

She paused and looked at a story in her hand. Five words were corrected, but every word-wall word was spelled conventionally. Her students stretched words and took the time to find the conventional spelling of grade-level words. They were proud of their stories and excited to see them “go public” in the main hall.

In a few minutes school would start, and the second graders were going to find that their stories didn’t measure up to someone’s standards. She rushed to finish taking down the remaining red-marked stories. As she dried her eyes and repaired her mascara, she thought, “We’re just going to publish again.”

Later in class, she told her students that they were going to make their stories look fancier. She found legal-sized colored paper and printed fancy borders around it. She gave students access to colored felt-tipped pens. She even broke out the glitter (and smiled sinisterly to herself: now the night custodian would be too busy to work a thick red marker on student work). Before returning the now-fancy student work to the bulletin board, she typed a letter to add as well that focused on everything the students knew as writers, framing each reader’s view.

“I decided there was no reason for me to be embarrassed,” said the teacher to the study group. “Their writing looked like second-grade writing. They are the most confident writers I have ever taught. Their conventions might not be perfect, but their writing is so much stronger than anything my former students have ever written. I decided to defend them as writers, as well as my instructional decisions.”

I wish I knew this teacher’s name so I could thank her. Her story changed me. I decided to stop insisting on perfection when students went public with their writing. I realized that when student writing goes public, we must be ready to defend it in the world. It’s not perfection that matters. It’s growth and strength that matters most.

Move to Make No. 13: Stand up for imperfect student use of conventions.

There will always be people in this world who wield thick red pens and look to correct mistakes. It takes a strong teacher to be able to shift the perspective from what students *aren’t* doing to what they *are* doing as writers. Although I don’t have the original letter the teacher in the previous story added to her bulletin board, I have several that have been inspired by her. Below is a bare-bones, fill-in-the-blank version of a letter to post alongside your next writing projects that are going public but are not yet perfect.

Hello Readers!

We are so happy you paused to read our writing. We’ve been working hard as writers and learning a lot about how writers craft _____ (genre). Check out the way we work words by:

(List teaching points: e.g., learning to write specific actions to help readers make a movie in their minds. How many specific actions can you find in our stories?)

We've also been learning about conventions. See if you can spot these in our work: (List teaching points: e.g., interrogative, exclamatory, declarative, and imperative sentences.)

Finally, we know there's no such thing as a perfect writer. All writers must keep practicing in order to grow and make their writing more meaningful. This is the best writing we could do and still meet the deadline. We won't be making the same errors in a month. (We'll be making new errors!) This is okay, because writers grow best when they take risks and learn from their mistakes.

Happy reading,
 _____ (room number)

If the writer is five, then the writing should reflect it. This step in the writing process is about getting as close to conventional as appropriate for students.

Peer Editing

I joke that I was a decent speller until I started reading so much student writing. Now I know better: I ask Sam, the top speller in our house, whenever I'm unsure how to spell something.

I can easily overlook misspellings, so I like to have others read my notes and other handwritten items before I send them out in the world. If I'm working on a computer, I trust spell-check, but still use proofreaders for things like my newsletters and articles.

This is true for all writers. We have proofreaders and more formal copyeditors. I think it's a misconception to lead students to believe that they must catch all editing needs on their own. Another set of eyes will always increase the quality of proofreading.

Move to Make No. 14: Teach students to be effective peer editors.

Students have a tendency to simply swap papers when in the editing phase. I've learned a more effective approach. Students sit shoulder to shoulder with the writing between them. The writer has the pen, and the peer editor is ready to pay attention to details. The writer begins by slowly reading and the peer editor follows along. When they spot an error, they point it out and discuss it, then the writer corrects it. If the writer decides the point in question doesn't need to be fixed, then he or she leaves it as it is; the writer always has the final say. This strategy allows students to spot a significant amount of errors by forcing two sets of eyes to slow down and pay attention to conventions. (See Figure 15.13.)