



September–October 1993

Bi-Monthly • Vol. 25, No. 1

Deep Revision

by Meredith Sue Willis

WHEN REVISION IS WORKING BEST, IT IS AS experimental and exhilarating as learning to walk and talk. One day the toddler stands upright for a surprised, balanced instant, then falls on its well-padded behind, laughs at the sensation, clambers up again and adjusts its balance just enough to stay upright half a second longer before being brought down again by gravity. I believe that the revision an adult writer does is on a continuum with the child's teaching itself to walk. Our lives are full of revision, conscious and unconscious. Revision is a form of learning: it pushes us farther into experience, which alters how we perceive the past and prepares us for the future. I don't mean to describe revision as extraordinary; on the contrary, it seems to me one of the most ordinary of human activities.

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As a child, when I had worked as much as I wanted on a given piece, I simply laid it aside and went on to something else. This can be viewed as one form of revision, particularly

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suited to very young writers: when you've gone as long as you can, you stop, and start something else afresh.

I remember in second grade reading over what I had written the previous year:

Fredy is a cowboy
 Fredy eats beans
 Fredy is a cowboy
 Becaus his teth gleamz

I had no interest in revising "Fredy," but my new writing had a relationship to what had gone before. In the second grade I wrote stories rather than poems, and they were longer, in

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script, and had more models from literature because I was reading more books from the library. I was making constant starts, trials, experiments, and the revision was centered not on any particular text, but on my whole relationship to literature. The old saws may be rusty: *If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well*. What if it's not worth doing but it takes doing it for a while to find out? Who's to say what doing well is? Sometimes we polish highly, sometimes we simply check for the most egregious spelling errors and send it off. *Don't start something you can't finish*. Why not start something to see if you want to finish it? What is finishing anyhow? For a six- or seven-year-old, finished is when you're done with it.

For an adult writer too, there are times when the initial flash of insight or inspiration will be enough. Or perhaps a piece is best left as a fragment. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" exists as a fragment of a dream he could not fully recapture. Or, you actually might hit it right the first time. We need to have different revising strategies, depending on the task or inspiration at hand. There are many adult writers who, like children, do not revise—at least not on paper—or who revise very little. Ironically, I consider it a form of self-discipline *not* to revise certain things I write: that is, I am so accustomed to long bouts of polishing that it's difficult for me to figure out when to stop making changes. At the same time, elementary school children *can* begin to learn to go back and *see again*.

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As students get older, revision can be presented to them as an activity done by professional and creative writers. The idea of writing as a profession didn't occur to me until I was well into my teens. I had no models of adult writers; I certainly knew nothing of the business and industry of book publishing and selling. But I did begin to recognize certain writers' names and to associate power with their invocation: Shakespeare! Tolstoy-and-Dostoevsky! Margaret Mitchell! I read articles about writers, and even began to play at being a writer myself. One summer, having read in *Reader's Digest* that great writers spend an hour a day or more (!) at their desks, I committed myself to being at the typewriter one hour each morning, rain or shine. I remember, one extremely hot summer morning, sitting on the rough home-poured concrete of our little patio with my mother's old black Underwood typewriter on a stool in front of me. How could anyone really do this? I thought. An hour is so long! It's so hot. I'm not cut out for this.

Then I learned that Great Authors revise over and over again. With a new self-awareness, I began to look at the stories and personal essays and poems I had been writing for my own entertainment. I found that making word choices was actually fun. Crimson? Scarlet? Incarnadine? I imagined the Great Author in a room lined with bookshelves, with one large powerful hand clutching his hair while the other fingered his words as if they were old coins. He held them to the light as if candling eggs, he sniffed them as if they were little vials of perfume. I saw him in my mind, and simultaneously I saw myself in my attic room at my small student desk. I saw myself as from a distance, and tried to revise myself into this revising Great Author. I didn't look like him,

but I tried at least to do what I imagined he did: I looked at my story word by word. I had written: "I was insulted that he thought no more of my power." I scratched out the word *power* so that the sentence read: "I was insulted that he thought no more of my *abilities*." A page later, I had written: "Then in spite of everything, I slept." I changed it to: "*Finally* in spite of everything, *I did sleep*."

Were the changes an improvement? It depends on how you look at it. I cannot say they are the changes I would make today. "Did sleep" seems fussy, as if I wanted to make the tone of my story more genteel or to show off my knowledge of complex past tenses. If I had been that fourteen-year-old girl's teacher, I would probably have been pleased mostly by the sheer bulk and ambition of the forty-page story. I might have felt duty-bound to point out that "in spite of everything" is a phrase that needs to be set off by commas at both ends. But I think I would have appreciated the experiment in tone that is represented by "finally" and "did sleep." When I scratched out "that" and replaced it with "the" or changed "lice or fleas" to "some horrible parasite," I was teaching myself that words are malleable.

Should a teacher or reader faced with such a student writer suggest that "lice or fleas" is more concrete and thus more vivid than "some horrible parasite?" My instinct is not to intervene too much with anyone who is—for himself or herself—playing with words. I would rather give models of the best literature and trust the student to discover the power of plain, concrete speech later, although over against this is my belief that any respectful response, no matter how detailed or strong, is useful to a young writer. Writing is not, after all, a sacred ritual that can be done only one way without angering the gods. Nor are young writers such frail beings that they cannot bear some contradictions and varying opinions. The most important thing, it seems to me, is a sense of respect on the part of the teacher for the student's own ideas and projects—and it's sometimes difficult to learn to participate in the younger writer's process of writing without taking it over. But this sense of respect is vital to the art of teaching.

Revising as a Response to Literature

Even in our earliest efforts at writing we are always consciously or unconsciously imitating. We learn to structure our ideas about writing from literary models—the story the teacher read the class or the comic book our big brother gave us. Our first forms are the ones that seem simply to be there. A boy who is engrossed in the origin of superheroes and decides to create his own superhero doesn't agonize over how to begin, any more than I agonize over filling out a subscription coupon: he knows that you start with the superhero's super-characteristics, just as I know what to write in the space labelled "name." In other words, we have conventional structures in our minds even before we read and write, and conventional structures are often exactly what is needed. Thus one thing a teacher can give students is familiarity with and practice in such forms. This can be done only through wide reading and lots of practice.

"Conventional" structures and "creative" writing are by no means antithetical. I love the fresh, the new, and the original,

but making a fetish of it is a twentieth-century quirk. In the sixteenth century, mastery of the conventions of sonnet writing was a desirable accomplishment. Variations were of course necessary, but the main project was to master the form with its exact number of lines, its set rhyme scheme, and the tropes that were appropriate to it—just the way a great basketball player does not make up the art of dribbling, but embellishes and perfects it.

My son Joel was assigned his first homework composition in the late winter of first grade. The assignment was to write something about the season, and he sat down and rapidly wrote a little half-poem half-essay about snow and children sliding and sledding. Not only did the piece sound nothing like his speaking voice, but we had not even had any snow yet. My satisfaction was in the beginning of his mastery of forms and levels of discourse. It was his idea of what he thought appropriate for a seasonal composition, his maiden voyage on the ocean of formal writing.

Some of my own earliest efforts at writing were imitations of popular culture. My poem about Fredy the Cowboy was essentially a commercial jingle. I turned to the funny papers and comic books for my models, because those were my first forms of literature. I carefully drew blocks, made pictures, squeezed words into the balloons—and one day discovered that if you write the words first and make the speech balloon afterwards, you don't have to squeeze. This was a technical breakthrough—the beginning of my taking control of conventions and forms.

As I got older, I would write my own version of whatever I read or saw. After the movie version of *Old Yeller*, I wrote a story called "The Yaller Dog." My version was not plagiarized, but something much less civilized: I wanted to get inside the story and eat it from the inside, like a voracious little larva working its way out of a fruit. In my version of the dog story, the dog doesn't die at the end. This doesn't mean that I hated the original or was traumatized by it, only that I wanted to do it my way.

One theory of literature states that what is written is only fully realized when a reader receives it, that the reader is, in a way, the true creator of a text; a poem or essay or novel or news article does not really exist until the reader has filled in the gaps with his or her own experience and knowledge. The psychology of the author and the author's intentions are nothing compared to the activity of the reader, who by recognizing conventions and transforming them with his or her own perceptions and beliefs creates what *is* on the page through the activity of reading it. As one theorist says, "The whole point of reading . . . is that it brings us into deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our own identities."¹

While I don't embrace this theory entirely, I am struck by the idea that a textbook, a story, a poem, a newspaper article, or a magazine essay is not something to be treated with exaggerated respect. This idea is of enormous practical value for those of us who teach.

• *The next time you read something leisurely—the sports page, TV Guide, or an article in People magazine—write a quick response to your reading. Include whatever is on your mind, even if it doesn't seem to be on the subject. Write about*

how hot the weather is, or your concerns for your team's standing in the league, or whatever. Do this over a few days with the same type of reading material. When you have three or more entries, revise them into an essay in the form of a feature article or review, such as an essay on Ann Landers or this season's Cleveland Indians.

Writing can thus be a way of making what you read your own and altering what you read to make it fit yourself. Some years ago, I was teaching a required second semester first-year literature course at Pace University. For many of the students, this would be the final go-round with the standard English literary canon, and—to add insult to injury—this class met on Friday afternoons. We had some good times in that class, although attendance was always sporadic. When we came to the required grappling with *Hamlet*, a number of the students were willing to try anything rather than actually read the text, and when they did read it, they seemed at a loss as to how to talk about it. I typed up some of the more famous monologues ("How all occasions do inform against me" and "O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven!") for closer study, and then asked everyone to choose a character in the play (excluding Hamlet himself) and write a prose or poetic monologue. To my surprise, several students tried something in blank verse, and most had a better grasp of the character they chose than I would have expected. Overall, I felt each of the students was able to think better—and consequently learned more—about the play through the revision exercise than they would have in class discussion alone. To speak analytically about literature requires a kind of training that these students had not had and might never have, but writing these pieces allowed them to meet the literature on their own terms, and showed me that they really did understand the play.

• *If your students are studying Hamlet (or some other famous work), have each of them write a dramatic monologue for a minor character. This is meant to be an exercise in capturing tone and meaning, in imitating a form—the dramatic monologue—and in revising the text by imagining its events from a different point of view.*

I, Laertes, despise the wretched Hamlet.
Such a fool as he deserves no kingship.
No true king would allow the transparency
of marriage to obstruct divine ascending
to the crown as did Claudius to Hamlet.
His soul is a flicker where mine flares.
That king fool we have now
who thinks from his groin
would never have eliminated his predecessor
were it not for my connivance.
Yet I still have no power;
I'll seek Fortinbras in this matter.
Now with my father dead,
his spirit rises with opportunity;
opportunity in the guise of revenge.
To kill Hamlet with the poison sword
Claudius shall give me!
Upon Hamlet's death, there shall be great mourning,
a nation in distress.

It is then that I shall expose
Claudius and his foul plans.
Revolutionary upheaval will follow,
and a divided Denmark will surrender
to Fortinbras' invading armies,
and I shall have power.

—Tom Wright, 1st-year college student

* * * * *

Claudius

I am now dying—and what for I ask. Here I have the throne and a beautiful queen. I have power throughout the land and am very happy. Why must I die by the sword of such a brash young prince? Life has finally been good to me, till now.

True, I have deeply sinned. I killed, manipulated, and schemed to get to the top. If only I could have done away with Hamlet sooner. I knew that crazy fit by Hamlet was an act. He always suspected me of killing his father.

It is so sad it has to end this way. I was just getting used to the idea of being the one with unchecked power and the final say in stately matters. It is a shame that I was outwitted by such a young prince like Hamlet. And yet he dies too. Now that is indeed sweet revenge. All I can say is, at least I made it to the top.

—Wayne Hugar, 1st-year college student

- If your students are studying a particular period in history, find a poem or two written at the time, and have students pretend to be the poet and write another poem about some other event or theme of the day, imitating the form and style. You can try the same thing using a news article from the actual period, a short story, or—perhaps best of all—a journal entry or letter.

Writing your way into literature by making your own versions can include both direct imitations (such as the Shakespearean dramatic monologue) and more playful exercises (such as writing anachronistic news reports about the events surrounding Hamlet's death). In both kinds of writing, the student changes the existing literature in order to get closer to it, deeper inside it. This approach to studying literature works as well with modern literature as with older literature. Monologues are particularly good for getting inside characters. I asked my college students to write pieces based on "Cutting Edge," a story by James Purdy about an unpleasant confrontation in a family when a son comes home with a beard and his mother wants him to shave it.² One student wrote his piece from the young man's point of view:

She is so blind. She can't possibly see beyond this beard.

I know that trying to change our damaged relationship is not likely but I want her to accept me as who I am and start building our relationship.

I am a new man now and unless you accept me and the things that are in the present, we won't get anywhere. I can't believe that she will refuse to accept the past.

What do you think of my face that's naked in its raw form? This beard is clothes for my face. What do you

want? Nude? Or clothed?

There's no hope. We are finished as a family. I don't want to see you again. It's quite clear that you don't want to see me.

—Jae Song, college junior

These next examples were written by high school students. I had them read one of my short stories, "Evenings With Porter."³ The story is about two characters who meet at various points in their lives. The male character is about to go overseas as a pilot in the Vietnam War, and the female narrator tries to convince him not to. I then had the students rewrite one of the scenes from the male character's point of view:

Just came back from Blair Ellen's Grandmother's store. I was there for a long while. Hangin' out and drinkin' pop. I went this afternoon. It's now past dark. I remember walkin' in to the store. Blair Ellen sold me a pop. She looked kind of cute, I mean for 12. After my pop, I hang around a little longer, we, Blair Ellen and me, went out on the porch to talk. We talked of the town boys and such. After a bit, her grandmother was rustlin' about the kitchen makin' noise. I guess Blair Ellen had chores to do or had to attend to her grandmother 'cause she said good night and left. We cut our talkin' kinda short. I'll prob'ly go back tomorrow.

—Kate Renlow, 10th grade

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Now, I'm flying all alone, I'm fighting for my country. I'm very scared, even though I told her I wasn't. I wish I would of listened to her, and flew up into Canada. Why can't I just turn around now, and go back and be with her? Well, I gave my devotion to the Air Force and this is where I'm going to stay. I just hope I'll stay alive, so when this is over, I can see her again. Now as I reach Cambodia, I'm even more scared, but I'll be alright, won't I. . . .

—Rick Raymond, 10th grade

The thing that pleased me about this exercise was how much in tune the students seemed to be with the story. They chose to go into it at various points, but in each case I found myself believing their interpretation. This piece also reaffirmed my sense that often a so-called creative or reader-involved response is the best one to literature for non-specialized students. When the student can take something he or she is reading and revise it, there is likely to be much more real understanding of its shape and texture. I am certainly not suggesting that there should never be critical writing about literature, but that critical writing should be only one of several ways of engaging students in literature. Personal involvement through revising literature should always precede critical thinking, because it is extremely difficult to think deeply about a work of art with which you have never really been connected.

- After reading any story or novel (preferably one in the first person), write one scene from the point of view of a character other than the narrator. Do this by assigning parts before the class begins reading the novel so that each class member has one character to follow and study throughout the work.

One quick way of using an author’s writing to get a feel for its shape is through copying and dictation. I am always collecting samples of fiction to use with students and in my articles and books on writing, and I have typed many paragraphs by my favorite authors, poets and nonfiction writers as well as novelists and short story writers. It’s a great feeling to have someone else’s words go through your body—learning what the rhythm of those words feels like, the shape of the paragraphs or the length of the lines. Imitating and copying should be, it seems to me, among our regular language arts activities.

- *Find some poem or paragraph that you admire and copy it longhand. If you are a teacher, bring in a piece that you admire and ask students to copy it over. This can be followed by the writing of an imitation or a continuation.*

- *Try the same exercise through dictation, having someone read aloud while the rest write it down.*

- *Do this with a poem, and then compare how you broke the lines with how the poet did it.*

- *After using copying or dictation, turn the paper over and, without looking, write down as much of it as you can remember. Compare the two pieces. Do you like your own remembered version better? Try writing it again a week later. The point is not to get a headache trying to remember, but to see what your memory adds and changes.*

- *Type a sonnet or other fairly compact poem, or a dense paragraph of prose, leaving out most of the middle, keeping just the first and last lines, or sentences, or perhaps the final rhyme scheme if it’s a sonnet. Duplicate and distribute, and have everyone fill it in with their own versions. Depending on the students’ ages and your own style, you can do this either by requiring the poem to be completed with the exact number of lines as the original poem (as in the example below) or by letting the middle part be as long or short as the students want.*

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,

I have wasted my life.⁴

- *Pass out the opening paragraph or line of some famous prose work, and have everyone continue the story. For some real fun, see what younger students can do with “Call me Ishmael” or “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”*

- *Instead of starting with the words, give the plot of some famous story: married woman falls in love with other man, destroys her marriage, in despair kills herself. (That’s Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina.) Flesh it out.*

Kids imitate whether you want them to or not—in fact, we all do, in life and in writing. For me, writing comes out of the experience of daily life (including all our language and mental imagery) and from literature. For many students, of course, literature (and much life experience) has been replaced by television and, to a lesser extent, the movies. It seems to me only fair and realistic to make a space for imitating models the students already have and are comfortable with. Thus student writers should get a turn at writing music lyrics or television scripts. Of course, there is a job of analysis here too—to understand the forms that are used by professional songwriters and television writers.

I observed writer-in-the-schools Josefina Baez working with eighth grade students at the Bergen Street School in Newark, New Jersey. The class was a small group of eighth graders, and Josefina perched on a desk, with the students arranged in a horseshoe open to the blackboard. The classroom teacher was sitting at her own desk. Josefina used the students’ own choice, rap poetry, as a means of working through the process of revision. The poems sprang from the students’ ideas and themes, which included drugs, pollution, and getting a paycheck versus getting a welfare check. The students first wrote their verses—which they discovered took more effort than they expected—then they transcribed the lyrics to the blackboard one at a time. Everyone helped ensure that the mechanics were right. After making written revisions on the board, the students then read the poems aloud in various styles: as sentences; as poetry; as rhythmic rap. One boy said, “Hey, mine could be a slow song, too,” and proceeded to sing it, and the teacher said, “Why, that could be blues—” and then she took a turn singing the student’s lines. It was a great atmosphere for showing how words can be changed and exchanged.

After this group session, the rap poems were revised individually by the students, typed up by Josefina, and prepared both for performance and for inclusion in a written anthology. Josefina’s students learned a number of things simultaneously: how they can use one another’s critiques to make changes, as well as individual revising and editing under the supervision of adults; that their poems can cross into other media—printed in a booklet and performed for an audience; and that songs do not appear magically in a music video. Much work precedes even a popular form.

- *Have your students choose any song form that they like. Depending on geographic location, you might get country music, rap, heavy metal, or something I’ve never heard of. What is essential here is that the students choose their music, whatever it is. Have them transcribe lyrics, and then write their own, using the form as you’ve analyzed it from the songs they bring in. Next, discuss how accurately the pieces followed the form, and how to make them better.*

• Try the same thing but with a television or movie script. Again, decide together what the elements of a television drama or, say, a horror movie are.

• Choose a poem or song that you like and ask everyone to write an imitation of it. Have the students write before any discussion, so that they can discover the elements and form on their own. (Later, when they discuss the poem and compare their imitations, they will pick up more elements and figure out more about the form.) After one draft of writing, read aloud, discuss what people chose to imitate, and then have them do a second draft, giving everyone the opportunity to imitate further, or add further elements or stylistic devices. There are a number of excellent poems that lend themselves to imitation for many different ages of children. Look through any good anthology for poems that appeal to you.⁵

Revising previous works of literature is another approach to writing fiction. For example, some years ago I read the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine in conjunction with a biography of him. Augustine mentions his concubine of many years—mother of his son—but never tells her name. I had many reactions to reading Augustine and learned a great deal, but this particular fact stuck in my craw, and I wrote a short story called “Sermon of the Younger Monica,” which was from the concubine’s point of view. This was a deeply satisfying exercise for me, as were other stories I wrote, including a revision of Shakespeare and a couple of Biblical revisions. In my version of the Adam and Eve story, I embedded sentences from the King James translation of the Bible as well as a fragment of Milton’s description of the serpent in *Paradise Lost*.

Revisionist literature has a very long and venerable tradition: Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* uses material from Homer, who borrowed from previous stories of the gods and heroes. Eugene O’Neill wrote his own version of the same material in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Parodies and travesties are time-honored literary forms, and science fiction includes a whole sub-genre of writing about what would have happened if history had been changed. A few years ago, a science fiction editor solicited stories that answered the question, “What if, at each presidential election in the history of the United States, there had been a different outcome?” What would have happened if Lincoln had lost his election? If Richard Nixon had become president in 1960 instead of in 1968? Judy Moffett wrote a story that had Davy Crockett defeat Andrew Jackson with positive results for the United States government’s policies toward Native Americans. Beryl Bainbridge has a mainstream novel called *Young Adolf* about a visit Adolf Hitler may or may not have paid to England in his adolescence, when his brother lived there, and Leon Rooke’s novel *Shakespeare’s Dog* revises history from the canine point of view.

• Write a poem or story from the point of view of some minor character in literature—someone whose life was affected by the hero, but who did not necessarily see things the way the hero did. This can shed new light on the story, perhaps from a comic point of view.

• Try writing an imitation of some brief passage or short work, such as a parable. Write it in such a way that you critique the original or give a different emphasis. This parable from Franz Kafka is followed by a high school student’s revision of it:

A Little Fable

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate up the mouse.

—Franz Kafka⁶

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“Help!” the mouse yelled. He stood caught in the trap and had no means of escape. “Surely,” he thought, “one of my many friends will rescue me before The Cat comes.” He waited and waited and yelled and yelled, yet no one came. Finally, he saw a mouse running to him. “Mother!” he yelled. “You could be killed. The Cat will surely be here any minute! Please, save yourself and allow one of my many friends to save me,” he pleaded.

“No, I will save you my son,” she said.

“But mother, why is it none of my friends came?” the little mouse asked.

“Son, it is true, you have many friends and you have chosen them well, but only one is your mother,” she said as they ran together back into the wall, just as The Cat lunged for them.

—Billy Maris, 10th grade

Billy captures the style very well, but revises the ending to fit his own world view. This “answering back” to literature and other arts is one of the things that writers do all the time. Filmmakers use showers and towers and crowds of birds and dozens of other images that allude to Alfred Hitchcock; Anthony Hecht revises Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” in a humorous poem called “Dover Bitch.”

• Do a modern version of some other parable or fable. Aesop’s are good models, as are the parables of Jesus.

• Write your own Zen parable, using the brief, surprising forms that the Zen masters use to make their students think in new ways.

Learning to Be Silent

The pupils of the Tendai school used to study meditation before Zen entered Japan. Four of them who were intimate friends promised one another to observe seven days of silence.

On the first day all were silent. Their meditation had begun auspiciously, but when night came and the oil lamps were growing dim one of the pupils could not help exclaiming to a servant: “Fix those lamps.”

The second pupil was surprised to hear the first one

talk. “We are not supposed to say a word,” he remarked.

“You two are stupid. Why did you talk?” asked the third.

“Ha! I am the only one who has not talked!” concluded the fourth pupil.⁷

This process of using existing literature to form your own literature can be done directly, through imitation, or through the answering back of parody and rewriting, and also through something I call embedding. Embedding consists of incorporating a previous piece in a new work. One particular embedding exercise is one of my all-time favorites. It works at many levels of age and competency. I especially like to do it once with total open-endedness, then have a discussion and send students back to have another go at it.

• *Here is a Skeleton Story. Copy these words on your paper with at least three spaces between each line.*

Hi.

Hi.

Where were you?

Nowhere.

Take these words and do anything you want to them to make the story longer and more interesting. Add, change, reverse, cut.

“Hi,” said Jessie, her blonde hair bouncing up and down.

“Hi, it’s nice to see you again,” said Samantha, struggling to hold her duffel bag.

“Where were you?” Jessie wondered, eyeing her duffel bag suspiciously.

“Nowhere,” said Samantha, thinking how nosy her friend was being.

“Well, you had to be somewhere if you weren’t home last night when I called!” she said, anger sparkling in her wide blue eyes.

“You don’t have to know everywhere I go,” said Samantha, thinking about how much fun she had last night when she slept over at Kelly’s house.

“Well, then, good-bye,” said Jessie, stomping off gruffly.

—Erika Robinson, 6th grade

After everyone writes for five or ten minutes, have a short discussion and read a few pieces, to show different ways the students handled the assignment. You might brainstorm a list of ways people made their boring conversation interesting: by adding gestures, narration, and setting; describing people, specifying tone of voice, etc.

• *Do the same exercise, requiring that everyone write for at least ten minutes (or whatever length you choose). This generates more details.*

• *Go out on the street or to some public place and collect fragments of dialogue. Bring them back and write up just the*

words, then try to reconstruct a whole scene from memory.

• *Do the same thing, but by making up the scene, rather than by remembering it.*

• *Do the same thing, but exchange skeletons with someone who wasn’t in your group so that everyone has a bit of dialogue to use that is new to them.*

In one of my novels, I wrote a scene that I realized was very much like a particular Kafka parable. I tried typing and embedding Kafka’s words as a focus for my visualization of the moment of crisis in my novel. Kafka’s parable “The Vulture” ends with:

Falling back, I was relieved to feel him drowning irretrievably in my blood, which was filling every depth, flooding every shore.⁸

My scene ends as follows:

She laid her hands on her thighs and stared at her fate, at the embodied shriek that plunged and plunged, plunged deep into her throat. She felt it fill her depths, flood her shores.

I should note here that this is not plagiarism because the original material is altered so much, and also because I am not trying to pass off an entire work by someone else as my own. Jane Wilson Joyce does something along these same lines but much more extensively in her beautiful poem-saga of the Oregon Trail, *Beyond the Blue Mountains*.⁹ She uses passages of diary entries of real individuals who went on the Oregon Trail in their covered wagons, and reorganizes and embeds those bits of diaries and journals in her narrative poem, hangs her work on these structuring elements, these bones of found language. Here is one poem from her book:

Not a tree,
not a stone,
nothing
but flowers and grass.
We women
spread our skirts
for one another,
spread them wide as if about to
curtsey, plain
wool and figured
calico, overlapped,
a courtly dance of
modesty.¹⁰

She is able to pinpoint her sources for this poem: all from *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*: “Not a drop of water, nor a spear of grass to be seen, nothing but barren hills, bare and broken rock, sand and dust” (p. 207) and “Passed what is called the fort, chimney & other bluffs, in appearance resembling castles, capitals of cities” (p. 65), along with introductory material about women’s need of each other for keeping their modesty while attending to bodily functions.¹¹ She describes the process of putting together her book:

Looking back at the process [of writing *In the Blue Mountains*] now, I'd say there are probably five basic methods:

1. Straight found poems (ex. "Oh my dear Mother")
2. Pastiche found poems (ex. "Pressing On")
3. Photo-based poems (ex. "A company of emigrants")
4. Incident-based poems (ex. "Accident")
5. Free inventions (ex. "We passed a rosewood/spinet")

There are mixed methods within poems, too. The main thing is that I immersed myself in Lillian Schlissel's book. There was a time when I could lay my hand on any phrase in its 200+ pages. . . . Another hidden resource is, of course, my personal stock of memories and experiences and impressions.¹²

- *Take a journal or letter of your own, or perhaps better, of your parents or some ancestor, and choose phrases that move you. Use these as structures for a piece of prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction. Let them form the posts you hang other material on.*¹³

- *Copy a poem, preferably one from previous centuries or otherwise difficult, then write your own paragraph, short essay, dramatic scene, anecdote, or whatever you want based on that poem. Change it as far as you'd like, perhaps in the end leaving no more than a few choice verbs.*

Consciously, unconsciously, and self-consciously, we are always using previous literature when we write: we imitate what went before us; we sometimes react against it; once in a while we make something genuinely new of it.

Another Revision Exercise

In a recent talk at T&W's Center for Imaginative Writing, writer/teacher Carol Dixon described a simple but effective revision technique she uses with students. She reads them some lines from Wordsworth and asks them to move their hands according to the feeling of the lines—a kind of manual seismograph—and then reads a passage from Eudora Welty and asks what kind of weather it reminds them of. Next she reads William Carlos Williams's "red wheelbarrow" poem—an emotionally neutral piece—and asks them what feeling they get from it. Then she has them rewrite the poem to make that emotion more explicit. One class revised the poem to make it angry: "Why should so much depend / upon / this broken / red wheelbarrow / mired in mud? / Besides / the white / chickens / are for dinner." A different revision, to make the poem scary, replaced a single word: "So much depends / upon / a red wheelbarrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the giant / chickens." Dixon does this exercise to show students that revision is not just a matter of "correcting" a word or phrase, but of changing the whole feel of the piece.

—Ed.

Notes

- ¹ Wolfgang Iser, as quoted by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 79.
- ² Reprinted in Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, 2nd ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1987).
- ³ Meredith Sue Willis, "Evenings with Porter," *Pikeville Review* (Humanities Dept., Pikeville College, Pikeville, Ky. 41501), Spring, 1988.
- ⁴ These three lines are from James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" in *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1975).
- ⁵ One particularly useful anthology of contemporary poems by adults and children is *The Poetry Connection* by Kinereth Gensler and Nina Nyhart (New York: Teachers & Writers, 1978).
- ⁶ As translated by Willa and Edwin Muir in Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).
- ⁷ This parable appears in Paul Repts, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1957).
- ⁸ Translated by Tania and James Stern, from Kafka, op cit.
- ⁹ Jane Wilson Joyce, *Beyond the Blue Mountains* (Frankfort, Ky.: Gnomon Press, 1992).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ¹¹ *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).
- ¹² Jane Wilson Joyce, in a private letter to the author.
- ¹³ See also William Carlos Williams's long poem *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), which incorporates previously existing material.



A Call for Help

Teachers & Writers is sponsoring a series of discussions on reading and teaching poetry between the poet C.K. Williams, T&W poets Nancy Kricorian and Mariela Dreyfus, and a group of high school teachers from the New York City area. But we would be very grateful to have your help as well. Send us your answers to the following questions and we'll send you a complimentary T&W tee shirt:

- What materials do you currently use to teach poetry? List 10 poems (by title and author) you particularly like to read with your students. (Include students' grade level.)
- Are there any other teaching materials (textbooks, anthologies, etc.) that you particularly like to use?
- If you are a classroom teacher, do you teach poetry as a separate unit or throughout the year?
- What are your aims and expectations when you teach poetry?

But hurry: *the deadline for responses is October 1.* Send your answers to Teachers & Writers, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306. Fax (212) 675-0171.

The discussions are made possible by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Awards.

Revising the Line

A Simple Exercise

by Peter Sears

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO BEGIN A STUDY OF poetry is to begin with what students *see*: a poem is written in shorter lines than prose. Most lines begin at the left hand margin and do not extend all the way across the page. Sometimes the lines begin away from the left-hand margin. This difference between a line of poetry and a line of prose is the basis for the following simple technique for teaching poetry. I demonstrate each step below, then allow time for the students to work on their own.

Step 1: Write a descriptive sentence of at least two lines. For example:

As I looked out my window, I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed and slithering along the ground a long, green thing that occasionally stopped, coiled slightly, oozed and softly sighed.

I write my sentence on the board and wait for the students to write theirs. I make my sentence overwritten, full of commas, and in the past tense. Doing so allows for various sorts of changes.

Step 2: Place a vertical line at each point in the sentence where you naturally pause when reading aloud. There is no right or wrong place to pause.

I mark my sentence on the board:

As I looked out my window, / I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed / and slithering along the ground / a long, green thing / that occasionally stopped, / coiled slightly, / oozed, and softly sighed.

Step 3: Rewrite the sentence, starting a new line after each vertical mark.

As I looked out my window,
I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long, green thing
that occasionally stopped,

As community services coordinator at the Oregon Arts Commission, PETER SEARS directs the Arts-in-Education program and works with local arts councils. His most recent book is *Tour: New and Selected Poems* (Breitenbush). His other books include *Secret Writing: Keys to the Mysteries of Reading and Writing* (T&W).

coiled slightly,
oozed, and softly sighed.

A poem? No, and that's not the point. The point is that the line-breaks provide opportunities for changes—and changes that do not involve major revising of the sentence. If students ask to change their sentences, say fine, but bring the new version up through step 3.

Step 4: What is your favorite word in your sentence? Mine in my sentence is “oozed.” I want to give my favorite word emphasis. How can I do that? I will try placing the word on a line by itself. If you want to do this for your favorite word in your sentence, go right ahead. See how it looks.

As I looked out my window,
I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long, green thing
that occasionally stopped,
coiled slightly,
oozed,
and softly sighed.

There are other ways to emphasize a favorite word, such as writing the favorite word in capital letters or with dashes between the letters. Whatever the method, encourage it, because the point of this exercise is to show how a poet can use the visual effect of the poem to enhance the impact of the words. The freedom to set the poem on the page the way you want appeals to students.

Step 5: Ask about the punctuation.

Students are likely to say that my poem doesn't need punctuation. I always hope that a student will say that the line breaks take the place of the punctuation: in the example, all but one of the commas appear at the ends of lines.

Do I need the punctuation? No? Then I'll drop it. If you punctuated your sentence and you don't think that it now needs punctuation to be clear, copy your sentence over without it.

As I looked out my window
I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing
that occasionally stopped
coiled slightly
oozed
and softly sighed

Through these five steps not one word of the original sentence has been changed. Yet the sentence certainly *looks* different.

Step 6: Well, if we can drop punctuation, then perhaps we can drop some of the words and not lose anything. What do you think?

The best candidates in this demonstration sentence have proven to be the phrase “of the shed” and the word “occasionally.” Other choices have been “long,” “slightly,” and “softly.”

If the students don’t offer suggestions, pick out your own and re-copy the poem—or, if you prefer, just cross out the deletions. I will drop the modifiers in the last four lines.

As I looked out my window
I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing
that stopped
coiled
oozed
and sighed

What I like about this choice of deletions is that it leaves on single lines both “oozed” and “coiled.” A student noticing this may point out how one apparent improvement has canceled out a previous improvement. So what do you do? Well, agree. The student is right. But we are not talking about right or wrong; we are talking about choices. So compliment the student, and discuss with the class which improvement is better, then choose one or the other.

I like to bring up another way to solve the dilemma. I say that the ending has four different words of action. All of these are not equally important. Perhaps one—but not “oozed”—could be dropped.

Students usually pick either “stopped” or “sighed.” I try each one out by drawing a light line through one, and then the other. Students see that deleting “sighed” doesn’t solve the problem: we still have “coiled” by itself on one line and “oozed” by itself on the next. Dropping “stopped,” however, does solve the problem because “coiled” can now replace “stopped” so that the line reads “that coiled.” What I like is a student’s suggesting that both “stopped” and “sighed” be dropped. That way, not only is “oozed” on a line by itself but the word gains further emphasis by ending the piece. Here is the example sentence without the last suggestion:

As I looked out my window
I saw sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing
that coiled
oozed
and sighed

Step 7: There is another simple change that can be made. Put the sentence in the present tense. One can make it more suspenseful by shifting it from the past to the present tense. The

principle of immediacy. This principle doesn’t mean much to students because they are used to narrating events in the past tense. Still, the principle is worth introducing. Ask the class, “Do you like the past tense for this sentence, or do you think it might be better in the present tense?”

As I look out my window
I see sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing
that coils
oozes
and sighs

Step 8: I involve the brevity principle by raising the question of whether or not the parts about the speaker of the sentence, the “I,” really add much to the sentence. Usually, the students don’t take to this question, but I press ahead.

Part of the sentence is about the person who sees the “long green thing” and the rest of the sentence is about the “long green thing” itself. Do we need the part about the person who sees it?

This question is optional: it involves a more difficult concept of revision. So don’t be surprised if students shrug or shy away from it. The point is to demonstrate that revision is not just editing, but re-thinking what is most important about one’s own writing. So, to keep the exercise moving and to emphasize that the exercise is a matter of choices, just say that you are interested enough in the possibility to try it. You just want to see how it will look. You can always go back to the way the sentence was.

Sliding down the drainpipe of the shed
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing
coils
oozes
and sighs

Students like to see me walking right back into the problem of trying to keep “oozes” the only word on a line by itself. Some students say that this problem returning shows that the idea isn’t any good. Leave it the way it was, they say. So I keep trying: I lift “coils” up to the end of the previous line and look at it. I want to demonstrate experimentation as much as I can.

Sliding down the drainpipe
and slithering along the ground
a long green thing coils
oozes
and sighs

There is one other thing I always do with my example. Whatever way I leave the revision, I always write the original sentence in prose right next to the revision and ask students which version they like better. If they have participated in the

choices along the way, they prefer the revision. With that you have accomplished some important teaching: the students have used the visual possibilities that poetry affords to improve a piece of prose.

This doesn't mean they all agree with all the changes made along the way. All the better. The lack of agreement demonstrates that people's choices aren't all the same, and that is just fine.

If I haven't exhausted their interest, I ask them to write down why they like one more than the other. And if they are still with me, I ask them to write down why they prefer one form of their own example over another. Saving this exercise for homework or the next day may work better.

I try to leave the sentence in each of its steps on the board and number them. This way I can show the students that the first five steps involved no change in the wording of the sentence whatsoever. All we did was to break the lines where we naturally paused, break another line in order to focus on my favorite word, and dropped punctuation. We didn't change a word until step 6. In fact, at no time through all the steps did we add a single word.

And you can vary the eight steps any way you want. You can take some out and add some of your own. I have found it advisable to keep the first three intact. I vary the other five according to the level of the students and the sentence itself.

Have you demonstrated the nature of poetry? No, but you have accomplished critical steps by introducing poetry from the standpoint of *writing* it:

1. A person writing a poem chooses to write lines of varying length that do not necessarily reach all the way across the page.
2. By using lines of varying length, the writer sets up possibilities for enhancing the impact of the words.
3. This possibility of giving the words more impact opens up the important possibility of using fewer words than one might in writing prose.
4. The more distilled the wording, the more special the wording may become.

This technique of changing prose to poetry can demonstrate some basic points of poetry to high school and middle school students, and perhaps to upper elementary school students as well.

If you wish to go further with this technique, here are some questions for students:

1. Is a line broken at a natural pause for breath easier to read than a line of prose that goes all the way across the page?
2. In a line of poetry, what word or words do you notice most?
3. Does this create any possibilities for the poet?
4. Might there be an advantage in breaking a line not at a breath pause but, instead, at another point?

Most students will say that a line broken at a natural breathing pause is easier to read than a line of prose that goes all the way across the page, because the poetry line is shorter than

the prose line. Books for young children, often written in short lines, reflect this preference.

Because a line of poetry is shorter than a line of prose, the last word in the line gets considerable notice—perhaps as much as the first. Ask the students which word they think gains the most attention. Then ask if the location of a particular word in a line creates any possibilities for the poet. A good way to show students the visual importance of the last word in a line is to write out in prose a rhyming poem or song lyrics. Students are quick to reset the lines according to the rhyme. This exercise demonstrates how a poet may use a rhyming pattern to organize a poem visually as well as orally.

Of course, a poem needn't be in rhyme for the last word in the line to have an impact. For example, the mood and pace of an action poem can be intensified by line-ending words that have sharp sounds—such as “bat,” “hit,” “strike,” and “crunch.” Likewise, you can create a soft mood by choosing end-words that have soft sounds: “ocean,” “flower,” and “meadow.”

Is there a situation in which the poet gains by breaking the line at some point other than that of a natural breath pause? For example, say the line-break for a natural pause creates the line “My best friend is a dog.” If the break is after “a,” the reader reads quickly through the line and down to “dog” on the next line. This line-break speeds up the poem. Choppy motion and sudden acceleration may be just what the poet wants for an action poem. A poet can speed up or slow down the movement from line to line by the selection of the line-ending word, a technique not available to prose writers.



PLUGS

The poem on p. 12, “Pages from a Notebook,” is from *Blood and Feathers: Selected Poems of Jacques Prévert*, translated by poet Harriet Zinnes and recently published by Moyer Bell, Kymbolde Way, Wakefield, RI 02879, tel. (401) 789-0074. Retail price of the paperback edition is \$9.95.

In *This Same Sky*, Naomi Shihab Nye has collected 161 poems from contemporary writers around the world, most of whom will be new to American readers: Iraqi and Palestinian poets alongside those from American Samoa, India, and South Korea, for example. The collection coalesced around poems that Nye, herself a poet, had been using with her students ages 10–adult. Published by Four Winds Press, at \$15.95 in hardcover.

T&W has just published Meredith Sue Willis's *Deep Revision: A Guide for Teachers, Students, and Other Writers*, in paperback (\$13.95) and hardcover (\$22.95) editions. Order from T&W, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003–3306.

Pages from a Notebook

by Jacques Prévert

Two and two four
four and four eight
eight and eight make sixteen
Repeat! says the teacher
Two and two four
four and four eight
eight and eight make sixteen.
But lo and behold the lyre-bird
passing in the sky
the boy sees it
the boy hears it
the boy calls to it:
Rescue me
play with me
you, bird!
Then the bird with joy
flies down and plays with the boy
Two and two four
Repeat! says the teacher
and the boy plays
and the bird plays . . .
Four and four eight

eight and eight make sixteen
and sixteen and sixteen what do they make?
Sixteen and sixteen do not make anything
and especially not thirty-two
in any way
and they go away.
And the boy has hidden the bird
in his desk
and all the children
hear the music
and eight and eight in their turn go away
and four and four and two and two
in their turn clear out
and one and one make neither one nor two
one and one like a shot go off
And the lyre-bird plays
and the boy sings
and the teacher cries out:
When will you stop being the clown!
But all the other children
listen to the music
and the classroom walls
collapse quietly.
And the windows turn again to sand
the ink to water
the desks to trees
the chalk to cliffs
the quill to a bird.

JACQUES PREVERT is one of France's most celebrated 20th-century poets. For more information, see "plug" on p. 11.

—Translated by Harriet Zinnes

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The work of Teachers & Writers Collaborative is made possible in part by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is particularly grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: American Stock Exchange, The Bingham Trust, The Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry, Chemical Bank, Consolidated Edison, Aaron Diamond Foundation, The Heckscher Foundation for Children, Morgan Stanley Foundation, New York Telephone, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, New York Rotary Foundation of the Rotary Club of New York, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, IS 44, IS 54, PS 75, PS 84, PS 110, PS 188, IS 136, the Columbus Academy, the Dalton High School, East Manhattan Outreach Center, the Lower Lab School, and the District 3 Dual Language Program, Manhattan; Districts 7 and 8, PS 49, PS 72, PS 75, CS 152, Bronx; Districts 13, 15, 16, 18, and 19, PS 58, PS 219, PS 282, PS 32, and James Madison High School, Brooklyn; Districts 25, 27, and 29, PS 42, PS 62, PS 90, PS 164, PS 165, PS 201, PS 225, PS 41, Queens; the Dinkelmeyer School; Jacob Gunther Elementary School; Park Avenue School; Saw Mill School; Nassau County BOCES; the North Shore Hebrew Academy, the Webster School; the New York School for the Deaf; the Beecher Road School; the Deerfield School; Isabella Geriatric Center; Arts Connection-Arts Exposure; the Arts & Cultural Education Network; the Girl Scouts of Greater New York; and the New York Zoological Society.

Editor: Ron Padgett. Assistant editor: Christopher Edgar. Printer: Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

ISSN 0739-0084. This publication is available on microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106. Teachers & Writers Collaborative is a partner of the Library of Congress.



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