

Rewriting Audubon

A Lesson In Research And Rewriting



Knowing it is easier to teach rewriting strategies when working with someone else's writing, this lesson helps students develop their skills in deciphering historical text and then learn to rewrite this text with more modern language and updated scientific information.

- Students will compare and contrast Audubon's essay about their favorite bird with more contemporary scientific essays.

- Students will immerse themselves into the life of one bird, and in so doing learn general concepts in ornithology that can be applied to other bird species.

National Standards:

NCTE 5 Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

NCTE 6 Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

NCTE 7 Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

NAS 1 Science as Inquiry: Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry; Understandings about scientific inquiry.

NAS 3 Life Science: Structure and function in living systems; Reproduction and heredity; Regulation and behavior; Populations and ecosystems; Diversity and adaptations of organisms.

Materials: Paper and pencil

Access to Audubon's Ornithological Biography

The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Bird Behavior by David Allen Sibley (2001)

Stokes Field Guides to Bird Behavior by Donald and Lillian Stokes (1996)

Background Information: Most folks know John James Audubon as one of the most important ornithologists in history, as well as a world-renowned wildlife artist. You might be surprised to find that in his day he was also considered one of America's greatest authors. For every bird he painted, 485 species, he wrote 3 to 5 pages about their life, habits and habitats. These were later published in 7 volumes as The Ornithological Biographies. He also published 50 short stories about his travels in the wildest places in North America.

By today's standards his writing is flowery, dated and filled with romantic euphemisms and run-on sentences that are difficult for today's students to decipher. Yet, there is a wealth of information worth sifting through. This sifting process can be a great way to teach students the skills they need to decode nonfiction essays while learning to rewrite overwrought material. If they can read and decode Audubon, then there isn't anything they can't tackle! Although his writing is dated, one aspect of his style was actually ahead of its time; namely, his ability to weave expository writing with a narrative thread. Most modern, award-winning science essays blur this line between narrative and expository writing, making for more compelling reading. Audubon was a master of this style and is therefore a great role model for students to emulate.

This lesson is a great follow-up to *Bird is the Word*. This is also one of the few stories in the book that I would highly encourage you to read rather than learn and tell. Because it lacks the typical plot line of a normal narrative and is packed with scientific detail important to the lesson, reading aloud with the same emotional fluidity and interactive flair of storytelling is the best strategy.

Instructional Procedures

Introduction: Begin by asking students to get out a sheet of paper and pencil and to take notes on the following narrative essay. Warn them that some of the language is flowery and antiquated, but there is a lot of good information. Their job is to listen for the important facts and write them down.

To introduce the story you may want to give a brief introduction to John James Audubon. I perform as Audubon and have only used this lesson after a performance, but here is a short introduction you can use.

"How many of you have heard of John James Audubon? The Audubon Society was named for him, an organization dedicated to protecting birds and their habitats. He was born in 1785 and died in 1851. He was the first man to paint a portrait of all of the known birds of North America, 485 species, including more than a dozen that he was the first to name. His art work hangs in some of the finest museums in the country, and he made his living selling hand-colored prints of his "Birds of North America." Though Audubon was often poor, if you owned a complete collection of his prints today, it would be worth more than four million dollars."

"In the early 1820s and 1830s he traveled in the wildest places in America, from Florida to the Rocky Mountains, Texas to Nova Scotia to collect birds. He also wrote 50 short stories about his adventures, kept a journal along the way, and for every bird he painted he wrote a short biography or scientific essay that blended his observations with delightful, though sometimes over-the-top, flowery language. Here is his essay on the ruby-throated hummingbird, which has been edited and updated with new scientific information. As you listen make notes of the important facts:"

Read aloud the story, *A Hummingbird's Tale*.

Activity: Immediately following the story, discuss the information contained within and the style of writing. What were some of the most important facts? Make a list on the board; encourage students to add to their lists. What are a few passages that you really liked? What are the parts where the writing seemed over the top?

Next, ask students to get out a sheet of paper and pencil and to make a two-minute, quick sketch of their favorite bird, fill the page with a large drawing, and try to convey as much information as they can. Make it clear that this rough sketch will not be graded for art class, but might be part of their science grade, so if they want to label parts or make notes in the margins, that might be helpful to them later.

Ask them to turn to a partner and take turns using their sketch as a teaching tool; share with your partner all that you know about your bird, answering the following questions: what does this bird look like, including differences between male and female? Where does it live (forest, prairie) and what kind of nest does it make? What does it do (how does it eat, fly, swim, build a nest)? Think in terms of verbs. With this information in hand, tell students that you are not asking them to write a new essay on their favorite bird; rather, you are inviting them to rewrite John James Audubon's essay on their favorite bird. Rewriting and editing are very important skills and sometimes they are easier to learn when working with someone else's writing.

Give them time in the computer lab to find and print a copy of Audubon's essay about their bird, or assign this research as homework if your students have access to the Internet, a printer and Audubon's Ornithological Biography. Ask students to read the essay and use a highlighter to highlight the important facts in each paragraph. Ask them to write a short phrase or one-sentence synopsis of each paragraph. Set this aside to return to later.

Provide students with copies of Sibley's Guide to Bird Behavior and Stokes Field Guides. Also provide access to All About Birds. Ask them to read at least one other modern ornithological essay about their bird, so they can look for new information to add to their Audubon essay. They should take notes on a separate sheet of paper and begin to think about where they might add these facts to Audubon's essay.

Especially with older students, a brief review or introduction to footnotes, quoting your source material, and the laws regarding plagiarism would be most appropriate at this point.

Here is where the fun begins! Instruct students to reread their essay on Audubon with the goal of cherry picking the best parts to make a short, sweet, slightly condensed edition of the essay. Their goal is play with Audubon's language, try to maintain elements of his style of writing, but update the essay with more modern language and modern science. They should aim for 1,000-2,000 words, which means a few essays might need expansion, but most can be cut in half. A few of the longer essays can even lose two-thirds of the drivel.

If working on paper, they can read Audubon's essay again. Underline their favorite parts, parts they want to keep, and draw a line through the boring, confusing, or unnecessary parts, parts they want to cut out or rewrite. They can also number the facts on their research notes and simply write the number of which fact they want to put in the right places. These notes can be rewritten into a new version of Audubon's essay.

If working on a computer, they can clip and paste the entire essay onto a new document. As they read through, they can cut the boring or confusing parts and reorganize the parts they want to keep. Encourage students to simplify some of the long convoluted sentences. One can often cut a run-on sentence in half by adding a period and a capital letter in the middle. A few of Audubon's longer run-ons I cut into three or four complete sentences. They can type in the new

facts trying to emulate some of Audubon's style of writing while using a more modern vocabulary. Students can also add some of the information they already know about the bird and true stories about their encounters with this species trying to write in Audubon's style.

If you feel your students need more detailed instruction, review paragraphs one, two and three of my edited version of the hummingbird essay above, versus the first three paragraphs of Audubon's original. Walk students through, sentence by sentence, and look at the edits I made. Emphasize the places where I added scientific information and simplified the text. Paragraph one I simply shortened. The second paragraph was nearer the end of the essay. I moved it and added most of the science about how they get their ruby throats. Paragraph three I wrote adapting an idea from *Garden Birds of North America* by Henry Hill Collins, Jr., and Ned R Boyajian (1965).

Or, as the teacher you can choose your favorite bird essay by Audubon and ask your students to help you. As a class you can work together to rewrite a paragraph or two, providing students with another example of this process.

Allow students plenty of time to rewrite Audubon's essay.

Assessment: The final essay can receive up to three grades: one on mechanics, grammar, and punctuation; one grade on the accuracy and depth of scientific information; and a third grade on the style and fluidity in the writing. With the first two grades it is easy to count the facts or subtract the mistakes. With the grade on style we are actually asking students to both maintain the voice of Audubon in the sentences they add and to update the language, simplify the grammar and improve the fluency of the piece, so admittedly this is a more subjective grade.

Follow-up Activities: These essays can be collected into a classroom book or shared with the class orally. You can also work with the art teacher to create large watercolor sketches of the birds to illustrate the essays.

In the spirit of Audubon, encourage your students to conduct field research about their bird, to go outside and observe it. Cornell Labs (www.birds.cornell.edu) has several great field ecology lesson plans online, so your students can participate in ongoing research about the birds of their region.

Comments: I shared this lesson plan with a seventh grade teacher to get his feedback, and he recommended Cornell Labs All About Birds web site as another resource for students to gather information about their favorite bird. This page has lots of cool facts that can enrich student essays with the latest scientific information.

