

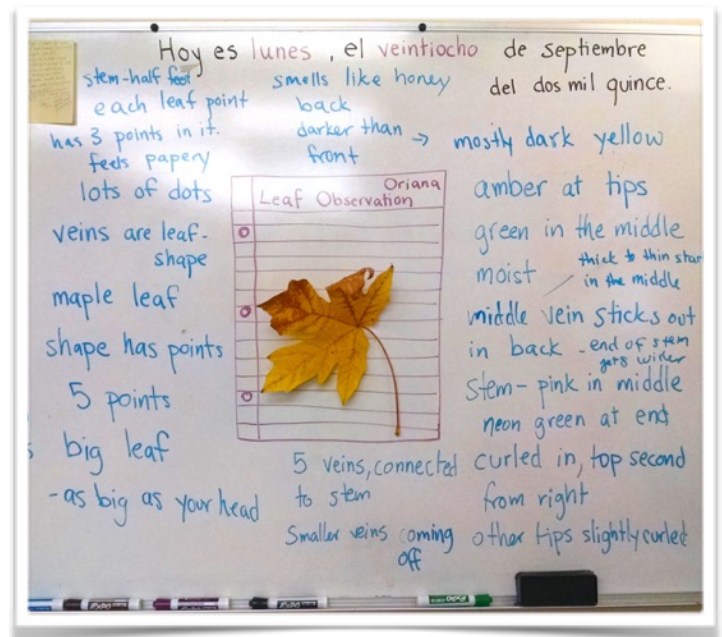
MAKING IT BETTER

Improving descriptive writing in young children through exposure, analysis, and repeated revision

Reading the work of seven and eight year olds can sometimes be a dull task. They have moved beyond the world of the absurd (to some extent) and into a world of realism – straightforward, bare-bones, sequential realism. The beginning of Adele’s “I Am From” poem tells us: “I am from my friends, kind and helpful. I play with them and it makes me happy.” Part of a three page long poem from a strong and confident writer in her second week of second grade, many may look at this stanza and think it a sweet and competent example of early writing. But what does it really tell me about Adele, her friends, and the world they inhabit? Not much. Hoping to take these emerging writers to the next level, my focus during our Fall term became *descriptive writing*. My central question, however, goes beyond how to enrich children’s descriptive language, and aims at the root of the problem: How can I encourage young children to **make their writing better**? How can I teach them to write with an audience in mind, to reflect critically on their own work, and to revise it using an arsenal of language tools? How can I get my students to prioritize painting a vivid and engaging picture with their words above the tantalizing prospect of *being done*?

What is descriptive writing?

I began my research in a mixed second and third grade classroom by introducing my kids to the idea of “good description”. The first component of successful descriptive writing we examined was **specificity**. Using the context of science, students practiced making written descriptions *specific* enough to indicate which leaf in a pile of leaves was their own specimen. Observation became key, as well as noticing details and differences. Students noticed that what made their



Class description of a maple leaf, using content vocabulary, numbers, directions, and specificity.

leaf unique was also what made it interesting and identifiable, and this was what they needed to include in their description for their classmates to find it.

In our study of the local indigenous tribes of the Willamette Valley, specificity became crucial as an effort to combat stereotypes. Reading through an antiquated text about Columbus' arrival to the new world and its depiction of indigenous peoples in contrast to a Paul Goble book about the Lakota people, I posed the question: *What makes one book offensive and the other informative?* Among a myriad of answers, the underlying theme became clear; one depiction flattened the image of indigenous peoples that spanned across several islands and an entire continent, lumping them together and describing

“It seems like the Columbus book made it look like Indians were just one thing, they weren't complicated enough to be real.”

- EVA, ON STEREOTYPES IN LITERATURE

them using inaccurate and degrading language. The second book, however, spoke of a specific tribe, and the details in it were rooted in historical fact. The tribe's clothing, belief systems, and rituals were those specific to the Lakota people. In their own writing, which took the form of first person journals from the perspective of a Kalapuya tribe member, I was careful to reinforce the expectations of specificity, based on what they had learned about these people thus far.

Next we moved on to another hallmark of engaging writing by noticing that a good description usually made us **feel something**. Whether reading about early humans crossing the Bering Straight and feeling the wind whip across our faces, or smelling the steam rise from a rice bowl in the wooden hut of our read aloud book, kids started to pick up on the fact that good writing makes the reader feel like they're inside the story, actually experiencing the things being described. Our fall poem writing workshop began with students laying on the carpet in a dark room, eyes closed, incense burning, while they listened to a reading of fall poems by Mary Oliver and W.S. Merwin. Rubbing their eyes stretching their limbs as they rose from this little trance, their task was to answer the question: *What did you see in your mind? What did you smell? Hear? Feel? Taste?* Following this exercise we created a mind map to record ideas of what our five senses experience most vividly in the fall.

In our writer's workshops, I could sense us creeping closer to our goal. At the very least, now that we understood two valuable components to good descriptive writing, our objective had been established. It was now up to me to decide what tools students would need to accomplish it.

Exposure

The first ingredient to being able to recognize and analyze good writing is to be exposed to it. As simple as this may sound, it can be easy for students, parents, and teachers alike to reach for independent reading material and read aloud books that they feel are at a child's lexical level. For emergent readers and writers, these can often be low level texts that are void of rich description. In thinking about my unit on descriptive writing, I took extra care in selecting our Fall read aloud book and ended up choosing Grace Lin's *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* for its lush settings, rich language, and almost constant use of simile. This book became a vehicle for several mini-lessons, including one on comparisons in descriptive writing. It was also the basis for our Powerful Word lists, a compilation of juicy words collected, defined, and utilized by students. These words became a cornerstone of our later revision process, and a tool that the kids showed genuine enthusiasm for, even having "Powerful Word Contests" during recess.

In addition to our read aloud text, I made an effort to consistently highlight good descriptive language in all aspects of our school day, especially non-fiction research. In fact, it was during one morning when I was reading from a text on early human migration to North America as well as from one student's report on Woolly Mammoths, that my project cracked itself wide open. After reading aloud, I was led to ask the students a

Teacher Tip: Powerful Words

I have been astonished by the success of making Powerful Words lists in the classroom. Students use these words over and over again in all aspects of their writing and speech, even making games at recess to see how many they can squeeze into a conversation.

- 1. Collect Powerful Words from a Read Aloud text.** Choosing texts with rich language that are a stretch above the children's lexical level is important. During a daily read aloud, children collect the words they find "powerful" (fancy, interesting words they would like to remember) by writing them down on ringed notecards, using their best guess-and-go spelling.
- 2. Look up one Powerful Word.** Once a week, students choose one powerful word from their cards to define (the teacher providing a fair way for them to choose in order so that no one repeats a word). If there are not enough children's dictionaries in the classroom for everyone, this can be done in small groups throughout the day.
- 3. Write the definition and an example sentence.** Students may copy directly from the dictionary or modify the definition to make it easier to understand. Example sentences can be invented or taken from the read aloud text. These are written on strips of chart paper and then pasted together on a class poster.
- 4. Post defined words in clear view.** Students will want to reference these posters during writing times.
- 5. Use Powerful Words in daily talk.** A fun way to incorporate these into normal conversation is to create a game where each time a PW is heard, students quickly put a hand on their head to call attention to it. Soon students will be using them just to see if their friends notice.
- 6. Type and print words as a reference tool.** In our classroom, posters came down after several weeks (once definitions had been mostly memorized), and our PWs were typed up, printed out, and stapled.

simple question: “What makes these descriptions successful?” Their responses blew me away; clearly in all of their exposure to good descriptive writing they had made some decisions about what it had in common. Writing furiously on the board to take down their suggestions, what I ended up with were the following components to a great description: Descriptive (juicy and specific) Adjectives, Descriptive Verbs, Powerful Words, Comparisons, Use of the 5 senses, and Fun/Putting the reader in your shoes. That morning I sent them off to their writer’s workshop, but as it settled on me what they had just presented me with I decided to return the next day and take it a step further.

I opened the lesson by handing out a nicely typed rubric-style checklist of their ideas, written with examples and empty boxes to be filled in with different colors. “I was so impressed by what you taught me about descriptive writing yesterday, I decided to type up your ideas to make a writing tool.” Proud faces shone around the room. I explained that we would be using this tool to look at different pieces of writing in order to decide if they were strong descriptions. After assigning a color to each of the six boxes, we first looked at a paragraph from *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, written largely on a piece of chart paper. When we were done underlining, the paper lit up like a rainbow. “Wow! That’s a really great description! Look at how many things she packed into just a couple of sentences...” exclaimed several kids. The buzz around the room was clear, we were onto something.

“I liked how Gary made it fun, and by saying “you” instead of “them”, he made me feel like I was really there”







- SAMUEL, TALKING ABOUT THE SUCCESSFUL USE OF THE SECOND PERSON IN A NON-FICTION REPORT ON WOOLY MAMMOTHS.

Analysis

Using this tool as our guide, we began to analyze all the writing we could get our hands on to investigate whether it was successfully descriptive. Often our writing workshops would carry forth a theme from the checklist; one day a paragraph written to children of the future describing to them a recess activity (descriptive verbs), one day describing how their character looked in their Kalapuya journals (descriptive adjectives), one day of describing the experience of autumn in their Fall poems (5 senses). After each exercise, we would take time to underline our writing with colored pencils in order to see at a glance what we accomplished. As we acclimated to this process, I modeled the underlining for them in a mini lesson at the beginning of the workshop, using a mentor text or my own writing. This served to inch them forward in their recognition of verbs and adjectives (a distinction that is still difficult for second and third graders) and provided opportunity for valuable conversations about what constitutes a genuine comparison, as well as when similes are really most useful.

Looking at my writing before tackling their own took some of the pressure off of the task of reflection, and for many turned it into a kind of game, a treasure hunt for good writing. Coming from an undergraduate background in creative writing based largely in small group workshops, I entered teaching being comfortable with this dynamic. I am confident in my skills as a writer, and eager to share my work with others for dissection. It took me years to get to that place where feedback was appreciated instead of dreaded, and I hope that by modeling this attitude for my students will get them there sooner. Being vulnerable with them by sharing my own work and reflecting on its quality also helps to shift the power balance of the classroom and to build caring and playful relationships, all keys to a successful writer’s workshop. Of course, after self reflection comes an equally daunting task- once we know what is there and what is lacking, *how* do we begin to make it better?

What makes a good description?

<p>Descriptive Adjectives <i>Examples: turquoise, papery, circular, enormous, tiny, glittery</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>	<p>Descriptive Verbs <i>Examples: soar, flutter, skip, shuffle, chatter, skate, slither</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>	<p>Powerful Words <i>Examples: glorious, stupefied, shattered, impervious, engrossed</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>
<p>Comparisons <i>Examples: "The monkey bars are like a metal ladder suspended in the sky."</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>	<p>Use the 5 senses <i>Describe how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>	<p>Fun, Interesting, Attention grabbing, Puts the audience "in your shoes"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Color </p>

Teacher Tip: Student Created Rubrics

Rubrics and checklists can be useful tools, but have the danger of feeling contrived or imposing when given to children without their input. Because this checklist was created from suggestions given directly by the students, it felt to them more like a tool to organize their own thinking and expectations, rather than a method for a teacher to tell them whether their writing was “good” or “bad”. I have not used this checklist to review their writing, the review process is entirely in their hands. Not only does this take the pressure off of them, it saves me valuable time when assessing student work.

Revision

A blip of worry occurred in the midst of this project as I began to notice the drastic difference in writing ability between some of my most emergent second grade writers who were just learning to tackle the task of encoding and did not yet have all their letter sounds, and those few sophisticated third graders who had been working on their writing with me for over a year. “Oh no!” I thought, “this is too much. Some of these kids don’t know *how to write* yet, how in the world can I ask them to think about the *quality* of their writing?!” Turns out, I could. Teaching

revision to kids is not easy; it is not an instinctual trait. I was tempted in the beginning, when the idea of the descriptive writing checklist first emerged, to believe that asking kids to *reflect on their writing* would be enough. Using the checklist, I hoped that they would celebrate their successes and move on to the next project with these goals in mind. I thought, in short, that asking them to change their writing would just be too much. The kids soon taught me, however, that they were ready to take this reflection a step further.

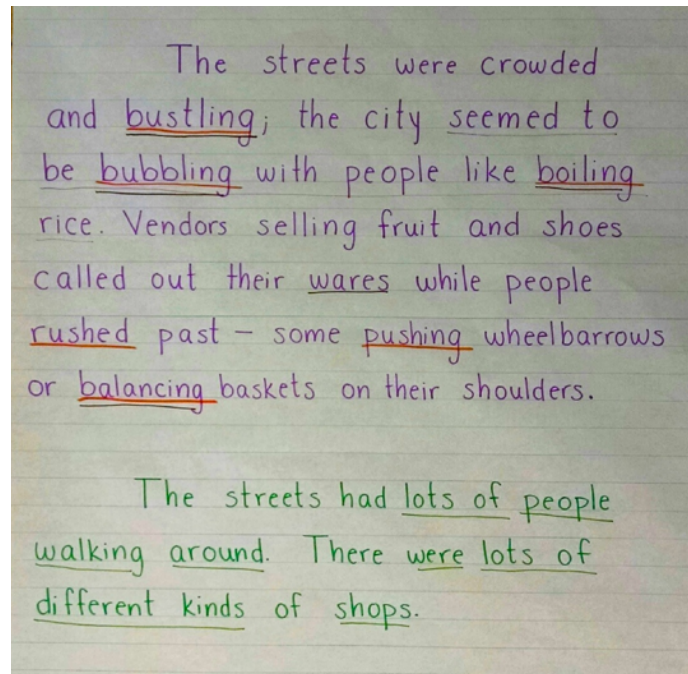
On a whim during one workshop period when kids were busy underlining their writing, I asked students to make a single goal for their revision of the day: add more powerful words, make more comparisons, cover all five senses, etc, and to write that goal clearly for themselves at the top of the page. Amazingly, the chosen goals were met by almost every student, even those struggling with literacy. These kids had looked at their own writing using an assessment tool, made a goal for improvement, and had gone in to actually change their writing for the better. Some goals were lofty and resulted in the addition of several layered and creative similes, some were simple and resulted in the changing of one verb from “walked” to “skipped”. The kids were differentiating for themselves and even the most struggling writers were making their writing better! Some may argue that such an intense focus on revision at this young age is not appropriate, but in watching my students dig into the process and grow genuine pride in their final drafts made me believe that creating such beautiful writing was a worthy motivator for production. This got me to thinking... what if I let them have even more fun with this idea, by really tearing to bits some pieces of writing, working backwards to make a delicious paragraph dull and uninteresting in an effort to make the difference even more clear?

Backwards Revision

“Today we’re going to do something a little different,” I announce to the wriggling class. “We’re going to take this delicious piece of writing, this paragraph in which the author masterfully describes her imagined city using powerful words, juicy verbs, comparisons, and multiple senses to make us feel as though we are in the middle of the bustling buzz, and *we are going to ruin it.*” A gasp washes through the crowd, Samuel’s face spreads wide into a gape-mouthed smile, his hands pulling at his hair *Are you serious?!* his eyes seem to shout. “I want you to take this paragraph and re-write it to make it as dull as you possibly can, while maintaining all its facts. Make it boring to read. Make it simple and unspecific. Use everyday words that mean very little to us and give us no reaction. Make it really bad.” At this point kids are sitting up on their knees, quiet laughter is pulsing between them, eyes dart around the room *I can’t believe this!* they signal to each other. Fred is lounging in the back, this emergent reader who rarely participates during writing discussions announces, “This is gonna be fun.” The writing begins and voices disappear,

funneled now through the skritch of all 20 pencils, there is not a motionless hand or glazed expression in the house.

The results were as hilarious as we all hoped. Grace Lin's description of the City of Bright Moonlight was changed to sentences as boring as "*They walked into the city. There were lots of people. There were lots of different kinds of shops.*" As each student proudly read their lackluster sentences aloud, we collected on the whiteboard all the "trap words" we found within them. This term we invented to describe words that are used so often they give no information included the ever-dangerous *like, nice, good, walked, said, great, lots, different kinds, and around*. "Phew!" I announced with a sigh of relief, "Now we know exactly what to avoid in our own writing!". In the workshop that followed, I asked them to write their own lush paragraph long descriptions of one of the settings from the book, avoiding all the traps they had identified. The next day, I asked them to revise these pieces using their checklists, noting that even though they may have started with something strong that avoided all the traps, there is *always* room for improvement, and the best writers always go back to make their best work better.



- BACKWARDS REVISION OF A DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH.
- underlining on purple text shows verbs and powerful words. Underlining on green text shows trap words.

Predictable Revision Cycle

The first few times I implemented revision as a stand-alone lesson in our writer's workshop, success varied. Yes, everyone had made goals and taken steps to accomplish them, but for many students this was the result of individual attention and prodding from the many teachers in the room. In thinking about making the process successful for young children independently (thinking forward to my future classrooms where the teacher to student ratios would not be so ideal), I realized that my directions would need to be less loosey-goosey (as they would be in a college poetry seminar) and more explicit. Instead of letting them go at their own pace and keeping directions to verbal suggestion, I

kept track of time for them and wrote our procedure on the board. For the first five minutes of the workshop, all they were allowed to do was read over and underline their previous work. Next they needed to decide on *one goal* for revision, and this goal needed to come from their checklist (some reticent students were making goals that weren't relevant to the lesson, like making their poem rhyme, or making goals that were too vague, like "make it more interesting"). Only once their goal was written clearly at the top of their page could they continue on to revise. Once they were satisfied with their revisions and could show how their work had changed, they could continue writing to expand their piece. Fifteen minutes into the half hour workshop, I asked that they begin revising even if they had not finished underlining (some students became so invested in the underlining process that they would take up all of their time making careful tallies they would use to mathematically decide on their goal for the day).

Another portion of the workshop that I made more explicit was the sharing portion at the end of the hour. Whereas I had previously encouraged students to share their work with the peers at their table during the last few minutes on many of workshop days, now I began to model what I wanted that sharing to look like. Instead of showing off the entire piece of writing, or the portion they were most proud of, I asked students to begin sharing the *revision* they were most proud of. I modeled the sharing with the sentence frame: "First, the sentence sounded like this: _____. My goal was _____. I changed _____, and now the sentence sounds like this: _____." Knowing that they would be asked to share in this format at the end of the work period, suddenly students became more invested in clearly showing their acts of revision. Before I knew it, another success had arisen; our class was celebrating revision above getting it perfect the first time. This shift in the culture became my priority above all else; if I could encourage students to be proud of revising their work, of not being satisfied with a first draft, their skills in description (and every other writing skill imaginable) would continue to grow in leaps and bounds into their adulthood.

Using this cycle over and over again in our

Teacher Tip: Revision Cycle

The goal of revision will vary amongst classrooms according to age, focus, and writing content. Here is the model that worked best for ours:

Underline using checklist

(analyze writing and recognize successes using student constructed tool)

Make a goal

(limit scope of revision by focusing on one or two areas of improvement)

Revise

(use trackable devices to add, change, or remove words from the first draft. require strikethroughs as opposed to erasing so that changes can be celebrated)

Share

(when conferencing with teachers or other students, highlight revisions and improvements to the first draft.)

workshop helped to normalize the need for revision and its benefits. Students began to see growth and improvement in their writing, and the more familiar the cycle was, the more they heard examples of brilliant revisions made by their peers, the easier it became.

When to stop adding

Once my students became comfortable with revising their writing and recognizing rich description in the writing around them, they began to pack to pack each sentence with as many verbs, adjectives, and similes as possible. This pendulum swing towards embellishment resulted in some writing that would have made my writing college teacher's eyes roll; fancy words sprinkled in purely for the sake of fanciness than didn't serve the piece or worse, actually took sense away from it. Still, language was pouring forth from these young writers like never before, and I chose to let them revel in it. Most of us know that the art of revision is rooted just as strongly in the ability to take out words that have no purpose as it is in adding words that improve it. Through this process, I've come to believe that we must first build up a writer's ability to fill out their frame before teaching them to strip it down to its essentials. For second and third grade writers, this may be as far as they get. One lesson, however, provided me an opportunity to broach the topic.

Description in Non-Fiction writing vs. narrative and poetry

Near the end of our Fall term, the Junior students began working on a long and involved non-fiction report on a group of Native American tribes that inhabited a specific region of North America (specifically the Pacific Northwest and the Central Plains). Traditionally teachers have focused their energy when guiding students in this process towards the very difficult task of research, synthesis, and recalling of information without copying. Little attention is paid, especially with our younger students, to how the writing ends up sounding, and whether the report will be an engaging read for their audience of peers. Having focused so explicitly on description this term, including in our reading of non-fiction texts, I wanted to pose the question to my students: *Can we use good descriptive writing to make our reports fun to read?*

Immediately ideas came forth; Matthew wanted to write his report as first person narrative, Silvia thought she could pay attention to verbs, adjectives, and similes when describing the landscape of her people, and Maria thought that using powerful words and opening her report in the second person would make her writing more vivid. Inspired by their suggestions, I devoted our next writer's workshop revision session to their report introductions. But before setting them loose with their descriptive checklists, I wanted to have a conversation about how to use these tools in a different context.

Referencing an annual symposium at Washington University that brings together poets and marine scientists, I told the students that descriptive writing has an important role in the field of research. “Scientists and Poets have a lot to learn from each other. When writing up their research, scientists want to make their readers experience exactly what they’re talking about, and they want to make sure their writing isn’t boring. Poets can also benefit from being inspired by information from the natural world and from history, and sometimes they also need to learn how to get to the point.” I asked the class how they thought their non-fiction writing might look different from their other work, and they all agreed that it might be a little more austere, with fewer adjectives cluttering it up. It could still, however, be rich and beautiful. Luckily we had a great deal of mentor texts to learn that lesson from; non-fiction writers who were skilled at painting scenes, engaging audiences, and even using similes to make their images more clear. “Okay,” I continued, “We’ve established that our revisions are going to look a little different today. We are going to be pickier about what words to add in, and we are going to make sure that above all else, the writing makes sense.” I was pleased to see that they all took this advice to heart, avoiding flowery verbosity, but making their reports more enjoyable to read than any I had seen before from this age group.

Making it Better

In a culminating effort to recognize their achievements in the art of revision and the craft of descriptive writing, I asked my students to make a piece that would teach others about the process. “You have learned so much about how to make writing better, I’d like to be able to show all the people who walk through our classroom, your parents, your young siblings, the kids in the primaries, even the intermediate kids, that we’ve discovered a great way to revise.” I was met with a sincere nodding of heads, they knew this was important to me, and were eager to rise to the challenge of being teachers. I asked them to look through all of the writing they had revised over the last month (a tall order due how prolific they had been) to choose their one very favorite example of successful revision. Once they found it, their task was to write our three different cards: a rough draft showing the sentence or paragraph the way it was originally written, a revised draft showing all of their beautiful underlining in bright colors, strikethroughs, carrots, and transformations, and a final draft showing the resulting improvement. No teacher edits were offered as I wanted to keep the line between revision and editing firm- in these final

drafts we would not be concerned with spelling or form, only that the writing sounded better.



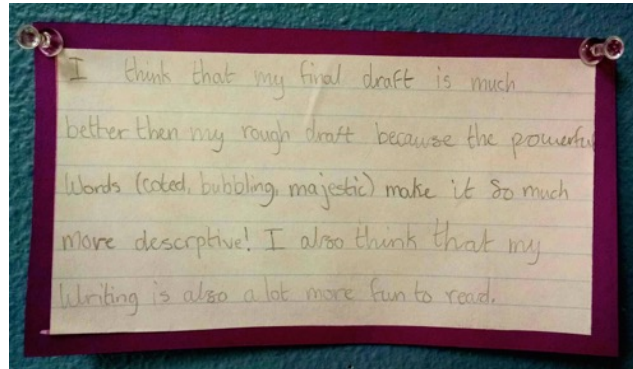
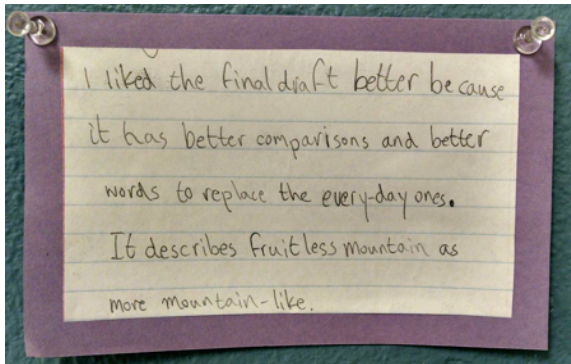
Some students still struggled with the idea of looking through all these pieces of beautiful writing and not just choosing the sentence, image, or stanza they were most proud of to begin with. For Adele, our feisty overachiever who helped spark this project in the first place, she still had nothing written down by the end of the writing period, having written a card with her favorite sentence and then realizing she had changed nothing in it, and all three of her cards would look the same. Others, however, were thrilled by this explicit and limited display of their work. Fred, a student who had struggled to get much out of his pencil at the beginning of the year, and who was one of the kids who made me doubt that revision was even possible at this age and ability level, produced a simple yet incredible example of improved writing. In many ways, this final assignment functioned as the ideal summative assessment; writing ability aside, which of my students were able to improve upon their own work? The answer ended up being *most of them*.

- FINN'S FINAL REVISION DISPLAY

with a first draft, a first impulse, a piece of writing that gets their point across, may seem like a tall order. Over the course of my research, however, I have discovered that it is an order that can indeed be filled. The bright eyed satisfaction that comes from a seven year old showing a piece of writing to a real audience with the knowledge that she

Asking young writers to be discontent

has not just written something that meets the task, she has written something *good*, is a moment to be strived for in any writer's workshop. The ways of getting there are varied and numerous, but must involve both exposure to sources of rich and powerful language and practice with thoughtful revision. The best writers return to their writing again and again to wear away the stone until their sculpture looks to others the way it looks to them in their imagination. Young authors can be inspired to adopt this mind-frame when they are taught that their writing is capable of transporting an audience in this way, and when they believe they have the right tools to carve it.



Reflections from two high achieving (above) and emerging (below) writers. Everyone has something concrete to celebrate in the revision of their work.

