

CHAPTER FIVE

Revising Is Re-Envisioning

Revision involves reflection and rethinking not what a piece of writing is, but what it might become. It requires time to consider roads not traveled in the first draft. It often involves collaboration and discussion. It can include sticky notes, index cards, computerized comments, colored pencils, highlighters, and messes. Always messes. And always allow time.

—Kate Messner

If you ask teachers, they will tell you that revision is one of the most difficult tasks to get students to perform regularly. Some of the children struggle so much to complete the assignment, they are happy to get it finished. Other children have basketball, swimming, or dancing three evenings a week and are not very interested in performing a thorough revision. Even the most eager and enthusiastic writers are ready to move on to something new once they have completed a draft. Convincing them that good writing requires extensive revision can be onerous. The good news is that poetry, with its nuance, sensory engagement, and attention to language, can help you make the case.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Revision encompasses a range of different elements, including capitalization, word choice, organization, and content. Even the simplest revision checklist is likely to have 5 to 10 items. Simple revision can include looking to see if the text makes sense, if the grammar



KwameTime
Video for Teachers
Revising Poetry
(See page 19.)

and spelling are correct, and if the use of words is effective. The task of revision can seem so overwhelming that it becomes an exercise that students and teachers want to avoid.

We must keep in mind that revision is not a one-size-fits-all lesson. Some students need assistance with word choice, while others struggle with structure and organization. Conferences and small-group instruction can help develop revision skills, but there is only a limited amount of instructional time. In truth, revision is like trying on a bathing suit—at some point you have to go into the changing room and put it on by yourself.

When students ask me what’s the hardest part of writing, I answer, starting, getting it all out on paper—every last forced, dissatisfying word. My favorite part is the rewriting. It’s more tedious and takes the longest, but there is something satisfying about cleaning up your work, putting a polish on it, making it shine.

I wrote *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band* in two weeks, and it was a very rough draft. It took me six months after that to get it right, and I was very pleased with the outcome. *The Crossover* took me nine months to compose the first draft and about four more years of editing, rewriting, and peer review to get it in its final shape. I not only prefer rewriting to writing, but like Ms. Morrison, I love it. I think this has to do with the fact that I am a poet.

Poetry is a tool that can encourage and instill good revision habits. Poetry is usually short. The compactness of the genre allows students and teachers to read through the text several times and focus on specific aspects for improvement. It is much easier to read through a haiku or a short free-verse poem and make suggestions than it is to work through a two-page report. At the same time, in a poem, students can see almost immediately how revision can improve the quality and presentation of their work. Changing one word or including a line break can make quite a difference.

In poetry, revision has some twists that are different from prose. For example, capitalization, spelling, and syntax matter until you read e. e. cummings. In the poem “2 shes,” he joins unrelated words and splits words at the ends of lines.

Emily Dickinson frequently employed dashes to punctuate her poems instead of using periods and commas. She even applied capitals to words mid-sentence and not just at the beginnings of lines.

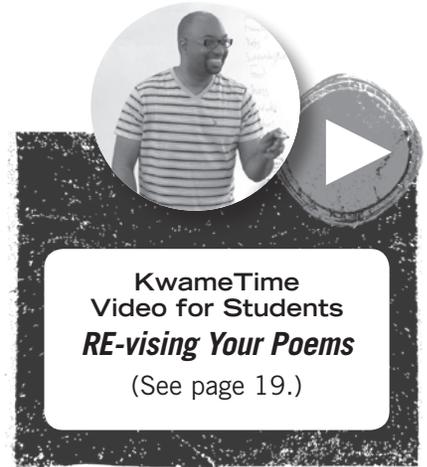
EXCERPT FROM “2 SHES”

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laughing obvicouldn’t
ouslyhelp it why be
cause. (9–16)

—e. e. cummings

Purposeful Revision

Given the examples from Cummings and Dickinson, poetry revision is not a straightforward set of rules that can be listed on an anchor chart at the front of the classroom. The most important aspect of revising poetry is being purposeful. In my workshops, I tell students they are free to ignore capitalization, make up words, or skip punctuation, but they must have a reason and intent. This restriction allows students some flexibility to exercise their creativity, but it forces them to be purposeful in the application of unconventional practices.



Line Breaks

Another twist to revising poetry involves the use of line breaks. In some cases, the rule is straightforward. A haiku has 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second line, and 5 syllables in the last line. In other cases, the placement of line breaks is less obvious. Should each line express a complete thought or image? Should each line end with a rhyme? Or, should the poet employ enjambment—continuing a thought over two lines? The idea of purpose cannot be discarded when considering where a line break should occur.

Having said this, I am honest with students when talking about line breaks. Sometimes the line breaks are based on a rule as in haiku, sometimes they are based on complete thought or a rhyme, and sometimes they are just a feeling.

QUESTIONS for KWAME

When you're stuck how do you know how to turn it around and write?

When I have writer's block, I stop trying to turn it around. I just put it aside, and work on something else. And read. Or shoot hoops with my kid. Or listen to music. Or read other people's poetry for inspiration. And, it works. Eventually, I'll get unstuck and find my way back to it.



Lesson in Action

Helping Students Understand Line Breaks

One exercise to help students understand line breaks involves “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams. Begin by taking the original poem and rewriting it like prose:

*So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens.*

Then ask the students to add line breaks to turn the sentence into a poem. The lesson reinforces the idea that poetry is different from prose, and it also forces students to think about the application of line breaks. In the original poem, Williams has four stanzas of two lines. The second line in each stanza has two syllables, while the first lines switch between three and four syllables. After students have presented their work and you have examined the original, ask them to decide how Williams used line breaks. You might even reflect on which students were closest to Williams’s original poem.

Another exercise to help students apply line breaks is an exercise called “The Power of Three.” Simply put, write a poem (or revise an existing one) with only three words in each line. (See Chris Colderley’s Solo Act on page 88.)

A third exercise is to have students study the same text shared as both prose and verse to determine how line breaks affect the power of a piece. In “A Shattered Wall,” the student poet added key line breaks and formatting to increase the power of her words.

A SHATTERED WALL

Sometimes, I feel like my temper and I are standing on opposite sides of a glass wall. Every time I get annoyed, my temper punches the wall, and it cracks. A tiny crack, but enough to make it easier next time I get frustrated. Sometimes, after a lot of punching, the wall shatters. I can’t prevent the wall from shattering, but I can pick up the pieces and build a new one.

—Kiley, 3rd grade

A SHATTERED WALL

Sometimes, I feel like my **TEMPER** and I
are standing on opposite sides
of a **glass wall**.

Every time I get **annoyed**,
my temper punches the wall, and it

c r a c k s.

A tiny crack, but enough
to make it **easier** next time I get frustrated.
Sometimes, after a lot of punching, the wall

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I can't **prevent** the wall from shattering,
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SOLO ACT: CHRIS COLDERLEY

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER, BOOK-IN-A-DAY POETRY FELLOW

During Kwame Alexander's Book-in-a-Day writing fellowship in Brazil, I wrote this short piece in my journal:

LOOKING FOR A MORNING SONG

In the morning I walk down the soft red sand path. Birds caw from hiding places along the way. The road ends at a clearing edged by dense palms and dark shadows. The ocean inhales and exhales somewhere past the trees. In the church on the right an organ plays. I look into the trees for the slightest movement. Maybe there's a monkey who will wave good morning before she runs away. This morning, I'm looking for a song floating in the trees.

By using the rule of three, I can apply line breaks to this piece of writing:

LOOKING FOR A MORNING SONG

In the morning
I walk down
the soft red
sand path. Birds
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Maybe there's a
monkey who will
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before she runs
away. This morning,
I'm looking for
a song floating
in the trees.

The poem is not complete yet, but I do have a piece that looks like a poem and can be revised with a purpose in mind. Have students try this with pieces of their writing. This exercise helps students with the organization of their poetry and gives them a starting point for more serious revision.

Word Choice

Another aspect of revision in poetry is word choice. Although the right word in the right place is an important tenet of prose, it is more critical in poetry.

Lesson in Action

Helping Students Understand Word Choice

“How to Ruin a Poem” (Thinkmap Visual Thesaurus 2012) is a lesson that asks students to alter a classic poem by using inelegant language and clumsy word choice. Using Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “We Real Cool” shows how this exercise reinforces word choice.

WE REAL COOL

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

EXCERPT FROM “RUINED COOL”

We are trendy. We
Left the academy. We

Hang around after dark. We
Shoot pool. We

Say bad things. We
Drink liquor. We

Mock good things. We
Will perish in a little while.

In the “ruin a poem” revision, the brevity of the poem is lost along with the rhyme and rhythm that make it such a memorable piece of writing. The changes also remove the alliteration that Brooks used to create a firm beat, as well as the creative word choices such as “thin” and “June.”

Sharing Poetry

“It is important to read your poems aloud in order to really understand them.”

—Nikki Giovanni

Reading poetry aloud to a classmate or to the entire class should also be a part of the revising and rewriting process during writing workshop. Creating a classroom where students are comfortable sharing their work requires some attention to etiquette and rules of engagement.

These behaviors begin well before students make formal presentations and should be established early in the year. If you want students to share their work, you have to create a community of writers that is safe and supportive, but most of all, honest. Any serious writer knows that the world is full of critics. Students need to be taught that constructive criticism is not a personal attack, but an opportunity to reflect upon their work and make improvements.

Small-group shared reading and writing with peers is a practice that allows students to engage in meaningful dialogue about their writing and think about the choices they have made in their texts.

Kwame’s Wise, Kind Student Listening Guide

- Listen, listen, listen! Shhhhhh. No talking over the poet.
- Focus. Rustling papers or moving around is a distraction. Stay put.
- Be kind to the poet. No boo-ing, eye rolling, or making fun.
- Offer applause or snaps. It takes a lot to speak in front of a group.
- Offer criticism. Start with what you liked, provide constructive criticism on what could have been better, then end with something you liked.
- Offer suggestions for possible extensions, deletions, or follow-up poems.
- Respect the mic! Be nice and do unto other poets as you would like them to do unto you.



SOLO ACT: ANN MARIE STEPHENS

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER AND PICTURE BOOK AUTHOR

The act of revising can be a daunting task at any age, especially with young children who are still learning what this means. But we can work on word choice, especially when we combine it with the borrowed poem concept.

Choose a simple poem such as the oldie but goodie “Roses Are Red.” Write the poem on a chart or the board. Circle the words red, blue, sweet, and you. Ask the students to look through their crayon boxes for red and blue crayons with unique names. (You’ll get things such as lava and manatee these days!) Record the names for the class to see. Then ask for suggestions to replace the word sweet. Talk about things that are sweet, and add these to your list. Rewrite the poem by choosing a new word for each of your circled words. Read the new poem aloud. The results are usually hilarious!

Do a few more shared examples. Later, create a template with this same poem, leaving blanks for the circled words (rosespoem.pdf). Give each student a copy, and allow them to use the lists to create their own borrowed poems with amazing word choices! Some students will even want to use their own ideas. Encourage sharing when they are complete.

Literary Excellence

Time spent revising poetry teaches students to write carefully and purposely. Once students believe their personal choices have a purpose and a value, they are more eager to undertake the task of revision. All poems are works in progress. Part of the experience is giving students ownership and encouraging them to pursue the kind of literary excellence necessary for publication.

**You
CAN Too!**

1. How can you establish with your students that revision may be the most important part of the writing process?
2. For what reasons are line breaks and word choice more important with verse than with prose?