The Express-Lane Edit: Making Editing Useful for Young Adolescents

Our experience tells us that students learn more from one quality language encounter than from a quantity of half-baked experiences.

—Jerome G. Harste and Christine Leland (2007)

Have you ever secretly—or not so secretly—thought that young adolescents just didn't have it in them to edit? Have you ever thrown in the towel when trying to teach editing? Or had too much coffee and tried to mark every single thing that wasn't working in a student's essay? I knew the ability to edit gives a writer a powerful tool, but was the way I was teaching editing showing this power to the young adolescents in my Title 1 Middle School in San Antonio, Texas?

I started thinking of how we taught editing at our school. It looked like a series of half-baked attempts to solve a problem that we were not sure how to fix. If I asked my sixth-grade class to correct a sentence riddled with errors, did that show them editing is a powerful tool? When I looked at their faces, I had to admit the answer was a resounding, "No!"

My sixth-graders come from homes where English is not the first language and/or is rarely spoken or even played on the radio or TV. My students wrote all the time (I felt like I was doing that part of writing workshop well), but I started to wonder how often I actually gave them an opportunity to edit their own writing, and to play with hearing, shaping, and revising their own voices.

Some of my colleagues were giving their students a steady diet of editing practice—little test-prep sheets. I tended to ignore those in favor of allowing more time to write. But we all had one thing in common—our students were not editing their writing. The truth was incontrovertible: the way we were teaching editing wasn't working.

I learned from Donald Graves (1984) and Nancie Atwell (1998) that writing is best taught as a process, and it is by writing that young adolescents develop as writers. I felt that I was doing a good job with teaching my students to use the craft of writing through drafting and revision. After all, my students wrote a lot and were learning ways to reenter their writing and deal with sensory detail and leads. But where was the editing part of the process? Editing wasn't fitting in the way I wanted and was often getting overlooked. Donald Graves (1984) argues that the "enemy is orthodoxy." I find that inspiring. We can't be absolutists. We have to continue to listen to our middle level students. Mine were telling me through their writing that how I taught editing wasn't working.

I set out to embed the editing process into the heart of the writing curriculum in my writer's workshop—not as some separate step, but as an integral part of the meaning-making process of writing and revision. I began to really think about what could make editing instruction more useful

to my students, so they would have something they could apply in their other classes and in years to come. Certainly, I didn't have more class time, so I had to find a way to integrate effective editing into our regular work with the writing process.

If I wanted my writers to use editing as a tool and not a machete, then I needed a way to praise what was right in their writing as much as to fix what was "wrong." I wanted to give my students a process they could use in their daily academic and personal writing. I wanted to create confident editors, not writers who cower with fear when confronted with the quandary: To comma or not to comma? That is indeed the question.

Middle level students need to know *what* to edit if they are ever going to be effective at it. The old "correcting is teaching" theory wasn't working, so I sought a meaningful way to help them know what they should edit for and provided opportunities to practice those skills on their own writing. And I had to squeeze this into my already jam-packed curriculum. I first decided I needed to think backwards—first, what goals did I have for my students' editing skills, and then, what would it take to get them there?

Read Your Words

First, plain and simple, I wanted to build into my students' psyche that most everything they write should also be read. Read and reread—by them—not me. But how could I build this into my daily routine? Not only did I want students to reread their own essays, short responses, and everything else, I also wanted them to use editing as a tool to clarify meaning: rewrite a sentence so it makes sense, add a required comma or delete a random one, add a forgotten question mark or delete an overused exclamation mark, fix a misspelled homophone, add a necessary apostrophe or delete an unneeded one.

Plus, I wanted them to read and edit when I wasn't there making them. How could I build the internal ability and skill to lead students to edit their own words? Donald Murray (2003) taught us that writing is a process. Shouldn't editing be a process as well? Sure, I had students give their

essays to a buddy to read, and I gave minilessons on punctuation and grammar. But how could I keep that from becoming lost in the deluge of lists of things *not* to do? I wanted to show what I valued through the way I spent my time in my classroom. I wanted to show my middle level students that they would be the final arbiter and editor of their own words. They were already asked to edit their writing. In the best-case scenario, they only edited when they had a fully processed piece. What about all the in-between times?

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If we want students to apply a literacy strategy like editing their own work, we have to consider and apply what makes instruction work. I studied the work of Johnston (2004), Purkey and Stanley (1991), and Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2004) and learned that research-based effective teaching:

- gives students opportunities to use strategies in authentic ways—the ways we want them to use them on their own

- gives students opportunities to explicitly make connections through talk and reflection

- provides positive reinforcement and an affirming learning environment

- asks students to summarize and articulate their learning

- presents similarities and differences.

Oh yeah, and all of this should be done in context as well. Easy to say, hard to do. Or was it? One day it stared me in the face. After school, I stood in the "Eight items or less" lane at the grocery store (we won't go into the fact that it should have said "Eight items or *fewer*"). I live my life in the express lane. I get what I need and get out of there. Then I realized it—the express lane offered the solution to my editing instruction woes.

The Express-Lane Edit

The grocery express lane is a concept and experience that all of my students share, so I try to use this familiar routine as a basis for a similar editing concept. How often do we get so bogged down in identifying and correcting all errors that editing becomes an ordeal for students and the teacher? What if we narrowed down editing tasks to a few items? We'd be able to edit more often, more quickly, and make editing in context more a part of the everyday fabric of our English classrooms. Express-Lane Edits (Anderson, 2005) gets my students rereading their work and moving naturally between thinking about how to edit their writing and celebrating what they do well.

All we need to begin is a piece of student-generated writing—not a final copy or a completed essay—but a messy beginning, like a writer's notebook entry, a freewrite, or a draft that was scratched out that day or the day before. First, I model the express-lane edit. Modeling thoroughly takes more time at the beginning, but saves a lot of time later. In fact, the first time you teach the express-lane edit, you will probably need a whole class period. You may even save the receipt part (you'll understand that shortly) for the second time through the process, so you can become fluid with one thing at a time. After my original time invest-

ment, I know things will speed up as my students become fluent with the express-lane process of editing, and they will use the process all year.

"I know most of you go to the grocery store a lot. When you're in a hurry and you only have a few things to buy, which line do you go to?"

"The Express Lane."

"It's faster," says Marquis.

"Well, I am going to share a faster way to edit—the express-lane edit." I explain that the express-lane edit will involve rereading our writing, and give us a way to "check out" important items. "Before we go on any shopping expedition, we make a list." I pick up my writer's notebook. "All I need is something I wrote today. I'm using this fiction story I have been writing." I draw a big rectangle at the end of my writing and then divide it into two boxes (see Figure 1). "I like to stop and read my writing periodically to see if I am making sense or saying what I want to say. First, I have to decide on one or two items to put on my list."

Check It Out

"We've been talking about apostrophes—when to insert and when to delete them. Apostrophes show our readers possession and contraction." I point to the box at the bottom of my writing and say, "In this section, I'll write the title *Shopping List*.

… Janie Bustamate's Twinkie ended up squished in Luke's hair. Janie wailed, "I didnt do it, Luke." Luke had to believe her because Janie would never part with one of her precious Twinkie's, much less waste it on him.

Shopping List (Items to check out)	**Receipt**
Apostrophes	*I used an 's to show ownership (Luke's hair)*

• *Possession or Ownership*
   Ebony's pen
 	
   Students' rights
	I deleted an apostrophe from Twinkie's because I just meant it to be plural (more than one). Just because I use an s doesn't mean I need an apostrophe—it has to show ownership or that letters were taken out.

• *Contractions* *She doesn't smile.*	
We didnt leave.	

With a model, I show the students how I use the express-lane edit to shop in my writing for things I need to fix and things I need to celebrate. For each item on the editing list, I show a correct model and one we can fix, giving us the opportunity to compare and contrast as well as an opportunity to review editing symbols.

Figure 1. Express-lane edit model

Here, I'll list which items I want to check out when I read. This is what we will edit in my writing." I use the shopping list as an opportunity to summarize and review concepts we have studied. For example, we list the cases in which we use an apostrophe, and we make the pattern (rule) concrete by listing examples (see Figure 1). And since writing is a mode of learning (Emig, 1971), the students write the lists on their papers. We also include one correct sentence to identify, highlight, and celebrate. Beneath the correct example, I provide an incorrect item for comparison. This also gives us an opportunity to review editing marks, like carets and slashes. I continue with the other items on my list, knowing the repetition of the process will serve as a review of what matters; the authentic piece of writing will heighten students' attention and purpose.

Finally, I reread my text, looking for needed apostrophes, rereading and thinking aloud when I hit questionable spots. I leave out at least one apostrophe and put one where it doesn't belong, so I have something to correct. I also highlight the correct usages, so I can model the most crucial part of the shopping expedition and the express-lane edit. If I want editing to be more inviting and less intimidating to middle level students, then I need to give recognition to what was done correctly as well.

Don't Forget Your Receipt

After I highlight some correctly used apostrophes and some that I needed to add, I pause and reread again, making sure I didn't miss anything. Now it is time to reflect and summarize what I have learned. This will be the receipt, which I will write in the box to the right of the shopping list. The receipt is the place for students to articulate any changes they made as well as to note anything they did well. By articulating or grappling with the words that sum up their learning, they etch the concepts in their minds.

When I model how to write an express-lane edit receipt, I use the language of our state test to familiarize students with the language: *I deleted an apostrophe from Twinkie's because I just meant it to be*

plural (more than one). *Just because I use an "s" at the end of a word doesn't mean I need an apostrophe—it has to show ownership or that letters were taken out.* I make sure to model how to write about doing something right as well, summing up the concept. *I used an 's to show ownership (Luke's hair) because I wanted to show that the hair belonged to Luke.* While the students reread their work, or the express-lane edit, I like to play music like "The Typewriter" by Leroy Anderson or "Shop Around" performed by Captain and Tennille or The Miracles. Music does much to create a positive editing environment.

Young adolescents will often say, "I don't have changes to make." I say, "Great. In your receipt, you will have a lot to tell me about how you used the apostrophes so well." And for those who say they didn't need any apostrophes in this writing, I say, "Wonderful. You have a new opportunity. Write two more sentences where you use an apostrophe both ways. You can cut them later, but for now, I need you to add the sentences." What's really funny is that kids, when limited to what they should edit, love to edit for something you didn't list. "Sir, I spelled a word wrong. Can I fix that?" I respond with "Well, I guess," as if I'm doing them a favor. Again, if the only benefit they get from this is rereading, then that's a start. And if I am calling their attention to an important concept in a real context, that's even better.

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Editing Their Own Words

An Express-Lane Edit is "a quality language encounter" that gives students the ever-important repetition of essential concepts or patterns in a meaningful context. We make a shopping list to check out errors and grammatical triumphs, we reread our own writing, and finally we pause and reflect on what we've accomplished. We're in, we're out, and we're on to other things. The Express-Lane Edit is one more way to weave in grammar and mechanics, to help make editing

manageable and, I hope, replicable when students face editing without anyone else at their side. I want my students to remember there is really only one occasion when they have to edit their writing—when we want to be understood.

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ATEG Conference, July 2008

The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) is holding its annual workshop and conference this summer at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. The workshop, **July 9–10**, is open to K–College teachers interested in learning how to teach grammar in lively, engaging ways. Instructors for the workshop include Amy Benjamin, Martha Kolln, Michael Kischener, Edith Wollin, and Cornelia Paraskevas, all authors of exciting books about grammar instruction. The conference, **July 11–12**, is focused on the theme "Seeing Grammar with New Eyes." Proposals welcome. Registration information available at www.ateg.org.