

Helping Young Writers Improve With a Unit on Word Choice

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Literacy

A series of lessons focused on word choice can help high-achieving elementary school writers learn to revise their work.

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For a beginning writer, organization and conventions are mammoth mountains to climb, and they can fill all of our instruction and feedback time. But what about those proficient writers who have already mastered these things?

According to our standardized statewide writing assessment ([NAPLAN](#)), my school had relatively high-scoring students, but they were not showing much growth between years. How do we help these high-achieving writers who already have a good grasp on conventions and organization achieve greater growth as they progress through primary school?

Combining insights from literacy consultant Riss Leung's *Oz Lit Teacher* blog, Ruth Culham's *6 + 1 Traits of Writing*, and Jennifer Serravallo's *The Writing Strategies Book*, as well as our professional development, I worked with my fellow second- and third-grade teachers to develop some ideas.

Setting Goals

We agreed that each teacher would zone in on precise and engaging verbs as a small crumb to focus on when teaching writing. Although all students in the class would be included in the instruction, the aim was to improve our top writers' word choices and see them making direct revision changes in their writing. We would give ourselves six weeks, using three of John Hattie's high-impact teaching strategies—explicit instruction, multiple exposures, and feedback—to achieve our goals.

We were aware that word choice as a focus for revision was new for our students, and it would be essential that mini-lessons explicitly explained and modeled this process. This would need to occur regularly, and we would narrow our feedback explicitly to demonstrate the importance of this skill.

Modeling Word Choice

The explicit instruction included the use of mentor texts that showed interesting and unique verbs to communicate a message. I talked to my students about creating an image in the reader's mind. We discussed synonyms for different verbs that could alter and tweak a visualization. The following are two of these mentor texts and phrases:

Tilly, by Jane Godwin: "It rolled cool against her skin" and "She arranged them on her bed."

Possum Magic, by Mem Fox: "She made dingoes smile and emus shrink" and "She could be squashed by koalas."

As we began to implement our new approach, we were thrown back into lockdown and remote learning. I was determined to keep my students engaged in this writing focus even if we were working from home, using online resources like Epic to gather mentor texts.

For example, I selected a text called *Boogie Bass, Sign Language Star*, by Claudia Mills. I conducted a quick formative assessment to ensure that the students knew what nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs were, clarifying any confusions as we

went. Then we read some of the text, enjoying and searching for the words and phrases that created specific images in our minds.

After this, I adapted the beginning of a picture storybook by rewriting it with the simplest of word choices. In a small group, the students contributed ideas to improve the story by adding and changing words. Throughout the process, I encouraged students to consider whether the new words were the best or we were inadvertently making the piece sound repetitive.

The students were hooked to the discussion and were excited to continue the story on their own. I didn't show them the original text so that they wouldn't feel like there was a right or a wrong way to progress the story. I only wanted them to see that there were choices and that they didn't need to stick with their first, second, or even third choice if they didn't want to.

When we were allowed to return to school, I introduced an adapted version of a Frayer Model. This was presented in an enlarged format with the whole class, and we could model our thinking around these new verbs. In addition, I explicitly taught and actively modeled how to spend time revising writing with a focus on word choice. Students were also encouraged to write more than one draft with the attitude that the first draft would never be the best.

After students wrote a piece, I modeled and instructed them to take a highlighter to their work and identify the action verbs in the piece. I pointed out how different verbs could truly give the reader a different impression of what was going on or a different understanding of the character's personality. Phrases such as "'We have to go!' she shouted," compared with "'We have to go,' she whispered," completely changed the mood in a story. The students then spent time brainstorming synonyms or alternative phrases to create a clearer or different picture in the reader's mind.

Monitoring Student Progress

It became apparent over the course of the unit that students were becoming much more interested in revising their writing with a view to improving it. They were selecting their words carefully and making changes when they reread their work.

Something that I didn't expect to see was the development in my most struggling writers. Even though, for these students, handwriting, spelling, and ideas were often a challenge, gradually they were making changes based on the consideration of which words would convey their message best.

Not only did this word choice unit develop my students' ability to revise their writing carefully—it also lifted their enthusiasm for writing.