways. For example, this might be a structured and timed freewrite or brainstorm that leads students to discover what they want to say. There's also time for talk—sharing with a partner or conferencing quickly with me, whether at my desk individually while the class is working on something or as I move table to table and talk informally with small groups. Students might “pitch” ideas before beginning a draft to me or to the class. Just these small steps in the beginning help students see the malleability of ideas and how things might change as we talk or think more, and how to trust talk as part of the process.

Once students have ideas, we move to drafting and a fixed date to bring a draft to class to share with their writing groups. These groups are crucial to success and I usually choose them. Before students ever look at each other's drafts, we do some team building and create commitments (I will bring my draft to class on time; I will be open to suggestions) so they begin to feel comfortable with each other. They may spend part of a class period playing a get to know you game, or they may participate in a conversation starter activity not at all related to writing.



An important part of the peer review process is helping students know HOW to respond to each other's work. Like any other skill, this one needs to be taught explicitly if students are to become helpful partners to each other. Before our first draft deadline, I ask for one student volunteer to bring a draft a day early. On this day, I ask for two other volunteers and as a class, we go through a structured protocol for responding to a draft. I sit in on this first conference with the writer and two volunteers to model the process, and the rest of the class surrounds us in a fishbowl set up. Students have a handout (see Figure) and we discuss how to frame our comments before the model conference starts.

- We will be honest and fully engaged.
- We will be specific and kind in our feedback.
- We will have our drafts on time.
- We will be active listeners.
- We will have a positive attitude about workshop.
- We will be open minded in listening to feedback.
- We will stay focused (stay off phone, not work on other things).

Figure: Period 2 Commitments

This protocol begins with the writer reading the piece aloud, with copies of drafts that students in the writing group read along with. In early stages, the reading out loud bothers some students, but when they hear awkward wording or other errors, they notice things they didn't when just looking on the page. Depending on the genre of the writing, one person in the writing group summarizes the gist of the piece, the plot of the story, the claim, the thesis, etc. The rest of the group adds to this or amends it. The ensuing discussion is listened to by the writer, who is not allowed to speak until the end of the conversation. The group then discusses strengths in the piece, pointing to specific evidence, and then opportunities for revision.

All of this is done using the very specific language on their handout. The focus is on what the writer did. So instead of platitudes like, "This is great" or "This needs work," students are encouraged to say things like, "When you [name something the writer wrote or a move

the writer made], it had the effect of. . . .” In other words, what did it do for you as a reader? Our goal in these conversations is to help the writer make the piece what he or she wants it to be. Therefore we avoid language like, “I would . . .” or “You should. . . .” This is very cumbersome at first. There are pauses and silences as students look at the handout, thinking about how to frame the feedback. I point out in our fishbowl the importance of taking this time and not worrying about awkward silences. Once the small group has finished the conversation, the writer can ask questions or get clarification about comments made. The writer can also bring up specifics that may not have been addressed. For example, “I really struggled with the conclusion. What do you think of it?” This is a crucial part of the process, because when I then conference individually with students, the first thing I might ask is, “What feedback did you get from your writing group?” If the student says nothing, I would follow up with, “What questions did you ask your group to help you know what you need to do next?”

Because I am sitting with students for this practice session, I can help them with the language they use in talking with each other and model it for them. We end with asking the writer if he or she has a sense of what can be done to revise before submitting the assignment. I’ve never had a student say no.

A benefit to each member having a copy of the drafts is that students can make editing comments and notes as they listen to the draft being read aloud. When the draft is returned to the student, he or she can compare editing notes and make decisions from there. I model and emphasize that unless editing issues distract from understanding, they don’t need to be discussed in the peer review. The listeners can also capture their initial responses so they don’t forget them for the discussion, and the student has a record in case he or she forgets feedback when returning to the draft to revise.

When we finish the model conference, we open up the discussion to the whole class and have them debrief about what they noticed in the conference and share what they think of the process. This often results in questions about the feedback. I tell students that ultimately, the decisions they make about whether to accept or reject suggestions

should depend on their intent for the piece. They also comment that other benefits of the conferences include hearing where others are in their drafts, getting ideas from each other and feeling better about where they are in the process.

The next important step is for me to observe conferences, especially early in the year and continue to nudge students toward productive conversations. Usually by the third piece of the year, they are functioning independently. My one-on-one conferences with students after they've submitted a paper or before the final draft help me to see if any of the groups are struggling as well. I keep writing groups together for the course of the semester so they build rapport. If I thought things weren't going well, I would re-mix the group, but thankfully I haven't had that experience.

I do not assign a grade for these conferences or the drafts, but I note if a draft was not present for conferencing because it is part of a process category on the final rubric. Students quickly see a correlation between their participation and their "final" drafts. Even after a score, I let students continue to revise after conferences with me until the end of the grading period, which may overlap with other writing assignments. For students who are struggling, this might be a requirement, but framed as helping the writer improve and get the targeted instruction necessary to do so.

We also do some focused work with specific revision strategies so students know what to do with the feedback they are given. If I am told I need to slow down and give the details of something that's happening, I might try Barry Lane's "Explode a Moment." If organization is an issue, I might try a reverse outline or cut and paste revision to reorder. Revision that is embedded in a course empowers students to do their best work, but it is a skill that must be taught and modeled explicitly.

When I first used peer review in the classroom, I didn't see its effectiveness because students would not focus on the task because they didn't know what to say. They would read each other's drafts and say, "That was great," and move on to the next person. I tried an online platform once and the result was a student crying about harsh feedback. The results were no different than the days when I

would grade a paper, give it back to a student and ask for revision, receiving instead a freshly edited copy of the same material. Now I see significant differences from draft to draft and students taking more risks because someone said to them, “What would happen if?” instead of “You should. . . .”

## **Blackout Revision: A Strategy for Playful De/Construction of Student Drafts**

Mark Latta

This revision strategy emerged from a workshop that Michael Jackman, senior lecturer of writing at Indiana University Southeast, recently led at the Flanner Community Writing Center in Indianapolis. The workshop discussed blackout poetry and invited participants to a process of creating blackout poems from news articles and IRS manuals. I attended the workshop and found blackout poetry so enjoyable that I decided to integrate the practice into my writing classroom.

One realization I had while creating blackout poems was how the process forced me into a close-reading gaze and invited me to re-see the text in new, previously unexplored ways. Blackout poetry encourages the reworking of texts by locating and noticing various centers of gravity, themes, and linguistic structures. Based on this insight, blackout poetry seemed well suited as a revision strategy for student-authored drafts in addition to its use as a remixing technique for published texts.

### **What is Blackout Poetry?**

Blackout poetry (also called erasure poetry) is created through the erasure of words and letters in previously printed works. Using newspaper clippings or other published works (books, menus, and even IRS manuals work well, too), authors black out words and letters with a Sharpie marker to rework the text. Through the erasure and removal of text, space, and punctuation, writers create blackout poetry “like a wood carving where the excess wood is removed to reveal the hidden object inside” (Ladenheim 46).

This process can be replicated digitally as well, as the Figure demonstrates. Here, a passage from the IRS Taxpayer Bill of Rights, “The Right to Challenge the IRS’ Position and Be Heard,” is reworked through the blackout process to create a poem, “The Challenge to Be Heard.” The resulting poem is revealed using the highlight feedback in Microsoft Word. By setting the highlight color to black,

**The Right to Challenge the IRS's Position and Be Heard**

Taxpayers have the right to raise objections and provide additional documentation in response to formal IRS actions or proposed actions, to expect that the IRS will consider their timely objections and documentation promptly and fairly, and to receive a response if the IRS does not agree with their position.

**The Right to Challenge the IRS's Position and Be Heard**

Taxpayers have the right to raise objections and provide additional documentation in response to formal IRS actions or proposed actions, to expect that the IRS will consider their timely objections and documentation promptly and fairly, and to receive a response if the IRS does not agree with their position.

Figure: Creation of "The Challenge to be Heard" through Blackout Poetry

students are able to generate blackout poems digitally. "The Challenge to Be Heard" reworks text from the IRS to say something about the difficulties and frustrations of attempting to be heard and being treated unfairly.

The process of composing blackout poetry invites writers to create through erasure and removal: "What's exciting about the poems is that by destroying writing you can create new writing. You can take a stranger's random words and pick and choose from them to express your own personal vision" (Kleon xv). This version of text rendering through creative destruction requires the author to look closely at letters, words, spaces, and punctuation in order to reimagine other arrangements. It is this close reading and de/reconstruction that make blackout poems ideal as a revision activity.

**Blackout Poetry as a Revision Activity**

This revision exercise assumes the high school or first-year college class has previously spent some time composing blackout poetry (perhaps as an idea generation activity) and that students are familiar with the process. As a revision technique, blackout poetry is well

suiting to help writers locate centers of gravity within their writing, identify themes and thematic connections, and help reveal allegorical possibilities. While I find this process most helpful for personal, persuasive, and creative nonfiction essays, I have also used this activity within research writing and have been pleased with the results.

When I incorporate blackout poetry as a revision activity, I prefer to time the activity to occur when students are working with drafts that are somewhere between developed and nearly complete. Ideally, drafts are between one and two pages in length, although completing this process with paragraph drafts is also possible. Although Figure 1 demonstrates the creation of a blackout poem with a concise text, the process of creating a blackout poem with longer works is manageable within a 50-60 minute block of time.

To complete a blackout revision, I ask students to bring two printed copies of their working drafts to class. Students first work in pair-and-shares. Before exchanging drafts with their partner, each student spends one to three minutes describing the main ideas of their draft. Then, students exchange drafts and read them silently. After each member of the pair completes a silent reading, I then pass out black Sharpie markers and ask each student to compose a blackout poem, using their partner's draft, that will help reveal something important about their partner's draft's main idea. In other words, can they create a blackout poem from their partner's draft that will help reveal something from under the surface of the text? While it is certainly possible to develop more specific suggestions, I find the ambiguity of this prompt usually helps to provide creative space for the text rendering the blackout poetry process requires.

After 20 to 30 minutes, I ask students to return the then-draft, now blackout poem to their partner. After a few minutes to read the result of the blackout poetry process, I will ask if anyone would like to read their poems aloud if time allows. This share-out portion of the blackout revision process helps foster connections between seemingly disparate ideas. Finally, after the share-outs are complete, I ask each student to write a brief, one paragraph reflection on the blackout poetry revision process. What was revealed? What did they

like about the process? What new ideas are developing? How did this process feel? How did it feel to read a poem created from your draft?

Often, the close-reading and deconstruction required to generate blackout poems activates the students' imagination and fosters a desire to rework the essay. The process helps students to see and imagine new possibilities for their text. To help capture these emerging ideas, I ask students to get messy with their remaining clean copy of their draft (the second copy each student brought). Students are invited to draw arrows between related ideas, create additional blackouts, draw pictures, or highlight passages in different colors. I also encourage students to write notes in the margins or interact with the second draft in a way that will allow a playful reveal of ideas. The goal of this step is to identify a core theme or allegory revealed through the blackout poetry process that students wish to develop further.

Additionally, this stage in the blackout poetry process is useful in highlighting that the writing process can look and feel playful and inventive. To underscore this point, I often bring in revision drafts of my writing which have gone through a blackout poetry reveal. Using my past drafts as a guide, I can point to the areas on the page in which core ideas were revealed, highlighted, and developed.

Blackout poetry as a revision strategy encourages students to re-see and rethink their work, while also revealing connections to the work of their peers. It is also fun. Because of this, I find a less rigid structure within the process of blackout poetry revision to be more helpful than developing too many rules and suggestions. This activity provides an opportunity to see writing as playful and full of potential. More importantly, blackout poetry encourages authors to see beyond their current work and imagine additional possibilities.

#### Works Cited

- Kleon, Austin. *Newspaper Blackout*. Harper Perennial, 2010.
- Ladenheim, Melissa. "Engaging Honors Students through Newspaper Blackout Poetry." *Honors in Practice*, vol. 10, 2014, pp. 45–53.
- United States, Department of Treasury, Internal Revenue Service. "The Right to Challenge the IRS' Position and Be Heard." *The IRS Taxpayer Bill of Rights*.