What Is Everyday Editing?
The writer will also discover surprises in the process of editing, and the writer should delight in them.


Delight? Surprise? Process? Are these words our students associate with our editing instruction? Probably not. Why is that?

We definitely teach students about editing, no matter how we present it in our classrooms. Our attitude, the activities we choose, the way we spend our time—this defines what editing is for our students.

What are we telling them?

Much editing instruction goes something like this. Students attack a sentence on the overhead. Accuracy is not as important as speed. Students know the game. If a teacher puts a sentence on the board, something’s wrong with it. It usually has something to do with commas or capitals.

“Delete the comma!”

“Add a comma!”

It doesn’t matter that they are guessing. They know they have a fifty-fifty chance of getting the right answer.
Have you ever thought your kids “got it,” then wondered the next day why they didn’t apply it to their writing? It’s a crapshoot—a guessing game. That’s not what I want to teach my students. I want to teach them a thoughtful process that may even delight or surprise them.

But how? Should I mark up their papers? If I do, what’s that teaching them about editing?

Let’s face it: When kids’ papers are marked up, they think they can’t edit or write. Overwhelmed, students address conventions in a haphazard fashion. Why invest too much? They’ll probably get it wrong anyway.

That’s not what I want to teach.

Reasoning through decisions about writing and editing takes time: Students need opportunities to test out theories. Correcting doesn’t develop—it corrects. And what about the next mistake? How will they know how to fix that? And how will we fix students’ attitudes once red-pen thinking takes its toll?

I want students to walk out of my classroom with deep structures and patterns etched in their minds—building pathways, making connections, discovering a way of “thinking” about mechanics’ meaning. I want them to celebrate all that we call editing can do. I want them to celebrate the written word.

We want students to make choices and decisions that create meaning. Not because they’re afraid of making an error. Not because of crapshoot-fifty-fifty chances, but because they are thinking. We want them to have ways to reason through what’s in front of them, what they see, what it sounds like, looks like, means. A thought process. Yelling random things out at the overhead screen is not thinking.

My Definition of Editing

If we are to believe the posters at the teacher supply store, editing is a phase of the writing process that occurs near the end—after brainstorming or generating ideas, after drafting and revising. Editing, according to these posters, is polishing, cleaning up. We’ve all seen laminated lists, with their nice, clean boxes waiting to be checked off. The editing items range from checking to make sure your paper has a heading to checking commas (no clarity on why you might need to delete or insert a comma, just a friendly nudge—check commas).

Students need more than a checklist.

Like corrections, checklists don’t teach anything beyond what to look out for. When students don’t know the patterns, it’s just a crapshoot all over again.
Kids aren’t professional writers or editors. They haven’t yet developed the skills that are listed neatly, all in a row. If only it were that easy. Editing skills need to be taught.

In my classroom, editing is a process. Writing process was founded on the idea that we teach students to do what real writers do. We have to ask: How do real writers edit? Do they have overheads in their offices where they put up transparencies and mark all the mistakes? Lola Schaefer, author of more than two hundred children’s books, told me this:

_I wish I could say that I learned to edit from the many well-executed lessons I received in grammar and high school. But honestly, all of that went in one ear and out the other. I didn’t really think about editing and what it meant until I became a writer. Now I’m constantly reading published books with a critical eye, experimenting with punctuation and paragraphing and learning at the knee of an editor. For me, all learning revolves around authentic use._ (personal communication, February 28, 2007)

Another children’s book author, April Sayre, said she learned to edit “primarily by wrestling with the process.” She edits her writing many times before feeling it is complete. “I have to hear the language in my head and it has to feel right before I can let go of the piece” (personal communication, March 2007). Part of editing is listening to our writing, making it feel right. It takes time. How much class time do our students spend wrestling with the editing process? Is that part of our instruction?

We may not be able to mirror exactly how professional writers edit, but we can discover how they learned to shape their writing, how they learned to craft sentences and meaning.

Many writers say they learned a lot about writing from reading. In the classroom, I experimented to see how I could accelerate students’ learning of editing and writer’s craft from reading—even with students who are not always natural or voracious readers.

If reading a book or short story teaches professional writers about writing, I wondered if a sentence or two could teach novice writers about craft and mechanics. Could that be editing instruction? I got into a regular habit of spending time reading great sentences and talking about them. And a funny thing happened. The types of sentences we looked at and talked about started affecting their writing. For example, after we looked at a sentence from _Flush_ (Hiaasen 2005), the craft and grammar the students focused on in our discussion of the sentence started spilling over into their writing.
The pattern—or process—we discovered looked like this.
I put the sentence up on the board:

*The deputy told me to empty my pockets: two quarters, a penny, a stick of bubble gum, and a roll of grip tape for my skateboard.*

“What do you notice?” I ask.
“It has a list,” Anali offers.
“What’s in the list?”
“Stuff in his pocket.”
“What does the reader know about the narrator by looking at what’s in his or her pocket?” I ask.
“He’s probably broke,” Diego says, nodding.
“What makes you think that?”
“Well, it says he only has fifty-one cents.”

Students discuss the items in the list. “What does the reader know about the narrator by looking at what's in his or her pocket?” I ask.

Later that day, while reading on his own, Jonathan finds a similar sentence. Excited about its similarity to what we discussed, he points to the sentence from *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Patron 2006):

*The sun comes out and you look around at all the changes the storm has caused: the outside chairs blown away, the Joshua trees plumped with water, the ground still a little wet.*

“Wow, Jonathan! Would you write this on a transparency strip so we can share this tomorrow?” I keep little strips of transparencies in an old tin can, at the ready for my writers.

He returns to his seat, almost gleeful, transparency strip and a Vis-a-Vis pen in hand. Excitement about craft and mechanics is part of successful editing instruction—not dread, not a crapshoot, not red-pen action.

Editing instruction became an editing process. Just as writing process brought joy and clarity to my students’ writing, I knew an editing process had begun. All I had to see was all the good writing we shared in literature ripple
through their words. When students encountered more and more beautiful text, this joy, this beauty ended up in their writing. And I knew. My students were writing under the influence—of literature, of powerful, effective, beautiful writing. Editing instruction starts with students observing how powerful texts work. What are the writers doing? What can we learn from their effectiveness—and, more often than not, their correctness? This way of editing is inquiry based, open-ended, and bound by meaning:

What do you notice?
What else?
How does it sound when we read it?
What would change if we removed this or that?
Which do you prefer? Why?

These questions put students in the driver’s seat. The instruction actually comes from the students. They see what effect the sentence has on them as readers. They see it. They say it. They are the ones commenting on a text’s effectiveness, what they notice, not what someone tells them to notice.

Students are not dependent on us for thought. They develop their own thoughts, and we listen and question and shape. Positive words build confidence. That’s what I want my children to learn. Confidence. Confidence grounded in knowing.

So if you’re still jones-ing for daily transparencies with errors to edit, consider that there may be another way to teach editing: a process that starts with powerful sentences, sentences that teach, sentences that marinate our students in positive models of what writing can be, not what it shouldn’t be.

Francine Prose (yes, that’s her name) gives this advice about the essentialness of reading “great sentences . . . of great sentence-writers” in her book Reading Like a Writer (2006):

One essential and telling difference between learning from a style manual and learning from literature is that any how-to book will, almost by definition, tell you how not to write . . . a pedagogy that involves warnings about what might be broken and directions on how to fix it—as opposed to learning from literature, which teaches by positive model.

The idea is to begin with the end in mind (Covey 2004). Knowing what successful writing looks like (Spandel 2004) helps students produce more effective sentences.
In his book, *Student-Involved Classroom Assessment* (2000), Rich Stiggins talks about how we should put kids in charge of the assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Students become more independent by doing tasks themselves. If students can see success, they can hit the target.

This is how editing begins in my classroom—with the vision of success and then working backward from there. How do we get to success? How will I welcome students into the world of editing to experiment, play, and learn?

Teaching Editing as a Process of Invitations

An invitation offers something beneficial for consideration. In Purkey and Stanley's National Education Association monograph, *Invitational Teaching, Learning, and Living* (1991), they say, “Learning is most likely to result when students feel confident that they can learn when they look optimistically at their chances for academic success.” Can we help students become optimistic about editing? Many students—and teachers—have lost all hope when it comes to editing. Doubt about editing success prevails. Teachers don’t think the students are learning and applying what they should, and students think they can’t ever do enough.

Messages are sent implicitly and explicitly, from marked-up papers to admonitions: “Did you even read this? Come on, Kelly, how could you spell *when* w-h-e-n-e? How did you get to sixth grade without knowing how to spell *when*?” And sometimes the message is sent to the whole class. “I can’t believe the errors I saw in the essays you just turned in. Paragraphs weren’t indented and you used apostrophes like you had no idea what they were for. I taught you that. You have no excuse!”

We surrender, throwing our hands in the air.

Students follow suit. When they crumple up their papers or leave them under their desks, they are communicating with us too.

If we nag about everything the kids can’t do, students take on an I-can’t identity. Would you be encouraged if you were told only what you did wrong? Would you really learn from that or would you shut down? We know that how we say things affects kids just as much as what we say (Johnston 2004).

When I showed students a powerful sentence, they engaged, became excited, and came alive. When I asked students to imitate sentences, I saw smiles, enthusiasm, and risk-taking. A sentence ended up being a manageable chunk of learning that was easily digested.

I was excited too.
I seized the opportunity to keep the positive momentum going. I began to realize that students needed editing to be shared with an invitational attitude. Could it be that simple? Focus on strengths rather than deficits? I began tinkering with the idea of making editing more invitational, of taking an approach that invites kids in and shows them how the authors did it.

A wonderful thing emerged. We stumbled upon a thinking process that helped students not only change their attitudes about editing, but increase their skills. Together, we learned a thinking process that aided students’ decision making. Finally, they edited their own writing because they had the power, not me.

I invite students to notice, to read like writers, to come into the world of editing—a friendly place rather than a punishing place, a creational facility rather than a correctional one. When we develop a place where concepts can be developed and patterns can be learned, kids feel safe, take risks, and feel welcome in every stage of the writing process.

I invite students into editing rather than shutting them out of it. This invitational philosophy undergirds the everyday editing lessons in this book.