It's Never Written in Stone: The Agony of Revision

BY RUTH BAJA WILLIAMS

"Good job!" I praised Jessica's first attempt at a draft. We had worked together to decide which parts of her story had to be revised. She'd forgotten some capitals at the beginning of the sentence. Her transitional spelling was wondrously inventive. Two ideas had been unnecessarily repeated, a clear sign of an interrupted thought. Waqeeem, who sat next to Jessica, had accused her of stealing his eraser. An argument had ensued, only to abate a moment later when the eraser was found. If I could have recorded the exact times of repetitious passages in Jessica's draft, I bet they occurred when her attention had been stolen from the task at hand.

I conduct writing workshops for first, second, and third grade classes at my elementary school in a Washington, D.C., suburb. Generally after we have gathered on the carpet and thought about our week's writing topic and shared ideas with each other, the students are eager to get to their writing notebooks to set down their ideas. The first day, the idea-gathering day, is usually smooth. On the second day, draft day, the students gather on the carpet once more to share ideas, then enthusiastically return to their desks to write their drafts. I remind them that they are writing a draft; this is not their final paper. I show them the beautiful "good" paper on which their final work will be written.

A heavenly hush settles over the classroom. This is the honeymoon period. The kids are engrossed. I sit at the front of the classroom with a clipboard, working on my draft. After 10 to 15 minutes the classroom teacher and I begin circulating to discuss (loudly so others can hear) works in progress.

Suddenly someone claims to be finished. The race is on. The room is peppered with shouts of "I'm done! I'm done!"

"Nobody's done," I remind them. "This is only your draft." I might as well be speaking Middle German. There is pride in what they have worked so diligently to produce, but they are not done. How dare the teacher say they are not done. Amid the tumult, nine-year-old Jessica's thumb slides silently into her mouth.

How do we teach the beauty of revision when it is such an agony for young writers? Their first products are not written in stone. Authors will tell you that even their final versions are not written in stone. So-called final versions can always be corrected. I've heard that skilled carpenters in the Middle East purposely insert a flaw in their finished carpets, for only Allah is perfect. We know erring is human, but a child's bright eyes will soon be dulled when teachers say, "Okay—now write it out again."

"AGAIN?" comes the wail.

"Yes," says my controlled voice. "That was only your draft."

A very bright first-grader, Mohammed was way ahead of the class when he completed his first draft. It was neatly, painstakingly written out with few areas to be revised. Together we changed a șunu to țion. I pointed out that the initials for compact disc should be capitalized and the word shiny should include an i. I gave him the "good" paper, saying all he had to do was write it out again. He balked. He put his head on his desk and pouted as I went to help answer the call of some wildly waving students. When I returned to Mohammed, he had done no work. I said he was so close to finishing. Now he only had to write it out again with the corrections, just the corrections. Again I left him to heed the call of other proud authors. When I returned to Mohammed, his page bore three entries: țion, CD, and i.

A teacher isn't supposed to laugh at a student's work. She certainly should not become hysterical. What could I do? Mohammed was literal, and that was good. I tantalized to the class teacher, who succeeded in cajoling Mohammed to complete his revisions correctly.

After this I took more time explaining the writing process. I told a third grade class that writing is like the life cycle of the butterfly (they had just learned about this in science.) The idea of the story is the egg. The draft of the story is the caterpillar. The revision is the pupa. The final paper is the butterfly. Young writers still want to produce butterflies right away. It's up to us to teach them the steps leading up to the final product.

Have you heard the story of the British publisher that put out a new revised edition of the complete (or should be "compleat"?) works of Shakespeare? Undoubtedly, the best editors in the world had gathered to produce this work, but before someone caught the error, some copies were distributed with: "To be or to be." When you think you are truly done, revise and revise again.

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A Short Take on Revision

BY MARK FARRINGTON

In teaching revision, I give students a number of exercises designed to show them that writing is fluid. I'll ask them to change the point of view of their stories, for instance. I'll have them go to a spot in the story where something happens and write "What if?" in the margin, then list five other things that could happen instead. The point is to demonstrate that working with a piece of writing is more like working with clay than with granite. Writers can add, remove, or reshape anything at any time; some writers even continue to revise a piece after it's been published. When it comes to a piece of writing, nothing is written in stone.

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