Nurturing thoughtful revision using the Focused Question Card strategy

Alexa Sandmann

This strategy cases students in fourth grade up to graduate school through a critically important aspect of the writing process—revision.

I love teaching writing, but helping my students understand the power of revising through conferring always proves difficult. Conferring with 20, 25, or even 30 students—at any age level—is always a challenge. As Calkins (1994) reminded us, revising is the heart of the writing process and conferring is at the center of revising. It is through conferring that a writer is able to experience the effect of his or her writing.

Wanting to help students become thoughtful and helpful revisers, I created a strategy named the Focused Question Card (FQC) strategy. Because revising can feel overwhelming even for competent writers, I designed the FQC to ease students (from fourth grade through graduate school) through this critically important aspect of the writing process.

Rationale

Each writer’s process is his or her own. Although the terminology sometimes varies, the prevailing understanding is that the writing process involves five parts: prewriting (generating ideas), drafting (getting ideas written down as connected text), revising (refining meaning), editing (focusing on form), and publishing (sharing the completed work). This framework will guide this article.

The FQC strategy comes into play after students have had a chance to brainstorm ideas and begin drafting, perhaps even for several days. At this point, it is often helpful for a writer to stop and reflect about the content and direction of the writing. The first conversation that a writer has about his or her work should focus on the content, the structure, or the organization of the work in progress—all revising issues. This is the time for a conference, one focusing exclusively on revising.

Editing does matter—eventually. Editing conferences follow revising ones; they should not occur simultaneously or before. This is a difficult habit for students to break—a reality of teaching writing I’ve discovered over the last decade. Usually, the older the writer, the more difficult this idea is to convey because editing issues (i.e., spelling, punctuation, capitalization) always “count.” The cognitive constraints (Flower & Hayes, 1980) of having to simultaneously spell and punctuate conventionally, as well as create a message, have created learned difficulties that some students never rise above.

For this reason, the FQC strategy can be liberating for students. I ask them to focus on what they want to say first; the conventions of writing can be addressed later. Editing conferences are also quite helpful when they are appropriately
timed. I’ve learned over the years that when we tackle revising first, students become attached to their messages. Instead of “fghting” me over the details of language use, students are actually (in some cases) eager to learn the finer points of usage because they want their messages to be clearly understood. When editing is placed near the end of the writing process continuum, students come to value it because they want their messages heard, and they understand that conventional use of language enables communication.

Like Murray (1987), I believe that the f rst “conference” should be between a writer and his or her text. “You have to read your own copy to make sure that it is clear to you that you are saying what you want to say” (p. 211). Then, he said, you have to read as a “devil’s advocate”—a critical reader. Murray described four ways to clarify or revise: discard, reconceive, proof, or edit. He believed that editing is the one we use most frequently because “few texts are produced that need only to be proofed; most texts have to be edited in order for the writer to be able to share that meaning with the reader” (p. 212).

Even though Murray (1987) used the term editing, he is talking about what I consider revising. He suggested three readings: one “reading for meaning, next for order, and third for voice” (p. 212), and he provided some editing principles: “build on strength,” “give the reader a full serving of information,” “cut what can be cut,” “simplicity is best,” and “listen to the writing” (p. 213). These are the principles I talk about with my students, especially “listen to the writing.” Murray explicitly suggested to “read aloud, for your ear is a better editor than your eye” (p. 213). He concluded this section by explaining that “writing without a reader is an incomplete act, and the writer must make every honest effort to achieve a reader” (p. 213). This is exactly what the FQC strategy does. It encourages writers to review their work as readers in order to clarify the text so that the reader has the greatest chance of understanding and enjoying it. The strategy makes explicit the writer taking responsibility for the direction of a conference. From the beginning, the concept of writing for an audience is made transparent through the FQC strategy.

The FQC strategy elaborates on Calkins’s (1994) vision of what should occur during a content or revising conference. In “real-world” writing groups, writers ask “real” questions—not “school” or “teacher” questions—of their group members, and these questions come from the writer. Real writers have natural, authentic questions that arise from their work, and the conference provides a place for authentic answers. The audience may have questions, and when they do, they are “real” ones—they stem from an honest response to an actual text. As Calkins shared in Lessons From a Child (1983), members of her writing group asked her questions such as “How do you feel about your draft?” “What are you trying to get at?” “What will you do next?” “What discoveries are you making?” “How can we help?” Calkins acknowledged that these questions “helped me to articulate what I wanted to say in an article, how I felt about the draft, and what I planned to do next” (p. 39). These are the questions that become a part of the writing community dialogue. Before students can ask questions this “big,” though, they ask more precise ones of themselves, tied to specific texts, that we have modeled for them.

The FQC strategy

To begin using the FQC strategy with my students, whether fourth graders or graduate students, I f rst discuss the basic quality of a revising question—a question that guides the conversation during a content conference. Students must ask themselves, “Does this text say what I want it to say?” Questions that improve a basic question are “revising” questions because they focus on content. For example, a writer might ask, “Does the eeriness of the night come through clearly? How?” “Can you tell me what my three basic points are?” or “Do I have enough specif c detail to make my point, or do I need to add
more? Where?" Each question helps clarify for the writer whether the content is clear. While "yes or no" questions are discouraged, they sometimes need to be asked. Then, students are prompted to add more questions after the first, such as "How? Why? Where?" (For more ideas, see Table 1.) In contrast, and to clarify, I discuss with my students what editing questions are. Editing questions primarily concern conventions of language: spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. While I would prefer not to discuss editing at this point in the process because content is the focus, I have found that I must because, despite earlier conversations, students still write editing questions.

After I have modeled revising questions for my students, using whatever piece of writing I am currently crafting as an example, I ask students to reread their own work in progress and to write one question that would help them to clarify their text on a small card I provide. After they have

### Table 1

**Possible revising questions**

1. Does the ending come too abruptly?
2. Do I confuse the reader?
3. Should I add more detail? Where?
4. Did I keep the same point of view?
5. Did my final paragraph continue with the main idea of the story?
6. Does my introduction set the stage for the rest of my writing?
7. Does my concluding paragraph wrap up the main thoughts of my writing?
8. Is my writer's voice coming through? How?
9. Did the extra background about _________ help my story? Or did it seem like too much?
10. Are the examples appropriate and in the right place?
11. Should/could my introduction be more positive?
12. Is the conclusion effective enough?
13. Is there a flow to the memory?
14. Does the beginning make sense and draw you in? Does my ending provide a good stopping point?
15. Should I rewrite my introduction?
16. Do I need a better conclusion?
17. Do my beginning and title fit?
18. Does the part about saying _________ seem too rushed? Does it need more?
19. Does the language help bring my personal experiences/memories alive for the reader? Can you visualize _________?
20. What suggestions do you have for the final passage in my introduction?
21. Should there be a specific order to how I present _________?
22. My piece revolves around several _________. Would the word _________ be a better choice?
23. Does the conclusion conclude?
24. Is my ending too melodramatic?
reread their writing and have written a question on the card, I ask for volunteers to share their questions. After discussing whether they are, in fact, revising questions—and not editing ones—the students all consider again whether the question on their card is a revising question. If not, they rewrite. If so, I ask students to sign the cards in the top right corner.

Once this step is completed, students choose a partner for the content conference. Students’ choice of partners is critically important to the FOC strategy. Students need to choose someone they believe can help them with their writing. A student may need a partner who knows baseball so that the appropriate player can be added to his story team’s lineup. Another student may need an expert in selecting rhyming words to finish a poem.

Students need choice so that their needs as writers can be met. They often choose friends. Who would choose a stranger when a personal task like writing is involved? No adult would, and neither do published authors who work in writing groups. They choose one another in order to be productive. Our students, as writers, need the same consideration. I explain to my students that as long as they are productive, they can choose their writing partners. As the teacher, this is not the time to negotiate relationships between students but to allow established relationships to nurture the creation of text. With relationships in place, the work becomes central. Students readily learn from one another in this supportive environment (Sandmann, 1990).

Questions in hand, students are then asked to move. They are instructed to sit across from their partners. This detail is important. If students sit side by side, the “listener” will be able to see the writer’s draft; few reviewers can ignore the impulse to edit a text if they see mistakes. If students sit across or at an angle, it is difficult to edit the text because it cannot be easily seen. This is significant if the conference is to focus on revising content only.

Once in position, one student reads aloud his or her revising question to the listener. This question gives the listener something specific for which to listen, and it gives the duo a place to begin the conversation. Next, the student reads aloud the text.

After the first writer has shared and the response to the question is discussed, the listener writes a brief response on the question card so that the author can review it later. The listener then signs the card under the response, signifying ownership of the response. Then, the roles are reversed.

When both students have read aloud their questions and their writing, responded to the questions, and written brief notes on and signed their partner’s card, the writing session typically ends for the day. I usually collect the cards to review the day’s conversations, noting the directions students are going—or not.

Participating in such a conversation is a “point-generating” activity in my classroom. Built into my rubric for the papers students are writing are “process points,” as well as points for the final product. Some of these process points are for active participation in conferences. Other process points come from my observations of students’ writing during sustained silent writing periods, the existence of multiple drafts, and the cards that document conversations.

Figure 1 provides an example of a process/product rubric. It shows that papers that go through the writing process are given points for two “content” conferences and one “editing” conference. The rubric in Figure 1 was based on an assignment that asked students to create a piece of writing that would be helpful to them as middle-grade teachers. It was meant to fulfill a purpose of their own choosing and be content area driven, hence the five “facts” criterion. While the content section of my rubric changes with each assignment, the process section (as well as the organization, use of language, and use of conventions categories) changes little over time.
Figure 1
Focused Question Card strategy process/product rubric
(20 points)

Process (7 points)

- Frewriting papers
- Revising/content conference #1 draft
  - #1 conference card with signature
- Revising/content conference #2 draft
  - #2 conference card with signature
- Editing draft
  - Conference card with editor’s signature

Product (13 points)

- Content
  - Preface paragraph that describes
    the purpose of this paper (2) and your
    evaluation of its purpose upon completion (2)
  - At least five “facts” are woven into your final product
  - The genre is recognizable:

- Organization

- Precise/interesting use of language
- Conventional use of language

Total = ___

Extending the strategy

In parallel fashion, I extend this strategy to editing as well. After students are convinced their texts say what they want them to say, students type their drafts, trying to get them as perfect as possible. Then, this time, necessarily in a side-by-side conference, the writer once again reads aloud his or her work while the listener reads along. While I require students to read their emerging texts to two different classmates, I allow students to return to a previous partner for the editing conference. Because the former partner is familiar with the text, he or she focuses more easily and intently on the form because the content is not distracting.

Again, the conference begins with a specific question the writer has about the form of his or her writing. Questions typically center around an editing issue—not a specific comma, for example, but perhaps about comma use in general. Or a writer might want the partner to look specifically for misspelled words. The editing conference is focused; listeners are not trying to fix everything in one read through. Even older students are well served by focusing on one or maybe two issues at a time (Atwell, 1998). If the listener notices something, the reader pauses to hear what the listener has to say and, if deemed necessary, the writer makes a note. Students learn that listeners are not always correct. A critical understanding for using this strategy is that only the writer writes on the draft itself; ownership is fervently protected.

Accountability

As an educator in an age that is consistently more focused on accountability, this technique has
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proven invaluable to me in terms of my ability to monitor student conferences. No teacher can monitor 10 or more simultaneous conferences, but I can gain a sense of the conversations by observing my students while they work and by collecting the cards at the end of class and reviewing them. I record whether each student has written a revising question (versus an editing one—which, early in this process, they are inclined to do), thus measuring their understanding of the concept of revision. I can also gauge their level of involvement during the conference by the quality of the response—the detail included or insights shared.

I “kidwatch” (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) as surreptitiously as I can while students are conferring with one another. I try to appear as if I am not listening because I want the students to learn how to use and trust one another as resources. I learned fairly quickly that if I “check in” with each pair and discuss their issues with them that my students learn that I am the only one who has the answers or that only my answers count. This defeats the purpose of using conferences in the classroom. So, while students are talking with one another, I am in the classroom observing and taking notes from afar and, of course, intervene if I must. My role is as a consultant when a pair of students a special issue—one that they have already discussed thoroughly but for which they think they need more input. I will talk with pairs of students but not with a student alone who thinks his or her partner is wrong and wants me to agree.

Through minilessons based on the kind of writing I require from my students, I explicitly teach writing strategies, related to both process and products, and writing conventions. I believe in teaching the writer, not the writing (Calkins, 1994). As my rubric indicates, I am more interested in the process and content of students’ papers than I am in the final form. Only the writer knows what the message should be; when points for conventions are greater than points for content, I believe assessment is askew. For example, I do not know whether published authors, like J.K. Rowling or John Grisham, know how to spell or capitalize, but I know their editors do.

In middle and high school classrooms in particular, it’s hard to find time for teacher-and-student, face-to-face conferences. When students have three one-on-one conferences with their peers, the writing is more than an assignment, and their final products indicate as much. Rarely are students unprepared to participate in these conferences, partly because class time is allocated for prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, but out-of-class time is necessary, too. Students have direction and motivation to write out of class. That’s pivotal in creating a writer for a lifetime—and that’s the power of revision. Students come to understand they truly have a voice.

The conference that I usually have with students is a “written” one. At the bottom of the rubric I write my comments. First, I applaud what the writer has done well, building on strengths (Murray, 1987). Then, if I see patterns that seem worthy of noting or issues that will surface again, I note those on the rubric as well. I do not “correct” the final draft. There is more than a hundred years of research (Calkins, 1994) that documents the inefficiency of teaching writing this way, despite the fact that it seems counterintuitive. If correcting all of our students’ errors worked, wouldn’t we all be perfect? Instead, I log the problems I find and create minilessons or extended lessons that are common among the students. For students who need more individualized help, I simply arrange a conference, either in or out of class, depending on a student’s level of need.

I typically use this strategy for the first two papers my students and I write and maybe one more time over the course of the semester, if time permits. It is not an end in itself. Real writers do not necessarily use index cards with questions on them to which listeners write responses, but real writers will write questions about their works in progress that they know they will have to address before the piece is completed satisfactorily. Real
writers don’t ask their listeners to “sign” the bottom of the card indicating completion of the task, but I have found using this strategy helpful as a way to monitor my students’ understanding of the goal and varied purposes of revision. Making students’ “thinking” about revision concrete by writing their questions enables them to internalize this stance as writers.

Challenges
I consistently model this strategy with undergraduate students in a literacy methods course and graduates in a course entitled Writing Process. I use it so that my students have “lived” this strategy and are better prepared to use it with their students. The first struggle in using this strategy, even with adults, is always the creation of a revising question instead of an editing one: most of these teachers and preservice teachers have lived a “product” model of writing versus a “process” one.

The second challenge is to get these writers to read aloud their text to a partner. They want to just say, “Here. You can read it,” and push their emerging draft onto the other’s desk for silent reading. This shortchanges the process approach dramatically. By reading aloud, writers see and hear things they want to change because reading aloud slows down the reading and allows the eyes and brain to double check what the tongue is saying. Often writers find text to clarify during this activity because reading aloud allows them to listen for both sound and clarity. With this strategy, I hope to nurture increasingly independent writers, so it is best when the writers who hear an error or need for clarity address the issue themselves.

Interestingly enough, teachers who have used this strategy with their middle or high school students tell me their students experience the exact challenges I face at the university level. These younger writers also fall back on editing questions and don’t want to take the time to read their manuscripts aloud. The time needed to clarify and learn how to write revising questions, as well as to read the texts aloud, is critical to the success of the FQC strategy.

However, the greatest challenge of the FQC strategy is that it takes time to fully implement. It is time well spent because students actually experience the reflective life so critical to a writer. As Atwell (1998) stated, “we need to acknowledge, once and for all, that writers and writing need time” (p. 93). Students need to have the opportunity to feel what it means to take a paper through the writing process. Obviously, all papers are not worth this effort. Some kinds of writing need only be one draft papers—journal entries, responses to literature, the writing part of many reading strategies. The goal for each of these kinds of writing is to record thoughts about life or literature and to get ideas down on paper. These drafts may eventually become part of a larger piece that goes through the entire process. However, for papers that are to be thoughtful reflections of thinking over time, the FQC strategy is ideal.

Successes
After initial reluctance, my university students like to use this strategy; and, according to their students, it seems to work particularly well with students over 10 years old, either strong or less talented writers. Students who are in fourth grade or beyond have the ability to “stand back” from their writing and create a question; this is difficult for younger students (Calkins, 1983). Students in fourth grade and up also have the speed and dexterity to write and respond to a question on a small card; creating and writing the question is not the purpose of the FQC strategy. If students have trouble thinking of revision questions, they could consult a list of them from a chart hanging in the room, possibly created from some of those suggested in Table 1. Such scaffolding may help an emerging writer make explicit what he or she wants to know.
Teachers who have worked with younger students (K–3) have reported to me that while doing shared writing with their students, they will sometimes adapt this strategy by modeling the writing of a question on a small card to consider “later.” As a consequence, even younger writers begin to see how writers “step back” and ask questions about their writing. While they may not be able to do it for themselves yet, teachers are scaffolding a place for this activity as students grow developmentally (Vygotsky, 1934/1978).

One reason I developed the FQC strategy for use with my university students was because I was frustrated that I could not individually confer with my students as much as I would like. The FQC strategy gives me a way to nurture all the writers in my room because every student is actively involved in the writing process. It also provides a model of a strategy teachers can use in their classrooms. My students are amazed at the difference in their final writing products when they are required to “live” a process approach, when multiple drafts are expected, and when conversations about how their drafts change are a part of the experience. They understand how powerful this strategy can be for their students as well. The FQC strategy reminds students to look carefully at their writing, and then, by doing something with those discoveries, they realize they are writers at work.

The FQC strategy is also successful because of the conferences. As Calkins stated, “If a conference is going well, the child’s energy for writing increases. The child should leave the conference wanting to write” (p. 234). These writers are ready to continue their work because their agenda, not the teacher’s or a classmate’s, has been addressed. Even if the answer is “yes” to a young writer’s revision question, “Is the beginning of my story boring?” the writer is not surprised because he or she is the one who posed the question. After the conference, the stage is set for the writer to brainstorm and generate ideas to make the beginning more engaging.

When writers share from the traditional author’s chair, classmates sometimes ask questions that make the writer uncomfortable and defensive. Despite a teacher’s best modeling of “helpful” questions or of emphasizing “useful suggestions,” a writer who is not ready to hear them will leave the sharing session deflated instead of invigorated. Of course, some of the suggestions that listeners make might improve the writing, but the goal in our classrooms is not to nurture the writing (a short-term goal) but to nurture the writer (a lifetime goal). Students who decide they are not writers will not write, and then there is nothing upon which to build any conversation at all.

Content conferences that empower writers are ones that students control. It is through this explicit process that writers develop, because they are continually nurtured to “anticipate their audience’s hunger for information and to anticipate places where their readers may be confused and need clarification” (Calkins, 1994, p. 235). The goal is for writers to internalize the questions their readers will have so that they can address them in their drafts. “If they can hold content conferences with one another, they are well on their way toward holding content conferences with themselves, and clearly this marks important growth in a child’s abilities as a writer” (Calkins, 1994, pp. 236–237).

Gardner said, “The enemy of understanding is coverage.” I must agree. Writers have to write, and to write well they have to revise, which takes time. As teachers, we can’t just talk about revising. Our students, no matter what age, have to live it. The FQC strategy is one way for them to do just that.

REFERENCES


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**LEBLANC LITERACY CHALLENGE**

Author Deborah LeBlanc is sponsoring a challenge for adolescent readers with a top prize of US$5,000. Readers age 13 and up in the United States and Canada (excluding Quebec) can participate in the challenge by reading LeBlanc’s novels *A House Divided* (2006, Leisure) and *Grave Intent* (2005, Leisure) and then answering a series of multiple-choice questions for each book. Entrants must also write a 200- to 250-word essay about a set topic for each book. The challenge opens on March 1, 2006, and continues until December 1, 2006.

LeBlanc created the challenge as a way to motivate and encourage reluctant readers. As a child, books were her escape from the reality of her broken home and abusive mother. After a suicide attempt in high school, she realized that education was her ticket to a more rewarding life. LeBlanc married at a young age and worked her way through college while raising three children. She has become a successful business owner and a dedicated writer. She hopes that her Literacy Challenge will inspire reluctant readers and disadvantaged youth and help them realize that they can achieve just as she has.

The LeBlanc Literacy Challenge’s grand prize of US$5,000 also comes with an extra US$1,000 to be given to the public school library of the winner’s choice. Should the winner choose to save the prize money for education costs, LeBlanc will contact the college of the winner’s choice about the possibility of matching funds. A series of smaller prizes are also available, including a desktop computer and bookstore gift certificates.

For more information about the 2006 Challenge, visit [www.theleblanchallenge.com](http://www.theleblanchallenge.com).