

# Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Teaching Writing

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1. *What do I do when some of the students just don't finish their work, time after time?*

These are usually students who have a hard time getting started. I nag. I insist on finished work and have a student come at lunch or after school to complete a paper that is due if it is a repeated concern. I don't let it go because 70 percent of my course grade is the writing pieces. If the first two pieces are late, by the third paper I call parents ahead of time to let them know the last two were late and the next one is due in a few days. I do what I can. Some students fail.

2. *What do I do when a student wants to write only about one topic?*

I don't think this is a problem. I have had several students write mostly about one thing all semester and it hasn't hurt their writing. I would expect it helped their engagement with the course to be allowed to stay with something they felt compelled to write about. I wouldn't let a student stay stuck in a genre, though. I ask students to explore the structure of different genres because I believe it will help them understand the way purpose can determine the form. I want students flexible in their thinking and able to manipulate the ideas they have to meet the expectations of genre.

3. *What do I do with the student who has good ideas but writes sloppily, spells poorly, and uses few conventions?*

First, you have to know if the student is unconcerned with conventions or if he truly doesn't know how to use them. I assume the student doesn't know how to use them and I teach sentence structure and other grammar topics in minilessons and confer-

ences. Finished work is done on a computer in our school so the student can use the spell-checker to help with spelling, and the handwriting issue is solved. I do not expect spelling and handwriting to be perfect in handwritten work.

Both content and conventions have to be addressed in high school. I always encourage smart writing, so I would compliment the student on content, but I would also teach conventions and insist on growth in that area. I haven't found kids resist if I offer time in class, as well as time outside of it. I will not give an "A" to a paper that has more than a few errors, no matter how strong the ideas.

It is important to help students publish their work because then the polish of the writing is for more than just the teacher or the grade. Students want to be heard, so find a place where that voice is needed and help the student see the value of editing.

4. *What do I do when I have students who come from another culture and language and yet need to write in English?*

I ask them to write as much as they can in English. Most come with dictionaries or translators, and they work slower than others, but they are usually willing to practice.

When they are new to the country and language, I have them compose in their primary language and then translate. I often have them read a passage to the class in their primary language because it gives the student a confident voice in my room, and the sound of fluid speech in another language is a particular kind of beauty. I can always find a student willing to work beside a student struggling with English to help translate. And I help with spelling, particularly homonyms.

5. *My students simply don't like to revise. What do I do?*

I believe revision is all about the task. If a student has something to say, he will work to say it well. If the assignment is of no interest, little work will be put into revision. I find that my students learn revision moves from each other in minilessons and share sessions and then try those ideas in their own texts. I often share a piece and revise it in front of them, talking out loud as I work.

I ask students to read their work out loud. Most will do this only at home, but I ask them to read slow enough to focus on each word and hear the punctuation they've used. Since I read to students every day in class, they are used to this "voice of a text."

6. *Can students really write about anything?*

Nope. P. J. wanted to write his loss of virginity story in all its graphic details. Not a chance.

7. *Can heterogeneous grouping work?*

It does in my room. In fact, I think it has distinct advantages to the culture and climate of a school and to the education of the most talented population we serve. One of my beliefs about public school is its power to transform thinking about economic disparity in our country. When those privileged sit beside students who work thirty hours a week to make their car and insurance payments, it matters. The shared stories are one gift, but the shared respect is something else. Students in our school have been separated into levels for most of their schooling, and when they have this opportunity to share their work, they gain a mutual respect. I also offer weekly vocabulary study and extensions of assignments to honors students, but make that offer to all, so that those who've never earned honors credit in the past have the opportunity to reach for it.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHING

1. *How do I find time to teach writing?*

Something else has to go. I think we have to address the imbalance in most high school English classrooms between literature and writing. Students need to write more and they need to write many things that are not connected to literature. The schools that I admire have divided up all grade levels of English into equal parts writing and literature. They teach in units and most spend one quarter writing and reading about literature, then the next quarter writing and reading about their own interests while the teacher focuses on a particular genre. Certainly reading and writing should work together, but we also have to help students find a place for their passions that often have little to do with classic literature.

2. *Finding time for my own writing is even more difficult than finding time to teach writing. How do I find that time? Is it really that important?*

Yes. It really is that important. Begin by writing when students are writing—even just for a few minutes. Talk about how you might complete the work you have assigned

to them. Don't try to write a perfect model; work to understand the process that will help you write and show students what you try. Remember that you don't have to take a piece all the way to final draft every time. And remember the words of Don Murray, "Fifteen minutes a day and you'll have a book in a year."

Our students need to believe that writing has a purpose in their daily lives. They will see this real-life purpose in the model of a teacher who writes. We write well when we have a purpose, an audience, or a passion, not for a grade or reward, to just "finish" an assignment, or to practice a skill. Writers write to discover our own understandings about life and to communicate those to others. Writing is simply not like memorizing the capitals and states, and we can't teach it that way. Writing is a tool for living more fully, for preserving moments that matter or those that don't make sense.

The teacher who uses her own writing to teach models that passionate search and motivates kids to use literacy to preserve what matters to them. Kids stop playing games with assignments and start using conventions to convey meaning, sentence structure to shape and tell a story, and details to share what they know more fully.

The teacher who writes speaks with knowledge about the process writers use to compose a variety of texts. Talk is centered as writer to writer, and students respond with honesty about the troubles they are having with their own texts. Teaching is more efficient because students seek understanding, instead of resisting a teacher's exercises and practice essays. The engagement begins when the student has control of the text. Until the teacher lets go of writing prompts and assignments, little about real writing is learned in a classroom. Students who are pursuing their own pieces come in with their own needs and are eager to learn. The classroom becomes a real workshop once the teacher puts her own text in front of students and invites them to observe her moves as a writer solving real writing problems.

3. *Our local and state systems for assessing writing simply don't resemble process approaches to teaching writing. How do I deal with the testing problem?*

I teach the "test-taking genre" in class as the SAT approaches. We offer test-prep classes after school and in the evening. I talk to students about the audience for the work and the expectations for their writing. I tell them to use all they've learned (details, voice, organization) and to know that with so little time to write (twenty-five minutes), simpler is better. I tell them this is the place when the five-paragraph essay works.

4. *How much does reading help writing or writing help reading?*

I always quote Nancie Atwell on this one, “There’s nothing better for you—not broccoli, not an apple a day, not aerobic exercise. In terms of the whole rest of your life, in terms of making you smart in all ways, there’s nothing better. Top-ranking scientists and mathematicians are people who read a lot. Top-ranking historians and researchers are people who read a lot. It’s like money in the bank in terms of the rest of your life, but it also helps you escape from the rest of your life and live experiences you can only dream of. Most important, along with writing, it’s the best way I know to find out who you are, what you care about, and what kind of person you want to become.”

5. *How do you work with an administrator who thinks the only important things in writing are grammar, punctuation, and spelling?*

I remember a middle school principal I had years ago. She was a smart woman, but when I started teaching seventh grade she gave me a grammar textbook as curriculum. I took it home that night and went back the next morning with a sticky note of questions. I asked her, “What’s a gerund and when was the last time you used one? Do you know what an appositive does in a sentence?” She laughed and admitted she had no idea. We then talked about what students at the school needed to learn, and she let me go on with my work. I made a point to show her how I taught and assessed mechanics in class and to show her the progress students were making with the writing workshop approach.

6. *Why aren’t kids learning to write well when they are presented with rules and models and are asked to do lots and lots of writing for all those years before they reach high school?*

This question has plagued me for some time. But just the other day I was giving a workshop at school near here, and I mentioned in passing that I didn’t know who Tom Brady is. A teacher said, “You must live in a cave! How can you not know? The Patriots just won the Super Bowl!” And I agreed with her because it seems that I should know. I live in New England. Everyone has been talking about them—wearing Brady jerseys, I remember now that I think about it—but I have been not attending to it. I’ve heard his name numerous times—I even would’ve guessed football because the knowledge has passed by me many times I’m sure, but I’d fail a test on it. I don’t know who he is. If you ask me, I’ll look mystified.

And that is exactly what is happening in too many high school classrooms. The kids don't care; they don't want to learn; they just aren't interested, so they don't attend. They are belligerent about our manipulation so they *will* attend, and they have no deep knowledge because their heads are elsewhere when the information is presented. When I'm watching the news and it turns to sports (unless it is tennis or hockey), I tune out. I'm looking at the weather in the stadium behind the announcer or noticing his tie or how he's speaking. I might wonder how the report was written. I'm wasting time until his part is over and the program moves to something I care about. I'm making a point of not listening and not learning.

So what is it for you? Formulas in math? Car parts or how an engine runs? Art history? Fashion? You know there are things that you just don't learn, even if you see them many times. We all tune in and out of life and it affects what we learn. How come I can read something once (like an obscure fact about an author I love) and remember it forever and then read something many times and still not know it, like the current price of gas in our town? I bet I couldn't guess it within twenty cents a gallon. I'm just not paying attention.

What's the answer? Our kids are not attending to what we're teaching because it seems to have no value. They won't ever read *A Separate Peace* again, so helping them rewrite the paper on it is just an exercise. They don't see that they're learning how to write; they think it is about that paper. It is why they use that ultimate insult ("busy-work") to describe most of what they are asked to do in school. And yes, a few do pay attention, but far fewer than we believe. We try segregating kids by their willingness to work, but there are far more outside of that box than in it. How narrow can we make the honors track? And when left to teach all of the others this same distancing curriculum, how dissatisfying the work is.

What's the answer? It has to be personally meaningful. That's what snags our attention. I'm an expert on nineteenth-century British women authors—five to six in particular—and Impressionist art, and—I shudder to admit this—fashion design. I've read widely on each. I revisit these areas often (retention theory) and truly embrace learning in each category. I attend. I study even. But ask me about history or biology or math or, obviously, the Patriots, and I know little. I find ways to compensate. I ask questions—the same one over and over, knowing that I've asked it before and I still won't learn it. It isn't that I can't. I don't. I won't. I won't try with a better teacher. Other things in my life give me energy, but not those. I want someone else to enjoy those things; don't ask me to.

We have to get students' attention in order for them to learn how to write. The only way to do that is to show them what writing means to us, so that they can find topics and writing pieces that will be personally meaningful to them. If we engage them in our own authentic learning, they will more likely engage in their own. Then they'll write measurably better under our care.

7. *How does writing story prepare students for college?*

Last year my son was a college freshman in an honors program in math. He has sent me the writing he's done this year for all of his courses, and I've looked for the match with what I'm teaching seniors. Each honors student is required to choose a writing-intensive course each year and he was thrilled to find a course centered on hockey. Here is the proposal for his final project in that course.

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Individual Research Paper Proposal

Hockey: the Coolest Game?

Cameron Kittle

Red and white clad fans cheered madly and pandemonium ensued at Joe Louis Arena on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997 as the beloved captain and city hero, Steve Yzerman, lifted the Stanley Cup for the Detroit Red Wings for the first time since the 1955 season. The city was buzzing with excitement for weeks as the team who, only ten years before, were known throughout professional hockey as the 'Dead Wings'. Losing seasons piled up after the Gordie Howe era came to an end in 1970 and the Red Wings consistently missed the playoffs year after year. The city of Detroit was in a downward spiral with economic and education issues in the mid 1980s and their hockey team did little to improve Detroiters' morale. The early nineties showed signs of promise but still showed no results. Finally, after a mediocre regular season, the Wings caught fire in the playoffs and swept the Philadelphia Flyers in four games to win its first Stanley Cup in 42 years. The city came together around that championship and soon associated the term 'Hockeytown' with the rebirth of a fallen city. Over a million fans showed up for the victory parade through Detroit on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997, showing their true dedication and support for the team. This commitment can be seen throughout the history of all sports and begs the question, how can a championship team help improve the spirits of a city and bring its citizens together around a common cause?

There are numerous recent examples of cities rallying around their sports teams: the 'Red Sox Nation' group of fans in New England in 2004 when the Boston Red Sox won the World Series for the first time in 86 years, the rally monkeys for the Los Angeles Angels during their World Series title run in 2002, and even the crazed waving of Pittsburgh's 'Terrible

Towels' throughout the Steelers Super Bowl victory in 2006. Thomas Joiner, Daniel Hollar, and Kimberly Van Orden conducted a study for the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* in which they determined that local suicide rates in some cities correlated with the final national rankings of local college football teams. While bringing citizens together around a championship team does not connect to suicide, their dissertation agreed with those thoughts in saying, "perceived membership in a valued group as well as interactions with group members result in sports-related 'pulling together' that may meet the need to belong."<sup>1</sup> They refer to a group 'pulling together' in something sports-related to meet a need to belong and that is exactly what my question addresses, only in this case the 'group' is an entire city of committed fans who are 'pulling together' to follow and root for their favorite sports team.

The case context I will explore in my research on how championship teams can improve the spirits of a city and bring its citizens together will be the transformation of the city of Detroit from the 'Dead Wings' era of losing in the NHL to the dynasty years of 'Hockeytown' and how the Stanley Cup victory in the 1996-1997 season solidified that change. I will interview my father, who worked with many Red Wings fans at his job in Ypsilanti, Michigan. I will also use newspapers, like the *Detroit Free Press*, and magazines, like *Sports Illustrated*. In addition to primary source material, my research will include scholarly sources from databases like those found in Academic Search Premier. Finally, I will organize all of the material I gather and form it into a formal account of how a championship team can bring a city together.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Joiner and Daniel Hollar and Kimberly Van Orden, "On Buckeyes, Gators, Super Bowl Sunday, and the Miracle on Ice: "Pulling Together" is Associated with Lower Suicide Rates," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 25 (Nov. 2nd, 2006): 179.

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Clearly the ability to summarize and illuminate story is worthwhile for those headed toward college and, of course, for those who will end their educations in high school. But I think it is worthwhile for bigger things as well. Working with story helps students read more deeply because thinking about intention in writing helps us see and hear writing differently. I believe that to see personal experience as art can help all of us live more fully in each moment: to notice and then to care, to slow down and absorb all of the richness of life laid at our feet each day.

#### 8. *How do you study vocabulary?*

This is about social justice to me, not busywork. I work with students, most of whom are not likely to hire an SAT coach or practice vocabulary before they take the test. They are not likely to have heard many of the words educated people use regularly and they don't watch the nightly news. We study five words each week, and the students

take a quiz every two weeks that is cumulative, leading to about 100 words they should know well by the end of the semester. We are slowly moving vocabulary study into all the content courses in our school and particularly in all English courses at all grade levels. I use Jim Burke's vocabulary squares from *Tools for Thought* as a way to learn each word, and we practice in class with synonyms or using a visual thesaurus online. Students begin to use the words in their writing and I applaud them for it. It's an area we simply can't ignore.

9. *How do I help my administrator understand what I'm doing if I teach writing in a writing workshop?*

We've all been there: a drop-in evaluation by an evaluator with all of the instant anxiety it creates. *Why today? Why this class?* The administrator types or scribbles rapidly on a clipboard for thirty minutes or so, then escapes out the side door. How can that moment in time begin to show all of the work I put into my teaching?

I might have one or two observations a year and I want to make them good, but there is so much to say and so little time. Without help, my administrator will make assumptions based on what he saw that day, and I'll end up countering with my philosophy in bite-sized bits and my thinking in a rough outline form. None of the richness I've put into my work can be explained like this: It will likely feel unsatisfying for us both. I have to do more.

Here's what we know about administrators: Most come from teaching, but few come from teaching writing. Currently in my building I could be observed by one of five evaluators: I have a principal who was a former math teacher; an assistant principal who was a former social studies teacher; another assistant who worked as a substitute coordinator but has never been a teacher; the director of vocational programs in our school; or our guidance director who has never taught. They may be well-read and understand some things about adolescent literacy, but it is unlikely they have my deep understanding of teaching writing. If I don't provide them with information on my classroom routines and purposes, my observations are likely to be an exercise, not a learning experience for either of us.

Extended time with an administrator in a busy public high school is unlikely. Putting together a portfolio of articles that explains my teaching or shows my work may be smart, but in the drop-in evaluation, it won't help me. And let's face it, few administrators have the time to really read my portfolio along with eighty others. I can shrug my shoulders and say they'll never get it, or I can teach them. I choose to teach.

I have created a clipboard of information for the evaluator to look at while I'm teaching. *During* the lesson is when an evaluator needs to understand what my students are doing—more than before or after the lesson. I can provide a lens for how to see. Here's what's on my clipboard:

- A classroom map/cheat sheet that explains what the administrator will see in my room.
  - o I include a legend that explains purposes, likely student and teacher behaviors, roles of both students and teacher, and the structure of a lesson within a unit.
- A brief explanation of *big* questions I can anticipate:
  - o Why make time for SSR in a high school classroom instead of just assigning it for homework?
  - o What is a minilesson and how does it work in a unit? Why might I be using my own writing in a minilesson?
  - o What is a model text and how is it used to teach writing?
  - o Why have students confer with each other?
  - o How often will students get time one-on-one with the teacher?
  - o When and how do I teach grammar and vocabulary?
  - o How are students assessed?
  - o What kind of feedback can an evaluator provide for me that will help me become a better teacher?
- How the current unit fits into the essential questions for the course—how one unit fits within the next and why they are ordered and structured the way they are in one semester (see writing scaffold, Figure 3.1, p. 13).
- An explanation of student work that will be delivered by one of my students when the evaluator arrives—a student portfolio and the writer's notebook.

*Things have a way of turning out so badly.*

—AMANDA WINGFIELD  
IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

This all takes time to prepare, but I've found that being misunderstood takes even more. And besides, I want to be seen as the together teacher I believe I am, especially if the lesson observed doesn't go well.

10. *What do you do when writing workshop isn't working?*

Here are some things I consider when writing workshop looks more like a hurricane than a productive classroom. My workshop rests on independence and purpose. Those qualities can be challenging when the temptation to goof off is strong. Sometimes I have too many students who appear to be wasting time. Students who waste time in workshop are doing so intentionally. If I respond with a lecture about expectations, I'm wasting time: It is the wah-wah-wah-wah voice of the teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons. I do this instead:

**In a quick write to close class today, I'd like you to answer one of these two questions:**

- Why were you wasting time during workshop today?
- What were you working on—what did you discover, wonder, and so on? Tell me about your process in working on writing.

I have to leave the door open for those who weren't wasting time—often more students than I think. But I have to be honest in the purpose of this as well—no one is getting in trouble here. I'm taking the temperature of the class. I'm problem solving, soliciting feedback, looking for solutions. I can't assume I know what is going on—I have to listen first.

These are common student reasons for procrastinating during workshop:

- *Tired of working in class.* Little sleep, big test in another class, argument with a friend: in other words: nothing to do with me. Solution: remind the class of options for those who just can't work that day—like silent reading, working in notebook on sketching or listing or ranting, but not chattering and wandering. You have to show students that you get the idea that sometimes they just can't

be productive. Explain it as part of the process of writing, but also a crutch or excuse many writers (even published, successful ones) find themselves using and must learn to overcome.

- *Something really troubling has happened in the student's life.* Failure, college admissions, serious illness, death of a pet, and so forth. I need to know this. Where else in the busyness of school can they find the time to tell me?
- *Procrastination.* The student doesn't want to write and started bugging others, and since I ignored it, the problem multiplied. Sometimes I use this information to move seats for the next day; sometimes I just really manage distractions for the next few class periods and communicate continually my expectation that all writers work hard without excuses. If they can't, they don't get in the way of anyone else. That is a basic definition of respect.
- *Poor teaching.* Not a clear model or next step—too many need help and wait too long for me, which unless I recognize and stop and re-teach can leave all of my writers frustrated. If I repeat the same kinds of instructions several times in a period, I need to stop and regroup. Maybe I ask small groups to gather and discuss the expectations for the exercise or I just re-teach the class.
- *They should move on to another idea.* Even late in a unit I've seen students start over and write much better with less time because the idea propels them.

Disengaged students waste time. I try to listen first to students, and then adjust what is happening to make learning and engagement more likely.

I imagine there are questions I haven't answered here, but I believe you can find those answers in the smart colleagues down the hall, in the line for coffee at a writing conference, or in one of the many books published each year on the teaching of writing. Seek answers. The challenge of this work is what makes it so satisfying to master.