

Making the Red Pencil the Gifted Student's Best Friend

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excerpts from *Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Middle School*

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Red Pencils are Every Writer's Best Friend

John Grisham's advice to young writers: "Read your work out loud."

"This may be interesting, but is it relevant?" Jennifer Pirtle, *Writer's Digest*, Sept 2004

"Remember that verbs are power words. Adjectives are weaker words that can dress up your work but can also interfere with the smoothness of the writing. Make sure each adverb you use is essential." Bob Mayer, *Writer's Digest*, October, 2004

"Purge all vague adjectives—*amazing, interesting, compelling, appealing*—and replace them with words that paint pictures. Readers like visual stimulation. Don't say that a shirt is 'amazing.' Say it [has] 'iridescent chartreuses with an orange quilted collar and 16 whalebone buttons.'" Becky Ohlsen, *Writer's Digest*, October, 2004

"Ego held me back. Only when I realized that everything I wrote wasn't golden did I begin to improve." J.A. Konrath, *Writer's Digest*, October, 2004

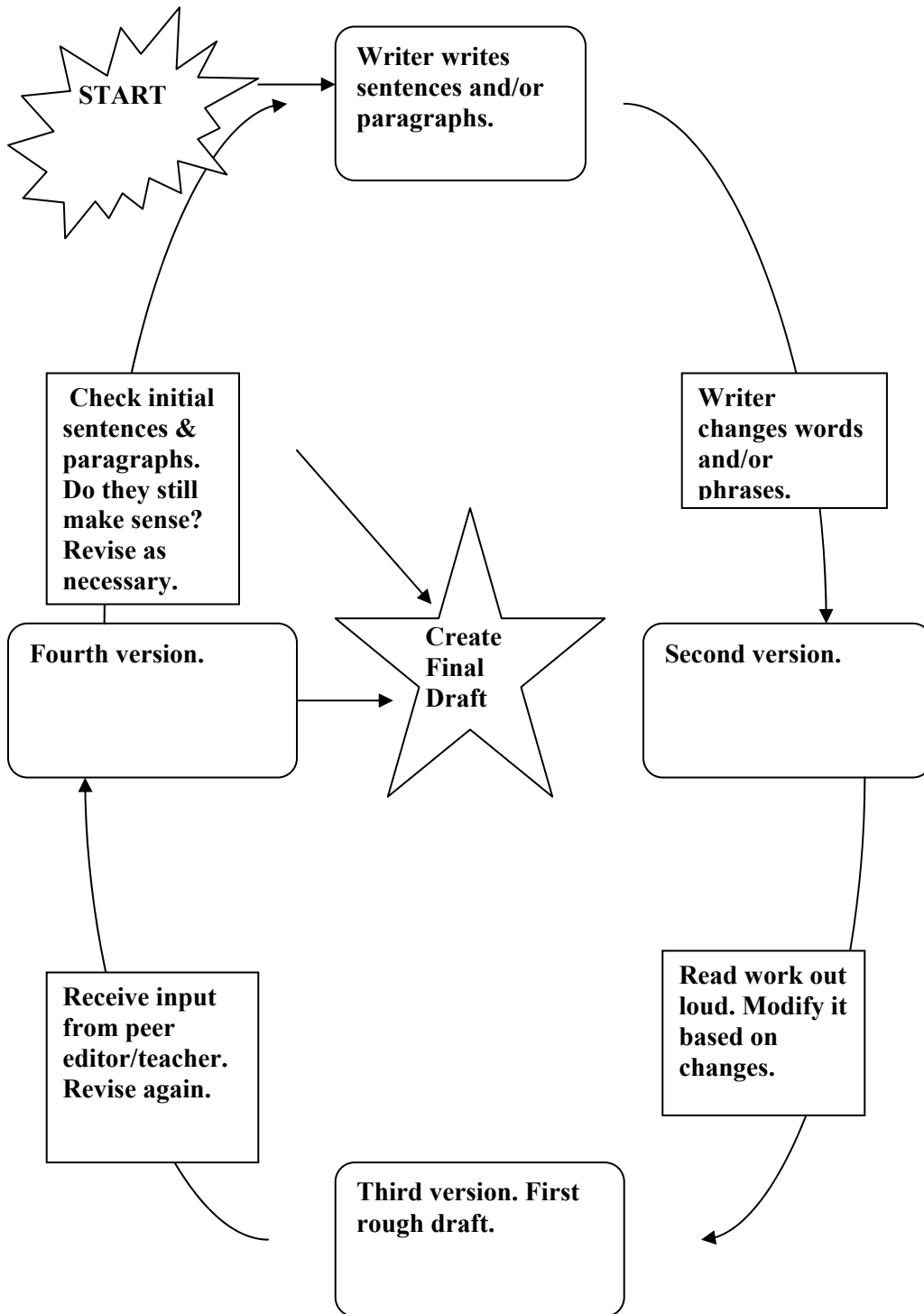
"Criticism should not be querulous and wasting, all knife and root-puller, but guiding, instructive, inspiring." Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Every artist was first an amateur." Ralph Waldo Emerson

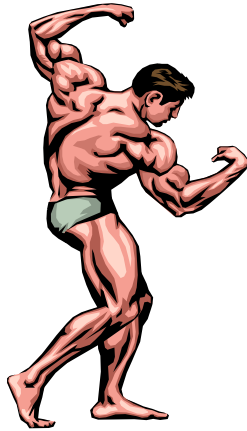
"Sit down and put down everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it." Colette, quoted in *Writer's Digest*, September, 2005

"Very few stories are aced on the first shot. Leo Tolstoy rewrote *Anna Karenina* seventeen times. Jean Auel calls the revision stage 'where I get a handle on the book.' And Isaac Bashevis Singer considered the wastebasket the 'writer's best friend.'" Nancy Kress, *Writer's Digest*, July, 2005

The Writing-Revising Cycle



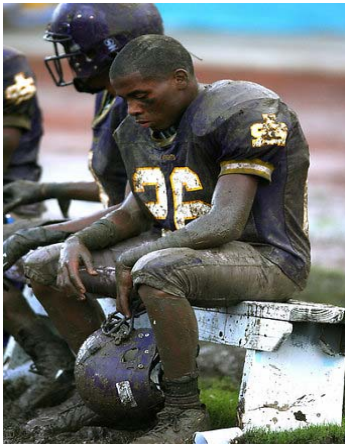
Exercise Muscle Words



- Vivid Verbs (*tip-toed*, not *went*)
- Specific Nouns (*Brookline Apartments* or *Castle Bordeaux*, not *house*)
- Image-driven Adjectives (*lichen-smothered stone walls*; *a droll smile creased his face*)

Discard Crutch Words

- "To Be" Verbs
- Passive Verbs (*-ing* endings)
- Helping Verbs (*become*, *seemed*, *make*)
- Vague Adverbs (*always*, *sometimes*, *very*, *slowly*, *proudly*)



Bench Tired Words

- Overused Adjectives (*awesome*, *interesting*, *great*)
- "He said, she said."
- Vague, Non-specific Nouns (*somewhere*, *thing*)
- Overused Pronouns (*it*, *they*)
- Clichés (*cool as a cucumber*)

FMEs—Frequently Made Errors

Directions: Check each item only *after* you have answered each question.

Check Your Content

- ___ 1. Are there “word treasures” that are too long or really aren’t necessary for the story?
- ___ 2. Do all the sentences or paragraphs make sense?
- ___ 3. Is the story *told* in narrative rather than *shown* through the character’s feelings, actions, speech & thoughts? (Is the character shown FAST?)
- ___ 4. Have you begun close to the problem or did you start off with long paragraphs of background or description?
- ___ 5. Have all of the conflicts been resolved by the main character?

Proofread for

- ___ 1. Spelling errors. (Particularly ones which spell check doesn’t pick up. Example: homonyms such as *too*, *to*, and *two*)
- ___ 2. Grammar errors. (Example: Are there misplaced modifiers?)
- ___ 3. Punctuation errors. (Example: Are quotes used appropriately for dialogue? Are apostrophes used correctly?)
- ___ 4. Capitalization errors. (Example: Are all proper names capitalized, including “Mom” and “Dad” when used to address the individual?)
- ___ 5. Tense errors. Have you begun the story in the present and switched to the past?
- ___ 6. Formatting errors. Are paragraphs indented? Text double spaced? Any extra lines between paragraphs?