GETTING STARTED

The Reading-Writing Workshop
Grades 4–8

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Figure 4–2: from "Ten Questions to Ask About a Novel" by Richard Peck from *The ALAN Review*, Spring 1978. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 4–3: from "Dialogue with a Text" by Robert Probst from *The English Journal*, January 1988. Copyright © 1988 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

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Contents

8

Editing Minilessons

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing.

—Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer

"Hey, Miz, I can't breathe!" a boy finally shouts from the back of the room. "Whatcha tryin' to do? Kill us?"

The rest of the class, after a unison intake of breath, bursts into giggles. Students who have caught on to my mischievous plan look at this boy as if to say, You don't know what she's trying to do? Duh! *Others look at me in confusion.*

We are in the middle of choral-reading an excerpt from our read-aloud, waiting for the author's cue to take a breath but finding none since I have removed all the punctuation marks.

I turn his question back to him: "No, I have no plans to kill you today—just to show you something. What do you think I'm trying to do?"

The look on his face says he gets it: "You're tryin' to tell us we need to breathe when we read. We can't breathe when reading this thing!"

"And why can't you breathe?"

"'Cause there's no punctuation," he says accusingly, as if telling the author, Shame on you!

"So what is the purpose of punctuation?" I watch the students' faces as they mull this over. Naturally, a few hands shoot up immediately. These students knew where I was going as soon as I projected the transparency. Slowly, other hands inch up into the air. I call on a boy whose hand is propped halfway up and whose face looks uncertain but willing to take a chance.

"What do you think?" I ask him with a nod, trying to reassure him that his thoughts will be validated, no matter what.

He responds hesitantly, "To tell the reader where to take a breath, I guess?"

"You're right," I congratulate him. I turn to the rest of the class. "You are the experts on your pieces of writing. Only you know where you want the reader to pause. Where you want the

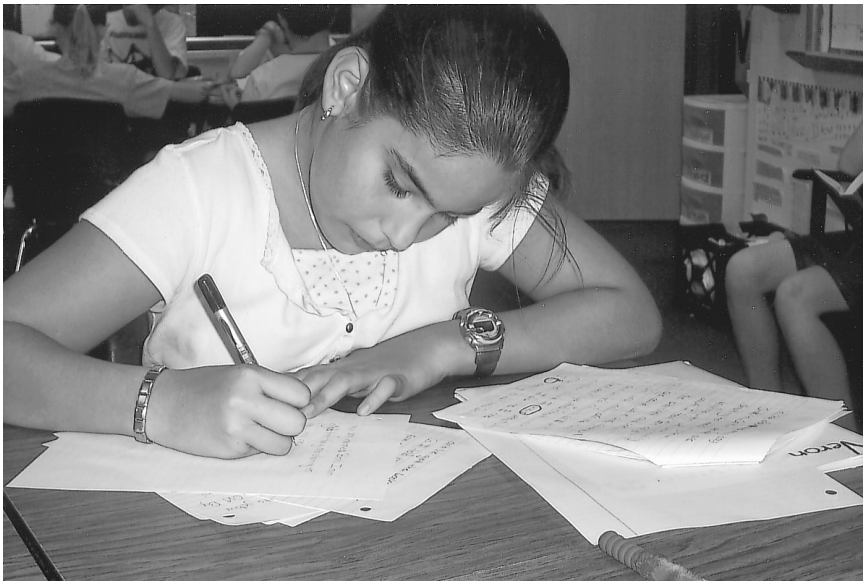

Figure 8–1

reader to stop. Where you want the reader to ask a question. Where you want the reader to read with excitement. When you read your paper to the class or a partner or a small group, you include your pauses, your stops, your questions, your exclamations. When you are not there to read to your audience in person, you must do that with punctuation. That's the purpose of punctuation—so the reader knows how to read your writing."

"Aw, Miz, why didn't nobody tell me that before?" the boy in the back says in exasperation.

Why didn't *anyone tell him this before? That's a very good question.*

■ ■ ■

Many students in the older grades have spent year after year in traditional English classrooms adding punctuation marks to pointless worksheets filled with sentences written by someone else. Many of them have never had an opportunity to apply these skills in a meaningful context. The writing process movement taught us better than this. The best way to teach these skills is through the context of writing. Then, and only then, will students "own" punctuation, because it is their text, something they have spent hour upon hour composing, and, by golly, they want it read correctly.

However, in today's high-stakes testing environment, more and more schools are reinstituting scope-and-sequence charts that require teachers to teach editing skills in the "correct" order. There are fewer summer writing

institutes for teachers. There is less writing in classrooms and more worksheets and exercises out of the grammar book or, worse, sample test passages focusing on isolated skills.

If students discover examples of conventions in their reading and then apply these conventions in their own writing, the knowledge gained is more likely to stick. When teachers from elementary grades through high school advanced-placement classes are asked, "What errors do you see in your students' writing?" the answer is always the same: run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, and spelling. That's not a long list. If we slow down, teach one skill at a time, and give students time to apply it in their own writing, the learning will be more meaningful and longer-lasting for students.

Connie Weaver's (1996a) cogent summary on the subject, entitled "On the Teaching of Grammar" may be found almost in its entirety at www.ncte.org/library/files/About_NCTE/Issues/teachgrammar.pdf. After an extensive review of the research, Weaver concluded that the systematic and formal study of grammar, such as identification of parts of speech and the parsing or diagramming of sentences, has consistently shown negative results on improving the quality of writing or language expression. On the other hand, results demonstrated that discussing grammatical constructions, usage, and punctuation in the context of writing and editing is more helpful than studying formal grammar and the rules of punctuation through isolated skills instruction. Results also concluded that extensive reading significantly promotes the acquisition of grammatical structures and grammatical fluency, especially for second language learners.

Weaver suggests the following implications for teaching grammar as an aid to writing:

- Teach only grammatical concepts critically needed for editing writing.
- Teach these concepts through minilessons and conferences, while helping students edit.
- Give students plenty of opportunities and encouragement to write, write, write for a variety of purposes and real audiences.
- Give students plenty of opportunities and encouragement to read, read, read.
- Read aloud to students, choosing at least some selections that have more sophisticated sentence structures than what the students would ordinarily read by themselves.

We present whole-class minilessons on recurring grammar problems in student writing, supplementing these lessons with instruction (as a class or in individual conferences) on less common problems as needed. For example, if a student is experimenting with dialogue before we've presented a minilesson on how to punctuate dialogue, we use a conference to teach him how to do it. Or if a number of students need to learn a particular skill, we teach them that skill as a group. Also, many students need one or several one-on-one conferences before they grasp the concepts taught in the general minilessons. And we always refer the students to the books they are reading. Authors are still their best teachers.

Run-On Sentences

When students begin to write with voice and complexity, they don't always know how to punctuate that writing, even though they may have punctuated sentences on worksheets or had their writing "corrected" by their teachers. Teaching punctuation from the perspective of *I am the only one who can tell my reader how to read this story* takes it to a new level.

Punctuation gives writing the author's unique voice. Jamie follows the scenario that opens this chapter by having the students punctuate the passage to reflect how they think the author would read the piece. Then they look at the punctuation the author used. Discrepancies lead to discussions about how punctuation conveys meaning.

Here's an excerpt from *Baby,* by Patricia MacLachlan:

> Sometimes she dreamed of white hair like silk touching her face and tiny white stones tumbled beach stones maybe and crying she could almost taste the salt of tears when she thought of it the taste of memory why then wasn't she frightened when she remembered this

If a student turned in this paper, what would we do? Too often teachers grab a pen and edit away, sure they know what the writer intended but losing the writer's voice in the process. Teachers have expertise, yes, but they haven't the right to tamper with a student's voice. Here's what needs to happen: the student must read the piece while the teacher explains how to punctuate it so that others can read it in that same voice. The student holds the pen, the

teacher and student together hold the piece. If Patricia MacLachlan were sitting side by side with you in a conference and she read her piece to you, perhaps you could help her use punctuation to reveal her voice, like this:

> Sometimes she dreamed of white hair, like silk, touching her face, and tiny white stones that tumbled. Beach stones, maybe. And crying. She could almost taste the salt of tears when she thought of it; the taste of memory. Why, then, wasn't she frightened when she remembered this?

Since we know what our students are reading, we have a good idea where their voice is coming from. They borrow from the books we read aloud to them and from the books they read on their own. This is not a bad thing, and we need to celebrate it instead of condemning it. Attempting to teach voice in lessons totally isolated from student writing doesn't work. Students who read write with voice, but they need us, the experts, to help them punctuate it.

We don't teach anything else this week. We *do* confer with students individually during writing workshop, helping them check for run-on sentences. If a student consistently lets her sentences run on, we ask her to read what she's written. Typically, she'll stop where the periods would be and pause where the commas would be, even though these marks don't appear on the paper. We say, "You stopped there. What do you need to do in your writing to tell the reader that you want him to stop?" "Oh," the student says and adds the period. Or, "You raised your voice there like you are asking a question. How do you tell your reader that is what you want her to do?" Or, "You said that with excitement in your voice! How do you tell your reader to read it that way?" If more support is needed, we choral-read from the book the student is currently reading, drawing attention to ending punctuation.

General Punctuation

Here's a follow-up minilesson:

- Ask students to punctuate this sentence: *Tom Smith called Sarah Lou is here*
- Ask volunteers to share how they think the sentence should be punctuated and then read it aloud.

- Demonstrate that there is no single correct way to punctuate the sentence. "How many ways do you think there are to punctuate this sentence?" (There are over seventy; see Carroll and Wilson 1993.)
- Point out that there are *incorrect* ways to punctuate the sentence, however.
- Remind students that punctuation conveys meaning and that they are the experts on their own writing.

Commas

When we focus on commas, we ask students to look in the books they are reading for examples of where authors use commas. One by one the students share what they've found, and as a class we generalize comma rules, which we post on a large sheet of chart paper, along with examples. Four basic comma rules take care of most of the comma errors in student writing (Carroll and Wilson 1993):

1. After a long introductory clause. Example: *After I went to the store to get milk, I went home.*
2. To separate an appositive. Example: *Ms. Mazy, the dentist, came to visit.*
3. To separate words in a series. Example: *I went to the store to get milk, eggs, and bacon.*
4. In a compound sentence. Example: *I went to the store, and I got milk.*

Of course, students will also discover commas in other places. The most common is in dialogue (*I said, "I'm going to the store." "I'm going to the store," I said. "I'm going," I said, "to the store."*) For the rest of the week, at the beginning of writing workshop, we ask whether anyone has found an example in their reading of a comma used in a way that we haven't discovered yet. We add these discoveries to the original chart. Again we confer individually with many students more than once. A common error is to overgeneralize and put a comma before every *and*: *I'm going to the store, and get apples.* We teach the difference between a compound sentence and a compound predicate and why the first requires a comma and the second does not.

Punctuating Dialogue

Punctuating dialogue is not easy. If students are readers, they will use dialogue in their writing long before they know how to punctuate it. Again, we refer them to the books they are reading for examples.

Figure 8–2 is an example of a transparency and handout we use when introducing students to quotation marks. The sentences were taken from Peg Kehret's *The Ghost's Grave* (2005). We like to use a book the students are familiar with. The read-aloud book works well for this. We project the transparency and discuss the rules and examples.

We then have students examine how their own authors have punctuated dialogue. We then invite them to share in pairs or small groups.

We also project the following sentences on a transparency or write them on the chalkboard:

Veronica said her mom was going to the store.
Veronica said, "Her mom was going to the store."
Veronica said, "My mom is going to the store."

We discuss the differences, explain quotations, and point out how quoted speech goes inside quotation marks. As students begin to analyze quotations

1. Each time a new character speaks, a new paragraph should begin.
2. Everything a character says should be in quotation marks.

   Willie looked annoyed. "If you must know," he said, "a ghost becomes an angel when he's ready to move on. That's when you get the wings and the halo."

3. Use a comma to separate an explanatory phrase from the quotation.

   Aunt Ethel said, "Here we are."
   "Here we are," Aunt Ethel said.

4. Place an exclamation mark, question mark, period, or comma inside the quotation mark.

   "Fleas and mosquitoes!" Aunt Ethel cried.
   "Do you live around here?" I asked.
   "I'm looking for my seat belt."
   "I'm looking for my seat belt," I said.

(Adapted from Geye 1997)

Figure 8–2 Rules for Punctuating Dialogue

in their reading and in their writing, they pay more attention to how authors use quotations. Again, authors are the best teachers.

Capitalization

We teach capitalization at the beginning of sentences when we teach students how to punctuate run-on sentences. Later we introduce students to the other major rules of capitalization by having them look in the books they are reading for examples and generating a list on chart paper, which we post on the wall of the classroom:

- Proper nouns (names of people and places).
- Major words in titles of books, stories, plays, etc.
- Titles of people.

They will run across other examples in their reading, which they can add to this list as appropriate.

Subject/Verb Agreement

Subject/verb agreement is a particular problem for students who don't read and write enough, because there isn't a good way to "teach" it other than by immersing students in conversation, the daily-read aloud, and independent reading. Writing and reading must be meaningful. When students are read to and given large blocks of time in which to read and write, they learn subject/verb agreement. They don't learn it by listening to lectures, filling in worksheets, or doing drills from the grammar book (Weaver 1996a; Krashen 2004a).

Spelling

Stephen Krashen (2004b) contends spelling instruction on its own has little effect. Spelling is visual and develops naturally as students read, write, and publish, and the ability to spell correctly derives from seeing words in print; in the beginning we need to allow students to use inventive spelling (phonetic spelling) (Gentry 1987; Weaver 1996c). Weaver (1996c) concludes:

> For decades, more people seem to have considered themselves poor spellers than good spellers, despite the fact that most of us spell correctly the vast majority of the words we write. With spelling, we seem to expect that all of us should spell one hundred percent correctly, even on first drafts, and even as young children. Perhaps it is this unrealistic expectation that leads some parents and others to object when teachers use newer methods of helping children learn to spell, such as encouraging children to use "invented spelling" in their early attempts to write. Such critics mistakenly assume that children who initially use invented spelling will never become good spellers, or that if the time-honored method of memorizing spelling lists were used instead, every child would become a perfect speller. Neither observed experience nor research supports these assumptions. (p. 1)

Even though Weaver's conclusions are based primarily on observations of young children, they also apply to English language learners and inexperienced writers. Her analysis of the research clearly demonstrates that young children allowed to use invented spellings in their writing—as opposed to those who are only allowed to use correct spellings—employ a considerably greater variety of words to their writing, score as well or better on standardized tests of spelling, and develop word recognition and phonics skills earlier. Analysis of the research has consistently demonstrated that we can help children learn to spell by:

- encouraging learners of all ages to write, write, write and spell words the best they can in first drafts;
- helping students write the sounds they hear in words (i.e., invented spellings). Young children or inexperienced writers may begin with one sound per word, naturally progress to more sophisticated invented spellings, and then move to conventional spellings.
- encouraging learners of all ages to read, read, read;
- encouraging students to circle words in their first draft that they think may be spelled incorrectly;
- Teaching children strategies for correcting spelling:
  - writing the word two or three different ways and deciding which one "looks right"
  - locating the correct spelling in a familiar text or in print displayed in the classroom
  - asking someone

- consulting a dictionary
- using a spell-checker, the computer, or a handheld electronic speller
- learning spelling strategies and major spelling patterns through minilessons and student discussions
- noticing generalized spelling patterns
- discovering meanings of Latin and Greek roots and suffixes (intermediate and middle grades)
- Making individualized spelling dictionaries (booklet, file box with index cards, or computer files).

Atwell (2002) has some excellent suggestions for independent word study: ask students to select five words a week from their writing that are giving them trouble; have them study the five words; then have them, in pairs, test each other. Students become excited about spelling when they are free to choose the words they want to learn.

Richard Gentry, a leading spelling authority, is himself a poor speller. He has spent a lifetime teaching us the value of early experimentations though invented spelling and the stages of spelling development. He dedicates his book *Spel . . . Is a Four-Letter Word* (1987) to a college professor who called him into his office and accused him of being lazy because of his poor spelling. In his writings, Gentry emphasizes that poor spelling does not signify a lack of intelligence. Our students need to know this. Spelling comes easy for some. For others it doesn't. Some have the talent; others do not. Even though research has shown that spelling improves through reading and writing for the majority of our kids (Weaver 1996c, Krashen 2004a), there are some who find spelling a challenge no matter how much they read and write. These students are the exception. (And these days, they have the great boon of spell-checker!)

A Final Word

Grammar and mechanics, including spelling, will improve as students spend large amounts of time reading and writing. They will also improve as we teach these skills, in minilessons and one-on-one conferences, in the context of the students' own writing, one teachable moment at a time. Students learn more

when we slow the process down. When students begin to experiment with conventions (punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and so forth) in their writing, they will begin to see those conventions everywhere. That's how we learn. We learn best when we have an interest in learning. We learn best when the learning is meaningful.

Conventions have only one purpose: to make writing more readable to those who want to read it. Learning how to use the proper conventions must be meaningful, timely, and take place within the context of making our own writing better. Students are more interested in making writing better if they have audiences for their writing. We can help them find those audiences by providing opportunities for students to publish their work. Publishing their work makes them care more about what they say and how they say it.