

# Teacher, I write a photograph

By Jacqueline Johnson, Canada

## Introduction

Writers make the blind see. We are talking about readers here. Readers see only what writers show them. I tell my students this, adding that luckily readers can see photographs and it is their job to make good photographs.

Then we get down to business, and I run through a drill that goes something like this.

“Let’s make some pictures: Read these words: *Car*—What do you see? *Woman*—What do you see? *Baby*—What do you see?”

“Let’s make some moving pictures. What do you see now? *The woman drives the car. The baby smiles.*”

I tell them that these are general pictures, and I extend the lesson. “I would bet that while you all pictured a car, if I asked you what colour that car was, there’d be some different answers, and the baby you pictured doesn’t match the picture I made. I would also bet that your video of the woman driving isn’t much like mine either” (Mine looks like my mother racing my brother and his teammates to a hockey game.).

At this point the learners want to talk nouns and verbs—all that stuff about person, place, thing, and action. I would bet that as teachers, that is what you are thinking right now, too. Let me reassure you, as far as real writing goes, those things are just *cool* paint brushes.

There’s nothing wrong with this. As teachers, we teach vocabulary, adjectives, and insist on a period in the sentence.

It is the first step. But in the real world, writers must use words that make readers see what they do. Most readers are not teachers. They just know if they get it or do not. This is where editors come in. An editor helps the writer bridge the gap between what the writer sees and what the writing says. An editor says, *I cannot see it*, and in four short words identifies what the reader cannot see. It is then up to the writer to figure out how fix that. Being edited is real life practice, so after we teach, the biggest gift we can give students is to act as their editors as they practice.



At first this is hard. We want to point out those nouns and verbs. We want to provide answers, to see them. However, when we edit, we become blind and guide the writers, our learners, with our blindness.

This becomes easier with practice, and as we become more comfortable with not knowing, teaching writing becomes so much easier. Like the reader, the editor cannot see the picture. Unlike the average reader though, the editor knows where the writer has hidden the picture and can tell the writer where to look and how to make it visible. I know, you would rather be a copy editor, but take heart, copy editors do not get paid nearly as much and it is boring, in my opinion.

I came into ESL teaching from an editing background. When you say the word editor, the picture that usually pops up is something like a woman in a plaid skirt with no nonsense heels brandishing a dictionary in one hand and a red pen in the other as she feverishly inserts and deletes commas. That is a copy editor. The copy editor is the last person to edit writing. The first editor is the one who can and does say, *amazing work! This has got such promise; by the way, I kind of lost the picture around paragraph 2, where you said your daughter is beautiful. Let's do another draft and see what happens. Your deadline is in two days.*

This article offers editing tools for teachers. It has 3 parts: The Writing Process, The Daily Diary, and PBLA Applications.

## **Part one: The writing process—nine basic truths about writing**

### **#1: Writing is scary.**

You have to nurture the writer like a small child. This is the hardest thing to remember. Writing is not natural even for native speakers. Editing requires curiosity about what the writer is saying. (or, more accurately, has not said). We want to teach...but we have done that. Writing is applying the teaching. Editing is guiding. I had the privilege of having Anne Collins as my first editor. She worked with Carol Shields and other Canadian stars. I just lucked out. The first time we spoke, the first words she said were: “You know, your writing reminds me of Dickens.”

She then proceeded to give me about twelve pages of edit notes. I was putty in her hands. I adored her. I worked with another editor. He sent me a note saying that my grammar and punctuation were terrible, and the piece was poorly written. He too gave me twelve pages of edit notes (for a 4-page article). I could not write for years after that edit.



## #2: Action verbs are the powerhouse of English

Teach students that action words create videos.

He runs.	He is a runner.
She ran.	She was a runner.
They're running.	They were runners.
We will run.	We will be runners.
You've been running.	You have been a runner.

The verb *to be* creates a still picture and usually a boring one. A good exercise is to have students find all the verbs *to be* and change them into action verbs. We often do this, but more as a grammar exercise to differentiate the tenses as opposed to teaching the power of words.

## #3: A verb can have many words

Teach this – not even Native English Speakers know this. Most people are afraid of verbs. While I don't usually spend a lot of time on grammar, I do spend a lot of time on verbs, and, on the fact that a verb can and does have many words.

Count the words in these verbs.

I <u>run</u> every day.	I <u>will have been running</u> for 6 hours by noon.
I <u>ran</u> yesterday.	<u>Have you been running</u> lately?
I <u>will run</u> tomorrow.	<u>Can you count</u> on running?
I <u>will be running</u> tomorrow.	
<u>Can I run</u> tomorrow?	

Verb identification is important. Many writers cannot improve their work because they do not know that shortening the verb is often like focusing a lens. More than adjectives, verbs are the descriptors that keep a reader awake.

## #4 : KISS – Keep it simple and specific

This is my marking mantra (It is also what I use when I write. One of the beauties of teaching L2 students is that they are naturally inclined to simplicity. They do not have the vocabulary to be wordy. The trick is to



teach enough vocabulary that they can be specific. Students tend to resist acquiring new words that will be more explicit than the ones they have chosen. I often find that rather than teach synonyms, I like to teach the differences that these words make. Specific also means accurate.

**# 5: Good writing talks about something you know and care about. *It's also a million times easier.***

Tell students this. It is a little bit of insurance against plagiarism. I choose writing topics and prompts carefully. If you know about something, you will want the L2 language to express it. There is motivation. You also have confidence. This helps deal with the scariness of writing. Also, even if you do not have the language in L2, you do have the picture. Sometimes the role of the editor is simply to point out that the writer does not give a darn and needs to find where he or she does.

**#6: Writing is discovery. Sometimes you don't know until you write it down.**

This is why Copy Editing comes last. Grammar and spelling mistakes are often clues about where the writer has lost the picture—indicating that the writer is confused.

Let your students play. Do not mark first drafts. Be curious. Good prompts encourage discovery through writing. I remember one student who realized just how much he liked a restaurant by writing about its menu and the joys of having brunch there.

**#7: Writing well is exciting. Be enthusiastic.**

It is really important to mark great sentences, great images, and great choice of words. Sometimes editing is simply being an obsessed cheerleader. Do not be afraid to clap and jump up and down.

**#8: Writing is rewriting. It's not wrong, just clearer.**

The terrible reality about writing is that the reader can read in 20 seconds (even an L2 reader) what took you as the writer an hour to write. It is a bit like cooking. Finding words is hard. Finding the picture takes time. Rewrites are a bit like going on a canoe trip—everyday you get up and paddle. The same thing—but it is getting you somewhere. When we view rewrites as correction, rather than process, it sets the writer up as a failure. When I mark, I note improvement not product.

**# 9: One way to edit is to read your work aloud: *The ear is more discerning than the eye.***

L2 readers tend to read every word and miss the meaning, but often, they will miss letters—the ones that are silent or they do not hear. Reading their own writing aloud will help students identify speaking and listening



issues (or, at least, help you do so for them). First language readers tend to read and miss words. This is a great skill for students to acquire. Teaching students to respect their writing motivates them to do their best.

## Part two: The daily diary process

### Dear diary: Principles and practices to make them work

My favourite writing tool is the Daily Diary. Students write one or two prompted paragraphs on Day One which is edited and must be rewritten over the course of the next four days.

#### 1) We write what we know. Make diaries relevant.

Your daily prompts are important. They might be on everyday things. Or on your theme or topic. People write best in first person initially, so diaries are a good place to instill the practice. Some of my favorite prompts are: *Write five good things that happened today or yesterday; describe your baby (if applicable); five things you did in your country (if applicable); five things you love about Canada.* I do a lot of lists. They lend themselves to pictures and simple sentences. Good writing uses simple sentences. They also can act as great introductory paragraphs.

#### 2) Students need to write every day in class.

This can be an original or a rewrite. The entry should be only one or two paragraph. Remember: You have to read it.

#### 3) Read each draft.

- **Give one success**
- **1-2 suggestions to make the picture clearer**

We always write to a reader. We always talk to a listener. You need to read what the students have written. You do not need to comment. Make one or two suggestions that need to be fixed. Do not fix them. Give an example instead. Your comments should focus on the picture. I do not see this. *I love how you showed me what the flowers looked like.* Do not correct punctuation. Do straighten out sentence structure and vocabulary. I am not saying punctuation is not important, just not here in the daily diaries and especially not in the first draft.

#### 4) Your comments are always about the picture.

Student writes: *“My daughter is beautiful.”*

Your Comment: “I don’t know what beautiful looks like? Tell me.”



### 5) As students advance, get them to use all their senses.

These are good prompts: *What does your favorite meal from back home taste like? Describe the smell of an orange;* when you create pictures using all the senses, they become memorable. Learners will struggle with these, but we all do, and that is good information to share too.

### 6) Sometimes accept weird syntax as poetic.

I think the best line in this article is *“Teacher, I write a Photograph.”* One of my students wrote it.

### 7) Students have to resolve your comments.

Yes, mark them for resolving the comments as well. If you make a comment, they must understand it and use it in a rewrite.

### 8) Diary Prompts: Always provide an example/template for learners to follow.

Diary Topic: A Daily Tradition in my Country

Prompt: Describe the bread you eat in your country

### 9) Give your students first and last Sentences: Make them the same.

*“We eat bread in my country. The bread is called injera. It is a sourdough bread made from spelt flour. It takes three days to make. It is soft. I like eating injera. It reminds me of my country. We eat bread in my country.”*

When your first and last sentences are the same, you can get away with a lot. Worst case scenario your students hand in poetry.

### 10) Punctuation and grammar are the final touches. Tell students that they frame the picture.

While we are aware of punctuation and grammar while we are writing, the final rewrite is about punctuation and grammar. Give the student a checklist of what they need to check. Have them do this systematically. Make the list short. For example: *Do all your sentences have verbs?*

### How and where to create diaries:

Diaries can be created in a looseleaf binder, online using Google Classroom, or as a 3-page handout with the first page giving the prompt for the first draft, the second for corrected copy, and the third as final polished copy. They can be handwritten or typed. I like to have a student submit a typed final copy because it looks



more professional and boosts their confidence as a writer. I also teach students the higher levels how to use Grammarly.

My biggest criterion is that whatever form the diaries take, I must be able to mark them in under a minute as I walk through the classroom. Google Classroom with its Assignment capabilities allow more formal marking and recording, but it is really hard for students with phones to use. Remember that an editor does not spend much time assessing. Their time is spent pointing the writer in the direction of a better draft.

## Part Three

### Recycle writing exercises:

#### PBLA Assessments in reading/writing/speaking/listening

Writing and speaking are expressive. They are outputs. Reading and listening are inputs. Whatever you do, recycle. If your students write, they have to speak their words, listen to them, read them. It reinforces. If they write about their traditional clothing, they need to read what others write, they need to learn to read that story with expression and tell the same story without notes.

Set your writing assessments as a process. Set the tests as improvement drafts and mark each. If a draft does not change from beginning to end, it is not writing, and chances are it is not the student's own work. Always ensure that the topics are real

#### From diaries to reading & listening

1. With careful prompts, students can create original letters, notices, instructions for classmates to read, or listen to.
2. Upper levels can also create reading/listening comprehension questions on their writing.

#### From diaries to speaking & listening

1. By listening to classmates read their diaries, students can practice listening strategies like reflective listening.
2. The intersect between speech and writing is heightened with oral reading of familiar topics.



## Skill building & skill using tasks

Daily Diaries become references and repositories for templates for a variety of real-life tasks.

- Use diaries to practice writing scripts for roleplays
- Use diaries to create writing templates for real life tasks
- Use diaries as ongoing assessments for all skills

## Conclusion

When we teach our learners to write, and when we help them practice with editing, then they become writers. They become writers with the power to make the blind see. How good is that? How good is it when a student passes you a piece of writing and smiles, “*Teacher, I write a photograph.*”

### Author Bio



Jacqueline Johnson BA, MA, OCELT is an award-winning journalist and editor and an ESL instructor at St. Georges ESL Centre in Guelph, where she has taught all ESL and LINC Levels and is a frequent presenter at TESL Conferences. Jacqueline believes that there is nothing more satisfying than the look of pride and wonder on a student’s face when they realize that they have written something important, and they’ve done it in English.