

The Cut-Up: Revision as Experimentation by Sophie Daws

Grade level: Early elementary

Time frame: 45 minutes

Objective: To develop an approach to revision that is experimental

Prior knowledge and skills: None needed

Required materials: A previously written poem, printed or handwritten; a pen

Literary model: None

This lesson approaches revision through three different methods: cutting words, adding words, and reordering. I had students work through these three concepts with a published poem first. I projected a poem by Hoa Nguyen and asked the students what words they want cut out. As they offered ideas, I blacked out the words. After we were done tossing out words from the poem, I read aloud our edited poem. I did the same with adding in words and with reordering the poem. Demonstrating these revision practices on a published poem felt in line with what I wanted to show the students: a poem is not sacred, a poem can be cut up, a poem is an experiment. Moreover, I hoped that revising a published poem sharpened the student's confidence in their poetic eye. If they have opinions on published poem, then there must be aesthetic changes they can make to their own.

To further the experimental ethos, revising a published poem, I hope, breaks open the question of "when is a poem ever done"? When asked to revise, students will often retort that they have nothing to change in their poem. It makes sense. Students (most of us) often just want to finish an assignment and move on. In revision, however, students are forced to sit with their poem. Hopefully, this exercise to both student and teacher that we could be spending a lot more time just sitting with our art.

STEP 1. Class Exercise and Demonstration

Select a published poem to use as an example for these revision techniques. The style of poem can be anything, but I encourage shorter to mid-sized poems so that students don't get overwhelmed with content. It might be interesting to select a poem that is relatively famous or "important" so that we breakdown the notion of "high art." This approach can help develop a critical eye for viewing art and, of course, a critical eye as they review their own art.

Cut up: Project the example poem on the board. Read the poem aloud twice so that students get an idea of the poem's music, meter, and overall "feel." After this, ask students to cut out words. Poems often repeat words, ask them to specify which word. If the student says cut the word "because," ask the students to tell you *which* "because." Remember: we're challenging students to develop a critical eye—what about the poem to change and where?

Keep the “cut up” revisions you made to the example poem and continue to the next revision method.

Adding words/repetition: Adding words for the sake of adding words to a poem can be a bit arbitrary. It is difficult to come up with words out of thin air and doing so often feels uninspired. However, adding words, whatever they may be, can steer the first draft of a poem in a surprising direction, or can at the very least, make a poem feel fuller and more complete.

I encouraged students to combine their chosen poem with another poem in their portfolio. This gave them material to work with and was an interesting way to salvage other poems they had written. Another method of adding words is revise a poem for repetition. Asking students to create repetition of words or whole lines is another way of generating material to add to their poem.

Of course, adding words just for the sake of adding words isn't useful. You might consider pairing this revision method with a lesson on the five senses, on sensory detail, and/or expansion. Ask students to add *descriptive* words—words that help paint a picture and better place the reader in their images.

Reorder: We've edited the example poem through cut up, through adding words, and now it's time to demonstrate reordering a poem. This is maybe my favorite of the methods. Students can make large, structural changes to their poem and have an opportunity to disrupt logical order in their work, creating surprises and associative leaps in their poems.

Start reordering with just words. Cut and paste words as they call them out and ask them where they'd want the word to be instead. Once the students have a grasp on this process, ask students for whole lines they'd like to see moved.

Lastly, make sure to read this cut-up, combined, and reordered poem to them. We want the students to have a sense of how much a poem can change during the revision process.

STEP 2

After you've demonstrated these three methods, tell the students it's their time to do the same to their poems. Instruct them to select at least one method of revision. Give them 10-15 minutes.

STEP 3

If there's time and it feels like students are excited by the process, ask the class to pick **another of the three revision** methods and make changes to their poem using that method.

STEP 4

Ask students to read their revised poem aloud. Sharing is always a great practice to have in the classroom and for this lesson especially. Reading aloud allows them to hear how different their poem is after revision. Also, reading aloud, as we know, allows students to catch any parts that sound awkward or jumbled.

Remind them that revision, like writing the poem in the first place, is an experiment. While revision is often thought of as the less creative counterpart to the first draft, in this exercise revision is the opportunity to cut-up, reorder, and experiment with these little creatures we call poems.