

A Painless Exercise in Revision

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Students often experience difficulty revising their writing. The things that need to be revised are not always apparent to them, and criticism of their writing is frequently painful. A less threatening revision exercise uses a group essay. Such an essay maintains the students' investment, but the problems are easier to see and the revision process is "painless."

I begin by presenting a picture which has a story to tell. (Many of Norman Rockwell's illustrations lend themselves to this exercise, and published collections of them can usually be found in libraries.) As a class, we discuss the picture and go over relevant cultural points and vocabulary items. We usually give the characters in the picture names to personalize them and to facilitate discussion and later writing.

Then I divide the class into three groups (or multiples of three if the class is large). In the groups, students discuss their ideas, write sentences and compile them into a group paragraph which they write on a sheet of paper. To ensure participation, each student must write at least one sentence for the paragraph. Group A is assigned to write a paragraph in story form explaining what happened before the event depicted in the

illustration took place. How did these characters get into this situation? Group B writes a paragraph describing the scene presented in the picture. What is happening? Meanwhile, group C creates a paragraph describing the conclusion of the story.

Before the class meets again, I arrange the three paragraphs in sequence and correct the spelling and grammar errors. With these out of the way, the students don't get distracted with editing and can focus on revision.

In class, everyone is given a copy of this "complete," three-part story. I read it aloud, and we discuss what needs to be revised. Because the story was written by groups working independently, it is typically quite disjointed. Sentences need to be re-written and resequenced. There may also be a need to add some new sentences and delete some of the existing ones.

After this discussion, students then revise the story individually. However, in contrast to the problems they usually have re-working their own writing, they experience *success*. They can see what needs to be revised, and they understand how to do it. Also, because writing the essay was a group effort they feel less threatened as individuals.

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