

# Shadowing the Masters: A Revision Activity for Narrative Writing

Li-hsin Tu  
Kanda University of  
International Studies

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Writing, like other professional pursuits, is a skill that one can develop through shadowing and emulating the work of the masters. In this paper, I discuss how I use model texts during the revision process of narrative writing in my university-level EFL writing course in Chiba, Japan, and introduce an activity that helped students revise the opening lines of their personal narratives by shadowing the narrative leads of the model texts.

ライティングは、他の専門分野でも同じように、その分野の達人の作品をお手本にして模倣することによって書く力を身に付けることができる。この論文では、ある千葉県の大学のライティング授業でどのようにモデルテキストを使用したかを説明し、授業でどのように学生がパーソナルナラティブの出だしを修正するように導いたかを紹介する。

**W**HEN I was growing up, Chinese calligraphy lessons were one of my least favorite activities in school. I never understood why people considered it an art form when all we did in class was tediously copy the work produced by ancient scholars. We would practice making a left-to-right stroke numerous times so that it would have the same shape as the “master stroke.” I often asked, “How can it be art when I never get to create my own style?” I soon got bored with the lessons and my brush calligraphy skills were never developed enough to be presentable. Later I learned that artists who have eventually discovered their own calligraphy *chi* and gone on to create signature brush expressions are those who had first mastered the styles of the ancient scholars. They went through the process of meticulously tracing, copying, and shadowing the work of the masters.

This principle of shadowing the masters applies to all kinds of learning and professional pursuits. Actors and athletes study films of legendary performers; painters and illustrators analyze and emulate the styles of the greats; language learners immerse themselves in the language and culture of the native speakers as much as possible. Writing, or being expressive with the language on page, is also a skill that one can develop through shadowing the masters. In this paper, I will discuss how I introduced published texts as writing mentors with this principle in mind and taught my EFL students to emulate the styles of the model texts during the revision process of narrative writing in my university-level writing course in Japan.

## Educational Context

The revision activity discussed in this paper was used in the introductory unit in a course titled Freshmen Reading and Writing at Kanda University of International Studies, a private university in Chiba, Japan. The course is compulsory for students majoring in international communication. There were 19 mixed-level students in this class: 13 female and 6 male. The group met four times a week, 90 minutes at a time, for a total of 30 weeks in an academic year. My personal goal for this course was that the students, who had little to no experience in reading or writing extensively in English, would become independent readers and writers by the end of the course.

The course's introductory writing unit is Writing Personal Narratives, in which the students are asked to compose a first-person short story about a real-life event. It is a good place to introduce a 6-step writing process inspired by Emig (1971). I continue to use the same steps throughout the year as my students and I work together on different genres of writing. As an EFL teacher working in and with an unfamiliar culture, I find this unit to be a great starting point to assess the students: their command of the English language, how they view writing and story-telling in general, and where they are in their writing journey, as well as their unique backgrounds and story-telling traditions.

## The Revision Process

The aforementioned writing process consists of six steps: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The first two steps, brainstorming and outlining, are often referred to as the prewriting or planning stage (Emig, 1971). Like many writing teachers, I find this stage of the process to be the most fun to teach because students are encouraged to let their thoughts and imaginations run free with mind maps, lists, and free-writing as they brainstorm and collect ideas. Afterwards, they decide which events

are to be included in their stories and use a timeline to outline a basic blueprint for the drafting process.

Following the planning stage is what I call the production stage, consisting of drafting and revision. This part of the process requires actual writing for a specific purpose: stringing words together to make sentences in a different language. Most students find this process to be the most challenging, for they are quickly confronted with their own limitations: the lack of vocabulary and tools to convey sights, sounds, and feelings into English. To address these challenges, I often encourage students to not be afraid of the blank page by silencing their inner critic during the drafting process and thus empower them to produce large amounts of English texts.

For most L2 writers, producing a complete draft is already an unprecedented accomplishment. However, for a writing teacher facing great volumes of rough texts that have little resemblance to the stories they envisioned from their students, the most difficult part of the writing process is just about to begin. Revision is a process that even the most experienced authors find daunting. How can a teacher guide students through this mystifying process in a foreign language? More importantly, how can the teacher deconstruct this process to a series of concrete, nonabstract steps that the learners can duplicate in the future as independent writers?

I read a blog entry by Maggie Stiefvater (2011), an American author of best-selling young adult literature, who wrote, "One of the finest tools in any writer's arsenal, I think, is the ability to turn a novel into a textbook" (para. 3). Her words reminded me of the Chinese calligraphy lessons I had in elementary school and that writing, like other professional pursuits, is a skill that can be developed by constant practicing, studying the craft, and duplicating the skills of established masters. I was inspired to introduce model texts in my writing lessons and have since relied extensively on using mentor texts, usually excerpts from the books or articles I enjoy reading, to help me demystify the revision process.

In this writing course, I used *Shortcut*, a picture book by Donald Crews (1992), to teach the importance of having a central conflict. The personal essay *Eleven* by Sandra Cisneros (2002) helped show the importance of revealing the narrator's inner journey alongside external problems. My students and I also discussed how Roald Dahl (1995) created the spooky mood and tone in his perfect murder short story *Lamb to the Slaughter*. Poetry and verse novels helped me teach literary devices, and Jane Yolen's (1987) lyrical picture book *Owl Moon*, illustrated by John Schoenherr, was a personal favorite for showing how the use of imagery and sensory details can bring setting to life.

In the following sections, I will introduce a revision activity in which I not only provided mentor texts, but also encouraged my students to find their own mentor texts, and discuss how this activity helped my college EFL writing students revise the opening lines of their personal narratives.

## Method

### *Modeling and Demonstration*

"Show. Don't tell," has long been considered to be the golden rule in writing. As an instructor, I have also found this rule to be golden in the teaching of writing, especially in the ESL/EFL context. Although clear, concrete, and thorough explanation is indispensable, no amount of explanation is enough to get the students started until they have seen how it is done. Students need to see what it means to not feel intimidated by a blank page and to witness the freedom required in the brainstorming process. Few things can inspire and empower students to "re-vision" their own work more than seeing the teachers experimenting with different writing styles, questioning their own choices, and cutting out words and rewriting parts to make the story better.

With this group of students, I modeled each step of the writing process by writing or typing out my own personal narrative and

showing it on the projector screen in real time. The personal narrative that I produced can be briefly summarized as the following:

One night after grading, I felt so heated and frustrated by the quality of my students' work that I decided to go out for ice cream late in the evening. Being lactose-intolerant I could not buy just any ice cream from a convenience store, complicating the quest. At the end, I was able to find a Vietnamese restaurant serving dairy-free coconut ice cream just in time for their "last order." The ice cream was delicious and life was good again.

Figure 1 shows the beginning of the first draft of my personal narrative, which I composed in front of the class, as shown on the projector screen.

One night I went out after grading and had the most delicious coconut ice cream ever. I had a particularly difficult time grading my students' writing assignments. I felt like I was the worst teacher ever. How could my lessons result in such tragedy! I was so angry I felt like my whole brain was on fire. I needed cold ice treats to put off that fire. I went to a local 7-11, hoping they would have ice cream that didn't have dairy in it. I had no luck.

Figure 1. Opening paragraph of teacher's rough draft.

After several lessons on revising the middle part of the story, it was time to revise the narrative lead, or the opening lines of the story. To prepare my students for the lesson, I said to the class that my opening lines, as shown in Figure 1, were not quite as interesting or engaging as the stories I loved reading and that I would like to glean writing secrets from those stories. Following the discussion, I distributed a handout packet with three model texts on the first page (shown in Figure 2) as we continued the revision process with the lesson on revising the narrative lead.

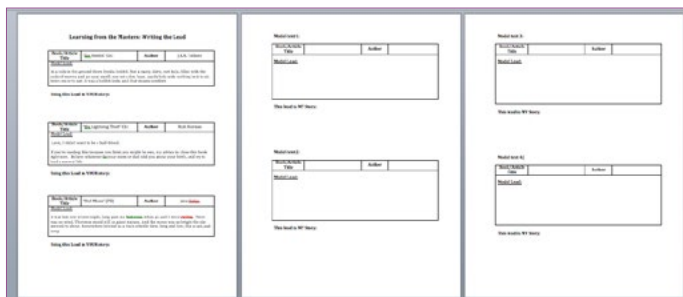


Figure 2. Revision activity handout.

## Revising Narrative Leads

The first model text I introduced is the opening line of *The Hobbit* by John. R. R. Tolkien (1937/1996): “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (p. 1). As shown in Figure 3, I used this model to emulate the pattern of introducing the main character (me) by giving the readers a sense of “place.” Through some think-alouds, I played with different ideas and experimented with different topics with the purpose of finding out which opening would fit my story and my narrative voice the best.

Book/Article Title	"the Hobbit" Ch1	Author	J.R.R. Tolkien
<b>Model Lead:</b>			
<p><b>In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.</b> Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.</p>			
<b>Using this Lead in YOUR story:</b>			
<p><b>* In a little city in the land of the rising sun there lived a tired English teacher.</b></p>			
<p><b>* In a busy little city in the nation of Japan there is a nice little restaurant serving delicious dessert.</b></p>			
<p><b>* In the little island on the great Pacific Ocean there is a group of young people trying to learn English. And they have teacher. That teacher is <u>me</u>.</b></p>			

Figure 3. Revision activity handout: *The Hobbit*.

Next, I used the opening line from *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2005), which we had previously read together as a class. After comparing this beginning to Tolkien's opening line as part of a class discussion, I modeled using the narrator's casual speech style, in which the writer addresses the audience in a direct manner, as shown in Figure 4.

Book/Article Title	"the Lightning Thief" Ch1	Author	Rick Riordan
Model Lead:			
Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood.			
If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever <u>lie</u> your mom or dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life.			
Using this Lead in YOUR story:			
Look, I never meant to eat ice cream right before bedtime. It's bad for your health, especially for people my age.			
Hey, eating ice cream in winter is never a good idea. But that day, I just had to <u>have</u> it.			
Look, teaching is hard work, ok? That's why <u>sometimes</u> , a little ice cream is good for a teacher's soul.			

Figure 4. Revision activity handout: *The Lightning Thief*.

The third model text that we read as a class is from the picture book *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen (1987). As with the two previous exercises, I demonstrated how I copied the style without plagiarizing the author's work through think-alouds (asking myself what I appreciated the most about this particular opening) and noted Yolen's emphasis of time as a major component in her opening lines. I then demonstrated envisioning having this type of opening for my own story in a number of ways, as shown in Figure 5.

Book/Article Title	"Owl Moon" (PB)	Author	Jane Yolen
Model Lead:			
It was late one winter night, long past my <u>bed time</u> , when pa and I went <u>owling</u> . There was no wind. The trees stood still as giant statues. And the moon was so bright the sky seemed to shine. Somewhere behind us a train whistle blew, long and low, like a sad, sad song.			
Using this Lead in YOUR story:			
It was a cold evening in the early spring at the end of a long workday, when I ventured out to my neighborhood in search of some good ice cream.			
It was a Tuesday evening, very close to my bedtime, when I put on my jacket and went outside to the cold. I was looking for a taste of summer.			

Figure 5. Revision activity handout: *Owl Moon*.

Notice that in my demonstrations, I always created at least two or three different examples for each mentor text. As I typed each sentence in front of the class, I would explicitly ask, "How else can I use this pattern in my story?" and "What can I do to make it sound like I came up with the idea?" One phrase I used often is "What if . . .?" What if I write about the coconut dessert first? What if I talk about my frustrations first?

It is essential for the students to see how writers use different tools to stretch their creativity. This step also helped the students understand that "lazy copying" is not acceptable, and that a writer needs to invest time and effort in this shadowing exercise for real

learning to take place. After each demonstration, I would give the class 10-15 minutes to experiment with applying the master style to their own narratives, followed by another 10-15 minutes of sharing the sentences they had produced with their writing group. When I was confident that the students understood the heart of the task, I asked them to work on the rest of the packet by finding their own model texts.

### *Finding Model Texts*

The university has a Self-Access Learning Center with an English library and a good selection of texts of different genres. After guiding the students through the first page of the packet, I took the class on a fieldtrip to the library, where they completed the rest of the handout. The students were asked to browse as many texts as possible, starting from their favorite type of books, and copy down the leads they found engaging or inviting. As shown in Figure 6, the handout provides spaces to copy and to emulate four model narrative leads, but the students were encouraged to find and work with as many different openings as possible. “A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest,” wrote T. S. Eliot (1921, p. 206). Therefore, it is best to allow students to explore a wide range of genres: fiction, children’s fiction, nonfiction, magazines and newspaper articles, and so on, and remind them that good writers are readers who enjoy reading, read often, and read widely.

**Model text 1:**

Book/Article Title	Author
<b>Model Lead:</b>	

**This lead in MY Story:**

Figure 6. Choice of model text.

Students with tablet computers or e-readers have access to thousands of texts for this activity, as most online bookstores offer the first chapter of their books for free. It is also a good opportunity to show the students how to take advantage of the tools available in the reading apps, such as dictionary, bookmarking, note taking, and highlighting.

When the students had collected a number of possible leads for their personal narratives, it was time to rewrite the beginning of their drafts. I often give an analogy of a house with a new roof, or a person trying on a new hat. If you really like the new roof, you will need to paint the rest of the house with the same or similar colors, or modify the roof to match the rest of the house better. Most students understood this comparison, as evidenced in the marked difference in the tone and language in their new drafts from beginning to end.

### **Results, Suggestions, and Conclusion**

Revision is a long and arduous process, and going through this process in a second language makes it all the more challenging. Similar to the Chinese calligraphy lessons I had in Taiwan, students often

find the revision lessons difficult, and keeping their motivation high can be a challenge for a writing teacher. However, it is during the revision process that writers are given the opportunity to sharpen their tools and develop their craft. Studying the work of the masters enables fledgling writers to re-vision their own work, and equipping students with the skills to “steal like an artist” (Kleon, 2012, p. 2) will ensure continual improvement.

After the activity, one student changed her narrative lead from “It was a sunny day and it was the day I waited for a long time” to “It was almost autumn, the end of summer vacation, and I was beginning to feel sad.” The master that she shadowed was Lois Lowry (1993) in *The Giver*: “It was almost December and Jonas was beginning to be frightened” (p. 1).

Another student, whose original lead was “My summer vacation is wonderful!! I had never lived what a wonderful life,” modeled her new beginning after that in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (1950/2005): “Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when . . .” (p. 1). The student’s new narrative lead became “Once there was a girl and a dog whose names were Yumi and Leonardo. This story is about something that happened to them when they were at home alone during summer vacation.”

This revision activity, in which the writers learned to write engaging story openings directly from published texts, was one of the rare occasions when my students showed as much enthusiasm as I did for a revision lesson. One student noted that using a new beginning in her story made her “change all of my story,” and her subsequent drafts showed attempt at humor and a new awareness of the audience. Another student noted that the activity helped her make her narrative more “like a story,” as opposed to an account of daily facts, after experimenting with using the fable-like voice emulated from the opening line of *The Hobbit*.

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal,” wrote T. S. Eliot (1921, p. 206) in the book *The Sacred Wood*. It is important for teachers to remember that it takes time and practice for students to become mature writers in their L2. I suggest giving students ample time when using this activity for the first time. Eliot went on to write in the same essay, “The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from which it was torn” (p. 206). To help the students achieve this goal, I suggest that when giving feedback, teachers should challenge students to continue asking “what if . . .?” and striving to make “one more possible opening” with the same style pattern. I also suggest making this activity a stable part in the revision process for different writing units as the repeated practice will help the students develop the craft of welding their theft.

Using model texts in revision lessons has rewarded both the students and me. Not only did my students make progress in writing, they also showed a more positive attitude toward reading. It was gratifying to see them fully engaged in the activity during our browse-and-borrow fieldtrip, working together and sharing their discoveries with their peers. More importantly, the progress made in the students’ subsequent drafts was an encouraging sign that they had acquired the skills to learn on their own beyond this writing course and will continue to develop their skills outside the classroom.

## Bio Data

**Li-hsin Tu** is a lecturer at the Kanda University of International Studies. Her research interests include narrative structure and development, writing instruction, and curriculum design. <tu-l@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

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