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5

A Studio workshop approach

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Writing Memoir Pieces

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Within the studio classroom, the work of writing is a cyclical process that involves reading and thinking as well as drafting, revising, elaborating, crafting, trying the piece out on one or more audiences, compiling a Writer's Notebook, and maintaining a portfolio. Each of these processes is integral to the entire Memoir Framework and to enacting the philosophies underlying both the framework and the studio classroom. Recall that the key here is that writers are working constructively and epistemically as memoirists to build authentic, meaning-rich texts for themselves and others. Recall also that the key value in the studio writing class is work—work that is meaningful and authentic—that is, work that is producing real texts for real audiences.

Notice that we frequently use the word *authentic*. Assuredly, working to create authentic texts for authentic audiences is paramount to the goals and outcomes of the studio writing classroom. Memoir is a real genre; it exists in the world, and people read it. Even though our students may not be writing the next *New York Times* best seller, we want them to work as if they were, as if they might be writing now the kernel of what will one day be a published text. Of course, many venues exist for publishing a work, many beyond the famous and the best-seller lists; and that is how most of our students will indeed become published. But who knows when the next Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Annie Dillard, Stephen Kuusisto, or Chanrithy Him (please, oh please, let it be so!) may be sitting and writing in our classes? We don't know, and our students probably don't know, either, if such is to be their outcome in life; so we work now to instill the working processes and habits of mind that will serve our student writers for a lifetime, regardless of what their eventual writing and publishing venues will be.

To that end, we work with our students to engage them in the full range of writing processes, from idea finding and drafting to taking their written pieces public. Our student writers often display not only their finished memoir pieces but also representations of their work—their writing processes—that surrounded and supported the

final texts. In this way, fellow students and parents, administrators, and our teacher-colleagues begin to understand a bit more about the Memoir Framework, its grounding theories, and its value for writing instruction and for learning.

In this chapter we will share with you some of the routines, rituals, and processes that we think are important for developing memoirists in our classes and the ways in which those processes promote quality instruction and learning in the studio writing classroom.

First Steps: Establishing Routines and Rituals in the Studio Classroom

Billy Collins hints at a writer's ritual when he writes tongue-in-cheek in his poem, "Advice to Writers," that you may scrub your house all night and even go outside to scrub nature, but that when you return home, you'll select a sharp pencil and write sentences "like long rows of devoted ants. . ."

Similarly, Donald Hall offers his daily ritual in his book *Life's Work*: "The best day begins with waking early—I check the clock: damn! It's only 3:00 AM—because I want so much to get out of bed and start working. Usually something particular beckons so joyously—like a poem that I have good hope for, that seems to go so well. . . I feel the work-excitement building, joy-pressure mounting—until I need to resist it no more but sit at the desk and open the folder that holds the day's beginning, its desire and its hope."

These authors approach their writing work with anticipation and hope. They are comfortable in their habits and confident in their work rituals. Just as professional writers generally establish a working routine (write every day from 9:00 a.m. to noon, for example) and have rituals that they follow for writing (sharpen every pencil available before sitting down to the computer to write, for example, as our friend Tom Liner used to do), so too do students working in the studio classroom need to establish some familiar work patterns. These familiar patterns—what we call routines and rituals—help students to know what to expect in your classroom and help them to work epistemically, to work as do real writers and to develop the habits of mind that assist published writers.

As the teacher, you will want to establish the initial routines and rituals for writing in your classroom. You have a vision of how you want students to work in your classroom. You have some values in mind and a working design for how the class ought to proceed. Develop a framework of ritual activities and familiar routines for approaching the writing work: We always share our writings in groups on Thursday, or we always read and discuss excerpts from professional writers on Mondays. Spend time teaching those rituals to students. They will appreciate your predictable structures and quickly adjust to the routines and rituals that you put into place in your classroom. We offer the following guidelines to help you design an appropriate instructional infrastructure that will not only represent what you value in your classroom but also signal to students the practices you believe to be essential to their success in the studio classroom:

1. Consider your values for the studio writing classroom. Return to our discussion of the values of the studio classroom in Chapter 2 to see which of our values

- fit well with your thinking about how to orchestrate instruction. List your values in priority order.
2. *Consider the writing activities that you want to instantiate into the daily occurrence of your classroom.* Think about the use of journals, Writer's Notebooks, literature selections, reading processes, writing processes, genre studies, minilessons, response groups, publishing students' written products, partner work, conferences, celebration of success in writing and learning, and other activities that come to mind. Then, select activities that match well with your values. For example, if you value highly student practice with writing, you may want to use journals and plan for some type of daily writing to ensure that students receive sufficient practice with their composing. Make a comprehensive list, pairing the activity with its value to writers.
 3. *Consider how much time each activity will take.* For example, will you devote an entire instructional period to response groups, half of a period, or divide the class so that one-half of the students are in response groups while the other half of the students are in conferences with you?
 4. *Consider how often you will engage in each activity.* For example, will every Monday be devoted to publishing and celebrating the gems and nuggets from the previous week's drafts? Will every Friday be devoted to Writer's Groups? Will you begin every day with a minilesson based on difficulties that students are exhibiting in their drafts? Will students read and write every day? Will students submit a draft to you weekly for your response?
 5. *Draft a chart on which you plan out several days' or weeks' worth of the rituals and routines that you want to instantiate in your class.* Don't worry right now about the specific content of the lessons. You know that, for now, we're focusing on memoir and that the specifics of the content will come as you continue to read this book and develop your own ideas. What matters at this point is to establish routines and rituals that will suit almost any literacy content that you are teaching, with only minor adjustments. What appear to be the flaws in your design? What seems to be working in your design? Be as specific as possible.
 6. *Consider standards.* Which standards will you be able to meet as you institute the writing studio as a vehicle for your students' learning? Consider district goals and objectives, state standards, and national standards. You may be surprised at how many standards the studio-classroom methodology will assist you in meeting within the context of authentic instruction. No longer will you have to labor to contort your content to fit standards because authentic literacy activities naturally adhere to most published standards.
 7. *Consider evaluation.* We discuss our ideas for evaluation of writing in the studio extensively in Chapters 10 and 11, but do some thinking on your own now about grades and grading. How often will you grade writing? How can you use tools like the portfolio and the Writer's Notebook to assist you in the sometimes monumental task of evaluation?

8. Consider state- and/or district-mandated testing. What types of writing are required on your district and/or state test? How will the writing activities that you have planned for use in your studio classroom help to foster students' authentic understanding of literacy and of written forms of expression? We are *not* advocates of teaching to the test. We are, however, realists who understand that such tests are often the tail wagging the instructional dog. What we have found is that students who are engaged in authentic composing and reading activities that focus on meaning, as we do in the studio classroom, improve their ability to write and to make meaning in genuine ways, which, in turn, helps them to perform well on mandated tests.¹

As you read this book, you will discover the routines and rituals that we typically incorporate into our writing classrooms, all of which are influenced by our experience of what works for our students and for us, and by our values as writers and as teachers ourselves. Once you write down your ideas about routines and rituals in a format—such as a chart or a list—that you can easily use as a reference, then you are ready to situate into your daily instruction in the studio classroom the activities associated with the vital writers' tasks of drafting, revising, and going public with writing.

Drafting the Memoir Pieces

First draft, rough draft, zero draft, freewriting, getting started—drafting goes by many names in the professional literature about writing processes. We're betting that you're already familiar with writing processes, that you have the posters hanging on your classroom's walls, that you took the pledge and gave your heart to writing-process pedagogy long ago. (If not, check out some of the many books on promoting writing processes in your classroom, including *Inside Out, Third Edition* by Kirby, Latta Kirby, and Liner, which contains information as well as a resources chapter.) So, how is drafting unique in the studio writing classroom?

1. *Drafting happens several times a week in the studio writing classroom.* Too often, in conventional English classes, students write one draft for a piece every two weeks or so. Worse yet, they write a draft one day and turn it in the next as though it were the finished product, thus diminishing the role of the draft in writing and blurring the distinctions between *draft* and *finished product*. In the studio, practice is one of our highest values. Writing needs to occur often and students need to try out new drafts, however sketchy, each week.
2. *Students need to write to see what they think and what they have to say.* How do I know what I think until I see it in writing? Even now, as we write this chapter, we are finding the just-right words and expressing our ideas in unique ways that we've not used before to write about the importance of drafting as a process of writing. The draft lets student writers get ideas down onto the page, look at them, and see if they still agree with what they said they thought.

3. *Writing needs time to gel, to rest, to simmer in the writer's mind.* Most students' drafts need to be composed and then set aside without much attention for a while. (Unless of course the draft has so engaged writers that they just can't quit working on it.) But writers can't afford to be idle; just ask any professional writer. Most professionals talk about their established routines and times for writing. That is part of the *work* and *habit* and *discipline* of the writer. If we are to write every day, then that means that some days we compose new pieces, and some days we return to previous drafts, choosing one or two to rework.
4. *Students write in class often, working with an idea to which they've just been introduced.* The written pieces are thus fresh. But they also read like drafts, not like finished products. That's fine for now, but later we'll need to revise the ones that matter to us, the ones about which we care enough to get just right.
5. *As writers accumulate multiple drafts, they are creating a body of work, an artist's repertoire, from which they can draw pieces for further work.* Remember that part of the essential work of drafting multiple Spider Pieces is to look for the *hook* or *anchor piece* around which to weave the entire final memoir. In order to weave together the entire memoir, with all of its attendant Spider Pieces, the writer continually and actively searches for the thread, the touchstone, the motif, the commonalities, the metaphor that will hold those pieces together as a unified literary work. We suggest encouraging your students to use a Writer's Notebook to hold all of their drafts. In the Writer's Notebook they have all of their writing in one easily accessible location. Student writers can readily search through all of their drafts, even the ones that they didn't think held much promise, looking for the metaphors, threads, motifs, and commonalities that will help unify their final memoirs. Those commonalities aren't always immediately apparent, so having a body of work and a Writer's Notebook to hold it will assist in this process of discovering the meaning in the works.
6. *Drafting, in the studio classroom, does not happen in a void.* We pair drafting with our reading of professional exemplars to spark the student writers' imaginations, to give them fresh ideas or a sense of how a piece might sound, how it might be organized, and what types of details and images might resonate with readers.
7. *Drafting, in the writing studio, is part of a social and communal learning process.* After we have produced a draft, we share it with our Writer's Group to see what ideas they have about the piece and if their responses match our intentions as writers. We learn to rely on feedback and suggestions from our group members. We get a sense of whether the piece is worthy of further work, and we gather ideas for a revising and redrafting effort.

Revising the Memoir Pieces

The notion of authentic revising—that is, of seeing a piece of writing with fresh eyes, forming fresh ideas for how to improve and enliven it—hence the word *re-vision*—is

important for student writers because the writers in our classes need to understand two important points: (1) Writing takes time, effort, and work; and (2) Final written products do not spring whole and perfect from writers' heads when writers first sit down to write. When inexperienced writers read a published work, many think that the published version was the first and last version of the text. Our developing writers need to experience firsthand the challenges of moving from initial drafts to polished pieces.

In recent years, professional authors have been more willing to be open about their struggles to produce texts. We like to read to students pieces in which published authors discuss their difficulties with writing, the various drafts and revising efforts that a piece underwent before final product, and the ways in which the initial written pieces evolved over time with consistent and determined revising work by the author. One fine source for such excerpts is Zinsser's (1998) *Inventing the Truth* in which he interviews authors of memoir about their processes and ideas for writing that eventually produced their published texts.

Once students have seen that even professional, published writers draft and revise extensively, perhaps they, too, will come to value working with their own writing over time, putting the effort into the pieces that matter so that their revision efforts allow a piece of writing to emerge from draft to finished product.

Over the years of reading and writing about revision as one of the many composing processes and of watching what our students do as they work on their texts, we have delineated several Revision Behaviors associated with the process that most people generally refer to as *revision*. Take a look at Figure 5-1 for an overview of these behaviors.

Too often, students focus on the lower-order Revision Behaviors and claim to have revised their writings. Our job as coaches of writing, however, is to help students focus on the higher-order behaviors, the ones that we see as authentic revision processes. We coach primarily by asking the writer questions: How can you *show* this powerful relationship with your mother? Why is this detail important? What happened before/after this incident? Where do you want to go next with this piece? Revision is not a quick, down-and-dirty process, easily learned and quickly accomplished. Initially, it is probably best done in class under our supervision and coaching. That makes teaching students how to revise well a labor-intensive effort. Revision is integral to successful writing, highly complex in its most sophisticated forms, occurring both during drafting and after achieving a decent draft worthy of more effort. Most important, revision is something that inexperienced writers can be taught to do.

In the studio classroom, Revision Behaviors occur with first drafts, in subsequent versions of those drafts, and later when students are working on their final memoir piece. As we read and discuss published memoir exemplars (see examples in Chapters 3 and 4), we try to help students read with a writer's lens to discover the techniques that these published writers employ. Then, students attempt those specific techniques while drafting their own memoirs. After they have achieved a draft, they review the piece and take it to their Writer's Groups to see if they have been able to utilize the techniques of the published authors in their own writing, revising as needed to heighten their implementation of those techniques.

<p style="text-align: center;">REVISION BEHAVIORS OF WRITERS <i>Higher-order Revision Behaviors include the following:</i></p>		
Behavior	When	What
FORMING and FINDING	Ongoing throughout writing processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sorting and resorting • Focusing and narrowing • Changing lenses • Discovering • Inventing
TRANSLATING and TRANSCRIBING	In-process during drafting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving ideas from head to page • Selecting in the head and on the page • Moving from inner speech to written language • Getting ideas down onto the page in order to work with them later
ELABORATING	After writing the first draft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling it all • Adding: details, dialogue, vivid verbs, etc. • Finishing the story • Fleshing it out • More, more, more
REVISING	After writing a rich draft, one that holds promise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing the writing again with new eyes • Telling my story my way • Cutting unnecessary stuff • Making and clarifying my point • Writer-directed; writing like a reader
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Lower-order Revision Behaviors include the following:</i></p>		
EDITING	After drafting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crafting, shaping • Giving the piece of writing an <i>authored</i> look • Reader-directed; reading like a writer
PROOFREADING	Last step before pronouncing the written piece as <i>finished</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking across the surface of the written piece at cosmetics • Conforming to standard conventions for punctuation, mechanics, usage, etc. • The final touch

Figure 5-1. Revision Behaviors of Writers

In preparing students to draft the Snapshot Piece, for example (see Chapter 4), we develop a minilesson in which we emphasize several techniques that Huggan employs in her *Elizabeth Stories* excerpt. We look at that piece together as a class and purposefully notice and point to explicit features, including the following:

- Immediacy of the experience: How does the author achieve that?
- Use of precise details: Point to some. (A song playing in the background, for example.)
- Use of the present progressive tense: That tense helps to draw the reader into the experience of the piece. Point to its use in the text.
- Hints at relationship: The narrator, even as a child, calls her parents by their first names, states that she is not used to embraces from her mother, and wonders what her parents have in common. What do those small scenes suggest about her relationship with her parents? How can you give hints in your writing rather than just telling the reader stuff?

As students draft their Snapshot Pieces, they try out these techniques in their writing. When they take this piece to their Writer's Groups, they may focus primarily on the story and the telling of the story, but can also focus on how well these techniques play out in their writing. When they revise the draft, they may return to the Huggan excerpt to study her technique and then try anew to integrate those features into their writing. Clearly, when the work is going well, reading, discussing, thinking, drafting, and revising processes intertwine in a recursive manner, allowing the writer to move forward and backward toward the creation of a "meaning-full" text.

In addition to focusing on Crafting Options (see pages 70–74 and Figure 5–4) during the processes of revision, writers in the studio classroom are also actively searching for the threads, connections, and commonalities among their pieces, crafting their pieces to heighten those *hooks* or *anchor pieces* as they discover them. Thus, the ideas that will resonate in their finished memoirs begin to emerge during students' reading, thinking, drafting, and revising processes.

Strategies for Revising Memoir

Within the studio classroom, revising constitutes much of the work of writing. Once students have an idea and have decided to run with it, their drafts need considerable higher-order work, even if they rather like what they have already produced. The concept of revising even the pieces that are pretty darn good from the outset is one for which many students will need some encouragement to incorporate into their values as writers.

REVISION FEATURES CHECKLIST

The first revision behavior in which we engage our students after they have produced a draft is to consider a checklist of features relevant to that particular Spider Piece. We derive these features by studying the techniques used by the published writers of our

exemplar pieces as we demonstrated in the Huggan piece earlier. Students then examine these checklists individually, discussing them with their Writer's Group, looking for revisions with which they might experiment in their drafted Spider Pieces.

For example, let's say that a student has just drafted a Spider Piece about a special or significant place. (See Figure 3-3 in Chapter 3 to review the possible Spider Pieces.) Perhaps among their exemplar readings, students have read the excerpt by Ellen Gilchrist about her home (see Chapter 4 for the excerpt), and they have written about a place that holds significant memories of a specific time, particular people, and precise events that occurred in that place. The student writer likes his first draft and wants to work on it more. That's when your work as writing coach and the Revision Options (see Figure 5-2) come in. If you find that you have not anticipated the precise Revision Options that interest the student and/or that suit his exact piece, don't worry; you don't have to lose this teachable moment. Work with the Revision Options that do fit the piece and then invent a just-in-time minilesson overnight to respond to what that student writer needs at the moment. Chances are, if this just-in-time technique will work for one student writer, it will also meet the needs of another student writer—maybe even *before* another writer anticipates the need. As you continue to develop these just-in-time minilessons, your own repertoire of revision strategies and prepared minilessons will expand, and you will soon have an entire inventory of them from which to draw as you teach.

You might also take to class a first draft of your own writing and use the following Revision Options checklist (see Figure 5-2) to point to places in your draft where such strategies would make the piece more powerful. Teacher's Hint: Write your draft strategically by leaving some places in your draft where these strategies might fit. Let students learn by doing as they *help* you to make your piece better.

When we teach in this manner, we find that our students become actively involved in higher-order revising, learn specific strategies, and learn to apply them to their own and others' writing. To aid this writerly development, we create a Spider Piece-specific guide for revising that incorporates techniques important to that particular type of writing. For the Place Piece, we work with a checklist such as the one in Figure 5-2 to guide students' revisions at this stage of their writing processes.

Revision Through Elaboration

The second Revision Behavior in which we engage students after they have produced a draft that they think may have potential (and not all drafts fit into that category) is that of Elaboration. Elaboration basically involves *adding more*: more detail, more dialogue, more of the interior thoughts of the characters involved in the story being told, and more information about the people and places involved in the story. We find that inexperienced writers often write the first version of a story or event too quickly. They have the *We just want to be done* mentality, so they dash through the writing, hitting only the basics. The draft needs . . . more. Elaboration is a process of returning to the piece in order to tell the *whole* story or event, leaving out nothing significant, drawing the reader into the story, and starting at the beginning and not stopping until the end.

Checklist of Revision Options for the Place Spider Piece

Directions: Review your Place Spider Piece to see where you may revise your piece using some of the options below.

- **INTENSIFIED IMAGES:** Find chunks of description in your piece that can be sharpened by adding sensory detail. Work with light, temperature, and sounds. Let us feel it and see it.
- **TELLING STORIES:** Deepen your descriptions by extending the narrative. Tell the history of the place. Connect yourself to it.
- **LENS CHANGING:** Shift between *up close* and *far away* lenses. (1) Once you have written about the up close details of the place, widen your lens and look farther away—around the curve in the road, beyond the backyard, between this place and three blocks in every direction. (2) Return to your close focus of the place and add in important, specific details: a porch swing where people sat, a kitchen table, a piano, a dirty window with lace curtains.
- **CHARACTER STUFFING:** Few places remain devoid of people. Populate your place with some of the people found there. At what times of day are they there? What do they do there? Focus on specific details such as their posture, clothing, facial expressions, and skin.
- **EMOTIONAL HOLDS OF THE PLACE:** Why is this place so special to you? Does it offer emotional calm, spiritual ease, or a transformation of mind when you're there? Why does this place have such a hold on you? Be subtle. Help the reader to understand what is special about the place through your descriptions and details.

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Figure 5-2. Checklist of Revision Options for the Place Spider Piece

Elaboration can occur for the revision of an individual Spider Piece. It can also occur more globally once the writer has identified the three or four (more or less) Spider Pieces that he will weave together for the final memoir.

In order to help students with Elaboration strategies, we consider what precisely it is that quality memoirs contain, and then we encourage students to add those sorts of details and information to their writing. Figure 5-3 is a handout that we use with our students to guide their Elaborations. This concept of elaborating writing applies well to any type of writing. We try to select the specific Elaborations that match the kind of writing on which the student is working. Consider these Elaborations for memoir writing:

Elaboration Strategies for Memoir

Directions: Begin this process by working alone to mark your own draft; then, read your piece of writing aloud to your Writer's Group and see what they think you can add to your draft.

Write directly on your draft, indicating where and the types of Elaborations that you might add to your draft.

Try at least two Elaborations. The idea for now is that more is better. Label your Elaborations and put a copy of your labeled and expanded draft in your Writer's Notebook.

PEOPLE DETAILS: Have the people in your piece of writing come to life by giving the reader more detail. How is she dressed? How does she smell? Describe her smile and eyes. How does he walk: strolling, swaggering, or loping along? Give the reader additional sentences and phrases that make these people come to life and exist in the reader's mind.

CONVERSATIONS: Let us hear what your characters have to say. Try showing feelings, personality, and emotions by using conversation. Try to capture their personality by choosing the precise words they would say. You can correct punctuation later, if necessary, or consider using some of the avant-garde-style conversation formats as found in several of our professional exemplars.

PLACE DETAILS: Develop several scenes and locations in your piece in greater detail by adding phrases and sentences that help readers to picture the place. When you close your eyes and picture the place, what do you see? Use those pictures to add the details readers need to envision the places in your memory.

INSIDE/OUTSIDE INFORMATION: *Inside* information consists of thoughts, feelings, and emotions—the private stuff that we all keep in our heads but may not say aloud. *Outside* information consists of details that you can see around you, conversations that you can hear, the setting, and all of the stuff in the external world. Work to balance and to shuttle between the *inside* stuff with the *outside* stuff.

TELL IT ALL: What else you know about this memory? Ask yourself, "What happened next?" Tell the whole memory. Fill in the rushed places in the story. Start at the end of your piece and keep writing to tell it all, right to the end.

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Figure 5-3. Elaboration Strategies for Memoir²

Once students have engaged in this type of revision, discuss with them the ways in which they are re-seeing their writing and engaging in higher-order revision strategies well beyond merely fixing the commas.

Revision Through Crafting

The third type of Revision Behavior that we structure for students is that of *Crafting*. Like the Elaboration Strategies, *Crafting Options* can be used to revise an individual Spider Piece that seems to be worthy of intensive work and revision. *Crafting Options* can also be applied more globally to the final memoir piece.

After student writers have worked their options for Elaboration to the maximum, we encourage them to refine their pieces further through *Crafting*. We know that good writing is often *crafted*—worked on extensively without having that *worked on* look. We tell our writers that *Crafting* consists of working deliberately with the reader in mind. The successful writer spends a good deal of time finding just the right word or image to invoke a particular feeling in the reader. The good writer works and reworks a scene or a critical moment in a piece so that it draws the reader in.

Crafting Options can be developed for all types of writing. We encourage you to analyze carefully professional examples of any piece of writing you ask students to compose. Identify the key features of that writing, and note where inexperienced writers are likely to need revision practice to create successful pieces. Then, construct your own Elaboration Options and *Crafting Options* handouts for each type of piece. We have delineated these particular strategies specifically for memoir pieces based on our study and reading of professional memoirs.

Some of the most difficult parts of writing well include producing enticing *beginnings* and satisfying *endings*. Students also need to work at this level with pacing, sentence structure, organization, and word choices. In order to help them do so, we begin with minilessons on techniques for writing beginnings and endings. Our objective in these minilessons is to have some fun with our writers and to encourage them to experiment and try out possibilities.

BEGINNINGS MINILESSON

Begin the Beginnings minilesson by asking students to take out drafts of several different Spider Pieces. We generally ask for volunteers to read the opening paragraph to their drafts. We tell our students that listeners' responses will indicate to them how well their beginning is going at this point.

Teacher's Hint: If you are teaching seventh grade and have created a positive studio atmosphere, 90 percent of the kids will raise their hands. If you're teaching tenth grade, no matter how positive your class environment is, only two kids may reluctantly volunteer. We go with what we get and find that the lively discussion and specific revision work generally draw in many of the reluctant students.

Because you prepare for every eventuality—such as reluctant student volunteers—you also have several samples of your own Spider Pieces cleverly written

somewhat poorly so that, again, students can *help* you improve them. If necessary, start with your own writing, modeling how this teaching and revising work will go, and showing students that this is a low-threat, helpful activity.

We take students through five or six possible optional beginnings, such as these:

The Hook This option is a standard newspaper technique. The writer tries to create reader interest immediately, perhaps by offering partial information or by creating a mini-mystery: "I should have known Mrs. Swartz hated kids." The sentences following that opening line add to the mystery: "She had **Keep Out!**, **Beware of Mean Dog**, and **This means YOU!** signs posted everywhere." Of course, when writers use The Hook to get readers interested, they have to deliver a good story.

Scene-Setting This is your basic narrative technique. The writer creates a picture for the reader, puts the reader there, creates a mood, or sets the atmosphere. The writer must use specific details to pull off this opening. Remember when Snoopy was writing his novel, he never got past the first line: "It was a dark and stormy night."

Telling Detail Sometimes a single unique detail can draw the reader into a much larger story. We often get the "When I fell off my bike and hurt myself real bad" story from middle school kids. High school writers tell much more graphic and hair-raising car wreck stories. Many of them begin in formulaic and trite ways. We encourage writers to replay the scene and review again what they remember. One seventh grader said, "I remember that they brought my tennis shoe to me in the hospital." "Ah ha!" say we. "Picture this: After they carted you off to the hospital, your tennis shoe lay on the pavement."

Character Throwing We love this opening. We ask kids to try opening their pieces without exposition of any kind. Just throw a character at the reader. "Teddy Howland was the skinniest, ugliest kid in Eureka. His arms were too long, his legs were too long, and his eyes stuck out like lightbulbs. His Adam's apple looked like someone had glued a tennis ball to his neck. His squeaky, high voice sounded as if it belonged to a third-grade girl more than an eighth-grade guy. Teddy Howland was a freak of nature, but his parents bought him every new toy in the world. Teddy was my best friend."

Walking This is another no exposition, no speechifying, no telling beginning. Student writers have a proclivity for giving speeches at the beginning of narrative pieces. They love to tell readers what they are going to say with explanations such as, "In a moment I will be telling a terrifying story of how difficult it was for me to get a dog. See, my father was deathly opposed the idea, but my mother was kind of okay with it. Anyway, as you will see in my story, I finally got the dog after a lot of trouble." To remedy such bad habits, we tell our kids just to walk right into the middle of the story in the first line. If possible tell the gist of the whole story in the first line. Don't hem and haw. Don't dawdle around. Just lay it out. Here's an example: "Giving credit where credit is due, if it hadn't been for my mother, I never would have

gotten him in the first place mainly because my father didn't like dogs." (That line, by the way, is from an old favorite of ours, *The Temple of Gold*, by William Goldman.) Notice that these Walking openings are often sentences that are informative, yet a bit mysterious, and somewhat gangly. That technique is part of their charm.

Dialogue Few student writers think to begin narratives without exposition by dropping the reader into a conversation that is already underway. This technique essentially invites the reader to eavesdrop, a favorite pastime of Dan and of many writers who are always on the lookout for quality, real-life dialogue. As an example of this technique, we set up the proposition that sometimes first dates are awkward and a bit tense. In writing about such a time, the writer doesn't need to explain that point; instead, the writer can show it with a dialogue that also draws the reader into the piece. The exposition that the writer wants to use to begin the piece occurs, in effect, in the writer's head, allowing the written opening to be immediate and enticing for the reader. We use a dialogue like the following to demonstrate how to begin a piece with conversation *sans* exposition:

"I'm not sure I even like you."

"I'm not particularly crazy about you, either, now that I think about it."

"Fine. So, how in the world did we end up on our first date ever, in the back seat of this stretch limo, on our way to the Prom?"

"I think it's Shannon's fault. She told me in Chemistry class that you secretly liked me and wanted me to ask you out."

"Shannon is an unreliable narrator."

We may continue to work on various beginnings for quite a while as students draft individual Spider Pieces. We engage in the same types of activities for teaching *endings* strategies. Then, when students are working on pulling together their final memoirs (see Chapter 6), we return to these techniques, asking students to view their memoir writings more globally and to craft them carefully. It is at this point that we consolidate the various Crafting Options, such as *beginnings* strategies, into a concise handout as a guide for final revisions. Here in Figure 5-4 is a sample of one such handout of Crafting Options for Memoir that we use with our students to offer ideas for their revising efforts.

Once students have engaged in these revision strategies, perhaps needing to perform several of them, and more than once, to hone their writing, they are well on their way to having more polished papers.

When student writers feel that their memoirs are approaching completion—and only then, for the most part—they will be ready to engage in the lower-order Revision Behaviors shown in Figure 5-1. One way of focusing on the lower-order behavior of proof-reading the pieces—to locate common surface errors that students have in their writing—is through the use of minilessons in which you take five to ten minutes daily to review with students ways to correct the mistakes they are making, such as appropriate apostro-

the use; the differences among common homonyms such as *its* and *it's* and *there*, *their*, and *they're*; subject-verb agreement; and the like. We firmly ground these minilessons of common errors within the context of the students' writing, teaching minilessons on *only* those errors that students are actually making. Students can remember only so much information at any one time. Offering a smorgasbord of minilessons on all possible surface errors may just addle students who are trying to get control of their specific mistakes. If all students in a class have, for example, flawless subject-verb agreement in their written works (we can always dream . . .), then we don't conduct a minilesson on that skill, focusing our valuable instructional time instead on the errors that *are* occurring in their writing.

Another way to focus communally on the lower-level editing and proofreading concerns of students' pieces is to work in Writer's Groups to seek and destroy the errors. Dawn has had good success with rotating papers around all of the members of a Writer's Group. Each member of the group selects a colored pencil and signs the top of the paper with that colored pencil; then the student writes with that colored pencil directly on the paper when it comes to her. This way, the author knows who made which corrections.

The first time students read a paper, they look for needed corrections in a specific common error such as apostrophes; we select the error for which students should look based on difficulties they have exhibited in their writing. Every group member reads every paper, looking only for apostrophe (or whatever we have selected) errors the first time. The second time, group members read every paper, looking for a more global feature such as sentence variety, paying attention to pacing and balance between short, quick sentences and longer, slower sentences; they may also look for sentences that are too choppy or so long that they are confusing. Again, we select a problem area with which students seem to be having difficulties. We focus on just a few (two to four) errors that students should seek out. Naturally, not all of the suggested "corrections" will be correct, but this activity then provides an opportunity for small-group discussion of the suggestions, with students looking up rules and uses in their grammar handbooks. This method does far more to help students learn such rules than mere lecture or having the teacher mark papers to death in red ink.

After this entire revision process, using both higher- and lower-order strategies, students should be able to see a pronounced difference and improvement in their written products from first draft to finished product.

Teacher's Hint: We understand that you need to give grades—and lots of them—daily and weekly, and for minor and major assignments. This requirement of massive grade-generation in schools does *not* in any way necessitate that you move prematurely to a so-called finished product. Such rushed writing is rarely the student's best work, nor is it reflective of your best teaching abilities. Instead, we find that working deliberately on various Revision Behaviors yields numerous products that can, in turn, yield individual grades. Grading is a stipulation of schooling, not the *raison d'être* of our teaching. We are teachers who want our students to learn to write well; we are teachers who grade because we must. The two do not have to be contradictory and exclusive behaviors.

Crafting Options for Memoir

Directions: Now it's time to work like an artist to craft your writing by making deliberate changes in your memoir piece. Work to enhance the reader's response to your piece.

This is the tough part. You have to work alone, and you won't always know what you're doing. Begin first with chunks, pieces of text that are several sentences long. Then, you'll do some sentence- and word-level work.

Write directly on your draft, indicating where and the types of Crafting Options that you might add to your draft. Or, use sticky notes. Or, use different colors of ink, or change your font to note your revisions.

Try at least *two* Crafting Options.

Label your Crafting choices and put a copy of your labeled and revised draft in your Writer's Notebook.

Beginnings (try at least two)

1. The Hook: "I should have known Mrs. Swartz hated kids."
2. Scene setting: "It was a dark and stormy night."
3. Telling detail: "There on the pavement was a small child's tennis shoe."
4. Character throwing: "Teddy Howland was the skinniest, ugliest kid in Eureka."
5. Walking: "Giving credit where credit is due, if it hadn't been for my mother, I never would have gotten him in the first place, mainly because my father didn't like dogs" (Goldman 2001).
6. Dialogue: "I'm not even sure I like you."

Endings (try at least two)

1. Circle: End where you began.
2. Ah ha!: Sadder but wiser, or gee, look what I learned.
3. A feeling: Stuck in Mobile with the Memphis blues again.
4. Drawstring: "And that's how it happened."
5. Surprise: The strange twist at the end.

Moving Chunks (no limit; cut and paste)

1. Movement: Pacing readers, making them play your game.
2. Paragraphs: Have some. Keep them short unless they have pictures.
3. Scenes: Shuffling the story.

Figure 5-4. *Crafting Options for Memoir*²

Deleting Chunks (no limit; follow rules)

1. Nice but doesn't fit. Save it.
2. Not nice and doesn't fit either. Cut it.
3. Eradicate chaff words: "-ly" words, "being" words.
4. Compact and compress. Cut the "telling."
5. Now that the hard part is done, turn to some relaxing sentence-level revisions. Make at least ten specific changes.

Sentence Level

1. Concrete detail. Add sensory stuff.
2. Specificity. Name stuff.
3. Strong verbs. Get rid of those adverb props.
4. Search and destroy the *is*'s and *was*'s.
5. Cure a serious case of the *would*'s.

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Figure 5-4. *Continued*

Using Effective Writer's Groups

In addition to the Drafting and Revision Behaviors discussed previously, we find that having our students work closely in Writer's Groups also hones their composing eyes and ears to what their written products need in order to become more audience aware and therefore less egocentric, helping our student writers to move toward polished, crafted, and finished pieces. Our students meet in Writer's Groups once every week or two, depending on the stage of writing in which we find ourselves. In the studio classroom, the use of Writer's Groups helps to build the social and communal aspects of work that support all artists, including writers. Too often, the general public still retains the notion that writers are rather weird folks who write alone in a dark garret. Some writers might still fit this stereotype, but the writers we know often participate in self-initiated formal or informal Writer's Groups, sharing their drafts, receiving feedback, garnering support for the trials and triumphs of living the writing life. This social aspect of writing is part of what keeps writers grounded in the real world with the ability to write for real audiences. In our classrooms, we value response groups for both literature and writing, and we use them frequently.³

As you are thinking about how to incorporate Writer's Groups in your classroom with your students, consider our Principles for Developing Effective Writing Response Groups, shown in Figure 5-5.

Principles for Developing Effective Writing Response Groups⁴

Consider the following principles as you think about using effective Writer's Groups in your classroom with your students:

1. **The teacher's response to students writing establishes the ground rules for the responses of all others.** Your appropriate modeling is the key to effective response groups. Whether orally or in writing, how you handle the words of your students will signal to your students how they are to talk and respond to each other's writings.
2. **Establish a "no hunting" rule for your responses and enforce that rule for students' responses to writing.** The rule basically means no cheap shots at writers as they try to express their ideas. Avoiding judgmental and unkind remarks toward writers must be a value in an effective response group. Similarly, gratuitous and insincere or inaccurate comments about student writing are not helpful.
3. **Appropriate response generally begins by trying to understand what the writer is trying to say.** Summarizing the piece or restating what seems to be the message of the piece of writing lets the writer listen to what the audience has made of the piece. Talk about the piece as a whole. Try specific comments such as, "I like the order of events," or "I like the way you wrap this piece up."
4. **Finding things to like in the piece is important.** Point very specifically to features of the piece that work. Try specific comments such as, "I like this opening," or "I like this verb right here." Point out where you think the piece is going well. Try comments such as, "I like the voice in this passage," or "Nice transition here." Writers need to know what they are doing well in order to keep doing it.
5. **A suggestion for how the writer can elaborate on what is already written is probably one of the most helpful responding postures.** Rather than suggesting that the writer make changes or correct errors, find places in the piece that have potential for more development. Through a series of questions to the writer, draw out elaboration possibilities. Try questions such as, "What happens next?" or "What additional details can you add to the story?" Try comments such as, "I'd like to see and hear more about this character," or "I'd like to hear more about this part here."
6. **As a reader, try musing aloud.** When the writer hears what his audience is wondering about based on a reading of his piece, he begins to see points for elaboration, clarification, and further amplification. Try

Figure 5-5. Principles for Developing Effective Writing Response Groups

thinking aloud comments that begin with "I wonder . . .," "What if . . .," "If this were my piece of writing, I might . . .," and "I notice . . ."

7. **Question the writer about what he or she plans to do next with the piece of writing.** The writer will need to decide if he plans to work more on a draft or just file it in his Writer's Notebook for a while. In order to help clarify such plans and decision-making processes, try questions such as, "What will you work on next?" "Where do you see this piece going from here?" and "How is this piece related to other pieces that you have written?"
8. **Give the writer the chance to ask questions of the response group.** The writer will no doubt want to clarify response comments and to ask advice and counsel about revising the piece when he returns to work on it. The questions that the writer asks can be prepared in advance based on what the writer wants to be sure to find out about the piece. Spontaneous questions will also arise and should be pursued. Model for writers how asking genuine questions is far different, however, from seeking false praise from the response group. That is, "I'm concerned about my opening. What can I do to draw the reader into the piece right from the start?" is far different from "I like my opening. Don't you?"
9. **Always focus on the piece, not on the writer.** It is easy to be sidetracked by the emotional content of the piece of writing, especially with memoir writing, which often delves into personal challenges and moments of revelation as experienced by the writer. Avoid the temptation to be too sympathetic or to become the psychoanalyst, priest, or rabbi. Continue to focus on *how* the experience is rendered rather than on the experience itself. Rather than a comment such as, "Oh, how did you feel when your mother told you she had breast cancer?" try "This is an emotional moment when your mother tells you she has breast cancer. How will you capture that emotion in your writing? Maybe through dialogue?"

Figure 5-5. *Continued*

After you have internalized these principles and others that you may want to have as a feature of response group work with your students, try modeling a Writer's Group in front of your students. We call this technique the *fishbowl* methodology because you and one carefully selected, not too shy, not easily intimidated student will conduct a simulated response session in front of the class. The student will present a piece of writing to you for your response, and you'll model the principles for appropriate responding as you, in fact, respond to the student's piece of writing. As the remainder of the students in class hear the types of questions that you ask and the ways in which you respond to the paper, they will begin to see the principles in action. Be sure to conduct

a debriefing discussion with students after the simulated response group session in order to highlight the ways in which the two of you interacted and the ways in which you responded gently but specifically to the writing at hand. This activity not only models behaviors for students but also provides an opportunity to learn inductively.

Just as you will need to think carefully about how to model and enact Writer's Groups in your classes with your students, the student writers themselves will need some guidelines for operating effectively within the community of writers. For the first Writer's Group session in a class, we often give students a set of principles for their interactions as an ongoing group. At the beginning of each Writer's Group session, we display these on an overhead or post them on our classroom wall so that they serve as reminders for appropriate behavior. See Figure 5-6 for a sample of the guidelines we use for students' response groups.

Discussion Guidelines for Writer's Group Responses

1. No apologies and no whining. Forget telling your group about how you had too little time to work on this piece for it to be any good. Suspend the belief that "To love me is to love my writing."
2. Read your piece of writing aloud to your Writer's Group. Group members, take notes as you read along on your copy of the writer's piece. Note what you like in the piece, places in the piece that need clarifying, questions that you have about the piece, and so on.
3. After reading your piece aloud, put your hand over your mouth (if necessary). Don't talk. Take notes about your group's responses to your writing. You may answer any direct questions your group has for you. Don't apologize, whine, or make excuses.
4. Group members: Begin with positive statement such as, "I like the part about . . ." or "I like the way you described . . ." Give specific responses. Avoid general praise such as, "That's good."
5. Group members: Give a specific suggestion, such as "I think I would be drawn into your piece of writing more if . . ." All group members should offer a suggestion and a response to the piece of writing.
6. Ask questions of your group to clarify your understanding of their responses and to cover specific questions that you as the writer have about your piece. Make notes about your group members' responses to use as you revise this piece later.
7. Decide what you will do with this piece of writing: Work more on it, finish it, file it in your Writer's Notebook for now. . . .

Figure 5-6. Discussion Guidelines for Writer's Group Responses

We have good success with community-building and fostering students' learning through the use of Writer's Groups. Groups take patience to set up and initiate, but with careful modeling and your guidance throughout each working session with individual groups, Writer's Groups are an effective methodological tool.

These stages of drafting, revising, and sharing writing with a constructive audience in the form of Writer's Groups support the development of writing and the emergence of polished products. They embody the philosophies (epistemology, constructivism, and phenomenology) and the values of the studio classroom as discussed in Chapter 2. Once you have effective routines and rituals in place and students are focused on the work of writing, they are ready to move into the next stage of pulling together several of their Spicer Pieces into a final memoir. Techniques for doing so is the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

1. To read more on the subject of instruction and mandated testing, we recommend that you see two sources: Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. 2004. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. And, Kohn, Alfie. 2000. *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards."* New York: Mariner Books.

2. For additional information on Elaboration and Crafting Options, please see Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. 2004. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

3. To read more on our specific suggestions for Writer's Groups in the English/language arts classroom, please see Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. 2004. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

4. These principles also appear in Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. 2004. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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