

Details, Details, Details: A Lesson on Teaching the Importance of Them  
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*“Where do details come from? A detail is the answer to a question a reader might have. They can come from the 5 w’s + h, 5 senses, action, feelings, attributes, or a setting (Peha). Since details can come from many sources, it is suggested by Robert Fletcher that a writer uses “concrete details to understate an important truth rather than clubbing the reader over the head with it.” He also states that the most important suggestion in his book *What A Writer Needs* is that “the bigger the issue, the smaller you write.” Meaning, a writer does not have to include every single detail in a piece, but just the ones that where perhaps the most significant to them.*

### **School-Wide Plan**

Each week our entire staff meets as a Profession Learning Committee (PLC) to focus on a topic that can be addressed school-wide. This year we have decided to focus on writing and how we, as teachers, can help our students elaborate or add more details to their writing. To help us with this process we have had a writing specialist coming into our school once or twice a month, for the past five months, to talk to us about how to teach our students to elaborate on their writing or add details to their writing. Another area of focus with the writing specialist has been to come up with writing rubrics for each grade. Not only is each grade preparing their own writing rubric, but we are also conferencing amongst each other, which is beneficial in many ways since our school only has one classroom per grade, so that the writing rubrics all relate to one another. Since this is something that I am focusing on in my teaching for PLC’s, I thought that it only made sense to focus on it for my teaching project for this course as well.

### **Participants**

The school that I am currently teaching at is a private Catholic School in Otsego, Michigan. The economic status of the school varies, some students receive a full scholarship to attend our school, some a partial scholarship, and others receive no scholarship at all. The entire school, kindergarten through eighth grade, consists of 89 students, with the majority of the

students being White-non Hispanic and only one being Hispanic. Each classroom varies in size from 5 students to 16 students, which gives the teachers more one-on-one time with their students.

My classroom consists of 9 students; four boys and five girls. While the majority of my students are at the same academic level,, a couple who are reading at a fourth grade reading level., but for writing purposes the majority are the same. Since it would be difficult to closely monitor the progress of all 9 of my students, I decided to focus on three of my students; all from a different academic level when it comes to writing.

The first student that I chose to follow through this project was Cassidy. I decided to choose Cassidy because even though she is a very strong reader and has excellent math skills, when it comes to writing she often “blanks out” or seems to get overwhelmed by the expectations of the writing assignment. If I had to “label” Cassidy as a low, medium, or high writer, I would have to say that she is one of my low writers. The next student that I decided to monitor is Jack. The reason that I chose Jack is because he is one of my middle-of-the-road writers who always seems to have great ideas to bring to the group. The last student I chose is Erin. Erin is one of my stronger writers, meaning she always goes one step further than what is expected and that extra step is always a wonderful addition to her writing.

## **Project**

The project that I chose for my students to do as a whole class was to write descriptive paper comparing their two favorite fruits. The students would first pick their two favorite fruits, then create a list for each one using their five senses. After the list was created, they would create a Venn Diagram. From there, they would write a paragraph using the descriptive words from the Venn Diagram on how the fruits are and how they are different.

## Day 1: Checklist

Before I began the actual writing projects that I would be monitoring, I sat down with my students and we created a check-list for them to follow when developing their writing pieces. Since we are focusing on adding detail to our writing, or elaborating our writing, I decided that they should focus on what they should look for in this type of paper. At first this process was confusing to them and they really weren't sure what they should include in this type of writing so I explained to them that when they add detail or elaborate their writing, they will "think about their telling details, close their eyes and make a picture in their head, make a mental list of everything they see in the picture, and then describe what they saw in their writing" (Peha).

Since we had already done several writing projects this year, my students were pretty familiar with the general steps of the writing process, meaning beginning with a prewriting activity to the final publishing, but they were not familiar with checklists or the formal name of the type of paper they would be writing, and that being a descriptive paper. After we developed the checklist, which was a redeveloped one from *Strategies for Writers*, I told them that when they use it they may check off certain parts of it as they are going through the writing process but when they write the final copy of their paper they need to go back through the checklist using a clean copy to make sure that they have met all of the requirements. Below is the checklist the students would use to check their paper:

- Tell what someone or something is like.
- Use "juicy words" that tell what people or places look like.
- Change or add words to make my paper better.
- Start each sentence with a capital letter.
- Use a period at the end of a telling sentence.
- Use a question mark at the end of an asking sentence.

## Prewriting

To begin the writing process, I had all of the students gather around our whiteboard and develop a list of nouns, verbs, and adjectives that could be of use to them in a descriptive paper. When describing to my students what an adjective is, I use the term that our writing expert suggested, and that is “juicy words”. After we created a list of each, we practiced some skills using some workbook pages from the *Write One* series. These workbook pages provided my students with the practice of picking out nouns, verbs, and adjectives from short pieces of writing. It also provided them with individual lessons on each of the three. For example, for the noun lesson the students had to add nouns to a story and put a list of words in the correct column (person, place, or thing). For the verb lesson, the students had to add the correct verb to each animal and circle the verbs in a given story. The last individual lesson was on adjectives. For these lessons the students had to pick an adjective from the box, write it next to one of the given noun and then draw a picture. Another adjective lesson asked the students to write a color word under a car and then color the car the correct color. The lessons that required the students to use all three skills involved writing the words from a list under to correct column (nouns, verb, or adjective) and to then use the words from the columns to create sentences. Each sentence had to have at least one word from each column. I felt that these lessons were a great start to helping my students determine what nouns, verbs, and adjectives were before we actually began a formal lesson on the writing process for a descriptive paper.

Usually when I do a writing exercise with my students we make lists or do a T-chart. For this writing exercise we were going to write about our favorite fruit. To start this exercise I had my students close their eyes and visualize what their favorite fruit looks like, how it sounds when you bite into it, how it feels when you touch it, how it smells, and how it tastes (Lewis). After the visualization, the students created a list of their favorite fruits. Next, I had the students think

back to their visualization and they created lists using their five senses (Routman) to describe their favorite fruit. I often call descriptive words “juicy words”. The students love his term and it seems to really get them to come up with some unique descriptive words. After we came up with a list, I decided that we needed to come up with a way to compare two different fruits, since comparison is one of the steps in the drafting process that is used in *Strategies for Writers*. To do a comparison, I wanted to introduce the Venn Diagram to them, another suggestion in *Strategies for Writers*. In order to decide which two fruits were the classes favorites, they each got to write down their two favorite fruits on a piece of paper and we took a class vote. After the vote was complete we were able to begin our Venn Diagram. In our reading series we have used Venn Diagrams to compare different characters in stories that we have read but we have never used one in the writing process. For our Venn Diagram we listed how apples and strawberries are the same and how they are different. To do the comparisons we used the “juicy words” that we had previously created. The last step for this writing activity involved the students to create their own Venn Diagram using their two favorite fruits. After they created their Venn Diagram, they were to write four sentences, their first draft. The first sentence listed their favorite fruits. The second and third sentence listed ways that the fruits are the same, the next group of sentences told about one fruit and how it is different from the other fruit, and the last group of sentences told about the other fruit and how it is different from the first fruit.

## **Drafting**

As I walked around the room to observe my students, I noticed that Cassidy, one of the participants for this project, was really struggling with getting started. This has been a characteristic of Cassidy’s from day one of first grade, so I decided to sit down with Cassidy and see how I could help her get started. To begin the conference I asked Cassidy if she knew what two fruits were her favorite. She smiled big and said, “strawberries and watermelon.” I then

made a Venn Diagram for her and told her that we would be filling this out together but first we needed to make a list of descriptive words for each fruit. Instead of using the lists that we created as a class using the five senses, because this is often very overwhelming for Cassidy to see multiple lists on the board, we made a list for each fruit as I asked her questions relating to the five senses. After we made our lists, we filled in the Venn Diagram. Cassidy decided that both strawberries and watermelon are red, have seeds you can see, they are both juicy, and they both taste sweet. She said that strawberries are small and watermelon are big. She said that watermelon has a hard shell but a soft, juicy inside and that strawberries are soft on the outside and the inside. She said that strawberries have a stem and leaves. Her last description was that you can not eat all of a watermelon (even though this was not on the list that we created together I thought that it was a good observation). Since I know that Cassidy struggles with writing, I decided to give her a fill-in-the blank paragraph for her writing. Before she started the paragraph, she picked the two ways that they are the same and two ways that each fruit is different from the other fruit. The paragraph looked like this:

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are both fruits. They both \_\_\_\_\_ .  
\_\_\_\_\_. They are also both \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ and  
\_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

While Cassidy worked on this I moved over to Jack. Jack had a great start! His Venn Diagram was complete, he was comparing oranges with watermelon, but I could see that he was struggling on how to get his paragraph started. I told him to first write a sentence telling me two ways the fruits are the same, two sentences telling me how the first fruit is different from the other, and two sentences telling me how the second fruit is different from the first. I could tell he was still a little unsure so I gave him the same paragraph that I gave Cassidy but instead of

sitting down with him to decide what ways he wanted to compare the two fruits, I let him decide on his own. I moved to the students around him, checking their work, and then went back to Jack's progress. He had a great start on his work and gave me a reassuring smile that he was feeling comfortable with the assignment.

I then moved to the final student for this project, Erin. Just as I had expected, Erin's Venn Diagram was neatly written, with several words from the class-created word list, along with some other ones that she had come up with on her own. She also had at the top of her paper a title, "Sweet and Sour". Of course, just the title alone made me want to continue on down her page. As we had learned in the writing process, the first draft is three different series of sentences: the first one compares the two objects, the second one is about just one of the objects, and the third one is about the other object. The two fruits that Erin was comparing were lemons and watermelon. When I asked her if these were her two favorite fruits she said that watermelon was but that lemons really weren't. I asked her why she chose lemons and her response was that she doesn't really like any other fruits so she just picked one. Fair enough response, so I let her continue along with her writing. When I asked her if she had any questions, she indicated that she was fine, which was her way of politely asking me to let her be.

Since Erin had not yet started on writing an actual paragraph, I continued around the room to see if anyone else needed assistance. I noticed that Cassidy was continuing to fill in the blanks for the comparison and that Jack had completed the first and second part, comparing the two fruits and writing about the first fruit. I then went back to Erin's desk and noticed that she had begun her paragraph. Once all students had completed their paragraph, I decided that this was a good stopping point for day one.



## Day 2: Revising

To start the lesson, I showed the students what I came up with for my fruit comparison, since they had already each completed their first draft. When looking at mine I told them that we would first go through the checklist to see if there were any visible corrections that needed to be made. Immediately the students noticed the periods that I forgot at the end of sentences and the capital letters that were missing from the beginning of sentences. Then we went over the other things on the checklist: did I tell what the fruits were like, did I use “juicy words”, and are there any words that I can change or add to make my paper better. As we looked at the paper, the students noticed that I did not use any “juicy words” to tell how strawberries and kiwi are alike. So together we changed my sentence from “Strawberries and kiwi are alike” to “Strawberries and kiwi are alike because they both have teeny tiny seeds”. After we continued through the remainder of my paper I let them go back to their seats to work on their own papers.

As I did on day one, I first visited Cassidy. I asked her if she had a period at the end of each sentence. She smiled and said yes. I asked her if she began each new sentence with a capital letter. She pointed out that she to change a couple to a capital letter. I asked her if she wanted to change or add any “juicy words”. She said that she liked the words that she picked. I agreed with her and then moved on to Jack.

Just as with Cassidy, I began my conference with Jack by asking him if he ended each sentence with a period. He smiled and said of course because the period was already on the page; I forgot that I had the period already printed on the page. I asked him if all of this sentences began with a capital letter. He said that he had to change all of them to a capital letter. This convention is one that Jack often struggles with during our journal writing, handwriting, and any other assignments that require a capital at the beginning of a sentence. I asked him if he wanted to change any of his “juicy word” and he said that he did not like the “juicy words” he used to describe the way oranges look different than watermelon. I asked him

what he thinks an orange looks like and he said the only thing he could think of was orange. I asked him if it was smooth or bumpy. He said bumpy. I asked him if he could think of any other “juicy words” for bumpy and he said lumpy bumpy. As Mark Farrington stated in his article *Four Principles Toward Teaching the Craft of Revision*, Jack was not happy with the words that he used to describe an orange, yet he had some difficulty coming up with words on his own until he was given a prompt. I smiled letting him know that I thought that was a good choice. I asked if he thought he needed to change any other words and he said no. I agreed and moved on to Erin.

Conventions of writing have always been Erin’s strong point so it did not surprise me when I reached her desk and asked her if she needed to change or add anything relating to the conventions that she said no. I then asked her if she needed to change or add any “juicy words” and she said that she added one more way that the two fruits were the same and one more way to describe each individual one. Erin is a writing teachers dream! She always goes above and beyond what is expected of her without making the writing silly or too wordy.

After moving around the room and looking at what all of the students had done, I decided that we should move onto the next stage of the writing process that day and that was editing.

## **Editing**

Since I teach first grade I knew that this stage of the writing process would need to be done with me. While the students were waiting to conference with me I had them work on an illustration for their descriptive paper and a title for it as well, if they had not already done so.

I decided to conference with the three students that I would be focusing on for this project first. As with all of the other stages of the writing process I had the first conference with Cassidy. Since Cassidy had filled in the fill-in-the blank paragraph I was not sure how much conferencing time we would really need, I read her paper out loud to her and asked her if she wanted to

change or add anything. By the look on her face I knew that she was not sure so I prompted her. I asked her if a watermelon had certain colors on the shell and she told me that the shells are green and white stripe. I asked her if we could add the colors green and white in front of the word stripe to give it more detail so that the reader could see what the shell looked like. She agreed. For the watermelon she said that the seeds were big and black but for the strawberry she said that they just had seeds. I asked her what the seeds looked like and she said tiny and white. I asked her if those were good “juicy words” to describe the seeds and she said they were so we added those to her paragraph. I read the paragraph to her again and asked her if she was happy with it. She said she was. Next, we came up with a title together, “Big and Little Sweet Fruits”. After that sent her back to her desk to write the final copy for publication. I told her to keep the checklist in mind as she wrote the final copy, even though we went through it during our conference and she had covered all points that were on the list.

Next, was Jack. Jack also did the fill-in-the-blank paragraph but he added a lot of extras so it was kind of a jumbled mess when he brought it to me. To help Jack write his final copy, I decided to write a clean copy for him as we had our conference. At the top of Jack’s paper was the title “Favorite Fruits with Seeds”. I asked him if he liked the title and he said he did so we moved on to checking the conventions of the paragraph. All of the sentences ended with a period and all new sentences began with a capital letter. Three of the six conventions were covered; since we did not have any sentences ending with a question mark, that box is automatically checked. Next, I read Jack’s paper to him. After I read it I asked him if he wanted to add any other “juicy words” to his paragraph. He said no so I sent him on his way to write the final copy.

The last student for this project was Erin. As I mentioned before, Erin is every writing teachers dream. She came to my table with a neatly written draft ready for editing. The first thing Erin and I did was double check to make sure that she had completed the two conventions

that were on the checklist. As suspected, she had. Next, I read Erin's paragraph to her and then asked her if she wanted to change or add any "juicy words" to it. She said no. Even though Erin's draft had every few errors, that probably could have been corrected by carefully erasing and rewriting over them, I still decided to have her write a clean, final copy. After conferencing with the whole class was over and the students had all written their final copy and completed their checklist, I decided to call it a day.

### **Day 3: Publication**

One thing that the writing expert stressed to us was to have a celebration of everyone's work. In other words, share their final copy, the copy that would go to publication. Since we have shared our writing pieces in the past, although they have not been as detailed as these are, the students know the rules of a good audience. Each student was able to come to the front of the room, sit in the special writers chair, read their piece, and share their illustration.

For this activity, I do what is called "Popcorn Pick", which means I randomly draw students names for the order that they will go. When it was each of my participants turn I carefully noted how proud they were of their piece. Even though Cassidy is not a confident writer, she sure is confident when she shares her writing pieces. Now as far as Jack goes, he is not the most confident writer nor the most confident reader but he still participates without a struggle. Erin, on the other hand, is both a confident writer and a confident presenter. Because I have a smaller class, nine students, and the students only had one paragraph to share, the student were able to share their entire writing piece. In reading one of the articles by Erin Ciccone, *A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop*, it made me wonder how I would have taught my students how to organize what they have to say, because at the first grade level they feel that everything they write in their papers is of importance.

After all of the students presented their pieces, we posted them in the hall to share with

other students in our school, teachers, and families. We received a lot of compliments, which will hopefully help those who are not as confident in their writing gain a little more.

## **Conclusion**

I was very happy with the outcome of this project and the way that the participants handled themselves during the entire writing process. In researching writing more and more, I have come to the conclusion that a Writers' Workshop such as the one that Jan Matsuoka mentions in his article *Revising Revision: How My Students Transformed Writers' Workshop*, sounds like a very interesting way to approach one aspect of a Writers' Workshop that is already in place in the classroom. Since it is so late in the school year, I do not think that I will start a workshop this year, but I would like to start one next year. I know that the second grade teachers in my school use a Writers' Workshop so I will be sure to pass this article on to them.

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## Writer's Memo

Since the school that I am currently teaching at is focusing so heavily on writing this year and will again next year, I think that I will continue to teach my students how to write descriptive papers and the importance of adding details to their writing. I think that one of the main things to keep in mind while teaching first grade students is that they need to describe something or elaborate on something so that the person reading their paper can create a picture in their head of what they are reading about. I think that by starting my students out with something that is not too hard to describe for one of their first descriptive papers was a good exercise for them but in the future years I intend to introduce this topic and concept much earlier in the year.

As I wrote this paper, I was constantly rereading it to myself to make sure that I did not repeat myself too often. When my children would go to bed, I would read the paper out loud so that I could catch even more mistakes, which really amazed me at the amount that I would find when I read it out loud. In gathering ideas for the paper, I do most of my thinking to and from work and right after I put my children down for the night. I find that the quietness of the car ride allows my mind to put everything aside that happened at school that day and the peacefulness of the night allows my mind to relax and focus on the task at hand.

When I look at the way I guided my students through this writing process, I realized that I had to make some accommodations for some, but that the accommodations were necessary in order for those students to feel successful with their writing. Would I make these accommodations again? Yes, I would. The question is, when do I back off on the accommodations and allow my students to guide their own writing? I think this question depends on the individual and what they are capable of doing. For example, I do not think that I will expect Cassidy to write a complete paragraph without some sort of assistance but I can see myself reducing the amount of assistance that Jack receives from me. This is when it is important for a teacher to know their students and know what they are capable of doing. For Erin, as I mentioned more than once, she is a writing teacher's dream student. She has loved to write from day one of first grade and I expect to see her writing grow more and more as she progresses through school.

The one thing that I learned from this Teaching Project is the satisfaction that all of my students received when they completed the checklist and how important the checklist was to them as they completed their paragraphs. Another thing I learned is how proud they were when they shared their writing piece because we took more time for this writing activity than other ones that we had done in the past, and I think that they were proud of the "juicy words" that they used that would allow the reader to picture the fruits they were comparing in their head.

One piece of the writing process that I think I still need to work on with my students is to continue to add more details to their writing. In saying this I mean, instead of only using one "juicy word" for each description, maybe next time they will use two or three. By teaching this they will not only add more detail to their writing, but also increase their vocabulary.