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**Chris Hall**

# The Writer's Mindset

**6**

**Stances**

**That Promote**

**Authentic**

**Revision**

Foreword by **Linda Rief**  
Heinemann • Portsmouth, NH

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**For Trisha, Emma, and Eliza,  
who buoyed me with their optimism.**

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## Foreword: Room 201

*Linda Rief*

**I**n the Fall of 2019, a few months into the school year, I stopped in at the middle school, wandering down the hall to see my former colleagues and Chris Hall, now the eighth-grade teacher in Room 201. When I stepped through the door, *my* door, all eyes turned to me. Twenty-plus eighth graders stared at me. Who is this person? What is *she* doing here? I stared back at them: Who are *you*? What are *you* doing here? This is *my* room. It was one of my rooms for more than forty years in this building. Heads bent back into their writing. Room 201. This was *their* room, with *their* teacher, Mr. Hall.

Chris Hall. I couldn't have been happier that he was taking over for me. He is a positive, compassionate, intelligent, energetic educator who brings both idealism and realism to all that he does. He is a person of the highest integrity, who still makes me proud to be a fellow teacher.

Almost twenty-five years ago Chris interned with me. He was my partner from the moment he stepped into the classroom. He worked tirelessly to plan, share, and reshape ideas with me. He integrated new content and techniques into numerous existing curricula designs. His awareness of the diversity needed in content, in strategies, in techniques, and in learning styles for adolescents was, and still is, so impressive. He brought a vibrancy to the classroom that I see carried into this book.

Chris views the world as his classroom, always noticing things that intrigue him and that might capture the attention of his students. I recall one example during his internship that vividly illustrates his thinking and actions as a teacher and as a human being.

We were studying the Holocaust through the lens of children and what happens when they have few to no choices in their lives. "I know so little about this," Chris said. "I need to know more." He researched a weeklong fellowship at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., applied, was accepted, and learned all he could about this horrific time period.

A few months later, when he returned from winter break after visiting Philadelphia, he couldn't wait to tell me about a chance meeting with Isaiah

Zagar, an artist who had covered a block of buildings in ceramic tile and looping ribbons of mirror—whole buildings, five stories high, were now mosaic art pieces. For a day, Chris apprenticed himself to Isaiah to learn what he was doing.

For Chris, always the learner, always wanting to know more, he connected these two experiences and couldn't wait to share with his students.

"What if we figure out how to build a mosaic in conjunction with studies of the Holocaust?" Chris suggested. His excitement was energizing and contagious. We spent the entire last quarter of that year working on writing, reading, listening to guest speakers who had survived the horrors of a death camp, and constructing a four-by-eight-foot mosaic that represented what students had learned about the Holocaust and other human rights issues. The experience was challenging yet invigorating. All the kids were engaged and changed by what they had learned. It would not have happened without Chris.

By reading Chris' book, you are apprenticing yourself to him. He will become your colleague, your partner, as he so thoughtfully and so unpretentiously describes what you might try with your students to help them see how to make their writing better.

In our middle school department meetings, we often looked to Chris for guidance as a collaborator as we developed and reframed curricula. I constantly nudged Chris to write a book. "Other teachers need to hear how you've enhanced and reshaped ideas from all you've learned and tried in your classroom . . . I need your book." And now he has done it: *The Writer's Mindset: Six Stances That Promote Authentic Revision*.

Essentially, the book focuses on revision—the heart of what makes writing powerful and compelling. But this book is about so much more. It is about helping our students develop the mindsets essential to writers who learn and grow *with* each other and *from* each other. The mindsets that Chris describes here, so eloquently and clearly, drive students deeper into their thinking and writing. He teaches them, and us, how to think like writers by noticing and paying attention to what they do during the process of crafting a piece of writing. Metacognition—how do you know what you know? As Chris articulates in this book, "Students embracing metacognition become aware of their own reactions to their drafts and their own writing moves." When students develop this mindset, they are internalizing the kinds of things they might try, or might avoid, in another piece of writing. They are moving their writing forward.

Rethinking one's writing also comes from reading like a writer—noticing that the writer did something that influenced you, the reader—making you wonder and ask, *how'd she do that? I'd like to try that in my own writing*. A mindset that further helps students develop as writers.

Chris demonstrates how seemingly small, but hugely meaningful, shifts in our beliefs and practices make a difference in the writing lives of our students. Accessible and sensible ideas that move kids as writers from “I like it the way it is” to “I tried using the first person *I* to make it more personal, and I changed all the verbs to the present tense. I feel like it says what I want it to say so much better. . . . I’m really proud of all I did to make this my best writing yet.”

Roald Dahl once said, “By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this” (Heard 2002).

“Suspicious of both facility and speed.” Chris agrees. Revision that promotes growth is not about speed or compliance or coercion. Authentic revision takes time and comes from developing a personal desire, an enthusiasm to make what one wants to say the best it can be. Revision comes from recognizing and understanding, for oneself, why a piece of writing is meaningful and significant to the writer. And like an athlete or musician, we get better with practice, learning the moves and techniques with more facility by writing again and again.

Chris seamlessly weaves in two essential ideas that remain central to my thinking as an educator: we must write with our students, and we must model our thinking aloud as we write.

It is worth repeating: we must write with our students, and we must model our thinking aloud as we write. When our students see us as writers, they trust us when we point out what they did well. They consider our questions to them as legitimate curiosity. They take our suggestions seriously. This is central to Chris’ book—developing a mindset for authentic revision for ourselves, as well as our students.

As I read Chris’ thinking, it strikes me again and again—we must make the time to talk with each other about our beliefs, our ideas, our practices, and our wonderings. These discussions are the most important conversations we have. Yet, if that doesn’t happen as often as we would like, we must ask those questions of ourselves and of our students.

Chris made time for these conversations by doing action research and working with colleagues as a Heinemann Fellow in 2017. He looked closely at one aspect of teaching writing that really concerned him—revision. He asked himself if his teaching practices sparked a culture of revision, or if he was “unintentionally feeding revision resistance.” Reading Chris’ words makes me realize there is so much I could have done differently in Room 201 to move students forward in their writing. We cannot, we must not, become complacent and satisfied that what we are doing, and how we are doing it, is the best we have to offer our students. Even those of us who write books for other teachers must admit that as a book goes to print, we have already begun to rethink and revise our teaching mindsets.

This is exactly who Chris is: the reflective practitioner who acts on what he learns from his students, from other professionals, from his experiences with adolescent writers, and as a writer himself.

I stepped out of the classroom in June of 2019. Forty years as a learner, most of it with eighth graders. I miss their energy and their complacency, their curiosity and their boredom, their maturity and their childishness, their confidence and their insecurities.

On that last week of school, I was still trying to *get through* to my student, Leah, who gave *some* reading and writing her best effort, and other times, shrugged off everything. "I'm still worried about you," I said. "What could I have done differently to make it better for you?" She gave me her best eighth-grade stance: hand on the hip, head bent into a rhetorical question mark, eyes shifting in resigned boredom from me to the ceiling, from the ceiling to me, from me to the ceiling. With the collective sigh of hundreds of eighth graders, she said: "It's hard working with teenagers, isn't it?"

You bet it is, I thought, and I loved every minute of it.

Chris Hall stepped into Room 201 in August of 2019 wanting to learn from eighth graders. I wish I was still there, trying so many of the things I learned from him as I read this book. *You* are still in the classroom. How lucky you and your students are as you learn how to develop the stances central to a mindset for growing your writing and the writing of your students with Chris as your guide. You will understand what Naomi Shihab Nye means when she says: "Now I see *revision* as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. It means you don't have to be perfect the first time. What a relief!" (Heard 2002).

# Reimagining Revision

## From a Stage to a Mindset

**I** like it the way it is." As a writing teacher, I groan when I hear my students say this. It's the verbal equivalent of that giant, capitalized declaration etched into many of their writing pieces: THE END (see Figure 1-1). Whether uttered or written, whether delivered with a defiant scowl or offered hesitantly, the message is the same: *This piece is not changing. This work site is closed, and no renovations will be made. No "revision"—no "reseeing" of this writing—is happening, period.*

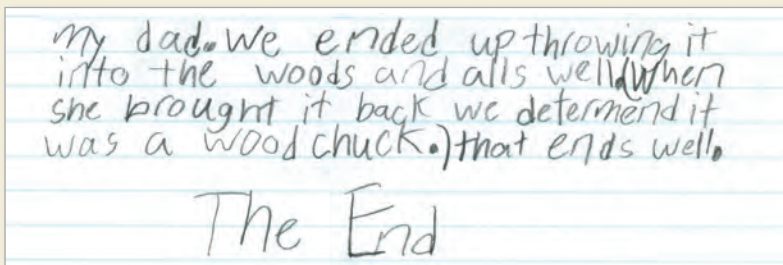


Figure 1-1 Student Story with the Classic Ending

# What's Behind Students' Resistance to Revision?

Maybe it should be no surprise, this resistance. If we're honest, it shouldn't be a shock to hear our students balking at revision. Revision is tough for *all* writers, for lots of valid reasons.

## A Big Ask

Let's face it: revision takes significant effort and time. For most of us, it can be a daunting task just to *complete a draft*, let alone revise it. Once we finish a draft, it can feel agonizing to have to let go of parts or change them, when we know how much work it takes (as the surveys from Cayden and Eli attest). (See Figures 1–2 and 1–3.)

Take, for instance, a moment with Henry, one of my fifth graders. It was around November during writing workshop, and we were conferring on his memoir about getting a new puppy. Henry had lots of difficulty getting his

**Figure 1–2** Cayden's Thoughts on Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

I don't like revising because it takes too much time because it is a very frustrating time and it's hard

**Figure 1–3** Eli's Thoughts on Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

I don't really care I mean like it takes up ~~time~~ sweet time which is my opinion.

ideas on the page early in the year—on his September self-reflection, he admitted, “i haet writeting”—but since then he had come so far. He was initiating pieces more on his own, quickwriting along with our class, and now he was eager to show me how he had written nearly a full page about his first moments with Pippin, his new pet. He lit up as he described Pippin’s wild play leaps, his painfully sharp puppy teeth, and how his family fell in love when they first laid eyes on him at the shelter. This enthusiasm was a huge achievement—even if many of his ideas hadn’t made it on the paper yet. “What did Pippin look like as a puppy?” I asked after a bit, broaching any revisions gently, carefully. After Henry’s animated description of his “fluffy fur ball,” I added, “I wonder if you might include some of what you just said so that readers might ‘see’ it, too.” Like a cloud passing in front of the sun, the gleam in Henry’s eyes dulled at the first whiff of feedback. I could almost see his heels start to dig in. *I like it the way it is.*

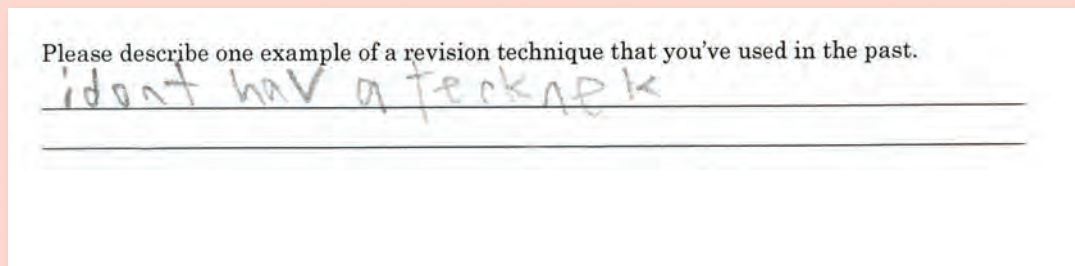
I wanted to have an exchange of ideas—a give-and-take so that Henry could see the options and power he had as a writer—but he was already feeling defeated. For Henry, I had suddenly morphed into just another adult telling him, yet again, to make changes, when just finishing a draft was a formidable task in itself.

## No Simple Path

There are no easy solutions, guarantees, or formulas for revision. Often, we can sense a piece of writing needs to be improved, but we’re unclear about what to do next. (See Figures 1–4 and 1–5.)

Ian, Kalen, and so many of our other student writers don’t feel like they have any strategies for revision, or they can’t see a path forward. They might have a vague—or painfully acute—sense that their draft is lacking, but they’re at a loss about how to proceed.

**Figure 1–4** Ian’s Thoughts on Revision



**Figure 1-5** Kalen's Thoughts on Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

Its okay, I just sometimes get  
frustrated when I can't figure things out.

## The Feedback Threat

It can feel threatening or frustrating when we get suggestions about our writing. It can feel like we've failed, that we've done it wrong, when someone asks us to make a change. (See Figure 1-6.)

Revision is a big ask even for some of my students who come to workshop loving writing and brimming with confidence. It can feel threatening or frustrating when we get suggestions about our writing. Take Lea, another fifth grader, who would practically skip to language arts class, excited to churn out another ten-page fantasy story. "My best writing is when I combine something that has already been written or created," she told me proudly in the fall. "Like the story I'm writing that's a combination of My Little Pony and The Hunger Games." Quite a wild blend, but Lea—with her rich descriptions of settings and characters—could make it work.

That is, until it came to revision. Lea was deep in an author share, reading her piece with relish, when—amid plenty of praise for her draft—some of her classmates voiced slight confusion about an aspect of the story. Lea bristled defensively. "I think it makes sense," she shot back, seeming to see the mildest of suggestions as an affront. "I think it's good the way it is."

**Figure 1-6** Kate's Perceptions of Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

I don't like revising my writing because it feels like  
I did it all wrong. I also think revising and editing  
is plain boring.

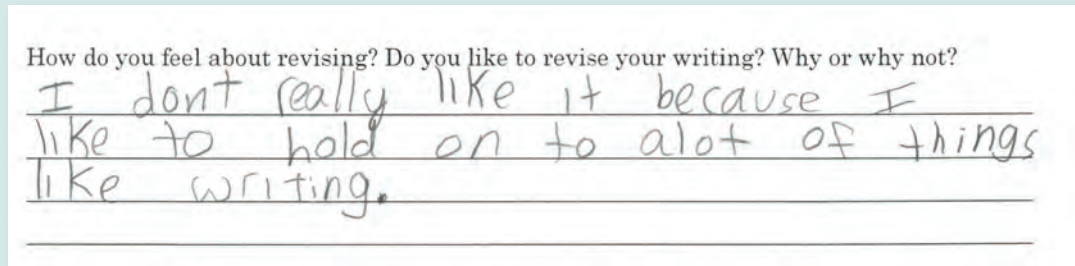


I understand Lea's reaction. When we face a reader's question, our first response as writers is often exasperation. "How could you *not* get it?!" we think. Sometimes our readers don't see something in our draft that seems clear to us, or they don't react in the way we hope. This can be discouraging or downright aggravating.

## Risk Aversion

Revising our writing often requires taking a risk, which is far from easy. We can feel vulnerable and unsure. We often have to cut out or alter parts we've become attached to. It's much easier to stick with comfortable, done, and "good enough." (See Figure 1-7.)

**Figure 1-7** Dylan's Opinion of Revision



## A Feeling of Compliance

Revision can feel like an act of submission as opposed to one of creativity. When we get lots of suggestions or are asked to make certain changes, it can feel like we're losing ownership of our piece. Despite our best efforts as teachers to take a gentle approach with our feedback, students can leave conferences feeling like we don't like their writing or that we're taking over control of it.

For many students like Mairtin and Jack, revision can feel like an act of compliance and capitulation rather than desire. (See Figures 1-8 and 1-9.)

## Mining Tensions in My Teaching

Fortunately, there are lots of times when my students seem to almost magically take on the work of revision with gusto. I'll look up in my classroom, perhaps a month into the school year, and feel a hum of energy in our writing workshop—students are seeking one another out for ideas, excited and

**Figure 1-8** Mairtin's Thoughts on Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

NO because sometimes teachers  
say change this, that and the other  
and you don't want to.

**Figure 1-9** Jack's Feelings on Revision

How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?

It's not my favorite because it feels like the teachers  
don't like your work my feelings on revision because I  
had a teacher that abused revision and changed  
out stories from one to another.

open to trying new approaches. There's a palpable buzz as my young writers are experimenting with their drafts, and virtually everyone gets swept up in the atmosphere. (See Figure 1-10.) These golden moments in my writing workshop seem to spring up organically, unexpectedly—like desert wildflowers—making me wonder: What sparked this change? How can I keep this culture of revision going—and re-create it intentionally—even when revision resistance rears its head? How do I get my students to embrace revision (or at least be more open to it)?

These questions spurred an action research inquiry in my own classroom a few years back. I had been teaching writing for a long time—passionately, pretty successfully, I thought—but this opposition to revision nagged at me. *What was at the heart of the resistance to revision in some of my students?* Using my language arts classes as a laboratory, I researched this and other questions by mining tensions in my teaching. "Tension is both an act of stretching and a state of uneasy suspense," say Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power (2012, 23), experts on action research. "We sometimes walk a tightrope between who we are as teachers and learners and who we want to be" (23). Through my classroom research, I took a close, honest look at all the moving parts of my writing instruction—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I had started with the tension in the way some of my students approached revision, but I began to examine tensions in my own teaching. If I was going to do some meaningful research into revision, I needed to take an honest look at my own teaching practices, to see what I was doing well (to spark the culture of revision I was sometimes seeing) and where I needed to change (where I was unintentionally feeding the revision resistance).



**Figure 1-10** Students Revise Their Work with Gusto

## A Digital Divide?

With more than a little uneasiness, I noticed some habits I had fallen into over the years, such as resorting to Google Drive comments more than face-to-face conferences, all in the name of efficiency. I seemed to always run out of time to confer in class, and, as the load of student drafts piled up, I was trying to get to more pieces. And I was—digitally. *Technology was playing a new role in my conferences, but was I losing some connection to my students?*

## Expecting Too Much?

There were the moments when the lack of revision left me discouraged. I would read “revised” drafts that looked virtually the same as ones I’d given students feedback on and then sigh about the (seemingly) meager improvements. But, in thinking about what it took to make changes to my own writing, I wondered, *Was I forgetting how hard it was to revise? Wasn’t it enough to make just a couple of significant changes in a draft? How much revision was realistic for me as a teacher to expect?*

## Whose Piece Is It?

I winced as I thought of the times when (again, for efficiency’s sake) I found myself giving students comments on *everything* I could think of. I told myself that there just wasn’t time to respond to their writing multiple times, so I’d

better not miss a thing as I chronicled every reaction in the margins. Sometimes, it was a deluge of feedback, leaving many kids looking dazed in its wake. Worse were the diligent students who took adult and peer suggestions too far, addressing every single comment until they had either overwritten their piece or killed any desire to work on it. *When we give too much feedback, or require students to address many of our suggestions, whose piece does it become? I wanted my students' revisions to be authentic and intrinsically motivated, but how much of the time were they just about compliance?*

## A Mindset, Not a Set of Steps

Taking a critical look at these tensions wasn't pretty, but the soul-searching prompted some important shifts in my teaching (some of the very ideas you're reading). For all the earnest desire to improve my own teaching practice, there was something else amiss, as well. Something about how my fellow teachers and I had been taught to approach revision. We presented revision as something to face after the first draft is over. Revision was a stage in the writing process—a step right after drafting and just before editing.

But when I looked at my students at their best—and at my own experience as a writer—I realized that revision was occurring *throughout the writing*, not just after the end. Writers were stopping periodically to review and reread their words, making adjustments big and small along the way. They were pausing occasionally to notice what was working and what parts were falling short. They were aware of the moves they were trying *as they were writing*—and *why* they were trying these. “I love how I’m using questions in the first paragraph,” Riley said when I conferred with her in the middle of her book review draft. “I think it will intrigue my readers and make them do a double take. Maybe they’ll want to pick up my book!”

The conventional wisdom was that revision was a step near the end of the process, but I saw it happening *throughout* drafting—in micro- and macro-changes that writers like Riley were trying before, during, and after composing each line. I had been taught to wait until after the first draft was complete to have my students revise, but that seemed too late.

There was also something that didn't sit right with the whole approach of writing process and workshop. There was certainly nothing wrong with teaching students that writing is a process (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing) and showing them the structures of the workshop model (e.g., mini-lessons, conferences, shares, and predictable writing times). The problem was where these approaches focused my gaze as an educator. The way I had been taught writing process and workshop put my emphasis firmly on the writing. The spotlight—for me and my students—was always beaming down at the page.

“And where else *should* we be focusing our attention?!” you may be wondering.

Well, as it turns out, on the students themselves.

A bit less on the writing and more on the writer.

“Teach the writer, not the writing,” Lucy Calkins said over thirty years ago (1986, 236). But the workshop model as I taught it—and the way I saw other colleagues teaching it—focused everything on trying to improve the writing. Our minilessons and conferences were always about ways to help students add, reorganize, reconsider, and troubleshoot the problems of the page. We taught students the power of leads, how to add dialogue, how a reader’s questions can crack open a draft—all worthy lessons, for sure. But it seemed to me that there were things to be learned at the other end of the pencil—in my students themselves.

*Revision was about what was happening in the mindset of the writer, during the writing process, not just on the page, after it was done.*

When I saw my students embracing revision, it wasn’t just that they knew craft moves and had learned certain writing skills (important as those are).

It was their willingness—and even enthusiasm—to revise. To identify lines that were working and build from them. To be aware of their own reactions as they were writing, not just at the end of a draft. It was their openness to a new approach or tendency to take the perspective of a potential reader. Their ability to transfer one skill they had learned to a completely new genre or draft. Their willingness to take a risk in order to stretch themselves as writers.

I felt like I was stumbling upon a new definition for revision, by gazing at the students right in front of me. In short, revision was about what was happening *in the mindset of the writer, during the writing process*, not just on the page, after it was done.

## Unpacking a Writer’s Mindset

Influenced by the mindset research of Carol Dweck (2006) and the Habits of Mind work of Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick (2008), I began to notice and name the behaviors my students were showing when we were in the thick of a culture of revision. I was drawn to the term *stance*—coined by Kristine Mraz and Christine Hertz in *A Mindset for Learning* (2015)—because it implied a behavior my students could adopt, not a fixed, innate quality they either had or didn’t have. Like a ready stance in baseball (knees bent, glove out, eyes on ball), a writing stance indicated a conscious *choice*, a way of approaching revision that we could learn and practice until it became a part of us (Mraz and Hertz 2015, xviii). Motor memory for writers.

But which behaviors—which stances—were most important for moving us beyond revision resistance? After I distilled elements from the Habits of Mind and other work, the key parts of a writer's mindset revealed themselves. Following are the stances that emerged in my classroom and students when we were at our best, our most productive—energized and open to revision.

## Metacognition

Some students were aware of the decisions they were making in their drafts—*what* they were trying (their writing moves) and *why* they were trying them (their intentions). They were willing and able to see their writing, and their reactions to it, clearly and honestly—paying attention to what felt right and what sounded off in their emerging drafts. To the places in the writing that energized them or fell flat. To the lines that would be intriguing or confusing.

I could see metacognition in my student Alja, as she was thinking out loud about her personal narrative: the mortifying time when she threw a snowball in an airport parking lot and it went awry, nearly causing her family to miss a flight. Alja was uninspired by her first lines and felt they needed changing. She was pausing mid-draft to weigh the words of her initial lead—the effect they would have, the order in which she should present them, how much information to dole out to readers. "It was Christmas Eve, and I was standing outside Logan Airport in the harsh, chilly weather.' I didn't really like that lead. . . . I wanted it to be more mysterious and leave people with questions, so I tried this instead: 'On the plane ride to Florida all I could think about was what had happened and wonder how a snowball could cause so much trouble.'" (See Figure 1–11.)

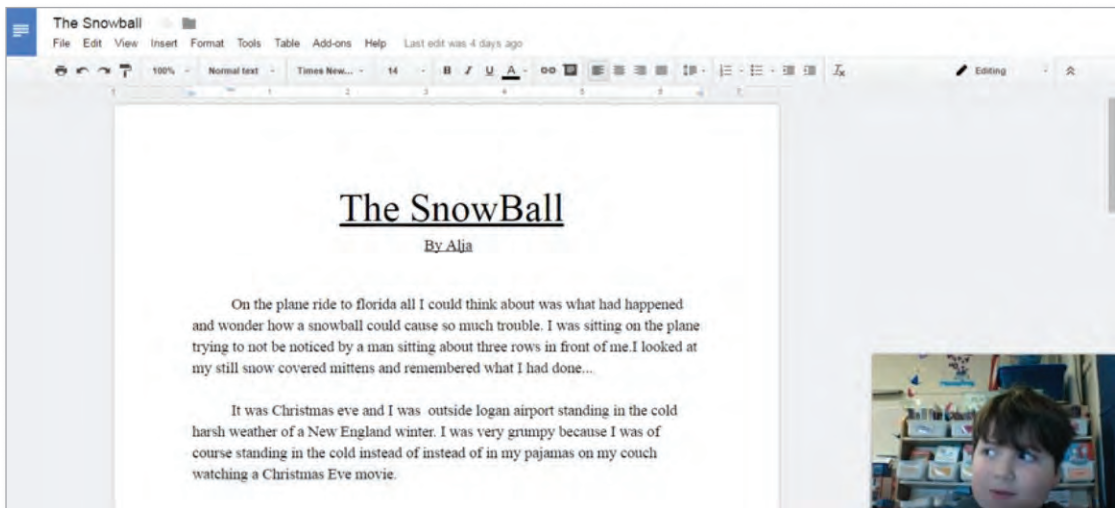


Figure 1–11 Alja Reflects Metacognitively on Her Writing

Not only did Alja create a stronger lead, but her metacognition—her self-awareness about her writing during the process—would be a resource for her to use again and again, a little voice she could listen to and learn from.

## Optimism

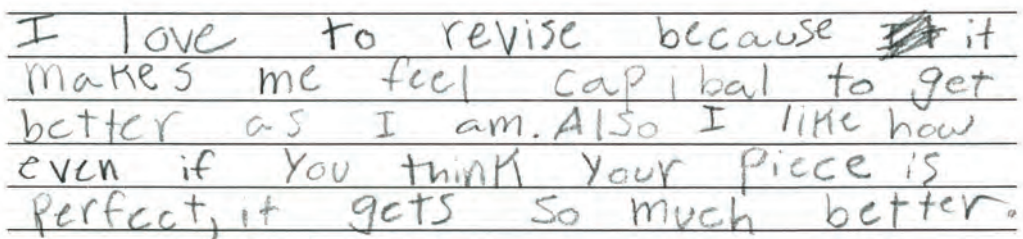
Some students were drawn to the strengths of their draft (rather than focused on its shortcomings) and built off what was already working. This optimism helped propel them forward through the hard work of revision. In looking at the positive aspects of their writing, these students often stayed hopeful, engaged, and persistent—even when they hit difficult spots in the process.

For example, there was Elly, whose quiet optimism shone through even as she struggled to describe an oyster shell for a nature poem she was writing. She read her drafts to peers, listened to their comments, and kept trying to look at her shell with new eyes and fresh metaphors. “I was wondering how many things an oyster shell could look like. . . . I had to really think about different word choice and description. . . . I started to think that nothing was really coming ‘alive,’ so I had to work on revising.”

Elly kept at it, adding several wonderful lines of figurative language, including one comparing the shell’s layers to “a silky white staircase / Leading into an empty palace.” In reflecting about the changes to her writing, she wrote, “I love to revise because it makes me feel capable to get better as I am. Also I like how even if you think your piece is perfect, it gets so much better.” (See Figure 1–12.)

The optimism I saw in students like Elly wasn’t some chipper, Pollyannaish attitude, but a tendency to invest their energy in what was working and to build from it. The persistence I witnessed wasn’t white-knuckle tenacity—some show-grit-through-the-misery approach—but a willingness to work through the challenges of revision because the writing was worth it.

**Figure 1–12** Elly Explains Why She Likes Revising



I love to revise because ~~it~~ it makes me feel capable to get better as I am. Also I like how even if you think your piece is perfect, it gets so much better.

## Perspective-Taking and Connection with the Audience

I also noticed the students who could readily step into their readers' shoes—to see their own writing from another perspective. They anticipated what their imagined audience might need or feel while reading their draft—the places where they might be confused, the background information readers would need for clarity, the details that would be most intriguing to them. These students predicted their audience's reactions, and they listened carefully to the *actual* feedback they received from readers during conferences. These were writers thinking like readers.

I saw this perspective-taking in Riley, who told me that getting comments, suggestions, and questions from her classmates had helped her “100 percent.” Riley said, “It gives me a second view (or more) on my work and can help me to make things more clear. Like in our memoirs, it may be clear to me because I was there, but to readers it may be confusing.”

Perspective-taking was what made Shreya rethink what her script for a social studies presentation on Pearl Harbor needed. Her draft was written in first person—from the point of view of an American soldier facing the surprise attack—but she felt like her lines were too informational. Thinking like a reader, Shreya reflected that her script was overpacked with facts but emotionally empty. She stepped into the shoes of her soon-to-be audience, spurring some important changes to her script. “I added more feelings and voice for my character,” she said, “so that the people who see [my presentation] will get facts, but also enjoy hearing how the person feels.”

## Flexible Thinking

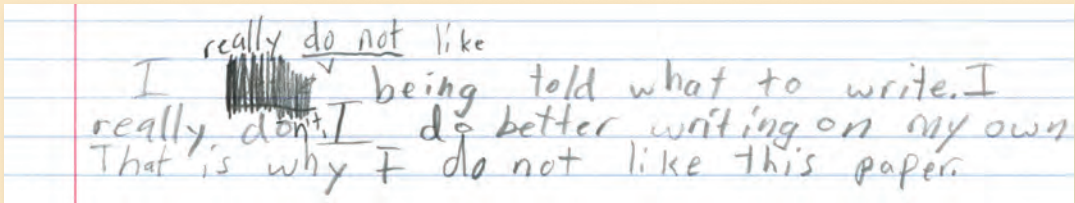
I noticed students who would hold off on saying, “I’m done,” who remained open to new ideas, approaches, and feedback. They showed a curiosity and confidence to try something novel with their writing—and a humility to recognize these great ideas might come from others.

Perhaps none of my students showed as great a change in flexible thinking as Lea. She started the year prickly and closed off when approached with virtually any comment about her writing. For Lea, almost any feedback—even a gently posed question—was a threat. “I really *do not* like being told what to write. I really don’t,” she shared on her writing self-portrait in September. “I do better writing on my own. That is why I do not like this paper.” (See Figure 1–13.)

Teaching Lea reminded me what a vulnerable act writing is and how it's not an easy task for a writer to trust their readers. It takes time to build a relationship, and it takes feedback that's truly supportive and helps writers to find their



**Figure 1-13** Lea's Initial Feelings About Revision



I <sup>really do not</sup> like  
being told what to write. I  
really don't. I do better writing on my own.  
That is why I do not like this paper.

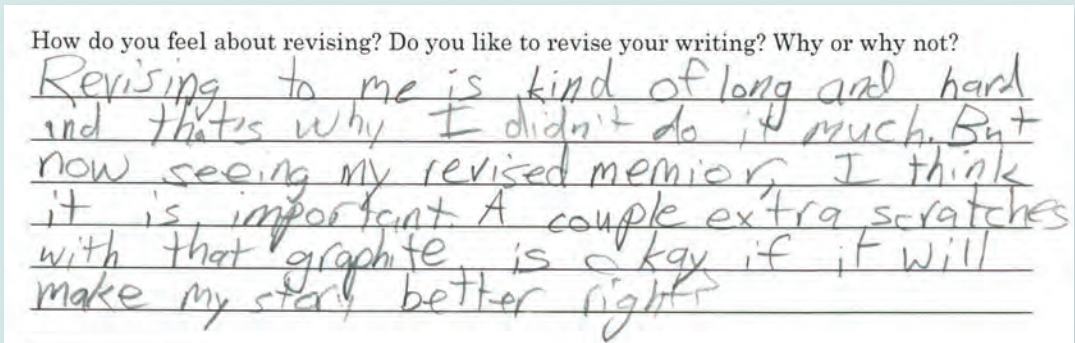
own way. Kids like Lea—all of us, really—need to know that revision doesn't mean deference or submission, but a creative back-and-forth between fellow writers. (See Figure 1-14).

As the year progressed, Lea came to see revision as challenging but well worth the effort. Taking a more open stance and listening to other ideas was a gradual—and far from easy—process for Lea, but she came to see the value in it. "Revising to me is kind of long and hard and that's why I didn't do it much," she wrote on an end-of-year survey. "But now seeing my revised memoir, I think it is important. A couple extra scratches with that graphite is okay if it will make my story better, right?"

## Transfer

There were students who were conscious of the wonderful writing skills and craft moves they had previously learned and were intentionally transferring these to new pieces and situations. For instance, Jack learned about adding interior monologue—a character's inner thoughts—from one of his peers. Jack had read a piece by Alyssa, which included some conflicted and quite funny

**Figure 1-14** Lea's New Attitude Toward Revision



How do you feel about revising? Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not?  
Revising to me is kind of long and hard  
and that's why I didn't do it much. But  
now seeing my revised memoir, I think  
it is important. A couple extra scratches  
with that graphite is okay if it will  
make my story better right?

thoughts about agreeing to ride a terrifying roller coaster with her dad. After reading her story, Jack pinpointed what she had done (even if he struggled to name the craft move): “Alyssa is really good at doing the ‘two voices thing’ in her head—like one voice is saying, ‘You’re going to die!’ and the other one is like, ‘You can do it!’”

Jack then set out to use a similar approach in his piece about a scooter crash, a time when he misjudged a ramp at a skate park. To capture the moment when he had to decide whether to attempt a dangerous landing or leap off his scooter, Jack transferred his know-how about interior monologue: “I flew up, still on my scooter . . . the ramp was getting closer and closer . . . ‘Do I stay on and maybe bash my legs? Do I jump off?’ I preferred not being paralyzed, so I bailed.”

## Risk-Taking

Other writers play with fresh ideas and willingly take a risk to stretch beyond what they can already do. They allow themselves to be vulnerable, pushing the boundaries of what they’ve tried before—experimenting with new genres, narrators, story structures, endings, and more. Rather than rushing to complete a draft, they’re willing to live with uncertainty in order to play with possibility.

There was Vincent, who tried writing from a point of view other than his own for the first time. In his poem “Poison Ivy,” he imagined the three-leafed scourge’s perspective: “I’m innocent / Don’t I look friendly? / I really love playing / . . . Maybe three might be your lucky number!”

For other students, the biggest risk isn’t what they will add or change, but what they will remove. For Sarah, stretching herself meant trimming down her book review. “I had to cut out the parts that gave away too much information. . . . At first I had three pages and it was so hard to cut [anything] out. It was all so important!” Removing some of her writing to make it a more manageable length was a risk for Sarah, and she was proud of how her streamlined review seemed to hook other middle school students when it was posted in our library.

I noticed my students embodying risk-taking when they presented their writing to an authentic audience—whether speaking about climate change at a community forum or acting as tour guides on Boston’s Freedom Trail. (See Figures 1–15 and 1–16.)

Metacognition. Optimism and persistence. Perspective-taking and connection with our audience. Flexible thinking. Transfer. Risk-taking. Do any one of my students—do *any* writers—display all of these stances, all of the time? Of course not, but these have become powerful guideposts for us to aspire to throughout the year. Teaching the stances cultivates positive behaviors not just in writing but in any pursuit.



**Figure 1-15** Students Present at a Climate Change Forum



**Figure 1-16** Students Act as Tour Guides

# Process Present—a New Lens on Workshop

I had taught craft lessons and writing process for years, but how could I teach *stances*, and how would these fit into writing workshop? I worried I wouldn't be able to squeeze more into my already-packed curricula and instruction, but, as it turned out, I didn't need to. Teaching the stances of a writer's mindset didn't require much more time, just a reframing of what I was already doing. I could keep my writing workshop structures; I just needed my students to think differently about revision—and about themselves.

One of the first steps was putting these stances on our collective radar. For years I had been asking students to reflect on their writing after completing a final draft—what I and my colleagues called a process history. I asked what they were proud of, what they struggled with, what changes they made in their piece. Some students groaned; others dutifully went through the motions, replying to each question. I wanted to get a window into their process as writers, but they didn't seem to find much value in it. The problem wasn't the questions, and it wasn't the students. In large part, it was the timing.

Postpiece is too late; a process history is a postmortem. For most students, rigor mortis has started to set in on their words and they are ready to move on; when a draft is finished, the piece is (cue Godfather voice) "dead to them."

Instead, I realized what my students needed was a *process present*—an awareness of their writing moves and their own stances *as they were drafting*. They needed quick metacognitive bursts during the writing process, not lengthy reflections after it was over. A process present, not a process history.

In *Mindset*, Carol Dweck points out that just introducing the notion of mindsets can be transformative. "Just by knowing about [fixed and growth] mindsets you can start thinking and reacting in new ways" (2006, 46). Mraz and Hertz liken it to putting on a "special pair of glasses," a filter through which we suddenly see our world differently (2015, 28).

Becoming aware of their own writing mindsets, my students began to see optimism in the way they identified a promising line or bounced back from a dismal quickwrite. They noticed their own metacognition in the inner voice they heard while nestled on carpet squares on the floor, pondering their next move. They paid attention to their flexibility when they paused after a minilesson, considering a new title or possibly even a whole new piece. They noticed they were anticipating their classmates' reactions to their drafts even before they dashed off to find conferring partners. They thought about their own risk-taking as they clicked away on their laptops, as they held off on saying, "I'm finished. *What should I do now?*"

The stances were suddenly everywhere—for them and for me. (See Figure 1–17.)

This book is about applying a new lens on our writing workshop practices. The goal is to see our instruction with fresh eyes: to recognize and incorporate the stances of a writer's mindset—metacognition, optimism, perspective-taking, flexible thinking, transfer, risk-taking—within our existing workshop structures.

Each of the chapters ahead begins with defining one of the stances. I then identify several core beliefs related to the stance—beliefs about its importance to writing and revision and suggestions on how to foster it in our students. Following each belief are practices—specific examples of how you can weave the stance into the minilessons and prewriting, drafting, conferring, and sharing activities you already do.

Along the way, we'll explore some subtle but seismic shifts in our teaching—ones that can spark a writer's mindset, keep students in a process present, and help them move beyond revision resistance.



**Figure 1–17** Students Share and Revise with Enthusiasm