

Getting Started:

Poetry & Prose

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Redrafting

Some essentials

Redrafting is a process that children quite often find difficult. Teachers sometimes find it hard to give them the help that is crucial to honing a piece of work from something good into something excellent.

There are a number of things that we're looking at when we try to help a child with a piece of writing. For example: Does the writing really communicate the child's ideas to the reader? Does a poem maintain a consistent rhythm? More obviously, is the spelling and punctuation correct? (Spelling and punctuation are less important in the early stages of a piece of writing when we are concentrating on creativity, helping a child to get her ideas from her head onto paper, but these more prosaic matters become important when it comes to the final draft.) How is the sound of the words and the way the piece flows? Are there words that interrupt the flow? If so these might simply need taking out.

All writers, when they've worked hard at something, are usually dismayed at the idea of losing words or even whole sentences. It is important that able writers learn that what is being taken out can be as crucial as what is left in when it comes to perfecting a piece of writing. Knowing what should stay and what should go is the essence of editing, and it's useful for children to learn that while they should be able to edit their own work, the contribution of others can be just as valuable.

We always tell children that our wives look at our poems before they go to our publishers. We explain that when you write a poem, you're often too close to it, too protective of it, and you need someone else to stand back and look at the piece in a less emotional way.

Quite often your critic will say she likes particular words, but then she'll point out a phrase that she doesn't like or she thinks doesn't quite fit. This can be a line that you really like and are desperate to keep in. When this happens to Brian he heads off for his office to sit and sulk. Roger always argues the point. But quite quickly we realise that our partners are right and it is our obstinacy that is holding back the completion of the poem.

Children find it interesting to know that writers of novels, too, have to suffer the indignity of having whole sections cut by their editors, who also often demand complete rewrites. It's not uncommon to have to rework almost a whole novel. When you're talking about rewriting several months' work you can imagine how that feels. But the best writers – the ones your pupils probably enjoy reading – will know that ultimately it is for the novel's good. An experienced editor will usually be able to see things that you can't, weaknesses of plot for example or flabby prose. Professional writers soon learn not to be precious about their work.

Response partners

Able writers are capable of acting as 'response partners' and this can be of real value in helping children to look critically at each other's work.

When organising groups of response partners it is often best if children keep to the same partner. This can lead to the development of mutual trust. Children should understand before working together that their responses to another's work should be considered carefully and offered in a positive way which will help improve the piece of work and not just criticise it. As writers themselves they should be reminded that negative criticism is very rarely of any use.



Give children a step-by-step plan. Ask them to read each other's work through, reading silently at first and then aloud to each other. These readings will often reveal any problems with the flow or rhythm of the pieces. Suggest that the first response should always be one of encouragement, they should try to find something they like, a line or a word, and mention that before anything else.

After praising their partner they can begin the more constructive criticism: Is there a line that doesn't quite fit? Does it need to be scrapped or could it benefit from a little rejigging? Are there dull words that could be replaced with more interesting or ambitious ones? Is the same word used too many times? Does the piece sound good when it is read aloud or can anything be done to improve it?

Once this process has been followed, then the two children involved should get together with their teacher and talk about each other's work. To start with, this discussion will almost certainly be teacher-led, but as children become more experienced critics they will begin to display more initiative.

The teacher's input

Of course, the rules are the same and you must practise what you preach: Start with encouragement for a good word, an interesting phrase, a clever idea. This will make it easier for the writer to accept that there is still work to do. Similarly, always finish with a word of encouragement – 'Once you've sorted that out then this will be a really good piece of work.' An atmosphere of encouragement and of mutual respect for each other as writers is of vital importance.

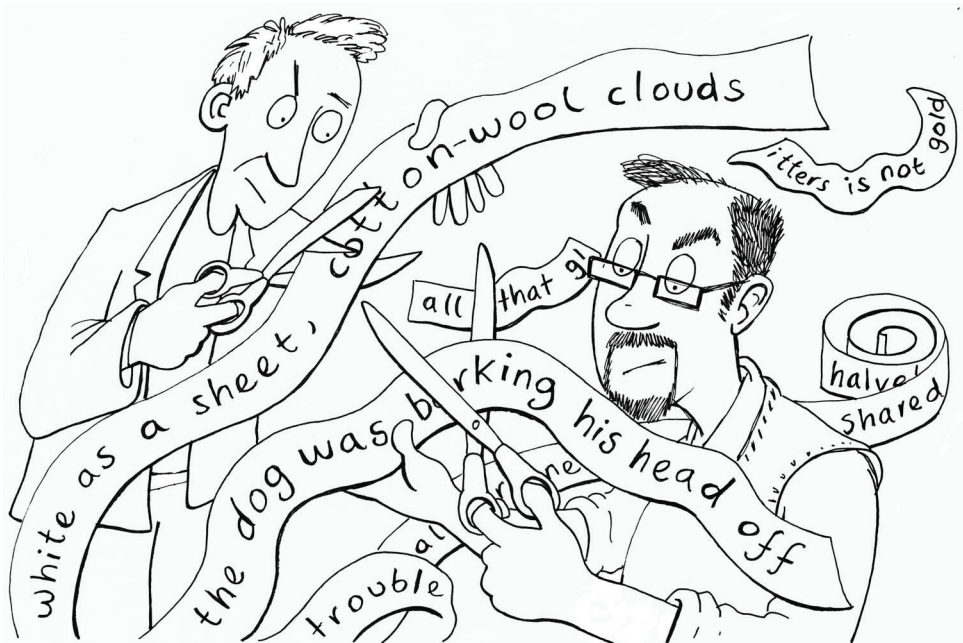
Another factor to emphasise is that the writing isn't being changed because it is wrong. It is rather a matter of sifting through words and ideas to find those which are best. Some parts that are rejected initially may well be reinstated later on – either in this piece of writing or even in another. For this reason discourage rubbing out and try to insist on crossing out. If a child is working on a computer, get her to save the first copy and work on a second.

Look for those words and phrases that could be trimmed, perhaps because they mean the same thing or because they spoil the flow of the writing. Perhaps there are better words that might be used. Ask the children to suggest what these might be. If children are shown how to use a thesaurus they may find words which convey more precisely the feeling they are trying to communicate. Sometimes words sound particularly good when used together and techniques such as alliteration can be discussed and employed to good effect.

Clichés

Discuss whether something is a cliché. Clichés are lazy writing, they are words and phrases that have been used far too many times. As writer and broadcaster Clive James once wrote in his *Observer* column: ‘...the essence of a cliché is that words are not just misused, but have gone dead.’

So help the children to look for clichés, for example *the dog was barking his head off*, *cotton-wool clouds*, *white as a sheet*. Talk about what makes them clichés and how they can be replaced or at least freshened up. There are one or two exercises you could try with your writers later in this book. It’s also worth remembering not to be too hard on the children here.



Although you will recognise a cliché – your writers will not have read as much as you, nor will they necessarily have come across some of these phrases before. Even if a description has been in use for many, many years, the first time you read it, it is new to you!

For more on clichés, see page 127.

Use of adjectives

All through their school lives, and rightly so, children are encouraged by their teachers to make use of as many different adjectives as possible. This can lead to children going completely OTT! You sometimes have to hurdle a whole list of adjectives to reach a noun – the silent, spooky, sleepy, eerie, gloomy graveyard. Frequently the adjectives will work against one another, or mean the same thing, eerie/spooky, for example. Point out how one carefully selected adjective is often far more effective.

Warming up

Some useful techniques

We're used to seeing sports people and performers warming up. Footballers skip up and down the touchline before coming onto the pitch; athletes stretch and bend; singers test their vocal cords with a scale or two. With our 'able writers' groups, where the children are sometimes strangers and feeling a little apprehensive, we use the following warm-up exercises to create a positive, can-do atmosphere in the group. But they are also suitable to use if you are planning a long session with any group of children. They help to get the mind in gear. Additionally, these exercises can be extended and used as full-scale lessons in their own right.

- **Make your confession**

Tell the children that you are going to confess to something you've done in the past. For example: *When my granddad came to stay he left his false teeth in a glass of water in our bathroom. I picked them up to look at them but the glass slipped from my grasp and the teeth fell into the toilet bowl. I fished them out and gave them a quick rinse before putting them back in the glass. I meant to tell him in the morning but I overslept. By the time I got downstairs, Granddad was eating his breakfast!*

Confessions like this can easily become the starting point for stories and children can be encouraged to think of their own examples. Have any of them escaped punishment by hiding the evidence of an accident, or by blaming a sister, brother, friend, dog or cat?

My Confession

by Emily

Can you keep a secret?

Good!

Okay, here goes.

It wasn't Andrew who let the rabbit out,
even though I said it was, I lied.

I let Silka out because she looked so alone and sad
left in the class during break time.

So I liberated her, let her run wild and free.

Then the bell rang, which meant trouble for me.

We came in and she was sitting on the desk chewing up our
homework.

The teacher said, "Who did it?"

And I blamed Andrew Slater.

But I felt guilty and really bad!

So there you go, I've told you now, so I hope you can keep a
secret.

My Confession

by Anna-Leigh

It was 2 in the morning and I went downstairs for a glass of milk. That's when I saw them – the chocolates that my dad got my mum for her birthday. It was tempting so I took them down and ate seven of them. There were three left. In the morning we were all downstairs and my family found out that seven were missing. As we all turned round my brother got tempted and nicked a chocolate. We all saw him and he got the blame.

- **Total mega embarrassment!**

Similarly, embarrassing moments can be turned to good use. Ask the children if they can remember a time when they were really embarrassed. Tell them you mean not just red-faced, shuffle-your-feet, change-the-subject embarrassed but more I-can't-go-on-existing-after-what-has-happened embarrassed. It's that moment when you're swimming and you think there's seaweed caught round your ankles and you flick it free. Then you realise that what you thought was seaweed was actually your swimming trunks and now you've kicked them away you can't find them. There is a very crowded beach between you and your towel.

Or it's the time you're sitting on the bus going on about how stupid and ugly and pointless your mate is, only to turn round and find that mate's mother sitting behind you.

That is total mega embarrassment!

Children can focus on one particular embarrassing moment and describe it or perhaps list a series of such moments in a poem:

*If my whole life flashed before me
I wouldn't want to remember
The day my dad took his trousers off in public
because a wasp had got inside them
The moment I took hold of someone's hand in the supermarket
and it wasn't Mum's
The journey when I found ourselves driving along
an airport runway
The meal when I spilt gravy all over dad's important business guest
And worst of all
Being made to hold my teacher's hand because I'd misbehaved on the way to
swimming lesson*

• Feeling frightened

Encouraging the children to remember a time when they were frightened can often kick-start a poem or story. Children can list things that they would like to do but are too frightened to attempt. Brian's list would include riding on a roller coaster and taking a trip on a boat for anything longer than the Isle of Wight crossing. Roger's would certainly feature finding himself at the top of the Empire State Building or climbing a mountain. Thinking about their fears and the way they react to them may help your writers understand themselves a little more and act as a stimulus for a piece of work.

Tornado Chasing

by Lucy

I'd like to feel the racing wind,
I'd like to see the lightning.
I'd like to test the tornado's patience
and cure my phobia of storms.

I'd like to do this
but guess what,
I won't!