7   REVISION AS EXPERIMENTATION

Revision is a word with an unpleasant connotation for many students and adults. It implies that the first draft is bad and needs to be fixed. It brings to mind drudgery, hard work and getting down to business. *Experimenting with a poem* has a much more positive, adventurous ring to it. I like to think of revision in the spirit of experimentation. In my Think-throughs in Section II, you will find examples of how I "experiment" with my poems, from start to finish.

In this vein, I like to keep my first draft intact on the computer and make a copy of it that I use for revising. I do this because it's hard to tear something apart, particularly if I'm attached to it. This is especially true for students. So I call revising an experiment, with myself and with students. I tell them what I tell myself, that they can always change their poem back to its original form.

Poet and novelist Miriam Stone taught me that I don't need to worry about the destroying the heart of the poem in the revision stages. Here's what she said:

> "In a typical first draft I may have one or two lines that end up being worth saving. But the cool thing is that those lines often end up being the backbone of the final poem, so nothing is really wasted."
> —*Miriam Stone*

If students wonder if poets revise, listen to this:

> "I feel a poem has to be worked on like a piece of sculpture, chipping away at every fold. This means eliminating as many words as one can, for poetry should hinge on each and every word."
> —*Lee Bennett Hopkins*

> "Revising is a little bit like wringing out a wash cloth. I know that a poem is finished when I can't squeeze any more water out of it."
> —*Bobbi Katz*

> "Every poem I write goes through 10-20 revisions. Shelley allegedly wrote 'Ozymandias' in one sitting. If so, astonishing. I've not been so fortunate, and quite obviously, I am not even writing 'Ozymandias.'"
> —*J. Patrick Lewis*

> "I begin my poems by scratching out a phrase or image, and that often triggers my imagination . . . Those lines that might have helped me get started,—ah, I feel guilt—might be abandoned in the end."
> —*Gary Soto*

REVISION/EXPERIMENTATION IDEAS

With older students, I hand out and discuss the list of ideas and suggestions below. They pick and choose from the list to revise/experiment with their poems. With intermediate students, we might focus on several of the revision ideas in one session. With younger students, I ask them to experiment in simple ways. I might suggest that they experiment by changing one word in their poem to a more interesting word, knowing that they can always change it back.

What would happen if you—

- change some words to more interesting words?
- change some verbs to stronger verbs?
- take out some words that are unnecessary?
- get rid of clichés, or phrases you've heard before?
- put in some of the senses, such as smells and sounds?
- take out or change lines that don't fit the rhythm or the idea of the poem?
- try a new title?
- change the beginning?
- change the ending?
- change the mood or tone (e.g. from sad to angry)?
- change the point of view?
- switch some lines around?
- experiment with different line breaks?
- use details instead of being general?
- use memories, real experiences?

The purpose of revising/experimenting is to help the poem say what the poet really wants it to say: for the poem to be itself more; for the poem to be energetic, alive, specific; clear or unclear (whichever the poet wants); and as fresh as it can be.

"I WONDER" QUESTIONS

Below are some questions that a poet can ask herself/himself in the spirit of experimentation. These ideas embellish and extend the more concise list above:

"I wonder what would happen if I . . ."

- changed one word to a more interesting word?
  silky versus *soft*
- took out one word from every line?
- took out unnecessary words?
- added an adverb?
  carelessly lazily timidly
- made three verbs more exact?

barged versus *ran, slinked* versus *walked, sprang* versus *jumped*

- changed one phrase that sounds like something I've heard before?
  as ferocious as a cornered ferret is better than *as ferocious as a lion*
- took out a line that is very general and substituted a detailed example?
  > *cleaned up my room* versus
  > *stuffed my books,*
  > *my tattered comics,*
  > *and my smelly soccer gear*
  > *into the farthest corner*
  > *under the bed*
- made every line twice as long?
  > *wove his web* versus
  > *wove geometric shapes of uncanny precision*
- changed the line breaks so the lines were shorter or longer?
- did not break a line where the natural pause fell?
  > *I tumbled off the*
  > *roof and sprained my*
  > *ankle*
- switched the order of some lines?
- let the person next to me add a line to my poem?
- read the poem backwards?
- changed the last line to make it more surprising, strong?
- removed the last line?
- thought of two new titles?
- illustrated it?
- cut it up and made it a collage?
- added a sound effect?
- added images having to do with the five senses: hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling?
  > *Monday after a vacation*
  > *tastes like sour milk that's*
  > *clotted into clumps.*
- wrote the poem again backwards under the original poem?
- turned it into a visual poem?
- changed the speaker in the poem from "I" to "you," "she," or "he?"
- wrote the poem in the past, present, or future tense?
- changed words to change the mood?
  > *Oh, brother, I won't do that again.*
  > has a different mood than
  > *I felt like I'd turned myself inside-out*
  > *and everyone was staring*
- ended with a question?

- rewrote the poem without any rhymes, or only internal rhymes?

Another major tool for revision is to read a poem aloud or have someone else read it aloud. Then the poet can ask herself or himself:

- Where does it stumble?
- Are some lines unnecessary?
- Is something unclear? Do I care?
- Does it have a rhythm of its own? Do any lines break the rhythm? Is that okay?

> "Sometimes in writing a poem I get stuck for a word for days, weeks even. Maybe longer. I read the poem aloud, think about the rhythm, the lyrical line, about each word and how it works with the words before and after. Does a word echo (not rhyme exactly) another key word? Have I put down an overused phrase. Am I clear in what I am saying, even though I am speaking metaphorically? Is there true emotion contained within the poem?"
> —*Jane Yolen*

CLARITY OR NOT?

For many types of writing, the author wants to be clear and consistent. For poetry this isn't always necessary. In poetry, sometimes ambiguity is interesting. A poet might leave out a clarifying comma, period, or word to keep the reader guessing.

> anger memories
> pounding in my mind
> as I shuffle through
> my feet demolish the leaves

Try putting a period after the word *mind,* or after the word *through*—the poem reads differently, but either way makes sense. Because the narrator is angry, there are no commas or periods and things aren't as clear as they might be.

A break in the rhythm of a poem can signal a change in mood or a change in the situation.

> Storm thrashing and flashing
> Wind billowing and blustering
> One last clap of thunder.
> It's over.

Or a change in rhythm can keep the poem from sounding too sing-songy.

Poems don't always make sense. The surrealist poets purposely made poetry that didn't make sense to the logical mind. The sounds might make sense to the ear or the mind, might be tickled to think about something that tweaks the imagination. The cinquain below is an example of this. If you loosen your logical mind from its moorings, it's fun to read.

Cinquain

Breathing,
like paper trash
in an unexpected wind storm,
can seem more like the moon than a
cat's eye.

There's also the fact that poetry can be written with an audience in mind, or it can be written just for the poet. There are times the poet doesn't care about being perfectly clear. The poem can be a way to express feelings or insights, in order to process them and put them in a concrete form, for only the poet's eyes. Even a poem that will be read by others is often written just for the poet.

"I write for myself, an audience of one. This is one of the reasons, I suppose, that I don't write verse for the very young. I don't want to be hemmed in with so many vocabulary constraints."
—*J. Patrick Lewis*

"I write for myself. But I am a very dedicated reader and read many different things. So I am the perfect audience for what I write!"
—*Jane Yolen*

"I try to write my poems for myself, but once I begin adapting them into songs, the audience becomes much more of a concern."
—*Brian Laidlaw*

"I always, always have children in mind. Children. Not an age . . . I write with the same joys and excitement that I felt as a child, slipping my own memories in and around it all."
—*Rebecca Kai Dotlich*

WORKSHOPPING

"I like to get a first draft of a poem or story quickly, and then I go back to hone the writing. I then share the work with my wife, who acts as my editor. No one works alone."
—*Gary Soto*

Many teachers incorporate revision conferences/workshops into their class-rooms: between the teacher and the student, between the class and the student, or in small groups or partners. This technique is similar to what some poets call workshopping. It's what I do in my writing group which consists of five children's book writers. Note that some students will work best one-on-one with you or a partner because they are overly sensitive to feedback.

With all student poetry, the most important thing is to be positive. (See Chapter 8 on Assessing Poetry Poetically.) Students will need to be taught how to ask questions and make suggestions positively. In my own writing group, I suggested that they first tell me what was working before giving me suggestions about what to consider changing in my drafts.

The language that is helpful sounds like this:

Positive Feedback:

- The key lines seem to be "_____." Do you agree?
- Your opening really grabs my attention.
- The phrase "_____" made me interested.
- The ending surprised me.
- The words "_____" were powerful and unusual. They really gave me a picture in my mind.
- The poem made me feel _____ and it made me think _____.
- This poem was so interesting, memorable, unusual because _____.

Clarifying Questions:

- I thought your poem was about _____. Is that right? If not, could you tell me more about your poem?
- I didn't quite understand what you meant by this part, "_____." Do you mind explaining that part to me?
- When you said, "_____," I was curious to know more detail.
- I would love to know more about what the person in your poem is like— what they look like, where they live, what their quirks are and what they like and dislike.
- You might want to experiment with sound effects or bringing in other senses since your subject matter is _____.
- I wonder what would happen if you shortened the lines.
- Have you thought about what would happen if you used the phrase _____ ____ less often or varied it?
- I wonder what would happen if you experimented with your verbs.

The writer might have some questions:

- I'm struggling with the beginning. Should I _____ or _____.
- Do you think the ending is strong enough?
- Does the word _____ work here?
- Should I give more detail about _____?
- Does the mood of _____ come across?

A poet is free to take suggestions or not. It's his or her poem. For some students, just writing the poem is a victory. For others, experimenting helps them grow in an arena they love. Others may take small steps by changing one word, improving one verb, taking out one word. And that's a victory, too.