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Bend I  Writing Flash-Drafts about Westward Expansion

1. Organizing for the Journey Ahead * 2
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2. Writing Flash-Drafts * 12
In this session, you’ll remind students that before writers write, they recall all they know about the kind of writing they are about to do.

3. Note-Taking and Idea-Making for Revision * 20
In this session, you’ll teach students that researchers shift between reading to collect and record information, and writing to grow ideas. When reflecting, researchers think, talk, and jot about patterns, surprises, and points of comparison or contrast, and they entertain questions.

4. Writers of History Pay Attention to Geography * 30
In this session, you’ll teach students that as historians write and revise, they need to keep in mind the qualities of good writing as well as the qualities of good history. One of the qualities of good history to keep in mind is the impact that geography has on the ways events unfold. A map is a useful tool for this.

5. Writing to Think * 40
In this session, you’ll teach students that when writers are researching, they think about the information they are learning and come up with new ideas. One of the ways writers do this is by asking questions and then figuring out answers to those questions.

6. Writers of History Draw on an Awareness of Timelines * 51
In this session, you’ll teach students that as historians write and revise, they need to keep in mind the qualities of good writing as well as the qualities of good history. One of the qualities of good history to keep in mind is the relationship between events in history.

7. Assembling and Thinking about Information * 61
In this session, you could teach students that researchers take stock of all the information they have collected so far and make a plan to do quick research to fill in any gaps.
14. Finding Multiple Points of View • 114
In this session, you’ll teach students that every single story, every fact, has multiple points of view from which it can be seen, and that writers ask themselves “What are some other ways to see this?”

15. Creating Cohesion • 122
In this session, you’ll teach students that to make writing accessible and easier for readers to take in, writers rely on patterning in words, structures, and meanings.

16. Using Text Features to Write Well • 128
In this session, you’ll teach students that informational writers include text features to support a reader’s navigation through the text.

17. Crafting Introductions and Conclusions • 136
In this session, you’ll teach students that research writers craft introductions that both explain the structure of their writing and lure readers in.

18. Mentor Texts Help Writers Revise • 143
In this session, you could remind students that writers study mentor texts for strategies and techniques they can try in their own writing, and teach them that writers also study mentor texts for revision ideas.

19. Adding Information Inside Sentences • 146
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers use punctuation to pack facts and information into the sentences that they have already written.

20. Celebration • 153
In this session, you could teach students that information writers share their writing with an audience and they teach their audience all they have learned about their topics.
As a result, there was a striking contrast between our methods of teaching narrative writing and our methods of teaching information writing. For decades now, when students write narratives, we have channeled them to write in a very particular way—zooming in on a focused episode; starting by showing themselves or the character saying or doing something; writing a tapestry of thoughts, actions, and dialogue; and using new paragraphs to show time moving forward. In contrast, for years, when our students wrote information texts, we emphasized the importance of noticing what other writers had done and drawing from a wide array of possibilities. Eventually, however, we began to realize that while students’ narrative texts improved in ways that were palpable and obvious to all, when they wrote information texts, progress was much less striking. Whereas one could walk into a classroom and know in a glance whether narrative writers were studying writing under the tutelage of a Teachers College Reading and Writing Project teacher, there was not the same crystal clear effect when students wrote information texts. Research by Hattie, Petty, and others, who synthesized more than 500,000 studies to illuminate the factors that support increased student achievement, helped us understand why our students were progressing in more dramatic ways as narrative writers than as information writers and led us to alter our approach to teaching information writing.

Hattie’s research shows that students progress more quickly when they are given a crystal clear goal that they can fix their eyes upon and when they receive informational feedback that provides them with concrete, specific next steps they can take toward that goal. Whereas one could walk into a classroom and know in a glance whether narrative writers were studying writing under the tutelage of a Teachers College Reading and Writing Project teacher, there was not the same crystal clear effect when students wrote information texts. Research by Hattie, Petty, and others, who synthesized more than 500,000 studies to illuminate the factors that support increased student achievement, helped us understand why our students were progressing in more dramatic ways as narrative writers than as information writers and led us to alter our approach to teaching information writing.

HE GENRE OF INFORMATION WRITING is a remarkably wide-open one. Crystallize in your mind, if you will, an information text.

To do this, your mind probably casts over the options. You consider pamphlets, feature articles, nonfiction books, websites, text books, research reports, encyclopedias, atlases, guide books, blogs, and recipes. You think, “Of all these many forms, is there one that captures the essence of informational writing?” Chances are good that no single image surfaces. While you ponder this, let’s go a step farther. Try crystallizing a short list of the most important qualities of good informational writing. Again, chances are good that you will not easily settle upon a list. The genre that is referred to in the Common Core State Standards as information writing is staggeringly broad.

There are reasons why information writing is harder to define than most genres. Information texts, for starters, exist to convey information that is, itself, constrained by the disciplines to which that information belongs. For example, information writing written by a field biologist takes on some of the traditions of that person’s discipline, as does information writing written by an artist, a travel commentator, or a chef. For years, because of the breadth of this genre, we taught information writing by inviting children to survey the whole wide world of options. We encouraged children to draw from that entire array of choices to make teaching texts. “Go to it,” we’d say. Students would write question-answer pages and fact pages; they’d write fictional stories that made their information juicy. We encouraged them to put information into their own words, to use text features, and to include a bibliography of their sources. But frankly, when the class was producing texts that were as different, one from the next, as all the colors of the rainbow, it wasn’t easy to know qualities of good information writing that would make a difference, and so our instruction tended to illuminate options and to be clearest when addressing peripheral topics such as bibliographies or text features.

As a result, there was a striking contrast between our methods of teaching narrative writing and our methods of teaching information writing. For decades now, when students write narratives, we have channeled them to write in a very particular way—zooming in on a focused episode; starting by showing themselves or the character saying or doing something; writing a tapestry of thoughts, actions, and dialogue; and using new paragraphs to show time moving forward. In contrast, for years, when our students wrote information texts, we emphasized the importance of noticing what other writers had done and drawing from a wide array of possibilities.

Eventually, however, we began to realize that while students’ narrative texts improved in ways that were palpable and obvious to all, when they wrote information texts, progress was much less striking. Whereas one could walk into a classroom and know in a glance whether narrative writers were studying writing under the tutelage of a Teachers College Reading and Writing Project teacher, there was not the same crystal clear effect when students wrote information texts. Research by Hattie, Petty, and others, who synthesized more than 500,000 studies to illuminate the factors that support increased student achievement, helped us understand why our students were progressing in more dramatic ways as narrative writers than as information writers and led us to alter our approach to teaching information writing.

Hattie’s research shows that students progress more quickly when they are given a crystal clear goal that they can fix their eyes upon and when they receive informational feedback that provides them with concrete, specific next steps they can take toward that goal. We came to realize that for our students to have equal success in information writing as in narrative writing, we needed to construct an image of good information writing that, like our image of good narrative writing, could provide children with a crystal clear goal to work toward and could provide teachers with a clear image of...
the pathway upon which children travel toward the goal of more effective informational writing. Of course, it requires some audacity to create a single image of effective information writing (when the genre is so wide open), but we realized that, in truth, narrative writing is far more varied and complex than the prescribed template that we have taught to young kids and that there is nothing stopping us from eventually teaching writers that neither narrative nor information writing is as simple as we first teach.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were tremendously helpful in clarifying one pathway that students might follow in becoming more powerful information writers. When making choices about what to value in information writing, therefore, we looked at the Common Core standards as well as many mentor texts, and we liked the way the Common Core opened up a coherent pathway of writing development. If we taught students to focus a topic, to organize it with logical structure, to group ideas and information clearly and order these parts in compelling ways, to include language and formatting that would help the reader transition and synthesize across parts of the text, and to incorporate and explain technical terms related to the topic—these skills, we felt, would serve writers well whenever they wanted to compose an information text. In addition, the Common Core’s way of insisting that some skills—the ability to orient the reader, to elaborate with detail, to provide closure—run across types of writing was also helpful. When we looked back at mentor information texts, both print and digital, we could see that the authors had deployed these very skills. We also saw some skills in the mentor texts that were not described in the Common Core, including a sense of passion for the subject and a commitment to make the subject engaging, to get the reader to care about it as well as know something about it. We studied how authors stirred up their readers as well, therefore, and incorporated that skill into our vision of how information writing might go.

This unit, then, starts off teaching students to write in one particular template for informational writing, then quickly suggests students build from this template to ones that seem most appropriate for their content. A handful rather than a vast array of qualities of strong informational writing are taught with vigor and clarity, and students’ progress toward producing this sort of informational writing is tracked, supported, and expected. The results have been as dramatic as the results we commonly see from units of study in narrative writing.

Besides choosing the skills you want to teach, when you model informational writing, you also want to decide on the content and concepts you’ll research. This unit of study on research-based informational writing focuses on Westward Expansion, one of the topics frequently studied in fifth-grade social studies, but you can, of course, embed the unit into your own content. You will want to make sure that students know enough about the content to write well. Otherwise what will look like writing difficulty will really be knowledge limits. It’s impossible for students to write well without a deep knowledge of the topic. One reason we sometimes worry that the Common Core may lead inexperienced teachers to solely text-based writing is that all writing will then be mitigated by children’s reading levels. For this unit, you’ll want to choose content that children have studied and know well, and you’ll want to make sure that all children have texts that they can actually read available for their research.

We’ve tried to provide a range of texts, both print and digital, to accompany this unit of study. However, it is possible to transfer the plan for the unit and the teaching points to another historical time period, say the Civil War or the civil rights movement. As you read any given session, ask, “What is the transferable teaching set forth here?” You will find that the strategies we teach are transferable even though the examples are bound to the content area topic of Westward Expansion.

Across this unit of study, the students will write several drafts. They begin the unit by writing a quick, full draft and then revising this draft before moving into the second part of the unit. In the second part of the unit students write a new draft and again take this through revision and editing strategies to produce a second report. One of our goals is to make sure that students learn how to write quickly and efficiently, improving their first-draft writing so that it shows their increased prowess as writers. Hence the emphasis on writing a whole draft quickly, more than once. At the same time, we want to also improve their stamina for meaningful revision. The revision is not meant to be tinkering with a word or two here or there, but large-scale elaboration and research. Moving from fast-drafting to large-scale revision should help students improve their range and resiliency as writers, as well as their capacity for continual research through writing.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

The Lens of History unit is designed to support students’ writing of informational texts within a content area study, in this case a social studies unit on Westward Expansion. This unit is aligned to the CCSS expectations for fifth
grade—and for sixth grade at times. You'll find that the unit moves students to achieve competency in Common Core reading standards as well as writing. Of course, students will be working on the Common Core writing standard 2, in all its parts, which focus on writing informative texts “to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.” To do that work, they’ll also find themselves deeply engaged with standards W.7 and W.8, which ask students to engage in research, including keeping track of and citing relevant sources. To do this work well, though, you’ll find yourself emphasizing virtually all of the Common Core reading standards for reading informational texts. To glean relevant information, students will need to delve deeply into informational texts, discerning significant ideas and supporting information, synthesizing and comparing information across texts, and considering their structure and craft as mentor texts. The truth is that before the release of the Common Core, we hadn’t focused enough attention on information writing in the upper grades. The Common Core convinced us that learning to write information texts well was worthy of more study, and you’ll find that this study rewards itself in leading students to become more powerful nonfiction readers as well as writers. The student who before skipped the confusing chart or sidebar in a nonfiction text will now ponder it, wondering what that writer was doing. In the many classrooms that piloted this unit, there was marked development in the students’ interest and ability to read nonfiction closely.

This unit of study has two main parts, or “bends.” In the first bend, you will teach your students to write quick drafts of research reports and then to revise these reports with various lenses before writing a second draft. The first draft will focus on organizing information in subsections and using all they have learned before about informational writing. We refer to these as “flash-drafts” because they are written so quickly. The Common Core puts a strong emphasis on logical structure, and we’ve found this to be a useful focus. The trick is not to teach students the way to structure an information text, but instead, to teach them how to make effective choices about structure so that they are flexible. You’ll see, therefore, a series of lessons that focus on teaching students to revise their flash-drafts with various lenses—by looking for patterns, questions, or surprises; by considering the way historians think about geography or timelines; or by hypothesizing. After several lessons that teach students to reconsider and revise their thinking and writing from the first flash-drafts, students will write a new and improved research report. In this second report the aim is to see that students have made use of the revision lessons you’ve taught. It can be quite exciting to see students’ progress, based on our teaching, in a relatively short amount of time. You’ll see, for instance, that this second draft is much more elaborated than the first flash-draft, and you’ll probably find that students need to think not just about structure but about formatting and transitions, also valued in the Common Core, as they incorporate more text. The celebration of these revised reports marks the end of the first bend of the unit of study.

In the second bend, you will teach your students to turn their attention to writing more focused research reports. This means that instead of writing about all of Westward Expansion as they did in the first bend of the unit, they will write about a more focused topic such as the Pony Express, the Oregon Trail, or the Erie Canal. Students will return to research, then, going back to texts to read more closely and purposefully, looking for information and ideas relevant to their subject, and also reading to think about themes and perspectives that arise around their subject. Their reading thus becomes not merely reading for information, but reading to notice the stance authors bring to this topic. While the Common Core particularly leads students to read this way in pursuit of opinion writing, in studying the mentor texts on topics like the Erie Canal, it becomes clear that writers explicitly or implicitly lead the reader toward certain views and themes. The topic is rarely all about the Erie Canal, it becomes clear the Erie Canal by the time your students are in fifth grade. It’s much more likely that an author is writing about the ways the Erie Canal changed the landscape or brought industry or was a sign of progress. That is, information writers also convey ideas, so you’ll encourage your students to be alert to these ideas as they read.

This close reading will pay off not only in more focused research, but also in how students think about mentor texts and the craft of their own writing. That is, you will teach your students to write reports with an attention to the qualities of good information writing, qualities aimed at delivering information and engaging readers.

Bend II focuses on learning from other informational texts, with a special emphasis on teaching others in engaging ways. As one part of this, in Bend II, students will learn to make use of primary sources in their informational writing. They’ll also study texts—including a film clip—analyzing what writers do in terms of craft, structure, and perspective (those hard-to-study standards CCLS W.4, W.5, and W.6). The truth is, students need reasons to study the craft of other writers. Returning to nonfiction texts as mentors gives them a reason to really analyze how these texts work. If you want to hone your own analyses of your possible mentor texts, it can be helpful to read them with...
the Common Core writing standards handy. Look for how writers organize information to lead the reader. Look for the changes in structure, the use of imagery, the way language is used. The more expert you and your students become as readers of texts, the more sophisticated they'll be as producers of texts.

ASSESSMENT

If you did not assess your students’ information writing at the beginning of the year with an on-demand task, you may need to do so before you start this unit so that you can assess their particular needs and adapt this unit accordingly. The plan we have proposed in this book is viable for most fifth-grade students, but by studying your students’ informational texts, you may find that there are particular lessons that you could abbreviate or skip and others that you will plan to extend for particular students.

Of course, because the unit begins with a flash-draft in Bend I, you may use this instead of the prompted “on-demand” assessment, though it won’t be exactly consistent with what other teachers at your grade are asking for (assuming they are using the prompt provided in our Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5 book). That prompt is as follows, if you choose to use it:

“Think of a topic that you’ve studied or that you know a lot about. Tomorrow, you will have forty-five minutes to write an informational (or all-about) text that teaches others interesting and important information and ideas about that topic. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source to help you with this writing, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you’ll have only forty-five minutes to complete this. You will have only this one period, so you’ll need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting. Write in a way that shows all that you know about information writing. In your writing, make sure you:

• Write an introduction
• Elaborate with a variety of information
• Organize your writing
• Use transition words
• Write a conclusion”

As in the first unit of study in this grade, and all units, you’ll want to look at these writing samples against the writing learning progression. In this case, of course, you’ll need the Learning Progression for Information Writing and the corresponding checklists and rubrics. Again, establishing grade level consistency as you match each student’s writing to a level of the learning progression will make your work more powerful both across the school and in your own classroom. Also, doing this work with colleagues brings out the complexities of the work, makes the learning you are doing about your own teaching more relevant and transferable, and is usually much, much more fun.

At the end of the unit, of course, you will need to conduct another on-demand assessment and again level the students’ work. What areas of the work of the unit still need attention? Should you take a few more days or create another mini-unit on this kind of writing before moving to the next unit in the series? The If . . . Then . . . Curriculum: Assessment-Based Instruction book of alternative and additional units can help you with this.

GETTING READY

This unit focuses and depends upon students beginning the unit with general knowledge of the topic. If you are going along with our choice of Westward Expansion as the content about which students will write, you may want to preview some of the materials you’ll be using on this topic. On the CD-ROM you will find a list of digital resources and search tips that you will eventually share with your students to facilitate their ongoing research on Westward Expansion. Bobbie Kalman’s Who Settled the West? from the trade pack sold along with this series offers a well-structured and well-developed text for students to study. Cheryl Harness’s texts They’re Off! The Story of the Pony Express and Amazing Impossible Erie Canal provide examples of artfully written informational texts. Similarly, excerpts from The Line, a documentary about the Transcontinental Railroad produced by the BBC, provide additional mentor texts for students. In addition, you will want to read over the demonstration texts found within sessions and the student samples, especially Kayleigh’s notebook samples and completed Pony Express text, found on the CD-ROM.

These teacher- and student-written texts will provide you (and eventually your students) with a vision for the work this unit highlights.
IN THIS SESSION, you’ll teach students that as historians write and revise, they need to keep in mind the qualities of good writing as well as the qualities of good history. One of the qualities of good history to keep in mind is the impact that geography has on the ways events unfold. A map is a useful tool for this.

**GETTING READY**

- Students’ copies of the Westward Expansion map
- Subsections of your draft, or the demonstration text provided, modeled to look like the students’, with a paragraph taped to the top and blank space below, enlarged for students to see (see Teaching and Active Engagement)
- “Information Writers” chart, from Session 3 (see Teaching)
- Student drafts (see Link)
- Chart paper and marker to create “Possible Geographic Revisions” list (see Conferring)

**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS:** W.5.2.d, W.5.5, RI.5.3, SL.5.1, SL.5.5, L.5.1, L.5.2, L.5.3, L.5.6

**Session 4**

**Writers of History Pay Attention to Geography**

WHEN WE TEACH WRITING, we teach students to adopt the mind-set of writers. We teach them to ask the questions that writers the world over ask of a text. “What am I really trying to say?” and “What works that I can build upon?” and “What doesn’t work that I can cut?”

In this unit of study, you will be teaching students to write not only like professional writers but also like historians. And this means that you need to help them learn to bring the questions that historians ask and the lenses that historians use to their work. The payoff for this instruction, of course, can be very big indeed, for you will not just be teaching students to bring one specific lens or another to their draft. You will be teaching something far deeper, grander, more fundamental. You’ll be teaching them that although, yes, there is a writing process that is fundamental to all writing, and that just as the scientific process undergirds all disciplines of science, the writing process undergirds all sorts of writing, the opposite is also true. The work that a writer does in a particular discipline reflects the mind-set of those within that discipline.

So what are the mind-sets of historians? There are many, of course, and within this one unit of study you cannot hope to be comprehensive. But, you can show students that applying fundamental historical concepts to their research allows them to rethink, to grow insights of their own, to synthesize what they are learning in the service on constructing meaning, and to rewrite not just out of a concern for good writing but also out of a concern for good history. Ultimately, this process will bring history to life and allow the facts that students learn to matter.

This session and a few that follow do this by starting with what will seem to you to be a simple concept: when studying history—time and place matter. That is, in today’s minilesson, you will teach students that as historians, they need to be sure that they bring a knowledge of time and place to their thinking (and writing) about any particular subtopic. We have found that a willingness to incorporate concepts about time and place into one’s knowledge of the subtopic at hand can add vitality to that knowledge. Even if a student has a novice’s meager understanding of the Pony Express or of the Louisiana
Purchase, a willingness to think about the implications of time and place on that subtopic will pay off. This is a simple idea—but our hope is that students will come to see that it can make a difference.

“You will be teaching not only what it means to think like a historian, but also what it means to transfer and apply what one learns, and to revise, in the truest sense of the word.”

While teaching this, you will be teaching students that when studying and writing about history, they need to look at the cold hard facts with attentive thoughtfulness—noticing patterns and surprises, for example—and being willing to work to piece those bits of information together. When trying to understand Westward Expansion, it matters that the Mississippi River is 2,530 miles long, beginning in Minnesota and ending in the Gulf of Mexico. That cold fact is not just something to parrot. Instead, that fact, like so many of the facts of Westward Expansion, posed challenges, shaped decisions, and influenced the way in which our country was settled.

Your minilesson will begin with suggesting that it is helpful to reread what one has written with the lens of time and place. A writer can notice the ways in which he or she did and did not bring out the elements of time and place in his or her treatment of any subtopic, whether it is the Pony Express, the Gold Rush, the Erie Canal, or Lewis and Clark’s journey. Chances are good that students will not have given time or place much thought at all, and in a way this is good news because it means that the lens you ask students to bring to their writing will lead to revision—and to growth.

The work you are supporting in today’s minilesson is big work indeed. You will be teaching not only what it means to think like a historian, but also what it means to transfer and apply what one learns, and to revise, in the truest sense of the word. Re-vision means, quite literally, to see again. And that is what your students will do today and for the next few days. They will revise the little passages they’ve written about a host of topics related to Westward Expansion, bringing the historian’s attentiveness to first place and then time to their early fast drafts, and they will revise their understanding of what it means to study and to write history.
MINILEsson

Writers of History Pay Attention to Geography

CONNECTION

Introduce using geography as a lens for revision.

“Writers, when I was in college there was a course for every single first-year student. You may be surprised to hear that it wasn’t about writing—it was about geography. The heads of the school felt very strongly that all of the students who graduated needed to know about geography, to know about landforms and climate, to know about the way that geography impacts the world. Now, I went on to take a number of history classes, and the study of geography became even more important because historians are always concerned about the ways that geography—the study of landforms, places, and climates—has an impact on events in history. Geography is crucially important to Westward Expansion as well as to any other event in history. This means that you, as researchers and writers, need to pay attention to geography as you revise your reports.” I paused to let this information sink in and make sure the students were still paying attention.

“Now, you may have expected that in writing workshop we would work on ways to revise our writing as writers, and we will. But today, our minilesson will be a little different.”

Name the teaching point.

“Today, I want to teach you that when you write and revise as a historian, it is important to keep in mind not only qualities of good writing but also qualities of good history. For example, historians think it is important to include details about the places where things occurred—about the geography of that place—because geography will always have an impact on what occurs. And here’s the cool thing: a history writer can think about the places in which a bit of history occurred simply by keeping a map close by as he or she reads, takes notes, and writes.”

TEACHING

Remind students that writers adopt specific lenses. The impact of geography can be a lens, and students can re-see their writing through that lens and revise based on what they see.

“Writers, do you remember that revision means just that—to re-vision, to re-see? And you will recall that it can help for writers to put on ‘special lenses’ before rereading their own writing, so that they look for special things. For example,
The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has a video in which I teach youngsters that to revise—or re-vision—a person needs to wear glasses. I then put on a pair of glasses to illustrate and laugh to show that writers don’t need actual glasses. I go on to point out that writers do need to put on and reread through special lenses. One is the lens of structure and a writer can reread to see if each of his or her paragraphs says one main thing.

It is important to resist the temptation to flood the room with lots of maps. Channel their attention to only this one map, at least for today, as a way to teach them that they can deduce patterns and read analytically, making a lot out of even one resource.

The Erie Canal connected the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Erie. Before the Erie Canal was built, boats could travel from New York City in the south to Albany in the north using the Hudson River. The Erie Canal added a branch to the Hudson River going west! Now boats could travel from New York City to other cities like Syracuse and Buffalo. Now boats could travel across and up and down New York!

"Notice the way I added more specific information, and I added towns as well as geographical features like oceans and lakes. To make some revisions, I crossed things out and used arrows, and to make other revisions, I added information at the bottom of my first bit of writing."

"When writing history, one thing a writer can do is to look through the lens of ‘Have I highlighted the ways in which the geography, the place, impacted the events?’"

Demonstrate rereading your own writing with the lens of geography, recruiting children to do this alongside you. Provide lots of support with the very start of this.

"So let me show you what I mean. This is one of the paragraphs I wrote in my flash-draft of a report." I flipped over a new page in the pad of chart paper, revealing one subsection of my report. I’d written the report to be just a notch better than those the children write and formatted it as they were doing, so onto the larger piece of chart paper, I’d taped just a little paragraph about the trip west. “Let’s reread this together, looking at it through the lens of, ‘How much specific information is included here about places, about geography?’” Then I added, “It helps to have a map on hand as you do this work, so I’m going to distribute one to each of you. While I read the text, will you touch the places on the map that I mention and think about the places I don’t mention but could?” I read:

The Erie Canal

The Erie Canal was built to connect the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Erie. This way people could travel by water.

As I read, I pointed to the Atlantic Ocean on my map, then said, “Writers, are you with me? Find and touch the specific places on your map, and think, always, ‘Could I be more specific? Am I leaving things out?’” I reread, as if mulling over what I might add.

Hands shot up, but I wanted to continue my demonstration before passing the baton to kids, so I said, “Oh! I can add . . .” I used arrows as I inserted more specific information into my draft. I scrawled furiously:

The Erie Canal connected the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Erie. Before the Erie Canal was built, boats could travel from New York City in the south to Albany in the north using the Hudson River. The Erie Canal added a branch to the Hudson River going west! Now boats could travel from New York City to other cities like Syracuse and Buffalo. Now boats could travel across and up and down New York!

"Notice the way I added more specific information, and I added towns as well as geographical features like oceans and lakes. To make some revisions, I crossed things out and used arrows, and to make other revisions, I added information at the bottom of my first bit of writing.”

a writer can reread his or her writing looking only at how the text seems to be structured, seems to be organized. Or a writer can look only at how he or she has spelled things.

“When writing history, one thing a writer can do is to look through the lens of ‘Have I highlighted the ways in which the geography, the place, impacted the events?’”
Debrief, highlighting how using the map and your knowledge of geography helped you to add more specific
details to your writing.

“Do you see, writers, that rereading with an eye on the specific places I have mentioned, and those I could have men-
tioned, has helped me to revise my draft? That’s what I mean by writing and rewriting with an eye out for ways to
include specific details about places. So, let’s add this technique to our information writing chart.” I returned to the chart
from the previous session and added,

Information Writers
1. Think about the topic—and the parts of the topic—to write about.
2. Plan how the writing might go.
3. Research, taking notes.
5. Revise with various lenses: growing ideas, looking for patterns, and asking
questions, thinking about how the geography of the place impacted how
the events unfolded.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Set students up to practice revising with an eye toward geography.

“Let’s read another section from my draft, and this time, will you try to do this same work on your own? Remember that
your goal is to notice how much the writing already highlights the places where events take place—and to find details
about the place that can be added. You will probably find it helps if you use any mention of a place as a cue to look at
the map, even to touch the specific place.”

I read aloud, and left children to talk with partners about ways they’d revise the next section.

The Oregon Trail

Many people living in the eastern United States wanted to have a better life for themselves
and their children. So, they traveled in wagons on trails into the western states to get land. One
famous trail they traveled was called the Oregon Trail.
After a few minutes, I called on children to suggest revisions and soon there was a new paragraph at the end of the original one:

The Oregon Trail

Many people living in the eastern United States wanted to have a better life for themselves and their children. So, they traveled in wagons on trails into the western states to get land. One famous trail was called the Oregon Trail. It started in Missouri and traveled through (what is now) Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Washington, and finally Oregon before it stopped at the Pacific Ocean.

LINK

Take a moment to celebrate the way students have already begun to use the lens of geography to revise their writing.

"Before you get started, will you reread the first bit of your own writing and after you have done that, point out to a partner some of the specific details about places that you think could be added."

After a minute, the children shifted from rereading to talking. I pulled in to listen as Melody turned to Winnie: "Well, I could add some thinking about geography to my section on the Trail of Tears. I could write about where the Native Americans began and where they were forced to live."

Winnie nodded and looked down at her draft. Touching her section on the gold Rush she said, "Well, I could do the same thing, I could write about where people came from for the gold Rush. Not everyone came from the east, some people came from the west, from Asia."

Set students up to work independently.

After a bit, I asked for the class’s attention. "So you have a lot to do. You’ll need to set up your materials to get ready for revision, you’ll need to reread and revise with a map in hand, and I’m sure you are going to want to continue adding new subsections to your report.

"After you have set up your materials, please turn to any passage you wrote. Any passage can be revised to bring out more information on place. Doing this doesn’t take searching and searching for the perfect passage; it just takes powerful thinking. Let’s get started. And researchers, when you have revised your sections for geography, you may also want to continue revising by adding more information, important vocabulary words, or your own ideas. Remember you are in charge of making your writing the best it can be. Get going!"
Revision with the Lens of Geography

YOUR GOAL TODAY will be, first, to help students set up their writing in ways that expect revision, and second, to help them do that revision. They will absolutely need you to help them mine the map as a resource, growing insights from their work with the map. You’ll probably find that the students are resistant to doing this—first, it means revising writing that already seems perfectly good to them, and second, it requires that they literally make new thoughts from a close, attentive, proactive reading of the map. “I’m done,” they’ll say. “This map doesn’t tell me anything more,” they’ll assure you. You’ll want to be ready to show them the patience, close study, and imagination that revision requires.

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For example, John was writing about the gold rush and was struggling to add more geographical information. On the map, he saw where the major gold “strikes” occurred. I asked him to put his finger on one such place, and he put it on Empire Mine. I then asked him to look closely to see what physical features he saw near that mine. Did he see rivers, mountains, or lakes? Did he see any names of places such as towns or states? John listed Sacramento, Pacific Ocean, a river, Nevada, Washington, Comstock Mines. I asked him to say which ones were closest and furthest from the Empire Mine. He did this, and I coached into his oral work by teaching him phrases that might help him situate places geographically:

- Further north...
- South of...
- East of...
- West of...
- Closest to...
- A great distance from...
- By the...
- Located in or near...

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FIG. 4–1  Chris’s Oregon Trail entry shows how he imagined himself in the place of settlers traveling west.
Toward the end of work time, I quickly charted the types of geographical information that children had started to include. This way they could look through their other sections, adding those types of geographical revisions. The list went like this:

Possible Geographical Revisions
• Where was the route?
• Where did important events occur?
• Which area was settled with which peoples?
• Which physical features had an impact? (rivers, mountains, lakes, deserts, . . .)
• What did the location mean for the climate and weather?
• What distances were involved?

John nodded, and taking my list of place phrases, he set to work writing. Soon he had written that one of the biggest strikes during the gold rush was at the Empire Mine. He then added, "The Empire Mine is north of Sacramento, California, and by a river that runs through a lot of California. It is east of the Pacific Ocean and north of the Comstock Mines located in Nevada."

When I was conferring with John, I found myself having to clarify east from west. This led me to realize that I should be on the lookout for those children in my class who might need some support in basic map skills. I also found that almost all of my students ignored the distance scale and so I coached one youngster to use it, then made his work famous. In fact, some of my students didn’t know the symbols for mountains, rivers, lakes, or oceans so I did a voiceover to point out the symbols key.
Explain what a scale on a map is for and demonstrate using it to help add geographical detail to your writing.

“Writers, take a minute to collect your materials—maps, notebooks, and pens or pencils—and meet me on the carpet for a quick share.” Once the class was settled in the meeting area, I began, “Most of you have added geographical information to your subsections. It’s been exciting to watch those subsections develop so quickly! You have been moving information about geographical features—like lakes and rivers and mountains—and information about settlements—like states and cities—into your reports.

“Now I want to teach you one more feature that you can notice on maps, and this feature will go far toward helping you understand the mystery of what life was like back then. It is this: scale. You can use the scale on the map to estimate distances.

“I’m going to figure out the distances related to the Erie Canal, and after I do that, you’ll have a chance to start calculating the distances on your map.” I reread my page:

The Erie Canal connected the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Erie. Before the Erie Canal was built, boats could travel from New York City in the south to Albany in the north using the Hudson River. The Erie Canal added a branch to the Hudson River going west! Now boats could travel from New York City to other cities like Syracuse and Buffalo. Now boats could travel across and up and down New York!

Then I used my thumb on my pencil to note the size interval used by the scale, and proceeded to count how many times that full scale can fit between the Hudson River and Buffalo. Muttering to myself as others worked to calculate their own distances, I calculated that the interval between Buffalo and Albany is about 350 miles.

“Okay, so now I have more geographical information that can be added to this entry. I always knew the Erie Canal was long, but I never knew just how long. By measuring the distance and including the specific details in my writing, I am able to help my reader understand what a big endeavor this was! Plus, I sound like more of an expert when I use precise measurements.” I added the number to my test, using a caret.
Ask students to try using a scale on their own maps. Share one student’s work as an example.

“Writers, right now I’d like you to try calculating a distance on your map, one that is important for your work. That way, you’ll have practice and will be able to do that work on your own, whenever you need to.” I pointed out how I’d used a caret to insert a distance and let students know that they’d no doubt invent other ways to include geographical information. After a moment, I gave them more examples.

“Marielle estimated that the distance between the Empire Mine in California and the Comstock Mine in Nevada was about 300 miles, while Alejandra estimated that the length of the Oregon Trail was 2,000 miles. So they will each be able to add this to their writing and in this way teach their readers more. Of course, this is also interesting because if prospectors had already traveled 2,000 miles on the Oregon Trail, a 300-mile journey from California to Utah might not have felt like a big deal at all! That is, by comparing distances you can help your readers visualize distances and also compare distances related to events in this time period.”

SESSION 4 HOMEWORK

REVISING WITH VARIOUS LENSES

Tonight, writers, I’d like you to continue working on your drafts. You may find that you have more revision work to do, based on the Westward Expansion map you have been working with. Please also remember the other lenses with which we can look at our writing to revise, looking for patterns and asking questions.