

Make it Messy!: Teaching Revision in Our Students' Own Words

Mark Trushkowsky

Many of us have found that our students often have a precarious relationship to the revision part of the writing process. Some students do not see the purpose and others doubt their own ability to make proper revisions and prefer to wait for the teacher to exert an expert authority over their words.

The seeds for this lesson were planted during a lesson study I was part of at the ALC at LaGuardia Community College in 2002. A group of teachers got together to write, model and revise a lesson on revision. The lesson I present here is quite different from that original lesson, and from the many incarnations in between. After all, what kind of self-respecting lesson on revision could not have undergone its own revision process? I really enjoy thinking about all the different forms this lesson has taken, because doing so provides me with a kind of autobiography regarding the development of my teaching practice. In the spaces of difference between the lessons, there is an opportunity for analysis of my own teaching practice, understanding the changes and choices I have made. The lesson lends itself to teacher self-reflection as well as to student development.

Throughout all of the variations, I have always had the following goals in mind: (1) to get students to experience the oft-repeated idea that when it comes to content, they are the experts in their own stories, (2) to introduce students to understanding the part of writing that is about making choices, (3) to model and explore revision but keep both the stories and the strategies in the students own words, (4) to set goals for revision that came from my students instead of from me, (5) to structure and support student independence in revising their papers - not just re-write it over on another sheet of paper - I wanted them to make their papers messy.

In this packet I offer you the following: (1) a pre-activity, followed by the steps for carrying out the activity. (2) some suggestions to connect the activity with other work you may be doing in your classes, (3) a few variations of the activity, (4) I offer you some examples of student work resulting from the activity. These examples come from several different BE level 2 classes.

Prior to the Activity

I have had very interesting results prefacing the revision activity with a brief discussion on writing. I ask students who wants to be a better writer and they all raise their hands. Then I ask them, "What do you want to be able to do with your writing?" I record their answers on the board or on newsprint and then type them up and give the list to students at our next meeting. I am always inspired by the passionate reasons students give. It is a wonderful thing to say "I want to be a better writer", but it sounds vague when compared to "*I want to live forever - when I put my ideas on paper, they will stay for many years even after I die and people will know who I was through the ideas that I wrote down and my experience will benefit future generations*" as one BE level two student said in my class. Having their own individual inspirations can really encourage them though the struggle to express themselves on the page. It also reminds us how personal a practice writing is for our students. Here are some further examples of students expressing in their own words why they want to become better writers.

What do you want to be able to do with our writing?

- 1) I want to be able to write without doubts
- 2) I want to be able to write better so I can use my writing to improve my reading
- 3) I want to be able to continue to educate myself
- 4) I want to be able to write what is on my mind easily
- 5) I want people to be able to understand what I am trying to say in my writing
- 6) I want to be able to write all my ideas - when I write I want to think and build my knowledge – writing is like our brains are working like the internet doing research
- 7) I want a good job and be able to write when I need to
- 8) I want to take notes about what I am doing so I can understand things later and better
- 9) I want my ideas to come together in my writing
- 10) I want to be able to express myself clearly - writing is the best connection between people
- 11) When I talk, I can talk with all of my feelings and I want to be able to write with all my feelings/experiences
- 12) I want everything I write to make sense to people who read it
- 13) I want to prepare myself for the GED
- 14) I want to be able to use writing as an exercise to practice my mind
- 15) I want to help younger people with their writing
- 16) I want to be able to know what is in my mind's eye
- 17) I want to stop making grammar mistakes
- 18) I want to write exactly what is in my mind - sometimes when I write I can't think of the exact word, I can think of a similar word, but it is not the same
- 19) I want people to understand my papers - if I make too many mistakes, people won't understand my ideas
- 20) I want to be able to express myself with a lot of meaning, using English vocabulary
- 21) I want to write to my daughter because there is no time to talk - I don't want to write a lot, but I want to write deep meanings
- 22) It is hard, I feel like I am always writing the same things with the same words
- 23) I want to live forever - when I put my ideas on paper, they will stay for many years even after I die and people will know who I was through the ideas that I wrote down and my experiences will benefit future generations
- 24) When I write, I always have to think in my language first and I do not want to do that - I want to be able to think in English

Basic Revision Activity

Step One: Creating and Revising the First Description

Materials: Two different colored markers (or chalk), a board or newsprint, a class set of copies of a photograph of a person

Hand out a copy of the photo you chose to each student. Ask them to look deeply at the photo for at least four to five minutes. Ask them not to write anything and not to discuss the photo. It is a little strange to be asked to look at a photo for a few minutes, so give them an extra minute or two to settle into concentration. If a student looks up from the photo, point their eyes back to the page. You want to give them enough time for their eyes just start to go beneath the surface of the picture.

Give them a thirty second warning and then a ten second countdown. Tell them to give the photo one last look and then ask them to turn the photo face down on their desk. Ask them not to turn the photo back over – the time for looking is over. The reason I don't want students looking at the photograph while they are building this class description is I am trying to recreate something in students' imagination that is similar to what is going on when they are writing. When a student is writing a personal narrative, it is most often a memory of a person or place that is not directly in front of them. When we are writing about those things, our initial impressions tend to be disjointed.

Tell them that you'd like them to create a class description of the photograph. Ask for a volunteer to start describing the photograph to you. Make sure students are giving you complete sentences – we are looking for a descriptive paragraph, not a list. Record the descriptive paragraph on the board (or on the newsprint). After the first volunteer has given you one or two sentences, ask for another volunteer. Continue asking them for more and more until they can not remember anymore. It should take about 20-30 minutes. It is nice to have the jumble of ideas of many minds writing one description, because it mirrors a free write (and the Three T's we practice in journal writing in my class - Think on the page, Trust the voice in your mind and Treat every word in your mind like precious gold.)

Some things to keep in mind as you are recording their paragraph: (1) Write things as student say them. Every step of this activity is about students vocalizing what is going on in their own words. (2) Do not edit. Because my focus is to have them revise their ideas, I do not want grammar to be an issue, but for me the goal is having the description in students own words. (3) If one student says something that has already been said, or contradicts a previous sentence, do not even bring it up – just write it again. If another student points it out, say, "We can fix that later. For now let's just try to write as many ideas as we can."

Read the paragraph out loud and ask if they think it is a good description. They will say yes, because it will be a good description and they'll have made it together. If someone says it is not, ask why. If they point out any repeated ideas, or a jumbled order of ideas, gently suggest, "Maybe we can work on it to make it even better, but would you say it is a pretty good description of the photograph that we looked at." You want them to give them a chance to feel good and feel proud of their class description. If a student makes a comment like that it makes a great segue into step two of this activity. If a student does not, you can raise the issue yourself. After they have applauded their description and feel good about it, ask them, "Is there anything we can do to make it even better?" Even though they will like their description, they will be engaged by the idea of improving upon it.

Let them turn over the photo and look at it in silence for another 3-4 minutes. Then have them turn it over again.

Grab the other marker, a different color from the first. Ask for a volunteer to make the first suggestion. In my experience, students will make the following categories of revisions: adding more details; adding a psychological or emotional content; grouping details or ideas that go together; rearranging the order and flow; combining sentences; tightening repeated phrases; eliminating repeated details; creating some kind of introductory piece. The key to this part of the activity is to go slow. You are modeling a revision practice that you will be asking them to implement. You should be asking them the revising questions you want them to internalize. When that first student makes a suggestion, tell her that you are merely acting as their hand. If they say, "Put all the sentences that describe the place together", ask them to be more specific. You want students to direct you to specific sentences and tell you exactly where to move them or how to change them. Students need to see that this part of the improvement involves them thinking, strategizing and most importantly, making choices. In terms of strategy, make sure you let it all come from them. I repeat, you are only a hand, connected to their brains. It is the act of making these choices we are exploring here. Do not erase, even if the student suggestion is an elimination. You are using a marker of a different color for a reason. Cross out, circle, use arrows, re-write, do whatever they tell you, and make it messy. After a few suggestions, the description may begin to get unreadable from your students to your students. If this happens, after every few suggestions, stop and read the latest version of the description out loud to them. Because it is all coming from your students, you can do this with any level class. It will open incalculable opportunities for you to ask a question that you want them to begin to internalize. If they direct you to make a change that requires another change, make sure to bring it to the students' attention. Usually after you do it three or four times, other students will begin to pick up on it. For example, say a change moves some things around such that what was once a word in the middle of a sentence is now the first word. You can ask them, "If I move this, do I have to change anything else around it?" You will have a student who will say you need to capitalize the word, because now it is in the beginning of the sentence. This is a question you want students to be asking themselves in the future. If there gets to be a lull in their suggestions, but you think they are capable of adding more, ask them, "I like it. Is there anything we can add to make it even more interesting?" but do not offer any more guidance than that.

You should expect this part of the activity to last for at least 45 minutes to an hour. After they have "made it messy!", read out loud one last time. Ask them if they think the description is better now than it was when we first did it.

If you did not use newsprint, you will need to copy down the description. I recommend following the first colored marker you used and writing the brainstorm. Then with a different color pen/pencil, make that description messy with all of the student revisions.

For the next class you will need to type up the descriptions. Prepare a packet for your students of the following: (1) the first page should be typed version of their first description. You could title the page, "Brainstorm" or "First Description" (2) the second page should be the same printout as the first, but made messy with the student revisions made in pen on the paper, (3) the third page should be the second description with all of the handwritten changes from the second page actually made in the typed description. Draw a line at the top of the second description. This is for students to give the story a title.

Make a copy of this packet for each of your students.

Step Two: Learning From Our Revision

Materials: Board (or newsprint), copies of the packet prepared at the end of Step One.

Give the packets out to the class and ask them to read the two descriptions. For my BE students, I tend not to use the words “draft” or “revision” because at this moment, I am prioritizing the concept and the practice. I do not want them simultaneously struggling with learning a new vocabulary word and a new concept. But for the sake of the conversation that is about to happen, you have to call each description something. You can always call them “the first description” and “the last description”, but you can usually tie into something you are doing with them elsewhere. In the reading component of my classes, we use the word “brainstorm”, and so my students are comfortable with it. For that reason, I tend to call the first description, “our brainstorm”.

After they’ve read the descriptions, read the first out loud. Remind them that they’ve already expressed that the second description is an improvement over the first. But remind them that the brainstorm was good as well. Write **“What was good about our brainstorm?”** on the board (or on newsprint), and put the question to them. Record their answers. Students will generally speak to the flow of ideas and the thinking/writing process. I do this because I want students to understand the value of that first draft, and they will, saying things like, *“when we are writing about things we can’t remember, writing can help refresh our minds and our memories”*, *“we kept getting new ideas from the things we were writing.”* or *“when we write everything that we were thinking, we will have a lot of good details that we can use later to make a good story”*. The reason why I think this is an important step is because I don’t want to send the message that if you are extra careful the first time, there is no need for revision. I think we have all had those students who want to spend 45 minutes writing 5 perfect sentences, as opposed to thinking on the page and trying to write as much as possible. I want to help them realize why it is not only safe, but useful to be a little freer with their ideas during a brainstorm.

Next, read the improved description. Explain to your class that you want to take a closer look at all the things they did to improve their description so that each of us can improve our own stories in a similar way. Write on the board, **“What did we do to improve our description?”** pose the question to your students and record their answers. The point of this part of the activity is to create a list of things students can have, so when they have a first “description” (story, draft), they will have something to guide them to improve upon it in a way they can connect to this class effort. The more specific you get them to be, the more useful the list will be for them. If they get stuck, direct them to look at the second, messy page in their packets. If they say something like, “add details”, write that, and then push them deeper by asking what kinds of details they added to this description that we can add to future writing. If they say, “We moved things around”, write that, but then push them deeper by asking questions like, “What kinds of things did we move around?” or “Where/why did we move different sentences around?” You can also ask them to find a specific sentence they moved and ask why.

Student responses to these two questions should be typed up and given to them. You can title this, “Suggestions on How to Improve Any Story”. This will allow you to read and discuss the ideas further with your class. It also gives them a tool they can refer to while they are writing which will offer them suggestions (from their peers, in their own words) about things that they themselves can do to improve their own papers.

As a final point, you can ask your students whether they think the second description could still be improved even further. If they have some ideas, have them write on the page you typed and make it messy. At the very least, have them individually read the second description and decide on a title to write on the blank line you provided.

Connecting this Activity to Our Class's Other Work

1) There are many copies of early drafts of prominent documents in American History. These can be used to connect writers in history (or literature) to the revision model students have learned. I have used FDR's "Day of infamy" speech and the Declaration of Independence. After the revision activity, you discuss the historical setting of your document of choice. For example, if you are doing any work connecting to the Revolutionary War or human rights, get your students comfortable with the significance of the Declaration of Independence, both historically and for us today. Once students have an appreciation for its importance and for Jefferson's literary estimation, show them a copy of an earlier draft of the Declaration, with revision marks all over it. Ask them how it was similar to what we did and all of a sudden they'll start yelling "He made it messy just like us!" Then ask them, "Why did someone like Jefferson write the Declaration and then make it messy? Why didn't he just write it carefully the first time?"

2) Collect a piece of writing from each student right before you do the revision activity. After Step Two, give the piece of writing back to them. Ask them to read their writing over. Then give them pens of a different color and ask them to make their papers messy and improve their stories. Some students will need more guidance. Ask them to read their papers and then look over the class's ideas about **"What did we do to improve our description?"** Ask the student if they could try any of those specific suggestions with their stories. If they say yes, ask them to do so. If they ask questions about what to do, try to put the question back to them. If, for example, they say, "I want to move this sentence but I do not know where?", ask them why they want to move the sentence. You want to get them to be thinking about choices and to start making them. They may make choices you disagree with. For me, that is ok, because that is part of developing independence in our students. This lesson is about building better writers, not necessarily building better stories. But you should be walking around as students are making their papers messy. As they are making revisions, you should be unobtrusively asking them why, not for them to defend their choice, but for them to explain their thinking.

3) I have the benefit of having my students in a computer lab for part of class time. After students right a first draft of a story, they type it in to the computer. Then they print it out. At that point, I ask them to take out a pen or pencil and to make that printout messy. I ask them to look at the "Suggestions to Improve Any Story" and choose the suggestions that help them the most with their own paper.

4) If students use journals in your class, I have found that this activity is a good model to help students take a journal entry and develop it into a more finished piece of writing. You can model this specific process with a page from your own journal. You can also meet with a student individually and talk to them about which of the "Suggestions" could help them.

5) After the activity, to further reinforce the practice they've defined, ask students to finish the following sentence, "A better writer is a person who..."

Here are some answers I received, again from a BE level 2 class:

A Better Writer is a person who...

- practices
- uses the new vocabulary words they learn
- is clear to help other people understand them
- reads a lot and wants to make other people feel the same way when they read our stories
- goes back and helps themselves
- learns from their mistakes
- wants to express the thoughts and feelings that they have in their minds so people can see the life they have lived and see the perspectives of their ideas
- has a lot of details
- writes with a high comprehension of what they want to say
- brings the story together so the reader can actually put themselves in that position
- is always thinking of the center point and gives the reader encouragement to think about this point
- is always thinking of changing people and of changing society
- understands their own ideas better by writing about them
- can read their own writing and learn something new
- can always improve their writing
- has a clear message and wants to get it across to people

Variations on the Revision Activity

- 1) “Psychiatrist” Version: Before giving out the photographs in step one, send a student out of the room. Proceed up through creating and completing the brainstorm. Invite the student back in and ask them to read the description. Then cover it up with newsprint (if you wrote it on newsprint, fold the newsprint). Ask them to tell you what the picture looks like and write down their description in a similar manner. They will have certain details right and certain details wrong. It is interesting to ask the rest of the class why they all thought the description captured the photograph, yet the student could not perfectly envision the same. Your students will begin to understand that the difference between them and the lone student was that when they were writing/reading their description, they had the picture in their minds. The lone student, who has not seen the picture, can not call upon the same. This is a nice way to get students to consider their readers and think about the responsibility to use their words to create in the mind of their readers the same thing they see in their own mind’s eye. You can also talk about the difficulties in writing about things that are familiar to us – we take for granted so many of the details because they are second-nature to us.
- 2) There is another variation to have your class discuss the difficulties in describing the familiar. Do steps one and two. When you are looking at the packet with the three descriptions, you can ask them something like, “We all really liked our first description and thought it was complete. But then we added all these other great details when we improved our story. Why did we think the first description was finished?” This is another way to help them realize that what each of us sees in our mind is not apparent in the minds of others unless we try to make it so.

Samples of Student Work

I have done this lesson with a wide variety of classes. I am including the following student work from a few of those classes:

- 1) Page 9 shows the brainstorm description of one class, and page 10 shows the revised story. After we did the revision activity, this is what I gave back to students to help them reflect on what we had done.
- 2) Pages 11 and 12 are the description and story from another class, looking at the same photograph, with page 11 being the initial brainstorm and page 12 being the improved version.
- 3) Pages 13-16 are the classnotes from discussions had in four different classes after doing the revision activity. The questions were posed by me, but all of the descriptions of what we did, how to turn a brainstorm into a story, how to improve your stories, etc. came from my students. I recorded all of their answers (which is why I have them to share with you). I also brought the classnotes to the next class and used them further, as a student created text, where we read them together, answered any questions that came up and most often took the conversation deeper. In one class, after discussing the classnotes, students decided to create a checklist of questions they could use to help them develop their own stories.

Our First Description – Writing Down Our Ideas



She is a soldier. She has a flag in her left hand. She has a big hat on her head. On her body she is wearing bullets. She has a machete in her hand. She is a beautiful woman. She is standing on the tracks at a train station. People from the back are looking at her. Behind her on the left there is a man holding a flag. She has black hair and thin eyebrows. She looks serious. She looks scared a little bit. She is dressed in the fighting dress. I think she is Mexican. I think she is preparing to depart for war because her face looks worried and sad. She looks like a guerrilla and she is standing for something. She is wearing boots and heavy clothing. It looks like it is winter. She is a successful soldier. She is a strong woman. She is about thirty years old. She is holding up a stick. She looks ready to fight. She is a freedom fighter. She is waiting for something and wants to show her flag. She wants to share something with us. She looks like a warrior. I think she is struggling for something. She is in Mexico. She is hesitant. She is a wise woman and very proud of her country because she is holding a flag and fighting for some reason. She is carrying a sword

A Soldier for the Revolution

This picture shows a Mexican woman from the country, wearing work clothes. She is standing in the middle of the tracks at the train station. She is a soldier of the revolution. She is a beautiful woman. She has black hair and thin eyebrows. She has rustic features. She worked in a field before. She is from a low social class. She is not standing like someone from the high social class. She does not care about how she looks. She is wise and very proud of her country. She is holding her flag and fighting for a cause. She has a machete in her right hand and a Mexican flag in her left hand. A machete is a long, thick knife that they use to cut cane and to cut throats. On her body she is wearing bullets. She is a successful soldier and a strong woman. She is dressed in the fighting dress. She is wearing boots, heavy clothing and long pants. She has a big hat on her head. She looks serious and desperate about the care of her country. She is a guerrilla. She does not agree with her own government and is fighting against it. She is standing for something. She looks scared in her eyes. Her eyes are in pain. I think she is preparing to depart for war because her face looks worried and sad. She is hesitant, but she is ready to fight. She is a freedom fighter. She is waiting for something. She wants to share something with us. She is a warrior. She is struggling for something.

People from the back are looking at her. Behind her on the left there is a man who is holding a flag. She is standing in front of the people to protect them. It looks like it is winter.

Our First Description



She is homeless. She looks maybe like a soldier.

I think this is a souvenir picture of a Mexican soldier. She has long boots, long pants, and a big cap. In her hand is a long sword. She has a cross belt with bullets. In her other hand is a flag. By looking at this picture, she symbolizes revolution.

The people standing behind her are well dressed.

They look like politicians. They are all men and

well dressed. She is standing on a railroad track. She looks like a border guide.

She is going to fight for her freedom. This is an old soldier. He is strong. He is a

soldier in the army and he wants to fight for his rights. She is fair in her

complexion and looks like she is in her thirties. She looks like she has long hair

and she is dressed in a soldier's uniform. She is standing on the train tracks. She

looks like she is standing there to stop a train from coming into the station. He or

she has to be from Mexico because of the color of the flag she is holding. For the

fact that she is sinking the flag down on the track, she symbolizes victory. She

looks too young to understand what she is doing. Behind her there are many

people. There are soldiers behind her in dress uniforms with large hats. The time

frame she represents is from the 1960's to the 1970's.

A Story of a Young Soldier

This is an old photograph from a long time ago. She is young, Mexican soldier. She has a serious face and she is not smiling. She has a frightened expression, but her eyes are full of courage. Someone is taking her picture and she is ready for that. She has long boots, long pants, and a big cap. She is fair in her complexion and looks like she is in her thirties. She looks like she has long hair and she is dressed in a soldier's uniform. In her right hand is a long sword. She has a cross belt with bullets, but she doesn't have a rifle. In her other hand is a flag with the colors of Mexico. By looking at this picture, she symbolizes revolution. She looks like a border guide.



Behind her there are many people. They are all men and well dressed. They are regular people in dress clothes, like the kind of clothes that they used to wear back in the day around the 1900's. They are looking at this soldier who is standing in the middle of the tracks. They look like politicians.

She is standing on a railroad track. She is going to fight for her freedom. She is strong and she wants to fight for her rights. She has a bomb in her belt. She is standing on the train tracks. She looks like she is standing there to stop a train from coming into the station. Because of the way that she is sinking the flag down on the track, she symbolizes victory. She believes in what she is doing. She believes in fighting for her nation. She is protesting about her rights. The time frame she represents is from the 1960's to the 1970's. She is a soldier in a time when people are fighting for themselves and their country.

The regular people behind her stand side by side, waiting for the train with anticipation, like this is the first time the train ever came to this place.

Using a Brainstorm to write a better story

What is a brainstorm?

A brainstorm is when you write whatever comes to your mind – you don't think about it, you just write it. A brainstorm is what we write in our journals. Every time we “think on the page” in our journals, we are practicing how to write a brainstorm.

What is good about writing a brainstorm?

- there are so many different ideas that come out
- it was instant thinking and instant writing
- writing can help refresh our minds and our memories
- brainstorms exercise our minds and they help us to *find* more ideas in our mind
- the more things you write down, the more ideas will come to your mind
- a group brainstorm can help us because 20 minds is better than just one mind thinking
- when we write everything that we were thinking, we will have a lot of good details that we can use later to make a good story

How can we use our brainstorm to make a good story?

- read your brainstorm and make it clear to yourself first – the more clearly you understand what story you want to tell, the more clearly you can explain it to someone else
- the brainstorm has a lot of different ideas and you have to read it and figure out what to use in your story – you have to figure out what will go first and what will go at the end
- look at all the details in your brainstorm and decide which ones will be good for the story
- choose how you want to present the story and put the details in order
- imagine (make a picture in your mind) about how people and places look ***and*** write it in your story – you have to put the picture you have in your mind into the mind of the reader
- the brainstorm is like the material you give to the tailor – the tailor takes the material and decides the best way to use it to make a beautiful shirt – you are like the tailor – you have to decide the best way to use your brainstorm to make a beautiful story
- make the story more clear – the brainstorm has everything mixed – we have to read it and then put everything in order
- Add more details!
 - o **What kind of details should you add?**
 - o It depends on what your story is about, but you want the reader to understand exactly what you are writing about
 - o if you don't add details, the reader can get confused
 - o details also make your story more interesting – you have to read your brainstorm and think about what details the reader will be interested to read
 - o The stories and pictures in your mind are special
 - o **Some examples of details that that we think are interesting**
 - o Details about the relationships between people
 - o Details about why people do things
 - o Details that describe the place and surroundings
 - o Details about the expressions on people's faces
 - o Details about what is going to happen
 - o Details about the problems and situation that people are facing
 - o Details that show someone's character

Using a brainstorm to build a better story

What is a brainstorm?

- A brainstorm is when you write everything you think and your brain has so many questions and ideas and you write them all down
- a brainstorm helps build up the story with words, ideas, and questions that come out of our minds

How does a brainstorm help us become better writers?

- when you write a brainstorm, you focus your mind and open your mind to ideas
- a brainstorm helps you think, it helps you figure out where your story should start
- a brainstorm can help you to figure out what you want your story to be about
- a brainstorm can develop your feelings and your imagination about your story because you can go on and on and find so many questions and answers about your story
- we can put so many details in a brainstorm, even if they are not in the right order, because when we make a story from our brainstorm later, we can use those details to help the reader see more clearly what we are trying to express
- when you write a brainstorm it makes you go further and further into your ideas
- everything we see in our mind we can make into a detail and every detail we put into our story can make our stories longer and easier to understand for other people

How can we use our brainstorm to make a good story?

- we can read our brainstorm and look for good details that will make our story more interesting
- we can change our thinking – after your brainstorm, your thinking will be clearer about what you want to write – your brainstorm helps you figure out what your story is
- look at what you wrote and try to add words that are more exact about what you are trying to say
- add more vocabulary and explain the words we use
- write your own opinion or advice about the story
- check and read it over to make sure that each sentence makes sense
- What information does the reader need to understand what you are trying to explain?
- Describe the place – make a picture with your words so the reader can see it clearly
- Describe the people in your story (describe their clothes, their character, their feelings, the things they care about)
- Describe more about the person
 - o What are they doing?
 - o What is their point of view?
 - o What they see with their own eyes?
 - o What problems and situations they are facing?
 - o What do you see in their face?
- What are the results? What happened?
- What advice would you give to that person about their problem/situation?
- What suggestion would you give about this situation?
- What questions will the reader still have about your story?
- How do the people in the story feel about what happened?
- How did the people in the story change? What did they learn?
- What is a good ending for your story

Working on Our Writing

In class Sefa said, the first time we write down everything in our mind. Then we go back and think about how to make our story better. Here are a list of ideas our class had about how to go back and improve every story you write.

How can I make my story better?

- add more sentences, add more information
- add more details to make your story more clear
- add our opinion about the people and places in our story (What do I think about them?)
- add details about what people's faces look like and their feelings. Like when we wrote, "Her eyes are in pain."
- change words that we repeat a lot. Like when we changed "She looks like a warrior." to "She is a warrior."
- put the sentences in order to make it more clear
- think about the main idea we want the reader to have
- put the description in order – put what you can see and physical descriptions in the beginning – then think about the people in the story and add details about what we imagine about their faces
- add words and change sentences to be more specific
- describe more about where people are (What does that place look like?)

What kind of details can we add to make our stories better?

- 1) Describe words or ideas that might be unclear and explain them more. Like when we wrote, "A machete is a long, thick knife that they use to cut cane and to cut throats."
- 2) Add details about what the people in the story want (What are their goals?)
- 3) Add details about why the people in the story do things (What is their motivation?) Like when we wrote, "She does not agree with her government and is fighting against it."
- 4) Add details to describe how the people in the story feel
- 5) Add details to describe where people are from and what kind of life they had
- 6) Add details to describe the way people are and how they act (characterize them) Like when we wrote, "She does not care about how she looks."
- 7) Add details to describe the background, heritage, traditions, legacy, culture of the people in the story

Working to Become Better Writers

As a class, we wrote a description of a photograph and then we worked together to improve our description. In class we talked about the different steps in our writing.

First we Brainstorm: What was good about our brainstorm?

- the first time, we wrote whatever came to our mind, we just put it down without analyzing it, which is good because we can get a lot of ideas on paper and then later we can review it, fix it and add more
- we can write whatever we want, and whatever we see – we are free in our brainstorm
- the brainstorm helps us think of ideas and create a center – then later we can add more to the center and try to make it more clear

After our brainstorm, how can we make our stories better? Make it messy!

- after we wrote the brainstorm first and then we went back and made it better
- we try to put every sentence in a place that makes sense
- we try to make more connections between the sentences, so our story makes more sense to the person reading our story
- our brainstorm was jumpy – we try to make our better description more smooth
- we try to make sure the ideas go step by step
- we try to add more to give a clearer picture
- we try to give the right perspective of how the story starts and ends
- sometimes we have many good ideas, but they are mixed up – we have to go back and try to put them in the right order
- we can describe the place more to help the center make more sense – in our brainstorm we wrote what happened, before we wrote where it happened – it is more clear to write *where* something happens first
- the brainstorm is like a puzzle, and in the second description we put every sentence in a place that makes sense
- we try to add more details because when we are writing something, we lived it and we know exactly what happened – but when someone reads our story, we have to be clear and add details so people can have the same picture in their minds as we have
- it is like when we cook – first we cut all the ingredients like onions, garlic, vegetables, and spices and put them all in separate bowls – then we cook it all together and taste it to know how to change things and make it taste better
- it is like when a reporter goes around and asks everyone their opinions and then the reporter has to go and put all those opinions in order to make an article for the newspaper
- it is like when we move to a new apartment – the first step is when we put everything in boxes and bring those boxes into our new home – the second step is when we have to unpack all the boxes and decide where everything should go
- we try to add more information
 - o we can add more about the personality of the people in our story
 - o we can add more about the specific things the people are doing
 - o we can add more to explain why people do things
 - o we can add more to explain where things happened and what that place looks like
 - o we can inform the reader exactly what we are going to write about to make it clear to them
- There is a lot to it to write something and make it clear to another person

A Brief Note on Choosing a Photograph

I have done this activity with dozens of photographs. There is no right or wrong photograph. I offer the following suggestions to consider when making your selection: No recognizable or famous people. Choose photos with only one person in them. Go for a photo of a person with some implied larger story, or at least of a person with some kind of perceivable emotional content. Try to avoid pictures that are confusing or cluttered. If possible, choose photos where some sense of place is visible. Photos where the individuals can be construed as a symbol also work well.

I have used Rosie the Riveter, a photo of a soldadera from the Mexican Revolution, a photo of Dorothy Day sitting calmly in the middle of several police officers, a photo of a bare-chested Woody Guthrie strumming a guitar in the woods to cite a few examples.

I hope you have as much fun doing this with your students as I have had doing it with mine. I look forward to hearing about responses they generate. I also look forward to any improvements, suggestions, questions, challenges that come up for you. You can reach me at mtrushkowsky@mail.cuny.edu