

Michael Hancock
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
mhanc@imsa.edu
The Great Gatsby
Fitzgerald dialogue and revision exercise

Making *Gatsby* Great: Fitzgerald's Revisions

Abstract: This discussion-based activity asks students to evaluate how effectively successive drafts of a passage of dialogue in fiction communicate tone and character. Working in small groups, students read three versions (manuscript, unrevised galley proof, and first edition) of a famous passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Examining dialogue tags and dialogue, students identify the strengths and weakness of each version and explain why the final version is (or isn't) the best. Students may be invited to write their own version of Fitzgerald's passage. They will recognize the importance of revision in the writing process.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1c Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Procedure:

Hand out (or post online) the three versions of the passage in which Gatsby describes Daisy's voice (see Materials). The first comes from Fitzgerald's manuscript, the second from the novel's galley proofs, and the third from the first edition of *The Great Gatsby*. Students should have already read Chapter 7 of the novel, where the passage appears in its final form.

Explain that the class will be looking at Fitzgerald's revision process and dialogue through his multiple versions of one of the novel's most recognizable passages. You may want to point out to students that Fitzgerald wrote out the first version of his novel by hand (the manuscript version) and later made some changes on the printer's preliminary version of his

novel (the proofs) before publication. Divide students up into small groups (of 4-6) and have each group read the handout with the three versions of Nick and Gatsby's conversation about Daisy's voice. Ask them to identify the strengths and/or weakness of each version and to explain why the final one is (or isn't) the best. You might also ask students to consider one or more of the following in their groups:

- Describe the characters' tone and mood. Does Fitzgerald account for how they feel?
- What, if anything, do the dialogue tags (which identify which character is speaking) contribute to our understanding of character?
- How appropriate are the characters' statements? Do they logically follow specific statements, actions, or events?
- What insights do characters' words provide into their identities, motives, attitudes, etc.?

I suggest that students spend about five minutes in their groups talking about each of the passages (15 minutes total).

Once groups have read and discussed the three passages, ask students what differences they noticed between them. From there, have them discuss the strengths and weakness of Fitzgerald's choices. For a list of possible responses, see James L. W. West III, "The Composition and Publication of *The Great Gatsby*," in *Approaches to Teaching Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby* (New York: MLA, 2009), 23-4), upon which I have drawn for this activity. Students might note, for instance, that Gatsby's happiness in the first version is unexplained and that what Nick agrees with isn't specified. Nick describes Daisy's voice as full of wonder in the manuscript, but that becomes love in the second. In turn, that voice becomes "indiscreet" in the final version, as Nick struggles to explain what it's full of. Meanwhile, Gatsby turns from happy (manuscript) to upset (galleys) to tense (1st edition). Gatsby's ready response to Nick in the final version suggests that he's long thought of Daisy's "money" voice. Encourage students to consider the meaning of that metaphor (e.g., as it conveys Daisy's wealth and social standing and hints at Gatsby's separation from but yearning for her world) and how Fitzgerald leads up to that payoff, particularly in the final version.

Next, ask students which version they think is best and why. Students should be able to give more than one reason for their choice. Fitzgerald's multiple versions of the passage should help students appreciate the importance of revision to writing. As an extension of Fitzgerald's composition process, teachers may ask their students, working together or individually, to come up with and share their own revisions of the "money" voice passage. The class could then choose their favorite from Fitzgerald's and their own.

Materials: A handout with Fitzgerald's three versions of the "full of money" passage (see PDF).