

# THE WRITER'S TOOLBOX: FIVE TOOLS FOR ACTIVE REVISION INSTRUCTION

L A U R A H A R P E R

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*These revision tools provide students with a set of easily accessible options for getting their jobs done in writing.*

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Revision is body work, overhaul  
Ratcheting straight the frame  
Replacing whole systems and panels  
Rummaging heaps of the maimed.  
With blowtorch and old rubber hammer  
Pound and pull, bend, use your 'bar  
Salvage takes sweat but it pays well  
(Though never rule out a new car.)

—Dethier, 1994, p. 43

I used to think of my classroom as a workshop. I set it up so that my seventh graders had the tools they needed to get their jobs done. Instead of the hammers, nails, and drills of a traditional workshop, I provided a trunk full of writing supplies—paper, markers, reference books, and stationery. Instead of blueprints, lumber, and scrap metal, I organized a file cabinet holding brainstorming lists and drafts and writing logs. Instead of being filled with the sounds of grinding and hammering, this workshop was filled with pencils scratching, fingers typing, and students conferring. “Functional,” I thought as I looked around the room. I was proud that my students had all the tools they needed for effective writing.

Yet, two years after setting up the writing workshop, I had a nagging feeling that some of the most important “tools” for writing were missing. Yes, my students had choices. They had time. Certainly, they had the physical tools they needed. Yet, their final drafts and the steps they took to write them suggested that they lacked some basic tools. My students didn't know *how* to revise.

Revision seems like a natural process in books such as Nancie Atwell's (1987) *In the Middle* and Linda Rief's (1992) *Seeking Diversity*. These books suggest that, if you ask good questions during conferences and

provide plenty of time for writing, students will be able to re-see their drafts and, thus, revise. I discovered, however, that student conference partners didn't hear or couldn't articulate the weaknesses in each others' writings. If a partner did find something that needed work, the writer most often would simply add or delete a couple of words and pronounce the revision a success. After years of just being told “Revise!” without further explanation, my students had become furtive recopiers, adding a few words here and there and using neater handwriting to revise their drafts.

In addition, my students' revision difficulties were compounded by other language factors. Two-thirds of them came from limited English backgrounds—the majority speaking Spanish as a first language, with most of the other students from Native American homes. Most of my students lived in poverty, with three-fourths receiving free or reduced lunches. In addition, with parents working seasonally in agriculture, many of my students were migrant, spending time each year traveling south to Mexico and back. As a result, they wrote and read significantly below grade level. They had limited vocabularies and ways of expressing themselves in English. They had almost no natural “ear” for how English should sound.

Try only to explain your *own* revision process, and it quickly becomes clear why it is a difficult thing to teach, even to the most able students. Revision is, according to Donald Murray (1987), “one of the writing skills least researched, least examined, least understood, and—usually—least taught” (p. 85). My students, like the inexperienced writers studied by Nancy Sommers (1980), “understood the revision process as a rewording activity” (p. 381). In addition to their limited English backgrounds, they “lacked . . . a set of strategies to help them identify the ‘something larger’ that they sensed was wrong” in their writing (p. 383). My students needed toolboxes full of strategies, or “tools,”

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with which to pound, saw, drill, and otherwise rebuild their writing.

What should a Writer's Toolbox do for writers? Well, consider what makes toolboxes so valuable to carpenters or mechanics. First, toolboxes keep tools immediately accessible. Carpenters or mechanics can grab their hammers or wrenches instantly and put them to quick use. A Writer's Toolbox must do the same. I wanted my students to have quick access to revision options and not waste time in needless mental blocks or

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endless rewordings. Second, toolboxes provide carpenters and mechanics flexibility. They have a range of tools from which to choose, tools appropriate to each job. Likewise, I wanted our toolboxes to contain a range of choices, or techniques, to expand my students' flexibility in making revisions.

Fortunately, I found a source for these tools. During our reading workshop time, I read Barry Lane's (1993) *After the End*, and I was eager to try some of his revision ideas with my students. I gave each of them a 5" by 8" manila envelope that would serve as a "toolbox" and stay in each student's writing folder. During the following six weeks, we filled the toolboxes with five of Lane's revision "tools": Questions, Snapshots, Thoughtshots, Exploding a Moment, and Making a Scene.

### Questions

When I became engaged to be married, my students cross-examined me for all the details. I took this to be the perfect way to introduce our first tool, or revising technique, called Questions. I stood at the front of the room and said, "Last month, my boyfriend asked me to marry him." I paused and looked around the room. "Any questions?"

"Where were you?" yelled Erin, probably surprised by the opportunity to quiz me about my life outside of school.

"How did he ask?" asked Jamie, followed by giggles from classmates.

"How did you feel?" called Melanie, with more giggles.

I quickly scrawled the questions on the board until I was out of room. When I finished, one curious student ventured, "Are you really going to answer these?"

I stalled. Before I would answer their questions, I said I wanted them to try Questions themselves. I asked them to pair up, read aloud the drafts of writing they were currently working on, and then write down any questions they had as they listened. There was only one rule: No yes/no questions allowed. One student, Monica, was asked by her partner how she felt when she realized that her house had been robbed. Andrew's partner asked him to tell more about the setting of his story, a favorite swimming hole. Elena's partner asked what made Elena's aunt, who had recently passed away, so special. Then, the students selected the most appealing questions about their drafts and freewrote on them.

In her first draft, Elena listed a few of the things her and her aunt liked doing together. She said that her aunt "had a baby boy named Anthony," and went on to write: "When my brothers would fall asleep, after playing with Anthony and his toys, Angie and I would go in the kitchen and make cookies."

After our Questions session, Elena decided to describe a specific time when she helped her aunt take care of Anthony:

As I was pushing Anthony in his rocker, his short brown hair blew in the breeze. He was laughing and clapping his hands. "Mama!" he called. As I walked to put him down, he hugged me with his hands. They looked like his mother's. I put his socks on and his pants. His chubby legs moved around in the air.

The Questions technique not only allowed Elena to add a few paragraphs in response to her partner's questions, but more importantly, it prompted her to rethink her story. Her first draft, which had been a rather impersonal expository piece explaining her sadness at her aunt's death, evolved into a narrative that vividly portrayed their close relationship.

While revising, Elena experienced what Murray (1987) refers to as "a process of discovery." He asserts that "writers much of the time don't know what they are going to write . . . [and they] use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know" (p. 90). The Questions technique reinforces this idea, especially for students writing in non-native languages. It slows the writing process so that new angles and memories can be expressed bit by bit. It also can be used to push drafts in new directions as new discoveries are made.

I wanted my students to have some way to keep this revision technique handy, just as carpenters keep their tools ready for quick access. I knew that, for middle-

schoolers, simply putting the technique in their notes wouldn't be enough. The "tool" would grow rusty with disuse and would eventually be lost. They, like the twelfth graders observed by Janet Emig (1971), needed a way to "translate an abstract directive . . . into a set of behaviors" (p. 99). Since most of my students were non-native users of English, creating "scaffolding," or temporary structures for building language skills, was especially important in the development of their English (Boyle & Peregoy, 1990). I wanted them to have something tangible—like a manipulative in mathematics—so they could remember the steps of the technique and begin to use them on their own. We needed to make actual Questions "tools" to put inside our toolboxes. To that end, we brainstormed about the technique's basic steps and then wrote them on index cards. Each student put a Questions index card, or tool, in his or her Writer's Toolbox, or manila envelope, which then went into his or her writing folder.

Finally, to save time for me as well as to make the technique easier for my students to use, I wanted us to have a shorthand with which we could communicate about our revisions. I wanted us, for example, to be able to jot notes to each other recommending that certain tools be used in certain places. As Lane (1993) notes, "though each writer's process is different, a shared language helps writers . . . to gain control" of the writing process. To that end, we created a symbol for the Questions technique, a fat question mark with a circle around it. Instead of writing a lengthy comment such as, "Try having a conference on this passage to see if you can get some more information," we could simply draw the fat question mark symbol on a draft. The writer would know at a glance to try a Questions conference. Peer conferences and teacher conferences, both crucial in helping non-native English speakers gain confidence in their writing (Mendoca & Johnson, 1994; Zhang, 1995), became more focused. Having created and practiced using our first tool, we were ready to move on.

### Snapshots

I wish I had a nickel for every time I scrawled "Describe" or "Explain" or "Give more detail" next to an imprecise sentence in my students' writing. To double my earnings, I wish I had a nickel for every time my students, having read my scrawled comments, simply added a word or two, believing they had done what I had asked. Sentences such as "I walked into my bedroom" actually became worse after complying with my margin comments, turning into "I walked into my big, blue, full, messy bedroom." Although it is true that my students *did* need to do better jobs describing, explain-

ing, and giving more detail, my suggestions did not help them discover the kinds of details that would bring their stories to life.

Information is critical to the revision process. During revision, writers need ways to "gather new information or to return to their inventory of information and draw on it" (Murray, 1987, p. 93). They need ways to re-enter their stories and actually "see characters walking or hear characters speaking" (Murray, 1987, p. 90). Like William Faulkner, they must be able to "trot along behind [their characters] with paper and pencil" (Murray, 1987, p. 101).

The Snapshot, our second revision tool, allows writers to do these things. It forces them to focus on close, physical detail and move from describing "preconceived thoughts and feelings to an objective reality that's both more mysterious and compelling" (Lane, 1993, p. 37). In other words, Snapshots provide a structure for the very thing we incessantly implore our students to do: Show, don't tell.

By way of introducing my students to the tool, we first looked for some good descriptions by authors we were reading, from Gary Soto to Gary Paulson. I offered an excerpt from *Little House in the Big Woods* (Wilder, 1989), which I had found in Lane's (1993) description of Snapshots:

Ma kissed them both, and tucked the covers in around them. They lay there awhile, looking at Ma's smooth, parted hair and her hands busy with sewing in the lamp-light. Her needle made little clicking sounds against her thimble and then the thread went softly, swish! through the pretty calico that Pa had traded furs for. (p. 33)

I asked my students to notice how Wilder, as she describes Ma's sewing, is freezing the action and painting "boxes within boxes" of descriptions (Lane, 1993, p. 33). I wanted to give them a visual representation of how Wilder had accomplished this. In a box the size of a Polaroid snapshot, we drew the scene described, including the lamp, Ma, and the kids in bed. Then, in a second box the same size, I drew a "zoomed in" picture of the same scene, but with only Ma, letting her figure fill the entire frame. As a result, she was larger, and it was possible to see details of her hair and her sewing. Last, in a third box the same size, I drew only Ma's hands, zooming in on the details of the needle and thimble, and even the design of the calico fabric, so that they became clearer.

Students practiced by taking Snapshots of nearby classmates. They either wrote a description of what they saw or drew a picture from which they were then able to write. After taking Snapshots, they were ready to try

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them in their current drafts. Students paired up and began looking for places in their partners' writing where they had trouble visualizing what was going on. The partners marked three or four of these places with our symbol for Snapshots, a small outline of a camera.

During one Snapshot conference, Amber's partner told her to add a Snapshot to a scene in which Amber is getting a new punk haircut. Amber had written in her original draft: "The chair rumbled as I wiggled. The razor buzzed along my neck. I could feel the hair falling, and I didn't exactly want it to anymore." She began by unlocking more of the memories she had of this scene and finding places for them in her story. First, she drew a picture of the scene at the exact moment the haircut began, with the action frozen. In a box on her paper, she sketched herself nervously seated in a barber's chair. Then, she wrote a paragraph describing what she saw and what the picture helped her remember. Under the drawing, she described the scene:

I sat there squirming, the blue plastic of the chair crumpled and cracked under me. The tightness of all the clips and hair ties made my head throb. I could hear the razor buzzing. I couldn't believe I was doing this.

Next, Amber picked a part of the picture she thought would be interesting to zoom in on. She chose her head as it was being shaved on one side. In another box, she drew a second picture, one that zoomed in on her head so that it nearly filled the entire box. Then, Amber wrote a second paragraph, describing what she could see in her second drawing. Under this box, she wrote what she saw:

I felt my hair falling to my shoulders, then to the floor. The razor vibrated behind my right ear, making me giggle. I tried as hard as I could not to move. I didn't want her to cut me.

Finally, Amber zoomed in one last time. She selected the part of her second picture that was the most interesting to her, and, with the action frozen, zoomed in on it in a third picture. She took an almost microscopic perspective, sketching the bristly hairs that remained on her head. Under this third box, she described the memories that the drawing triggered:

The tiny bristles left behind itched, but I didn't dare scratch them. The beautician still had the left side to shave. As the razor pulled away from my head, I crunched my neck back. The bristles jabbed into my skin, and I felt a tear come to my eye. What if she messed it all up? It would be impossible to grow back.

Through the Snapshot technique, Amber discovered things about her story that she thought she had forgotten. Instead of being commanded to "Describe more" or

"Be more specific," she was given a strategy by which to recreate the experience. Having been given a strategy instead of an abstract comment, she elaborated more on physical sensations, such as the "tightness of all the clips and hair ties," as well as on her own emotional state. Amber *showed* what it was like to be getting this drastic haircut, instead of only *telling* about it. Like

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Robert Frost, she experienced the "surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew" (as quoted in Murray, 1987, p. 101).

After completing our Snapshots and finding places for them in our drafts, we made our Snapshot tool. We brainstormed about the basic steps of drawing and then writing the Snapshot. Whenever we are reading a draft and have trouble picturing a character or a setting in our minds, we simply draw a small camera in that spot, confident that the writer will know how to fix the problem. This symbol is probably our most frequently used.

### Thoughtshots

Helping students create vivid descriptions of the concrete stuff of their stories is challenging. However, this challenge pales in comparison to the difficulty my students had portraying the internal landscapes of their characters. They struggle with describing how their characters feel and what their characters think. At best, my students resort to simply telling. They write statements like "He felt confused" or "She was mad" or "I couldn't wait." At worst, they leave out their characters' thoughts and feelings completely, resulting in stories populated with unthinking robots. Indeed, characters in middle school students' writing often "exist merely to serve the plot" with no attention given to their "internal reflection" (Graves, 1994, pp. 288–289). No wonder realistic characters are so rare in their writing. Thoughtshots, our third tool, give writers ways to move inside their characters and show what their characters are feeling.

To get a better understanding of how professional authors move inside their characters, my students and I turned to our novels. We flipped through examples from our independent reading as well as from books like *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994), *Fallen Angels* (Myers, 1988), and *Catherine, Called Birdy* (Cushman, 1994).

We listed three basic things that authors do to portray the internal reflections of their characters: (1) characters have flashbacks, triggering their memories of related events or causes; (2) characters have what we called “flashforwards,” predicting the outcomes of their actions and anticipating what people will say and think; and (3) characters have what we called “brain arguments,” debating with themselves about what is going on and what they should do about it.

Once again, I asked my students to read their current drafts aloud to their partners and look for three or four places where they would like to know what the characters were thinking. Then, the students set to work, choosing one such place and giving characters flashbacks, flashforwards, and brain arguments.

Maria’s story was about an incident that happened while she babysat her brother. He decided to fry the legs of a frog he had caught in the backyard, a tense situation for any babysitter. Her first draft contained only one line of thoughts or feelings: “I was bored.” Maria’s partner suggested that she write a Thoughtshot to describe what it was like when her parents came home. Maria began with a flashforward:

I heard the rattling of a car engine coming closer to our house. Could it be my parents? I thought. I could picture my mom’s face in my mind when she sees that we have two frogs in the kitchen. I know she’ll throw away the pans and dishes we used. I hope they know it was all my brother’s fault.

Then, she added a flashback:

I remember when my brother and I had made my mom a mud cake for her birthday. She had thought it was real chocolate, probably because we had put real candles on it. It wasn’t long before she found out it was mud, after all. Why don’t I ever say anything against my brother’s ideas?

Last, Maria wrote a brain argument, showing the way she argued with herself about what to do to stay out of trouble:

I started feeling the sweat on my hands when the door shut. “Quick, in my room,” my brother whispered. “Should I stay where I am or hide with my brother?” I asked myself. Why should I leave if I didn’t do anything bad? I’m getting out of here. Before I knew it, I was in my brother’s room leaning against the door.

By adding Thoughtshots to her story, Maria not only lets her readers know what her characters are thinking but also does some rather sophisticated characterization. From these brief paragraphs, we get both a history of this brother-sister relationship as well as a glimpse of

Maria’s desire to be seen as “good.” This characterization was something Maria did with little difficulty once she was given a strategy, essentially a set of behaviors, rather than an abstract command to “develop these characters.”

To keep this strategy easily accessible, we discussed and wrote the steps for writing Thoughtshots on index cards and put them in our toolboxes. We then decided on the thought bubble as our symbol, our shorthand way of saying, “I’d like to know what this character is thinking right here. Let me inside!”

### Exploding a Moment

“Time to the writer is like play dough in the hands of a toddler” (Lane, 1993, p. 65). Writers are in control of time in their stories, and they can shape it according to their purposes. Yet, my students were not able to stretch out the exciting moments of their stories. They rushed through climactic events—motorcycle crashes, high-dive plunges, and romantic advances—in a matter of one or two sentences. Their stories more than lacked suspense. Major life events in their stories were almost laughable because of the cursory treatment they received. Exploding a Moment makes writers the masters of time in their stories. It links together Snapshots and Thoughtshots by using action, thus allowing writers to stretch the exciting seconds of their stories into what seems like hours, creating suspense for the reader to savor.

I brought my kitchen timer to school when I introduced the Exploding a Moment tool. I read aloud an excerpt from *The Chosen* (Potok, 1967), one paragraph at a time, getting students to time the length of each one.

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We then looked at what actually happened in each paragraph—a wind-up, a pitch, a return throw from the catcher, a second pitch, and, finally, a hit. While the entire action in *real time* probably took less than two minutes, the *story time* took twice as long.

The students identified the exciting moments, including the time preceding, during, or subsequent to the exciting moments, in their own drafts. Salvador picked the moment when he was being chased by a dog; Israel, the few seconds before he gave a girl a Valentine

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present; and Felicia, the instant when she knew she was locked in the trunk of a car. They estimated how long these exciting moments lasted in real time. Then, they read the exciting moments in their drafts to determine the story time. Most students found that, instead of making their exciting moments last as long as they did in real life, they actually were cutting them to less than one-tenth the actual time. The students inserted the symbol for the Exploding a Moment technique—a stick of dynamite—into these scenes.

Felicia was writing a story about a time, during an especially aggressive game of hide-and-seek, when she had gotten locked in the trunk of a car. In an early draft, she told the story in an abbreviated way: “I was playing hide and seek, and I thought I would hide in the trunk of a white car.” However, by Exploding a Moment, she broke this moment down into smaller actions. She realized there were actually four events that she had been lumping together: One, she climbed into the trunk; two, she pulled the trunk almost closed; three, her brother pushed the trunk closed; and, four, Felicia kicked and screamed to be let out. Now, Felicia wanted to explode the moment by using these four actions as the main ideas for three paragraphs and by adding Snapshots and Thoughtshots to each one.

In her first paragraph, Felicia paced herself and described only her first action: her entry into the trunk. She blended with this single action some fragments of Snapshots and Thoughtshots:

I crawled into the trunk, onto the hard but padded floor. I looked to see if he was there. I glanced back at the door. As soon as I saw him coming, my face pinched into a worried frown. I slowly lay down. I grabbed the steel white rim of the trunk and pulled on it until it reached the tip top of the lock. I could see a little, just enough to peak. It looked like a line of light between the trunk door and the car.

Already, Felicia had created more suspense, taking the reader inside the trunk with her. She then showed, in slow motion, the next action, again blended with mini-Snapshots and Thoughtshots:

“Where is he?” I asked myself. I could no longer see through the small opening of light that had come into the trunk. It was completely silent. No one was to be seen. I looked out, raising the trunk lid a little. He sneaked around, looked right at me, eyeball to eyeball, and slammed the door shut. I pushed. I kept on pushing. It was locked!

Finally, Felicia moved to the final action, her response, which was made more vivid by including her thoughts and some physical details:

I panicked. “Open this trunk right now!” I said. I kicked at the door. How could he open it, though? I asked myself. He didn’t have the keys. I started to feel sweat roll down my body. I kicked and kicked and kicked. What could I do? All I could do was wait. I felt bruises forming, and my legs started to sting. It was dark, and I just lay there. I was burned out with no energy left. It was all silent.

This passage of Felicia’s story, which originally could be skimmed over, if not skipped entirely, was expanded into three suspenseful paragraphs.

Exploding a Moment allows students to tell important parts of their stories in slow motion, and, in the process, it helps them remember. “One unexplored skill which might help our understanding of . . . revision,” suggests Murray (1987), “is the writer’s use of memory” (p. 95). He theorizes that writing actually “unlocks information stored in the brain” (p. 95). Exploding a Moment allows us to access information locked in the brain, resulting in both more descriptive writing on the part of the author and more suspenseful entertainment for the reader.

### Making a Scene

At the root level, revision means “to re-see.” According to Sommers (1980), inexperienced writers frequently have an “inability to ‘re-view’ their work again . . . with different eyes” (p. 382). Furthermore, non-native English speakers, with which my classroom was filled, need additional help remembering that their drafts are temporary, that they can make extensive changes to their writing without focusing on conventions (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Our fifth revision tool, Making a Scene, works as a diagnostic tool that helps students see their writing through new eyes. Like a mechanic’s lift, this tool allows students to take a better look at their writing and see if it is balanced.

Many students only use one element of narrative writing: action. Their stories read like laundry lists of things their characters did. Few student writers and conference partners know when a piece of writing needs more dialogue or description or internal reflection to flesh out the action in the story. The Making a Scene tool helps students evaluate their drafts for the four main ingredients of narrative writing—action, dialogue, Snapshots, and Thoughtshots—and allows them to see where and how often they used each type. We began by designating one marker color for each main ingredient in narrative writing: blue for action, yellow for dialogue, red for Snapshots (here being used to include almost any physical description), and purple for Thoughtshots (or internal description). The students

then traded drafts and underlined every line in one of the four colors. Some drafts were almost completely underlined in blue; others had no yellow; others had huge blocks of red; but only a few drafts had a rainbow of colors. In case the colors didn't get the message across boldly enough, we also tallied the percentages of each type of writing in the drafts. Suddenly, my students could "re-see" their drafts.

Monica, writing about the robbery of her house, saw that she needed to add more dialogue and action to her

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story. Nearly two-thirds of her story was Snapshots; 17% was Thoughtshots; 14%, action; and a mere 2%, dialogue. Angelica's story about her family's recent move was overloaded with action at the expense of physical detail: 44% of her story was action; 22%, Thoughtshots; 18%, dialogue; and only 6%, Snapshots. Even students who had balanced the elements of their writing more proportionally could "see" areas of their drafts where they could better blend the elements, mixing thoughts with descriptions, combining dialogue with action. With the evidence in front of them, my students had reasons to revise and saw possibilities for doing so. Furthermore, Making a Scene helps students as they draft new stories. They realize the importance of drawing from all four elements of narrative writing in order to create balanced scenes.

Our symbol for Making a Scene is the black and white board that a movie director clicks shut when crying, "Action!" Placed in our toolbox, it became our fifth tool for revising.

### Conclusion

Like the toolboxes of any skilled craftsmen, the Writer's Toolboxes give my students a set of easily accessible options for getting their jobs done. As a result, my room works more like my vision of a real writing workshop. However, I still have a few nagging questions. First of all, what other tools might be added to my students' toolboxes? For example, what tools work well in other genres, such as expository or persuasive writing? What tools might work better with students with other

language backgrounds? Second, I wonder what methods are most effective in teaching these revision techniques. Is it important, as one group of students advised me, to perform all of these techniques on one piece of writing? Would it be more effective to scatter these throughout the year? Third, and most importantly, what effect does the toolbox have on related areas of the reading and writing workshop? How do these tools change students' approaches to conferencing, to reading, to prewriting, and to drafting? My sense, as I listen to writing conferences and book groups, is that these tools, with frequent use, become internalized and improve my students' abilities as conference partners, readers, and drafters.

Despite the inevitable need for fine-tuning, the Writer's Toolbox—by increasing choices and by creating a common language—strengthens my students' ownership over their writing. Tait, a reluctant reviser at the beginning of the school year came to this conclusion after our Writer's Toolbox unit: "I used to think revision was just a waste of time, but now I've seen what revising can do to a story." Brian, a student instantly frustrated by comments like "Describe more," also came to understand the purpose of revising: "My ideas about revision have really changed. Now, I can do more to help my writing, to make it better. At the beginning of the year, I didn't understand it. Now I do." In fact, when questioned in an anonymous survey, all of my students said they would definitely use these revision techniques in the future. By giving them a way to talk about, to make decisions about, and eventually to perform revisions, the Writer's Toolbox transformed my students from recopiers to writers more in control of their craft. After all, that is what a writing workshop is all about.

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