

Block Buster: Listen to Music

You might not be able to write while music plays, but it often helps you to relax and think of ideas.

Are You a Honey or a Trunchbull?

Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull are two characters in Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*. Honey, Matilda's teacher, is kind and likes children. Trunchbull, the headmistress, exploits students' weaknesses and abuses children. Her approach hurts under any circumstances!

Once during a writing workshop with Grade 2 children, a seven-year-old boy blurted out, "I'll never be a good writer. I can't spell." I winced to hear how discouraged he felt at such a young age. That is a conditioned response. Someone—a peer, teacher, parent, caregiver, sibling, or grandparent—had made him feel like a bad writer.

Teachers play an important role in determining how individual students develop as writers. We must provide experiences that respond to their interests, needs, and learning styles.

Lucas checks the teacher's comments on his story with confusion and disappointment. He notices the words "Unclear. This is difficult to read." Further down he sees squiggles on his page signifying spelling, grammar, and punctuation problems. His mark meets the standard, but the final comment says, "Needs work."

Needs work? Lucas thought he was finished. He had tried to include interesting details and print neatly. When the teacher says "This is difficult to read," does she mean his ideas are unclear or his writing is messy? Now Lucas wonders what to do next.

Student writers face Lucas's dilemma every day. The idea of starting again overwhelms him. Lucas doesn't need to go back and start again. He needs clear communication about how to move forward—suggestions for improvement. Specific terms make it easier to write well. The success of a writing program depends on clear communication.

Moreover, if kids associate revision with something negative, or something they must go *back* and do, then it will be less appealing. Students find going back to re-do something off-putting. Give them suggestions to move forward.

Helping Kids Revise

In my workshops, I include a segment on editing. I explain to kids that each of their favorite authors shines at some parts of writing and struggles with other parts. For example, Betsy Byars, whose realistic fiction novel *Summer of the Swans* won a Newbery Medal, says her strength is writing dialogue and her weakness is description. Kenneth Oppel, whose fantasy adventure *Airborn* won the Governor General's Award, says he writes and rewrites his stories many times before he's happy with them. None of these people work by themselves. All of them get help from an editor.

When it comes to writing, teachers act in the role of an editor. So do classmates, in the form of peer editing. So do the parents, siblings, grandparents, guardians,

Effective teachers give simple objectives, clear communication, and frequent feedback.

Revise by identifying the qualities of good writing. Does the writing

- Contain vivid verbs and strong nouns?
- Create a picture in our minds?
- Include similes (comparing two things)?
- Use the senses (hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and feeling words)?
- Have time and place words?

and caregivers who “check” students’ writing. Whenever I ask kids how they feel while somebody else reads their writing they say

Anxious
Tense
Embarrassed
Awkward
Uncomfortable
Scared
Nervous

They worry that people might make fun of them and fear others might laugh.

An editor’s job is to help the writer. If you look up the word “editor” in the dictionary, you find the words *encourage*, *nurture*, *nourish*, *prod*, *prompt*, *suggest*, *support*, *train* and more. I tell kids that when I work as an editor, I feel like a support beam holding up a building. My job is to help make a piece of writing strong. We do that by telling the writer all the good things they’re saying first—giving them credit—then making suggestions to strengthen their work. I like to think of editing as moving the writer forward: Edit → Credit.

A good editor never starts by pointing out mistakes. I can’t read an author’s story and then start by saying, “You spelled Samuel wrong,” “None of this makes sense,” or “You need to go back and fix your punctuation.” A good editor begins by praising specific strengths in the content. Likewise, teachers should focus on what the writer *says*—their ideas and words—first. Start by commenting on the message. Choose specific examples from the writing that relate to content and style. For example:

Excellent organization.
Clear text.
Interesting details.

Kindness ranks as important as theoretical knowledge. When I ask kids, “What would happen if we begin by telling the writer all their mistakes?” Young children answer, “The writer will feel *sad*.” Older students, whose language is further developed say, “The writer will feel *discouraged*.” True. And if a writer feels discouraged, what’s going to happen next?

As one ten-year-old girl in Grade 4 said, “He would lose his spirit in writing.” They’ll stop writing. I ask, “Do we want our favorite authors to stop writing?” Everybody shakes their head.

Young writers feel frightened and vulnerable. They feel nervous when others read their writing, afraid it may be wrong or sound stupid. Remember, elementary children are still learning to talk. They’re *learning* to be good writers too. Help them feel confident enough to do their best work.

The environment for writing must be safe and nurturing. Encourage gentle but specific comments and responses. All writers are different. Find out what each writer needs and help them get it. Rather than point out what they did wrong, make suggestions for improvement. For example:

“Use *I think* less.”
“Support your conclusion with details.”
“Use the models provided for spelling.”

“The secret of good writing is re-writing.”

— Mem Fox (memfox.com)

Offer ways to move your writers forward. Children learn best when they enjoy the process. If they're anxious about their writing, that defeats the purpose. So keep it lighthearted and fun, content-rich and packed with practical skills.

Finding Errors

Two Tips for Finding Errors

1. Cover the page with another sheet of paper and read one line at a time. (Or use a ruler.) We call this line-by-line reading. This helps you concentrate on each word. Sometimes you see duplicate words, left-out letters, or punctuation problems.
2. Read the words aloud. If the reading is difficult, punctuation may be missing or incorrect. You can hear grammar errors. Well-crafted sentences want to be read aloud.

Other Secrets to Successful Proofreading

- Computers help spot common typographical errors, but hard copy works best for thorough proofreading.
- Create distance from your work. Put your writing aside for a while. This resting period might last a few minutes or a few days. However long, it allows you to read your writing with a fresh eye.
- Proofread in pairs to increase your accuracy. Get feedback. Watch your partner's face while he or she reads your work aloud. Is the wording clear, correct, and complete? Listen for repeated words or information, or places where the reader stumbles or gets lost in a sentence. You may hear parts that needs more work.

Editing Checklist

A checklist gives writers a tool for editing their work. Teachers can adapt the list on page 107 according to their needs and expectations.

Punctuation Tips

- Use dashes to introduce a word, phrase, or list. Also, use dashes to set off words and ideas.
- Use an ellipsis for omitted words.
- Use semicolons to separate independent clauses.

"I enjoy writing and it is hard. But then it's hard for everyone to write well. I have to rewrite over and over again so that on average it takes me a year to write a book."

— Avi