

TRAIT FOCUS: WORD CHOICE

Lesson Objective

Students revise a piece of writing in order to eliminate clutter words and filler.

Correcting a Lazy Writing Habit

It is often the case that when student writers are given a minimum word or page count assignment, they will pile on the padding in an effort to meet the expectation. Some students become masters of turning one page into two with filler content that adds nothing to the topic, yet still takes up the necessary space.

Left unchecked, this can become a lazy writing habit. It is important to coach your students on always striving for tight, concise, and informative text without relying on clutter content to fill up page space. Model literature selections can be used to prove the old axiom: sometimes less is more. Once they've seen the principle in action and have removed clutter from their own writing, remind them that they can always add in more details during rewriting.

The short story "The Father" by Raymond Carver is an excellent mentor text that tells a big story in a very compact amount of words. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your curriculum as a way of illustrating the practice of cutting clutter and filler during revision.

Story Overview

Taken from his collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Carver's story of a father and his new son is a work of flash fiction covering two tight pages. As the family stands over the baby basket, they each begin to comment on the infant's features and whom he might look like.

The father, meanwhile, sits apart from the rest. That simple question—"Who does the baby look like?"—seems to stir up a pain deep within the father.

Sometimes Less Really Is More

1. Use the following lesson as you teach the trait of word choice as a strategy for revision. Students will have completed a first draft of their papers. Next comes the time when they revise their writing for clutter and filler.
2. Explain that sometimes in writing, you might try to find just the right way to say something and end up saying too much. This is "clutter." Or, you might be worried about having enough to say at all and use too many words to say something simple. This is called "filler."
3. Tell them that clutter and filler only get in the way of your topic. They don't enhance your writing or the story you're telling. The reader has to wade through the wordiness in order to get to the meat of your work.
4. Preface the reading by saying that often writers can say a great deal with only a handful of carefully chosen words. Then choral read the story as a class.
5. Discuss the story's meaning and the various interpretations. What is the conflict? (father's feelings toward son; grandmother's feelings toward the father) Why do the grandmother and father seem upset? (perhaps the father's parentage is in question)
6. Note how much discussion is generated by two short pages. This is an example of robust writing with absolutely no clutter or filler. Every word is specifically chosen and serves a purpose.
7. With this exercise fresh in their minds, have your students revise their papers with a focus on improving word choice and eliminating clutter and filler.
8. If they find their writing has become too short, encourage them to brainstorm new ideas and details to take the place of the clutter. It's better to add more information than more filler.