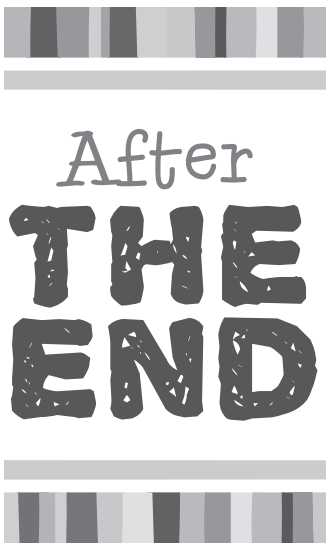

After THE END

Teaching and Learning Creative Revision

SECOND EDITION

BARRY LANE

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For Dr. Jennifer Cook

I would love to turn the hierarchies that exist in schools upside down, the same way that I would love to have college professors teach preschool and for mothers to come into college classrooms and tell us all they know.

—Dr. Jennifer Cook

Contents

Revising the World

Crazy Ones Unite!

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

—Albert Einstein

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, then these women ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again.

—Sojourner Truth

A while back, there was a list referred to as "Rules Kids Won't Learn in School," which was attributed to Bill Gates and went viral on the Internet. The list contained homespun edicts, like Rule 5: "Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your grandparents had a different word for burger flipping. They called it opportunity." Or Rule 6: "If you think your teacher's tough, wait 'til you get a boss."

The whole point of this list of rules was to show that kids today are somehow spoiled and that their generation has a false feeling of entitlement that will be corrected when they face the "real world." I did some research and found that the list was not written by Bill Gates but by a journalist named Charles Sykes and was taken from his book called *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves but Can't Read, Write, or Add*. The subtitle of Sykes' 1995 diatribe could be seen as the moniker of the current education reform movement, which began in earnest with the No Child Left Behind law several years later. Sykes uses the same international test score data cited by Congress to pass the No Child Left Behind law to say that our children have fallen behind the world and that our schools are more concerned with self-esteem than with learning.

Since then, these same data were used to pass Race to the Top and mandate more standardized tests than at any time in the history of civilization. Many of our schools are now test-prep academies whose survival depends on test scores. (You can read educational historian Diane Ravitch's book *Reign of Error* [2013] if you want to understand how test scores mislead and serve the testing industry more than children.)

But my concern here, as I begin this revision of my book on revision, is Sykes' very first rule on his list for college graduates, the rule that, ironically, went viral under education-reform funder Bill Gates' name, the rule that seems to sum up the last fifteen years of school reform and its view of children and schools.

Rule 1: "Life's not fair. Get used to it."

I sometimes project this statement to teachers on a blank screen and ask them to reflect in writing what it means to them. Most take the view of Sykes and say that children must be hardened off and learn to face life with grit, resilience, and determination—favorite terms used today in inner-city charter schools, where severe poverty shapes the culture. Everything in life won't always turn out your way, so you have to be prepared for that. I wait a minute and then ask, "Is that all that this quote is saying?"

Then, slowly, using the miracle of technology, I insert photos of Rosa Parks, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Susan B. Anthony, Helen Keller, César Chavez, Gloria Steinem, Billie Jean King.

"Aren't you glad these folks didn't get used to the unfairness of life?" I ask.

Suddenly, the quote is not about having grit and resilience; instead, the quote is about being told to put up and shut up. The teachers experience a full-scale sea change of what that quote actually means.

These kind of aha moments are what excite me as a teacher, as a writer, and as a thinker and why I wrote *After THE END* back in 1993. I wanted students to see that, given the right tools, writers can grasp new possibilities and not accept writing or even life at face value. Revision is more than a writing tool. Revision is a way of seeing new realities, both in a piece of writing and also in the world. To that end, in this revision of *After THE END,* I have included chapters on informational writing and persuasive writing so that students faced with a set of rules for college graduates can learn to talk back to them. In fact, let's give that a whirl, right now.

Rule 5: "Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your grandparents had a different word for burger flipping. They called it opportunity."

Response:

You are right. The dead-end, minimum wage job that you mention could be an opportunity, *if* we could unionize the workforce and raise the minimum wage to $19

per hour. Shareholders might make less money, but the employees would at least have a living wage, and perhaps we could narrow the widening income gap and lower the employee turnover rate. How can we be a healthy society and tolerate the working poor? What's more, poor and middle-class people tend to spend their money and support the service economy while tax breaks for the rich send our money to offshore tax-free accounts in the Cayman Islands.

Rule 4: "If you think your teacher's tough, wait 'til you get a boss."

Response:

Toughness is not the only quality a good boss or a good teacher possesses. What about empathy, team spirit, and a willingness to fail boldly? The boss you describe would not be a very effective leader in a company today. If you don't believe me, read Daniel Pink's book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2011), to find examples of bosses who are more than just tough guys. Furthermore, toughness does not motivate workers in the same way that rigor does not motivate students. There needs to be passion and engagement. Why work hard for someone just because he or she tells you to? That is the kind of leadership exemplified by Egyptian pharaohs. What a limited and obsolete way of seeing both education and business.

These responses reflect the real revision qualities and the new paradigm thinking needed for young people growing up in a world with many problems that were created by status quo thinking embodied in Sykes' rules. As I write this new preface, the United States Senate has just voted that global warming is not caused by humans, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. Our children live in a world where politicians are voting against scientific evidence that will affect future generations simply because it might affect business as usual. Never has there been a more important time for teaching students to talk truth to power.

The Old and the New

Question: Why has it taken me twenty-five years to revise my book on revision?
Quick answer: It was done.

But, unfortunately, the world of teaching writing wasn't. Sometimes writing a new edition of an old book is like living out the words of the serenity prayer. You are constantly trying to decide what you can change, what should stay the same, and praying for the wisdom to know the difference. For the last item, I have to thank my editor, Sue Paro, for her cheerful assistance, critical insight, and good horse sense. One decision Sue and I made was to keep the original introduction of the book because it explains the book so well and came out of a specific historical context.

In that piece, I talk about my previous editor, Dawn Boyer, and her critical influence on the book. It strikes me that editors are a force of nature, like wind or water. Their presence shapes the literary landscape and their influence endures for decades. Like all authors before me, I am eternally grateful.

In this redo, I have updated chapters and added sections that relate to today's connected and standards-driven classrooms. Along with time-tested, favorite anecdotes and activities, you will find

- new chapters that focus on informational writing, persuasive writing, and creating a classroom community that embraces the idea of combining writing with technology
- new features throughout the book that weave connections to visual media, online resources, technology, and nonfiction into the writing classroom
- interviews with professional authors and master teachers that expand the scope and complexity of the book by adding a chorus of expert voices on writing and revising
- updated appendices that include links to videos and websites to enrich your and your students' writing experiences.

Implement-Nation: Taking the Teacher Oath

The original edition of *After THE END* was written when American public education was seen as locally defined, diverse, and generally successful. Teachers were respected hometown professionals, serving a community's children in a democratically managed school system. Teaching was seen as a professional art founded in the sciences of developmental psychology and pedagogy. Local teachers and principals collaborated, creating their district's scope and sequence and exploring and choosing approaches, methods, and professional development opportunities appropriate to local goals. Teachers had both instructional authority and responsibility within their classrooms. They were expected to understand the developmental nature of childhood cognition and emotion, and to create lessons and curricula that met the emerging needs of the real children in their classrooms. There was open discussion and diversity of opinion at faculty meetings. Teachers were valued professionals striving for excellence and expressing their individual talents and expertise in the service of their students and communities.

Today, in too many districts, teachers and principals have lost their professional autonomy and are now the designated implementers of externally produced programs designed to satiate the ever-increasing demand for testing and metric evaluation of both students and teachers. Teacher's voices have not been included in the national-level discussions of policy, content, assessment, or standards. Developmental

psychology is too often dismissed as "edubabble" by one-size-fits-all innovations, whether corporately owned charter schools or curricula developed by testing companies to ensure test compliance and success. The dictum that assessment drives instruction has never been truer. The heavy reliance on metrics to determine federal funding has created a testing frenzy that drives local administration, determines instruction, restricts teachers to implementation rather than education, and reduces the infinite complexity and beauty of our children to numbers on a grid. The tragic flaw of the standards approach to improving American schools is not always the standards themselves, which are often laudable, commonsense goals, but that these goals are linked to expensive, high-stakes, standardized tests that narrow curriculum and marginalize the best teaching. When testing directions come with an explanation of how to respond to those children who will vomit during the test due to stress, it is clear that parents and educators must respond. To that end, I have tried to infuse this edition of *After THE END* with the spirit of teacher solidarity and integrity that I have experienced in schools and classrooms around the country. Real revision begins when we teach students to see new possibilities in their writing and in the world. So here is The Teacher Oath. Raise your right hand and repeat after me:

The Teacher Oath

I am a teacher, not an implementer.
My first responsibility is to the developmental needs
of my students and their lifelong learning, not a standardized test
or any other mandate that comes from outside my classroom.
I will therefore *teach* standards with passion,
Creativity, and all my teacher craft and pedagogical
wisdom. Like any professional, I will use only
materials and methods that are useful to me in my
pursuit of excellence.
You are allowed to tell me what to teach,
but I will always
determine how I teach it.

In the time since I wrote *After THE END*, I have done workshops in all fifty states, along with schools in Canada, Europe, Africa, and Asia. One of my most memorable workshops was for the Noyce Foundation in a lecture hall of the Stanford Linear Accelerator plant in Palo Alto, California. This was the same room where the Home Brew computer club met in 1976 and where Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs introduced the Apple I computer. At the time, personal computing was an outrageous idea shared by a few visionaries. America is famous for producing and promoting these unique rebellious souls. As I presented my ideas on revision, I couldn't help but think of the now-famous Apple ad, which spoke of people who could envision a different world—people who know how to do things differently, might appear crazy to some, and are convinced they can change the world. In today's test-driven teaching world, all great teachers are a little bit crazy, because they stand by their students, and they pay attention to the important things, which, in many schools, are not always valued by the powers that be.

So, here is a song for you crazies, sung to the tune of "Stand by Your Man." Always remember that those who think they are crazy enough to change the world are the ones that do.

STAND BY YOUR PLAN

Words by Barry and Carol-lee Lane

Sometimes it's hard to be a teacher,
Spending lonely nights with lesson plans.

You teach glad kids,
you teach the sad kids,
and you find a way a way to hold each hand.

But state assessments drive in instruction,
They say that kids are just test scores.

They say there's one size,
But you know that's all lies,

And so you close your classroom door.

Stand by your plan,
And show the kids you know them,
And you will walk beside them,
Each year they're in your classroom.

Stand by your plan,
And show the world that teachers
Do more than tests or textbooks can.

Stand by your plan.

Stand by your plan,
And show the world that teachers
Do more than tests or textbooks can.

Stand by your plan.

To watch a video of Kentucky high school English teacher Kym Rickman singing "Stand by Your Plan," see Appendix A. While there you'll find a link for an instrumental version with which you can use for karaoke in the teachers lounge.

6

More Kirk, Less Spock

BOLDLY GO WHERE NO NONFICTION WRITER HAS GONE BEFORE

All writing is narrated; it comes through a teller, a mediator, a guide who must win our trust, and in some cases wins affection.

—Thomas Newkirk

Without freedom of choice there is no creativity. The body dies.

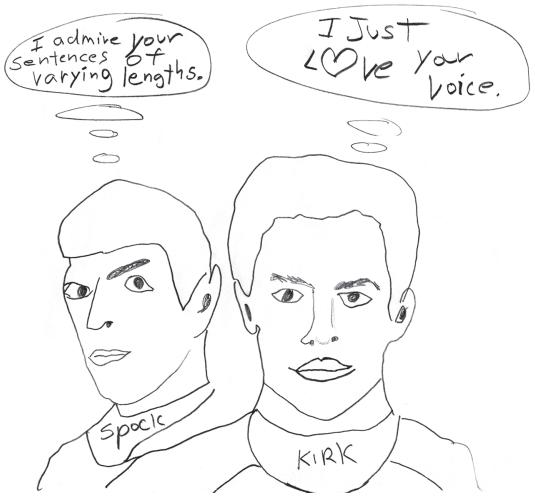
—Captain James Tiberius Kirk

Logic is the beginning of wisdom . . . not the end.

—Mr. Spock

One of the great longstanding offenses of boring academic writing instruction is the insistence that good writing begin with a predictable central idea to prove, rather than a question to explore and expand upon. One glance at writing rubrics from any state or testing company will find the phrase *controlling idea* mentioned throughout. Terms like this are never used by writers, who spend more time chasing ideas than controlling them. Good nonfiction writing, according to most states and test companies, is viewed as a sort of mathematical equation: Controlling idea (thesis) + Supporting relevant evidence + Conclusion = Excellent essay.

I call this *Spock writing*, after the half-Vulcan, half-human character played by the late Leonard Nimoy on the famous TV series *Star Trek*. Like most Vulcans, Spock is supremely rational and calculates each situation with his overworked



Writing conference on the *Starship Enterprise*

left hemisphere. Spock would simply be a robot if not for his half-human lineage and his close association with Captain James Tiberius Kirk, the dreamy, defiant, unorthodox, deeply flawed leader, who is just as likely to punch his way out of a situation as calmly negotiate. The problem with state standards and other rigid textbook approaches to writing is that they are all Spock and no Kirk. All reason and no bluster.

The best nonfiction writing has an element of Captain Kirk in it. It is unpredictable, surprising, dreamy, inquiring. It contains, in Star Trek language, strange anomalies. Not all paragraphs begin with topic sentences. Not all details are held in place by a neat controlling idea. The inquiring writer takes the reader on a journey, and neither is totally certain where they will end up. The writing is organized around the passion of the author, a question trying to be answered, an idea unfolding, a thesis explored, not just proven.

Once, I was asked to write a short essay on the power of reading. I began writing with no idea where it would lead. When I started thinking about reading, I started by comparing my TV days of childhood when I didn't read with the days after I started reading. I remembered some key reading experiences. By the end of the essay, my writing led me to one very simple truth: reading is not a skill; it is a miracle. (Read the complete essay in Appendix D.)

I found the main idea of my essay in the very last sentence. Imagine how the essay would have read differently if I had started with, "Reading is not a skill; it is a miracle. There are three main reasons why. First of all. . . ." Encourage your students to take the journey to the thesis, or, to paraphrase the famous captain, to boldly go where no nonfiction writer has gone before.

This Is a Test

Read the following passage carefully and tell what the main idea is.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created based on the precept that standardized testing can assess the individual literacy progress of each child, teacher, and school. Monitoring standardized test score data is the most important factor to help

school leaders understand the effectiveness of each school and the skill of its teachers. Tests will hold schools and teachers accountable to higher standards and improve our educational system, helping us to better compete in the global economy with other countries that take similar tests and have similar standards. Improving these tests will therefore lead to improving our schools. Consequently, the lion's share of educational funding should be spent on tests, computers, and programs that can help students achieve on the tests.

A. American schools must be held accountable.
B. Standardized test scores are the best measure of student learning and should be where our funds are spent.
C. American education is in competition with other countries in the world.
D. The standards movement is a scheme to make money for test companies, tutoring companies, and computer makers.

Most multiple-choice tests have two more-plausible answers and two less-plausible answers. If you chose B, you are correct because this is the most correct answer based on the words in the passage.

Test-prep companies make their million-dollar profits each year by promising increased test scores on standardized tests if you take their courses, hire their tutors, buy their books, or all of the above. Is answer D is looking better to you yet? When readers bring their background knowledge, their schema, to the page, comprehension becomes more than deciphering the author's message. Reading is a mind meld between author and reader. Both participate. To teach otherwise is to be an advocate of something I call *closed reading*.

Closed Reading

Closed reading, not to be confused with *close reading*, is the essence of most reading tests and a big reason literacy curriculum is boring to students and teachers. To assess reading comprehension, well-meaning (and even more well-funded) reading experts devise various schemes for measuring a student's ability to think exactly like themselves. These experts think they are measuring comprehension, but they are really measuring a sort of tactical compliance. I learned this from my friend Kenny (see Figures 6–1 and 6–2).

Today Kenny is a lawyer, but in sixth grade Kenny took a reading test and found himself getting angry at the way some test questions were worded. He especially

Figure 6–1 **Older Kenny: Deputy Attorney General, New Jersey**

Figure 6–2 **Young Kenny: Sixth Grader**

hated the question "What's the best title for this story?" He decided to write a letter of inquiry to the testing company. He told them in his letter that questions like those are opinion questions and are no different from asking, "What's the best soft drink, Coke or Pepsi?" Students have the right to pick any of the four multiple-choice answers because they are being asked their opinion. Kenny went on to say, "I am not stupid. I know the answer that you want me to choose. I just want to know why your opinion needs to be my truth. If you were honest, you would pose the question this way: What do you think *we* think the best title for this story is?"

The testing company replied with a six-page letter complete with graphs, charts, and data refuting Kenny's point. Kenny was surprised and little puzzled at how seriously they took a challenge from a ten-year-old. It appears the testing world has a lot invested in proving there is one way to comprehend a text. And that was decades ago, when high-stakes tests were not mandated and most schools used achievement tests as a low-stakes assessment to evaluate schools and students in a general way. Kenny is now a deputy attorney general in the state of New Jersey, and his job is to protect the rights of abused children. I believe he started training for this job in sixth grade.

Closed reading is a type of subtle bullying, which only the most precocious children, like Kenny, seem to understand. To most children, it is simply following the rules and doing what you are told to find the correct answer. The work of Louise Rosenblatt and others has proven that reading is interactive, that twenty students will draw twenty different subtle meanings from the same text. Though there may be a central idea to glean from a piece of writing, how each reader does this is unique and complex—and not the simple act of extraction that test-prep culture promotes. Students must connect personally with what they are reading. That connection does not only come after they have read, but rather it is ongoing. It begins the moment a student reads the first sentence.

When children are drilled from an early age into thinking all reading is just about searching for the author's main ideas inside the four corners of the text, they stop trusting their own instincts—their curiosity shuts down. They become "closed readers" who shrug their shoulders when asked for their opinion or ask shyly, "Do you want me to look in the book?"

The only cure for closed reading is to create choice-based reading programs in our schools, where students can find their passion as readers. Professional books like Donalynn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* (2009), Penny Kittle's *Book Love* (2012), Jennifer Serravallo's *The Reading Strategies Book* (2015), or Nancie Atwell's classic *In the Middle* (2014) are great places to start. Turning kids into avid readers awakens their instincts and tunes them into the multifaceted meaning. These readers will excel on the monolithic test without being swallowed whole by its limited worldview. In the words of Jan Burkins and Kim Yaris from their book *Reading Wellness: Lessons in Independence and Proficiency* (2014), children can "lean in to the text on the page" and lean out to find their own perceptions.

Closed Writing

The same one-dimensional afflictions of the closed reader can be found in the closed writer. Nonfiction writing can be an exciting explorative journey into fact and meaning or a dry list of information coughed up after a topic sentence or thesis statement. In *Minds Made for Stories* (2014), Thomas Newkirk demonstrates that the best nonfiction writing is organized under the principle of story. A best-selling nonfiction writer, like Dava Sobel, does not give us lists of facts or abstract proclamations but instead leads us on a journey like any great storyteller would, only her journey is not just about events but also about ideas and understandings. There is plot, drama, and anticipation in all the best nonfiction writing. Readers want to know what's going to happen next, and so does the writer. You could even think of each sentence as a story in which the subject is our main character and the predicate, what happens to him.

Weeding and Writing

Story, or *narrative* (its formal name), is not just a stray technique used by nonfiction writers, as portrayed in the appendix of the CCSS. Story is a deep structure, hardwired into the brains of all humans, what Newkirk calls "itch and scratch." The informational writer, like the storyteller, builds patterns of anticipation and gratification. He interacts with the reader's mind like a painter with a canvas. Each brushstroke on the reader's mind hints at future brushstrokes.

I learn this lesson regularly from my wife, Carol-lee, who loves gardening and Tolkien novels. Perhaps this is why when nasty burdock weeds appear in the garden she does not simple say in a calm textbook voice, "Barry, please make sure you pull out all the burdock weeds." No, Carol-lee approaches me, her face full of urgency, her voice tinged with the deep emotion a Tolkien dwarf might display as the Ork army approaches the walls of the city: "Barry, the burdock are taking over. We must kill them. Kill them *all!*"

When you have a mission, gardening is far more meaningful and revision makes sense. The same applies for all nonfiction informational writing. How do we fuel a student's sense of mission when writing about facts and information?

Is Elvis Really Dead?

Like every English teacher since the dawn of humankind, the CCSS place great emphasis on finding text evidence to back up assertions made by students. The thesis-controlled essay continues to be the unquestioned cornerstone of academic writing, and with good reason. None of us want to live in a world where you turn on a TV and find a host of smart people making blind assertions with no evidence to back them up. Oh, wait a minute, strike that, that is *exactly* the world we live in and also why we want our students to recognize the need for evidence when they argue. The trouble with the traditional thesis + evidence view of information writing is that it undersells the true power of writing as a tool for expansive thinking.

Bruce Ballenger—my friend, former colleague, and author of *The Curious Writer* (2012)—explains it this way: When we teach students that essay writing is exclusively a simple deductive process, we teach students to narrow their writing focus too much. Anything that does not fit with their thesis is excluded and everything that does fit is kept. Their voice flattens and their vision and wisdom contract. This becomes very apparent when a student chooses a really limited thesis like "Is Elvis dead?"

How do we find proof for this thesis? We can go online and research all the Elvis sightings for last year, but doing so only confirms how limited my thesis was to begin with. There is nowhere to move. Real essay writing is inductive, not deductive. It looks up to the heavens, not down at its own toes. Great essayists and informational writers take us on a magical mystery tour. We follow them because we know they are not content to stay in the parking lot; instead, they hop on the tour bus and drive off. So how do we get our bus moving? How do we raise Elvis from the dead? It begins by simply asking questions to determine and refine the thesis as we did in Chapter 1.

Questioning the Thesis

1. Write a bland, one-dimensional thesis on the board: *Is Elvis dead?*
2. Ask your students to reflect on this thesis by asking more questions.

   Examples

   Who said Elvis is dead?

   Why do so many people say Elvis is not dead?

   Why is it important for America that Elvis not be dead?

   What role does a continuing-to-live Elvis play in American society?

   Why are there no Richard Nixon sightings, only Elvis?

   Ask your students if any of their questions might lead to a more interesting thesis for an essay on Elvis.

3. Turn one of the questions into a new lead like we did in Chapter 1 of this book. For an example:

   In the 1950s, America was ruler of a world that lay in ruins after a terrible world war. Rock-and-roll reflected the happy-go-lucky yearnings of a conquering country, and we anointed a young king named Elvis. Years later, as America declined, with the turmoil of Korea and the divisive Vietnam War, so did Elvis. By the 1970s Elvis was a shell of his former self, a prop, injected with drugs and placed up on the stage to perform by his infamous manager, Colonel Tom Parker. Like the happy days of America, the Elvis of 1950 had "died" long before his tragic death from a drug overdose in 1977. Perhaps that is why we people across the country still see his bloated self in his sequined jumpsuit. Elvis is America's shadow self.

4. Discuss with your class the process of questioning and how it can help a writer make a more interesting.

Spinoffs

- For younger students, we can teach this expansive view of writing with "wondering sessions." Wonder is when we ask questions and get curious about a topic, a fact, or an idea. Model this and then have students write *I wonder* on a blank page in their writer's notebook on a regular basis. If students practice wondering, their writing will expand.
- Another way to question a thesis is to ask, "So what?" Write those two words on the board and ask students to "so-what" their main point in a conversation with their partner. Example: Maybe Elvis is not dead. So what? If the thesis does not pass the so-what test, students ask more questions to dig deeper and expand.
- Make a question wall in your classroom and give students an opportunity to post their questions on that wall. Review the questions with your class and try answering them. Ask the question, "What makes a good question?"
- Find intriguing statistics facts from a source such as Harper's Index. Here is one Bruce Ballenger uses with his college classes:

  Portion of men whose attractiveness is judged by U.S. women to be worse than average: 4/5

  Portion of women about whom U.S. men say this: 2/5

  Now pair up students and have them ask each other questions about these statistics. What do they mean? What truth can you infer? Have students grow a thesis from their observations about the statistics.