



### **Mini-Lesson: Sensory Revision**

Many students struggle with the difference between “editing” (mere correctness) and “revision” (substantively improving) their writing. Some students want to believe that, once their essay or story is written and proofread for errors, it is “done”; other students wish to improve on a rough draft, but are not sure how to start. This mini-lesson asks students to evolve and enrich an early draft by focusing on the use of sensory detail.

#### **Materials Needed:**

1. A teacher’s computer connected to visible screen (such as an LCD or HD projector, SmartBoard or Promethean touch screen, etc.).
2. Internet access to reach the “On the Fly: Writers on Writing” interview with author Bo Caldwell at the UNESCO City of Literature website: [www.writersonthefly.org/bo-caldwell](http://www.writersonthefly.org/bo-caldwell).
3. Writing program (such as Microsoft Word) that can be projected for the class from the teacher’s computer OR an overhead projector with a transparency and transparency marker.
4. Composition materials for students; this could be the computers if in the computer lab, or writing journals, or loose leaf notebook paper with pen or pencil.
5. Highlighters (one for each student).

#### **Anticipatory Set:**

Ask students to take out their journals or notebook paper and, at the top of the page, write the name of their favorite place in the world. This could be a beach they visited on vacation or it could be a room in their house or it could be the route they go running every day or it could be...anywhere.

Next, give students three minutes to write a description of that place for an audience who has never seen it before. Three minutes is not enough time to worry about proper paragraphing or precise spelling, but tell your students that they **MUST USE COMPLETE SENTENCES**.

As always, teachers are encouraged to write with their students—it shows that writing is something you think about value, not just something you make them do. In addition, you are going to use your own pre-writing as a model for the students in this activity. Therefore, do your writing either at a computer where you can project your screen for the kids to see OR write on an overhead transparency. After three minutes, ask the students to finish the sentence they are writing and stop.

Next, view the interview with Bo Caldwell from the “Writers on the Fly” website. She has a lot of interesting things to say about writing, but one great insight comes at 2:50 in the video:

*“When I am setting a scene, I go back and I look at the different senses. Maybe the first time around it was very visual, that’s my first take...but then I go back and I think about other senses. Am I doing anything with taste? Am I doing anything with feel? ... Even if I cut it later, that helps me as a writer get beyond the room or the yard... and to remember there is a whole world out there.”*

It seems that most written description, especially for developing writers, relies heavily on visual description. There may even be a biological reason behind this: 70 percent of all stimulus receptors in the human body are located in the eyes, and 40 percent of the cerebral cortex is involved in processing visual stimuli. Humans are visual creatures, so we default to visual writing. Unless...

### **Write on the Fly:**

Project the writing that you did during the three minutes on a screen, and then highlight (or underline in a contrasting color if using the overhead projector) all of the NON-VISUAL descriptions of that place. Given limited time to write and the natural inclination of humans to consider visual stimuli first, most of the writing will likely be visual: the size and shape and color of objects and surroundings, the source and intensity and hue of light, the borders of the room or line of the horizon. Perhaps a few vague sound details included, or a nod to touch with the texture of the ground or the temperature in the room. There is likely nothing regarding smell or taste. You may have nothing highlighted at all—it was all visual.

Pass out highlighters to students and ask them to mark their writing the same way—highlight any description that is NOT visual—that focuses on smell, taste, touch, or hearing (if you want to really nerd out, highlight each sense in a different color to show strengths and blind-spots). This becomes a great visual evidence of our (over-) reliance on visual description. Good readers know that great writing includes a rich description of setting and characters that uses ALL of the senses, so time to revise:

Give your students ten minutes to write. Ask them to describe that favorite place again, BUT they cannot use ANY visual descriptions. They have to make their reader experience this place using their writer’s tongue, nose, ears, fingers, and toes.

Challenge your students, especially for advanced your writers, to really describe the senses—not simply to say “I can smell grandma cooking,” but to describe those kitchen-like smells in detail down to the ingredients. Avoid stating “I can hear people talking,” and instead describe the tone of voices, the accents or dialect, write the dialogue itself. This is a great place to suggest the use of similes, if your students have studied them already—what do things smell or sound or taste *like*...?

Teachers should consider participating in this ten-minute re-write with their students.

### **After the Writing:**

Consider sharing your writing with them by reading it aloud—perhaps even putting the original three-minute writing next to the ten-minute sensory revision to show the changes. Then invite volunteers to read their work as well. Ask your students: if you were to take the best details from BOTH versions and combine them into one descriptive essay, what would you keep from each?

Collect your student’s work and read without a pen in your hand—there will be grammar errors and spelling errors, but that was not the lessons for the day. If you write anything in response, consider praising a detail in the revision (“I can totally hear the way...”) or a connection (“I love the smell of fresh-cut grass too...”).

If you keep portfolios of student work, keep this in their portfolio. One long-term use of this “Writing on the Fly” lesson is to use it as a revision tool for a future assignment. Somewhere down the road, when you asked the students to write a poem, a short-story, a personal narrative or similar assignment, ask them to take out this activity and re-read the way their writing evolved when they stopped focusing on the visual. Then, provide time in class for them to re-write a stanza of a poem, or a paragraph from a short-story or personal narrative, by focusing on non-visual details. As Bo Caldwell reminds us in her video:

*“It’s really gratifying to me to be writing. I feel strongly that for me that no writing is wasted. So, even if I am working on something that has nothing to do with my fiction it comes back to help me later on. I’ve seen it again and again.”*

Even if your students do not use everything they come up with in a non-visual sensory revision, they will likely find a few details to enrich their writing. If they find nothing at all to use in a second draft, then at the very least, they have practiced the skill of writing with all their senses, which will help them on future assignments.