

Sample Draft #2

American Airlines Flight 77, Washington to Los Angeles, September 11, 2001
by Laura Ferguson

~~Bernard Brown, 11, student, Leekie Elementary School (Washington)~~

~~Hilda Taylor, sixth-grade teacher, Leekie Elementary School (Washington)~~

~~Asia Cottom, 11, student, Baekus Middle School (Washington)~~

~~Sarah Clark, 65, Columbia, Md., sixth-grade teacher, Baekus Middle School (Washington)~~

~~Rodney Dickens, 11, student, Ketcham Elementary School (Washington)~~

~~James Debeuneure, 58, Upper Marlboro, Md., fifth-grade teacher, Ketcham Elementary School (Washington)~~

~~Barbara G. Edwards, 58, Las Vegas, Nev., teacher, Palo Verde High School~~

I'm not sure you need these names listed at the top of the story since you so powerfully convey what is lost in the text.

It has been said that we seek what we know. As I've sifted through the dust and debris of the [overwhelming amounts of horrendous information received in the past week and a half,] *(while this phrase denotes when the piece was written, I might consider taking a longer view of the reader – in other words, how might you rewrite to make this more sensible to someone several years from now?)* I've found myself ~~continually~~ *(try to avoid adverbs as much as possible. The use of an adverb usually indicates that you haven't used the strongest or most meaningful verb.)* returning to these people on board American flight 77 who were plunged to their deaths.

Bernard Brown, 11, Asia Cottom, 11, Rodney Dickens, 11.

Hilda Taylor, teacher. Sarah Clark, teacher. James Debeuneure, teacher. Barbara Edwards, teacher.

(Setting the names out here in the middle of the text is more powerful than leading with them, I think.)

I am a teacher, and I know 11. I know the spirit of 11, the eagerness to do, the willingness to try, the enormity of the intellect bursting forth from the pint-sized brain like a molar erupting from the infant's gums.

I know 11. I know the [gangling awkwardness] *(something a bit fresher here perhaps?)* of teenaged limbs on children's torsos, the way colored gel pens and lip gloss and beautifully laced sneakers and Harry Potter are brandished and waved like machetes as these people forge their way into the edge of the jungling *(while "jungle" is a noun and "jungly" is an adjective in my Webster's, I find no verb "to jungle." However, I rather like the "verbing" of this noun. Sometimes this is the way words are created. Though some of my colleagues – the syntax police might arrest me for saying so.)* confusion and uncertainty that characterizes the adolescents' world.

I know 11. I know the devotion and creativity that can be found to attain a goal, especially one that involves being set apart and rewarded for exceptional work. I know the candy that can be sold, the mile-a-thons that can be walked, the lists that can be memorized, the pledges of nickels and dimes that can be wheedled. I know the enthusiasm of first-time converts, free of cynicism and pessimistic thoughts, bright shining faces with no trace of the patina that inevitably comes with experience. I know

the spelling bees, the choral festivals, the sporting events, the book reading contests, all the trappings of the mild (or not so mild) competitions that motivate and sometimes frustrate the academic lives of 11s.

I know 11. I know the pride of 100%, the disappointment of 97%, the dogged sheepishness of 72%. I know the tiny ovals with #2 lead, the timer ticking the 45 minutes ever closer like a waiting bomb, with some pencils scratching away and some rubbing, rubbing, rubbing the uncertainty into a smudgy litter of tiny paper fragments. I know the circles that begin to be drawn, ever closer and tighter as the months unfold, that bring in some and track out others. I know the slow but inevitable movement of social circles like a continental drift that rends a class from a large community of learners into small groups of friends. *Wonderful paragraph!*

I know teachers. I know the care that is put into lessons, the agonizing decisions that are made between helping those students reaching for the sky and those still getting off the ground. I know the pain that is felt year after year as a united hope for a class begins to splinter off into individual concerns, each child finding her rhythm and pace regardless of our best laid plans to keep all our 11s together until 12. *How powerful this number here when we realize that the 11s on this plane never made it to September 12.*

I know teachers. I know they recommend taking every opportunity that presents itself. When children receive an opportunity, a teacher will do what needs to be done to make sure that child takes it, whether it be giving up ~~their~~ vacations, spending ~~their own~~

personal money, tutoring after school, making home visits, listening to the frustrations of parents and maybe even taking an airplane ride to California. Teachers offer themselves up to children over and over again, class after class, year after year, educational reform after educational reform in order to spark the fire that will ignite a child's life into a great blaze of meaning.

I know teachers. I know the sense of calm they try to impart in a cacophonous world, the safe havens of reading corners and listening stations and quiet time and silent work that characterize their classrooms. I know the overwhelming sense of justice that is spread over groups of children, falling softly on the desks like a cloud, cushioning the blows of inevitable inequities that happen day by day. I know the quiet outrage that simmers in their hearts, bubbling up and over when abuse or rudeness or disrespect heat them past the point of comfort, [quickly deflating as the desire to make covert differences rather than overt shows cool and temper their actions.] *I might look again at this last phrase and how it complicates the sentence a bit. Can you simplify?*

[I know people. I know the gut reaction of "I'm getting mine!", the primal urge for self preservation when terror strikes oozing into the gut like liquid lead shooting into the bowels, whether the terror be an unexpected encounter with a snarling dog at the garbage can, an unforeseen near miss on a dark slippery road or the completely unfathomable reality of a hijacked plane crashing into its demise.] *I'm not sure this paragraph adds to the overall effect. It carries me away from the students and teachers to a more generic*

scene and it begins to go a bit grandiose on the part of the narrator. I'd consider deleting it.

Here I would shift away from the "I" and simply try to describe with the authority already earned by the narrative voice. I continually imagine what it must have been like On American Airlines flight 77 in those last moments, there were . I imagine the screams, the chaos, the an complete abandonment of the tacitly agreed upon civility and norms that make the strange familiar. I imagine the tight cabin uncomfortably close, the sense of claustrophobia as the masks come down, and the dinner trays gouge the knees of people grabbing and pushing and shoving and smacking, hoping to do something to make the terrible nightmare of an altered reality disappear, desperate to once again bring back the other terrible nightmare of only just being a sardine in a can with a coke and a baggie of snack. (Sometimes less is more, and here – because the experience of being crowded onto an airplane is familiar to most people – I'd stop short of the wordiness here. Getting back to the children is more powerful, helping us to see them in those last moments is the image you want, I believe..

And then I imagine my 11s, still with their seat belts on, sitting close between their teachers in coach as they create three tiny ~~and short lived~~ islands of calm and comfort in a sea of frightening chaos.

I know this is true. No one will ever be able to ~~prove this and all the evidence of human nature points to its improbability, but no one will~~ convince me otherwise. I know 11. I know teachers. I know this is what happened.

Summary Comments

Part of the tremendous power of this piece is in the repetition and the musical quality created by repeating “I know.” The narrator’s authority is established immediately.

A word on process: In writing a first draft like this one, it is important to let all the images and the immediate language flow freely in the moment of inspiration and passion, holding back nothing, mining the mind and heart for every possible connection, as our writer has apparently done here. After the piece has cooled for a few days or weeks, then it is critical to come back and pare down the images and sharpen the language, eliminating wordiness and imposing a fierce process of selection, choosing only those images that have the most power and resonance with each other.

It is often the case that the most powerful connections in a story like this come directly out of the subconscious and work on the reader that way, too. It took me several readings to notice the connection between the date September 11th and the fact that these children were 11 years old. When the author tells us that *she knows 11*, she is also telling us that she knows 11 in a new way without having to say it. That is the kind of power and magic that comes in this kind of writing inside a moment of strong feeling, and often, not until you finish the draft, do you realize how many different layers of meaning you’ve laid down in a piece. Perhaps our author knew exactly what she was saying when she wrote “I know 11” for the first time. But just as often, these kinds of connections flow out of our deepest inner resources without recognition and thus make a striking resonance for both reader and writer.

This piece, however, precisely because of the author’s intensity and force of feeling about the topic, also presents a danger of going over the top. In some of the places where I’ve suggested cuts, the language gets a bit too analytical, summarizing the meaning of what was happening rather than giving us particular details.

Likewise, the paragraph near the end that begins with “I know people,” goes over the top in lyricism while unintentionally putting us back on the ground with barking dogs and garbage cans instead of keeping us suspended in the air with the children and their teachers in those last horrible moments. This paragraph sticks out much like those old exercises that ask us to find the one picture among several that doesn’t go with the others. This paragraph doesn’t work because it takes us away from where the plane (and the story) has been heading all along. Though it is difficult, becoming a seasoned editor requires that an author look ruthlessly at every sentence and paragraph and perform the

“do I really need this?” test. Read the writing as if it were not your own. Ask yourself what doesn't quite fit.

It is also notable that some of the sentences toward the end of the piece don't work as well because of their length. The author is trying to give us a vision of the inside of that plane in the last moments, but you can't recreate panic with multiple dependent clauses. Here form must follow function. Short, brisk sentences convey the speed of the action and the racing of hearts much better than long, abstracted commentary such as the phrase “the terrible nightmare of an altered reality.” That is the kind of language to avoid when creating a dramatic scene, especially one in which there is so much visceral potential in the description rather than using any cerebral rumination.

All these things said, this brief story is extremely effective and is at its best when the images are concrete. Study it for the number of concrete images (nouns) and all the scenes these nouns evoke. Therein lies the power. Nowhere do we find the literary label “tragedy,” nor do we need it.