Writing Better Poetry Before Peer Groups: Revision's First Steps

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Evaluation of one's own poetry appears to be a difficult process. Yet, we know, and it is well documented, that revision is always a critical and necessary part of the poetry writing process. Readers' comments are one just way to spark new ideas. However, many of poetry's initial revisions do result from the responses of others: peer groups. Peer Groups have been the revision tool and trend of late, but without a good self-revision, peer groups may be non-productive. Therefore, an effective, first-step self-evaluation will allow students to be the first to "re-see" their poems.

The revision process begins before peer comments, and students should not take an initial draft into peer groups. Students need a strong sense of direction within their poem before they discuss their writings with peers. With this confidence, students will find it easier to evaluate and respond to peer comments. In addition, students need to have their poem strengthened to the point where peer comments will be at a higher level, instead of standard remarks like "you are telling, not showing" or "explain this cliché." These problems should be eliminated, as much as possible, before group response so higher quality "writer discussions" can develop within the peer groups. The need to eliminate these problems falls on the writer, and it was this idea that prompted me to analyze my own poetry writing process to figure out how a writer can better prepare for peer groups.

Within peer groups, a poem's owner, or true author, may be unclear if student authors are dependent upon using the initial ideas of others to revise their poems. Also it seems that if students know a third party will look at their poem critically, they themselves may not take their initial draft seriously prior to the peer group. Therefore, the first new ideas students are exposed to are ideas they did not create. As a member of many peer groups myself, I noticed I was guilty, at times, of not taking my initial draft seriously before entering the group. On the contrary, many times I saw members of my peer groups as sponges for comments, copying down my suggestions of what to write verbatim. This sponge effect is the direct result of writers being unprepared for the peer group, and not having a focal point from which to discuss and analyze what they have written.

So, by meticulously breaking down my own poetry revision process, I

developed a self-evaluation which student writers can use to critique their poems before entering their groups. This process was completed by critically analyzing and documenting all changes I made to a poem, start to first-draft completion. I looked at what steps I took throughout the process, why I took them, what prompted me to make the changes, and the goals I wanted to achieve. When developing these ideas, I moved back and forth from revisions to my journal, noting the areas I marked up, changed, and why. From these experiences, and through questioning myself constantly, I began a self critique and the poetry revision process that resulted in a work sheet "Making My Poem Better Myself" (reproduced at the end of this article).

Writing to Say What You Wanted

As I read my initial draft, I first found myself referring to what I now call a post initial draft paragraph, which describes exactly what I wanted to show within the poem. I had always kept these ideas in my mind, but for discovery purposes, I wrote down this mental paragraph. This explanatory paragraph of my initial ideas and intentions proved to be a resource tool from which I drew constantly. Of course, my intentions changed as I did more and more drafts, but the initial importance of the paragraph was to provide focus for the poem. Shortly after, I discovered this method documented as an activity (Bishop 149).

Discovering What Is & Isn't Finished

After writing the paragraph and comparing it to my actual poem, I found myself creating a list of where changes needed to be made. For student purposes, I would ask also that they write what they have accomplished so they do not feel writing poetry is only a never-ending process of corrections. Students should be made aware that sticking to the ideas of the initial paragraph is not a must, but just a guideline of what can be done. As for myself, I only used two ideas from my original list. However, what the list did do is spark more ideas, and it made me realized I wanted to say too much in one poem.

Assuming Too Much?

I discovered I was asking myself quite oftern, "What are you assuming?" Most poetry is the recording of our personal experience, expression, or opinion. This is where our poem's ownership lies: within *our* thoughts. And within initial drafts, we writers may assume details. From what I discovered, missing details usually disrupt flow. These may be the details that connect the ideas, images, and thoughts in our minds to our readers' minds. Therefore, we need to step out of our writing minds and become the reader. By reading it from a reader's point of view, missing details may become obvious And with the advantage of us, the authors, reading our poems, we knowexactly what and where to revise.

Noting and Exploring the Showing, Not Telling

"Show, don't tell" is classic advice given because as writers we want to see poems, not hear words, as we read. I found this essential to the poem's imagery development, and I always went through and noted "tell" in the necessary

spots of my poem. As for the students, I would ask them to mark both "show" and "tell", so they could experience the difference between the two, and more importantly, realize they have the ability to "show." When I came across a portion of my poem marked "tell," I stopped and tried to visualize what I meant to say. Sometimes, I just wrote until an image came, and if nothing came, I wrote something anyway, hoping I would read it differently later to spark what I really wanted to say. Elbow calls this method "making a false point," which he encouraged (130). Hence, studetns should brainstorm their "tell" ideas in their journals, in anticipation of further development later.

The first five sections of the worksheet are intentionally set off from the rest. Depending on the student, too much initial revision may be overwhelming. Therefore, this critique is set up to accommodate all writers. The more motivated stsudents will jump at the chance to continue making their poems better, while the less interested students will have a place to stop. However, the final sections should not be ignored. Students should realize that if they continue with the critique past this stopping point, their poems will improve by "keeping these ideas in mind" as they revise. All sections of this critique point out important aspects of poetry revision, that if used, will create a better piece of writing.

Getting Them "In Your Mood"

I noticed the first change to my firswt stanza was to establish proper tone. The original tone wasn't putting my potential readers in the frame of mind I wanted them in. In fact, there really wasn't a tone. Readers need to be put in the correct mood so the author's images can have the intended effect. Setting tone early wll help the poem unwind the way the writer wants it read.

Breaking the Dams

Flow is very important, and as in composition papers, it requires transitions. I noticed that what will hurt flow is missing details, subject change, a "telling" in the middle of a "showing," wordiness, and vagueness. Student writers, when they become readers, will recognize where flow isn't smooth, and they will need to find a solution. This recognition forces students to look critically at their poems, and learn critically through discovery. When the poem flows, more than likely the writer is saying what he or she wants to say. Therefore, we can't assume the smallest detail; it may be that detail which reveals and or connects our intended meanings.

Repeating or Rephrasing: Should It Be Said Twice?

As for redundancies, I am always guilty of over-explaining at first, having one too many examples, or repeating an earlier stanza with a different view. Yet, these initial redundancies have actually improved my writing. Once I recognize that I have a redundancy, I have to figure out which works best. It could be the choosing between examples, which may lead to a third and better one, or it could be the appropriate choosinsg of location, or both.

When writers accidentally write an idea twice, it gives them two views. This is why writers should not revise too early as they are writing; they may want

to use what they wrote at a later time. Elbow says, "if you manage yourself right, you won't need to revise until you have written enough to throw away." Basically, when you have overexpressed yourself, the revision process can start. So now, if writers know that they will critically revise their poems later, they can write redundant material to maintain that writer's groove. However, poetry is the conciseness of words, and authors should not repeat themselves, unless it is strategic. Therefore, eventual conciseness will improve the poem.

Originality Works, but the Familiar Marks Returning Points

Cliches do not belong in poetry; however, at first, cliches will get down on paper what the writer wants to say. There are two advantages to using cliches in initial drafts. First, it is a way for a writer to keep moving. Instead of stopping to pry open new meanings, the writing can continue with the context surrounding the cliche. Secondly, cliches are markers telling students where to revise and create original images. By using cliches in an initial draft, students know where to return to, without stopping and losing valuable ideas.

This entire self critique is a tool that will allow upper-level poetry students to improve their poems before peer evaluations, and may be used as a discussion guide within the group. As mentioned earlier, if a writer has a good self evaluation, it will help peer responses attain a higher level, forcing all group members to think a little more deeply about the group's poetry. And instead of responding to common remarks, group members will be able to discuss their poem ambitions more critically. An ineffective self critique will wast peer response time with comments like "don't tell" or "you said this twice." Good self critiques will lead to efficient, thought-provoking peer response groups, with the members discussing a solid first draft, not an initial one.

This self critique is a step-by-step process that will improve poems. However, long after this process is done, revisions will still need to be made. Therefore, I developed a list of activities to complement this self critique. These activities, a few discovered in writing books, along with those that I have done historically, are designed to help students "re-see" their poems before or after peer group sessions. These activities are designed to help students experiment with words, and/or the way a poem visually appears on paper. Of the list (reproduced at the end of this article), activities 1 through 4 are ones I have used before. The following six are complementary activities which I found documented in many sources and are self explanatory. Activities such as these can be a less formal, more enjoyable form of revision.

Revision is a complex, on-going process and should start with the writer keeping a strong sense of ownership. Once the writer is confident with the piece, or sick of it, it is time for other methods of revision. David Madden, author of Revising Fiction, says, "Many writers who have earned their reputations through hard work agree that one must write at first just to have something to rewrite" (qtd. Bishop 131). Revision is a vital part of the poetry creation process, and arguably the most important. This is where self critique and supplemental activities are crucial. Students should be encouraged to revise without the constant thought that what they revised was poor poetry. Elbow clarified revision when he said, "revision does not mean wrong" (132). Revision is simply the development of initial ideas.

Works Cited

Bishop, Wendy. Released into Language. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990.

Elbow, Peter. Writing with Power. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Activity List

1. From memory, rewrite your entire poem. Compare the poems.
2. Mix and match current stanzas. Without looking, rearrange word selections in a completely new order. Read the new poem and note observations.
3. Copy the poem word for word onto another piee of paper. Keep notes of your observations.
4. Remove all punctuation from the poem and convert all capital letters to lower case. Read the poem without endstops or put it into new paragraph form. Read the new poem and note observations.
5. Experiment with adjectives: remove all adjectives (or adverbs or both).*
6. Rearrange the poem so that the line breaks at the end of sentences. Then arrange it in 10 syllable lines. Try it in two-or four-word lines. Space it by phrases and move the lines across the white space. Read all versions aloud and explain how each works or does not work.*
7. Remove all conjuntions, articles, and prepositions.*
8. Cut the poem in half while trying to maintain the original intensity.*
9. Try turning an unmetered poem into iambic pentameter and vice versa.*
10. Cut and paste only the strong images in any order without changing them. Then try to reconnect images using fresh ideas. (Elbow 153)

* Tsujimoto, Joseph. Teaching Poetry to Adolescents. 1988. As found in Bishop 148-49.