

Seven Strategies For Helping Students to Assess and Revise Their Own Writing

1. Share lots of sample papers.

- Do not use sample papers from student writers who are in your class.
- Use samples that are either very strong or noticeably weak on a given trait.
- Work on just one trait at a time.
- Read all the samples you use aloud.
- Make an overhead of each sample paper you use. You can hand out hard copies too, if you wish, but use an overhead anyway.
- As you present each paper, give students a minute to talk with a partner before asking for comments from the large group.
- Ask for a show of hands: How many give it a 5 for Ideas and Content? How many gave it a 4?...and so on. Then record the numbers on a chart or chalkboard.
- Encourage students to be specific in explaining the reasons behind their scores. If a paper is "pretty good," they need to explain why; if it needs work, ask, "What would you do to revise it?"
- Be sure to have copies of the scoring guide available for students to refer to when commenting on sample papers. This helps them use and learn the vocabulary of the traits. It also helps them to understand and justify their scores.

2. Share print materials to illustrate strong and weak examples of each trait.

- Bring your favorite literature to class and share it aloud with students. Use the literature to illustrate compelling voice, exceptional word choice, notable detail, rhythm and flow of sentences, etc. Choose a segment small enough that you can share it orally and on an overhead. As an example, if you are focussing on voice, ask students to identify the writer. If they cannot, ask them to create a mental profile of the author: How old is the person? Male or female? Serious? Sarcastic? If focussing on

other traits, ask students to think about details, moments of fine word choice, the rhythm and flow of sentences, etc.

- Ask students to share their favorite literature and to highlight passages as examples of one or more of the traits.
- Use other print materials. Don't just stick to books. Print materials offer striking examples, both strong and weak, of the traits. Check newspapers, catalogs, magazines, textbooks, junk mail, greeting cards, menus, office memos, letters, brochures, advertisements--and anything else you can think of. Here are a few ideas when using print materials:
 - Rate an office memo for conventions;
 - Look through junk mail for examples of strong and weak ideas and content, strong and weak voice. Which pieces get your attention?
 - Find some examples of greeting cards that catch your eye or touch you--as well as some that turn you off. Score them for word choice and voice--then revise. Create your own greeting cards for your own special occasions--e.g., "Dedicated Student Day." Compare the results; how do different people use voice to give their message a special style and flavor? Can you tell who wrote which card?
 - Check out a sample menu or two. Which ones are written best? Why? What revisions would you make?
 - Review a set of directions for the trait of organization.
 - Examine newspaper articles. Which traits get the most emphasis? Why?
- Picture books are an outstanding resource for teaching the traits. Picture books are short. Within just a few minutes, you can make a strong case for the lure of a good opening (organization) or illustrate the power of thoughtful word choice. Picture books entice readers of all ages; so don't feel that if you teach middle or high school, your students will have outgrown this delightful resource.

3. Ask students to help you revise your own writing.

- Don't panic! It's normal to feel insecure about sharing your own writing. Remember, if you feel this way at the thought of sharing your writing, imagine how some of your students feel.
- This strategy works better if your writing needs work. If you're too good, you'll blow the whole thing. You want flaws in the writing, so students can easily suggest things to revise.
- It doesn't have to be long. One paragraph will do nicely. In fact, if you write more, you may make the lesson too cumbersome. So, keep it short and weak-to-mediocre.
- Select one trait to focus on. Ask students to help you revise something you have written so that you get a "5" or "6" for organization or voice, etc.
- Review the key characteristics of the trait you have selected before you share your writing. Get students talking about the trait. Ask them to tell you what a writer must do to be organized, have good sentence fluency, etc.
- Read your paper aloud to the students. Make a copy for the overhead and, if possible, provide students with their own copy.
- Rate the paper. Ask students to rate your paper (1 to 6) for the trait you have selected. Also ask students to justify or explain their scores, using language from the scoring guide.
- Get some guidance for revision. Ask students for suggestions on how to improve your writing for that particular trait. Write down their suggestions. Model appropriate responses to their feedback/criticism.
- Revise your paper for the trait your focussing on. Use the suggestions that your students have given. If some of their suggestions address a different trait, point this out.
- Share your revised paper with students on the overhead, and, if possible, on student copies. Your revised paper should show your cross-outs, arrows, inserts, etc. Let them see the process of revision. Explain what you did as you go over your revision.
- Share your new draft when it is complete. Score the new version with students in the same manor you did with the first draft. Ask how you can make it even better.

4. Have students work in pairs to revise (a) a piece of writing that is not their own, and then (b) their own writing.

- Select a trait. Discuss the trait with the whole class.
- Put students in pairs (ask them to select their partner or you assign their partner).
- Read aloud an anonymous writing sample. Ask students to write down a score (1 thru 6). Have students compare their score with their partners. Ask partners to discuss their scores. If they don't agree, ask them to work it out, using the scoring guide to help them.
- Now it's time to check on scores for the class as a whole. You can do this with a show of hands.
- If the students in pairs or as a whole class are within a point of each other, that's considered agreement. The main thing here is to make sure they understand the difference between organization and lack of organization or between fluency and nonfluency, etc.
- If students disagree by a lot, this usually means that they don't really know a trait inside out--yet. They need more examples and more teaching.
- Once you have a clear sense that students understand a particular trait, ask them to revise the paper with their partner for that trait only. Give students up to 20 minutes to work on their revisions. They should write them out.
- Reconvene students and invite volunteers to share their revisions aloud with the whole class. Every group does not need to do this--there won't be time, for one thing. But try to get at least three or four pairs to volunteer. That way, you can hear some differences and make the point that there is usually more than one path to effective revision.
- Once you have confidence that students in pairs are effectively revising anonymous samples, you can have them revise their own writing by themselves or with partners. Proceed here with caution, especially when students are asked to share their own writing with partners.
- Once you are confident that students can revise all 6 traits effectively, you might consider creating editing groups. Each

group could be assigned one of the six traits. All papers would cycle through each of the 6 editing groups for revision.

5. Provide opportunities for students to share what they know, reinforcing their thinking on the traits.

- Students respond positively when they are given a chance to be the expert now and again. In sharing what it means to be a good writer, students learn to express themselves in a variety of creative and personal ways. They clarify and expand their own thinking about writing in a manner they might never do as passive listeners. Check out these ideas for giving students a chance to share what they know:
 - Ask students to write a letter to a favorite author. These letters give students an opportunity to ask questions, compliment authors on a particular work or passage or writing trait, etc.
 - Partner with another grade level teacher and switch papers. Have each student read 5 or 6 papers from the other class. Then lead a discussion that generalizes the strengths or problems they saw. Ask students to then draft a "Dear Writer" letter, offering some tips for making the writing stronger.
 - Ask students to write letters home to someone who could listen and respond to their writing. The letters should explain what the reader at home should be looking for in reviewing their writing.
 - If your students keep a portfolio of their writing, ask them to compare their earlier writing with their later writing. Ask them to reflect on growth in a particular trait of writing. If they don't see any growth, have them establish a writing goal (use the writing thermometers to track their growth).
 - Have students give book reviews based on a trait or traits.
 - Have students develop their own editing or revision checklists.
 - Have your students coach younger students on writing.

- Ask students to create alphabet books on writing and revision.
- Have students create slogans or bumper stickers with writing tips based on the traits.

6. Link the traits to effective strategies and lessons you already use to teach writing.

- Think about the lessons you already do to help kids with their writing. Chances are you can link them to one or more of the traits. You are undoubtedly already teaching idea development, growth in word choice, organizational skill, sentence fluency, etc--even if you haven't been referring to those traits by name in your lessons. Learn to mentally "file" your lesson plans under the trait headings, and you'll soon see how many things you are already doing to support growth in each trait.
- Refile your old files. Create a file called Ideas and Content, one called Organization, and so on. Then just start putting things in as you use them. For example, the lesson on sentence combining that you have done for years--wouldn't that be filed under Sentence Fluency? The lesson on transitional words? Organization!

7. Use minilessons to build skills in each trait.

- Mini-lessons are usually short (five to ten minutes). They focus on a problem or question that interests or befuddles students at the moment. Minilessons are specific, highly focussed, and based upon student writing or from real-life writing samples you have collected and presented to students. For instance, if you have noticed that many of your students are having trouble with semicolons, or with leads, or with showing instead of telling, you might plan to do a minilesson on one of these topics. A minilesson, for example, that will encourage students to go from telling to showing addresses the trait of Ideas and Content. Specifically, you might provide students with a sample sentence that merely tells the reader something rather than shows something. For example, you could ask students to provide details to the sentence: "The tennis player was skilled." Once students have added details,

have them read their pieces that now show the reader something about the tennis player.

Final Thoughts:

It is tempting to teach revision by actually doing the revision for students. This approach rarely works. When the focus of instruction is on strengthening student's revision skills, rather than fixing the writing for them, students actually become better editors and, therefore, better writers.

Good Writing equals Good Thinking.

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"In order to know what I think I have to write and see what I say."

E.B. White