Writing Workshop 101:

Process, Standards, Craft & Joy

# General Overview

Artfully and fluently communicating ideas, thoughts, feelings, and stories through the act of writing – this is what writers do, from William Shakespeare to Barbara Kingsolver, and it is this communication through writing that lies at the heart of the writing workshop model.

**The goals of a teacher teaching writing in a writing workshop classroom are fourfold.** What children have to say is important, as is the way in which they say it, and so the **first goal** is to move students beyond obedience to writing prompts to an elevated point where they realize they can be independent, competent, and even accomplished writers. To do this, you’ll need to start with the determination (and the district go-ahead) to de-emphasize and diminish prompt-based writing and emphasize and elevate craft-based writing.

The **second goal** is to coach, instruct, and guide your students to a place where they consider themselves to be accomplished real world writers, with stories to tell, points to make, feelings to convey, and ideas to explore. To be real world writers, students must develop and master the skills needed to write fluently, expressively, and artfully, and our goal should be to get them there.

A **third goal** is to understand the process of writing by becoming a writer. In writing workshop, teachers learn alongside their students and even practice a bit when they have a moment. In this way, they come to understand the craft of written expression.

A **fourth and final goal** is to create a community of writers, one that includes the teacher, the students, and family members willing to support young writers. To form community, children must be enabled to take risks, share experiences, teach each other, trust one another, listen patiently, read carefully, and respond to each other’s writing in challenging, supportive, and thoughtful ways.

## Time to Write, Write, Write

*“We cannot expect students to produce quality writing in the classroom and on standardized test writing prompts without establishing an extensive writing routine.”*

– Lynne Dorfman (Grammar Matters)

Competent writing, in all its forms, comes from extensive writing. To become writers, children need to write, write, write. The bulk of time in a writing workshop lesson is devoted to actual writing - with crayons on oak tag, with pencils on paper, and with fingers on keyboards. To make this writing happen, you must schedule appropriately long writing workshop lessons into each week.

* Writing sessions are for a minimum of 30 minutes. Forty-five minutes is preferable.
* A writing workshop lesson should occur daily if possible. If not, it should occur a minimum of three times per week. Twice a week might be enough, but sometimes what seems to be the bare minimum is really the same as, or is even less than, nothing at all.
* The first six to eight weeks are the weeks devoted to getting children excited about writing, to establishing routines and procedures, and to building all important writing stamina.

## Choice

Students pick their own topics to write about. Why?

* Choice fosters engagement
* Doing away with teacher-directed and program-directed prompts lowers the cognitive load.

In writing workshop, you will ask your students to make deliberate choices: word choices, style choices, format choices, choices about sentence length, on how to start a piece, on what mentor text to choose, etc. Why is choice so emphasized?

* Choice fosters engagement.
* Choice puts power and responsibility into the hands of students, not teachers.
* Choice cultivates the feelings of “being a writer.”

## Routines

Writing workshop is routine-based. There are routines for sharing, for writing, for picking a topic, etc. If you concentrate on procedures and routines in the first six to eight weeks of the year, and if you patiently help your students build writing stamina, then the rest of your year will run smoothly.

Here are phrases that describe routines associated with writing workshop. You may want to pick three or four, tease out the kernels (in italics), make them your own (but don’t make them too wordy), and teach them to your class in a cycle of lessons. They could be displayed on an anchor chart on wall, an anchor paper pasted in a folder or binder, or on a slide on Smart Board during every writing lesson.

* We *write, write, write*. We *work hard* and continually build our stamina.
* *During writing workshop, we are always thinking, always working, and always writing.*
* During writing workshop, we use a topic list to keep track of what we want to write about. We use our topic list to pick new topics to write about and to revisit favorite topics. *A topic list is always changing and growing. When we finish with one topic, we start writing about another.*
* *Writers want to find ways to make their writing more interesting to the reader.* Good writers want to make their writing easy to understand. Good writers want their sentences to flow. This is why *we rewrite, revise, and edit, often more than once!*
* *Independent writing time is time for us to concentrate on writing*. We start with 10 minutes of quiet, concentrated effort. Only then do we move to conferencing, reading to the wall, etc.
* Before we publish a piece, we re-read it to ourselves and read it to a partner. *Before we publish a piece, we write and rewrite and revise* and rewrite again. We also conference with a partner and conference with a teacher.
* After we publish a piece of writing, we begin to write about something else. During writing workshop, we are always thinking and we are always writing.

# Getting Ready

## Classroom Environment: Student Configuration

**Whole group**

* Especially early on, while focusing on procedures and routines, and while building stamina, many lessons, if not all, will be taught in a whole group setting. The bulk of independent student writing will also occur within a large group. As much as possible, configure your room to allow for constant and consistent monitoring.

**Small groups**

* Later, once children are more independent and have greater writing stamina, you can run small, guided groups, ala guided reading, while others work independently. Rotate these groups as needed, giving some more attention than others if needed.

**Independent**

* Students can write independently while you run a guided writing group. Or during guided reading time, students can write independently from their topic lists. Later, they can work on these pieces of writing during your official writers’ workshop time.
* An “I Can” list can be used, or not.

## Classroom Environment: Room Materials

* *Crown words* – designated just for writing. King of *Ing*, Pie of *My*, Buzz of *Was*, Head of *Said*, Dove of *Of*, etc.
* *Family tree*
* *Word walls* – show children how to use the wall, don’t put up too many words! Fewer and easily navigated is better than more and confusing.
* *Theme books*, *word books*
* *Mentor texts*
* *Student thesaurus*
* *Publishing center* – a special place for writers to think, dream, and write
* *Whisper phones; designated Read to the Wall spots* (optional) – for students to practice reading their pieces out loud, for listening to flow, correct word sequence, etc.
* *Carpet squares; meeting rug*
* *Author chair; share chair*

## Student Materials

* Writing “tubs” for holding all materials
* Folders and journals or papers
* Topic list
* Binders
* Writing dictionaries
* Banish Boring Words
* Good writers checklist
  + Permanently on the wall for the whole group
  + Projected on the smart board every time they write
  + All students have same in folder; active checking; changes over time
  + All students have 3-4 same, 1-2 differentiated; active checking; changes over time
* Writing kit
  + Pencils
  + Crayons
  + Space men; pennies; etc.
  + No erasers (?)

# Lessons Components

## Overview

Typical lesson components

* Mini-lesson
* Independent writing
* Teacher conferences and peer conferences (during independent writing)
* Sharing / Publishing

## The Mini-lesson

There are different types of mini-lesson:

* Inquiry
* Explanation and example
* Demonstration / modeling
* Guided practice with whole or small group

The length of a mini-lesson can vary but it should never take up bulk of the lesson. It can be skipped on occasion, in order to make room for sharing, publishing, exploration of a theme, etc. But because there much content to cover, it is important to provide some amount of focused instruction to a large or small group in almost every session. Also, over the course of a few days, you’ll want to revisit and review your main teaching point, in order to help students solidify their understanding of the skill you are teaching.

## Independent Writing Time

Children use the bulk of the time in writing workshop to write. This means they are planning, writing, re-reading, writing some more, revising, and editing. During independent writing time, student explore and practice what was learned in the mini-lesson, such as how to capitalize proper nouns, how to pick a strong verb, and how to connect paragraphs.

I suggest (as do others who know a lot more than me) that the first five to six minutes of independent writing time begins with *silence*. This allows students to become engrossed in their work. You want writers to achieve *flow*, and writers want to experience this for themselves. During this silent period, you observe students, notice behaviors, and take notes (see Assessment).

Independent writing time also encompasses having a peer conference, having a teacher conference, revising a “finished” piece, researching a topic, and so on.

## Conferring and Conferences

Conferencing takes two forms: the teacher conference and the peer conference.

While students write, teachers confer. After the first five to six minutes of silent writing, begin to confer. To efficiently teach and assess, focus on only 1 or 2 skills in each conference.

At the beginning of the year, conferring might occur as you monitor whole group independent writing or during guided small group writing. Rotate among the kids, and notice writing behaviors, monitor skill growth, and touch down as needed. As you monitor the room, stop by a desk, pull up a chair if you need to, and guide a student in her writing for three or four minutes. During 20-minutes of independent writing, you might meet with 4 to 7 students, some for a longer time than others.

Later, once your routines are well established and your students have developed stamina and independence, conferring can become a more formal conference, in which a student is called to your desk. But do this type of conferencing one student at a time. When children stand in a line at your desk, they are wasting precious writing time! You can develop a student sign-up sheet for conferencing, which allows students to know where they stand for a future a conference and allows you to keep track of who you have conferenced with.

The focus of a conference can be either a long-term goal or a short-term goal. Until you are secure in your teaching of writing workshop, you might want to stick to short term goals, each tracked via your assessment sheet and/or a student’s Good Writer’s checklist.

Peer conferencing is social and enjoyable. The job of the student in a peer conference is to read his writing to a peer, read the writing of a peer, to tell a peer one thing he liked about her writing and one suggestion he has for making her writing better, to point out and help correct a convention of writing, such as mismatched tense or a missing period, and to keep the writing process moving forward. Like the teacher conference, the peer conference focuses on only one or two skills at a time.

I suggest you build up to student conferencing. As with all routines, model for you class what an effective student conference looks and sounds like. Then have the kids practice their conferencing as you observe and guide them.

## Sharing Session

Most writing workshop gurus preach the importance of committing five to ten minutes of workshop time to student sharing. I’m not a guru, but I agree that each workshop session should include five to ten minutes for students to share their written work. This sharing can take any number of forms:

* Partners or trios share
* Randomly selected students share to the whole class
* Students in a small, guided writing group all share
* One student teaches a skill or models a strategy
* Students sign up for sharing via the author’s chair
* On a bi-weekly, tri-weekly, or monthly basis grade level classrooms come together to share
* Occasionally, cross-grade classrooms come together to teach and share

Sharing writing is emphasized in writing workshop. Why?

* Sharing fosters engagement.
* Sharing is publishing, and publishing feels final and fulfilling. Publishing through sharing emphasizes the act of writing, de-emphasizes the act of copying to perfection (think of a medieval monk in a scriptorium), and ultimately saves time, which translates into more writing practice for students.

# Assessment

Assessment in writing workshop is often formative, sometimes benchmark, and rarely, if ever, summative. I suggest two basic categories for assessment: formative assessment from monitoring and conferencing, and benchmark assessment from student samples (which can be, if needed, translated into a grade).

## Formative assessment from monitoring conferencing

Possibilities include:

* Note student writing as you monitor the room. I suggest a clipboard. If writing behavior is common to others or is observed as a constant over time, turn this behavior into a point of praise or a point of improvement (a writing goal).
* The same type of assessment can occur at conferences at your desk. Keep the points of improvement to one or two. Group students by common areas of improvement. Make sure students know what their goals are. Later, you might want to teach students to manage their own development; monitor their progress and goals.

## Benchmark assessment

For benchmark assessment, come up with a rubric that works to 1) track the skills and/or program components you want to track, 2) isn’t too complex, and 3) can be translated into some type of grade.

# Curriculum

## Scope and sequence

**See Scope and sequence for grades K-2**

## Grammar and Conventions

Grammar is for writing (except when it is for doing well on a mandated test). Thus, grammar is embedded into writing workshop, as is mechanical correctness.

Speaking of correctness, because correctness counts, and because writers are taken more seriously when they communicate clearly and structure sentences correctly, some mistakes such as “Me and my dad…” should be tackled head: “The correct way to write that is ‘My dad and I…’ Make that change now.” The same holds true for commonly, chronically misspelled words, such as *thay* for *they*, *sed* for *said*, *there* for *their*, *becos* for *because*, and so on.

Chronic grammar and spelling mistakes can be treated as class goals or as individual goals.

## First Lessons: ideas for grades 2-3

1. Writing is telling a story; giving information; stating an opinion and giving reasons
2. Creating a topic list
3. Planning a story: say it, tell it, draw a picture, make a quick web
4. Writing sentences and paragraphs
   1. Writing is for readers
   2. Sentences have a start and a stop
   3. Spelling words in a sentence: sounds and letters, use room, circle and come back
   4. Stretch the sentence
   5. Vary beginnings
   6. Writing stamina