

# JENNIFER SERRAVALLO

*New York Times* best-selling author of *The Reading Strategies Book*

Grades  
*K-8*



# *Teaching* WRITING *in Small Groups*



**Heinemann**

361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912  
www.heinemann.com

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# THE CASE FOR Small-Group Instruction in Writing

When and how do students write in school? What are the purposes for writing, and what procedures and processes do students follow when they write? Where does small-group instruction fit?

Consider Mr. Rivera's, Mr. De La Fuente's, and Ms. Walker's classrooms. As you read, notice how small-group instruction benefits students and teachers in every case, no matter the approach to writing instruction or grade level.

## FROM CONFERRING TO SMALL GROUPS

**Mr. Rivera** describes himself as a "writing workshop teacher." He organizes his writing into monthlong units of study, each focused on a different genre. Every day, he teaches a very short whole-class lesson focused on one strategy, and then sends children off to write on topics they've self-selected. While children write, he makes his way around the classroom to confer with students one-on-one, something he's learned from studying Calkins, Graves, Murray, Atwell, and Anderson. He spends about five to seven minutes with each student checking to see

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**FROM  
CONFERRING  
TO SMALL  
GROUPS**  
CONT.

*Mr. Rivera Continued from previous page*

how they are getting on with the class lessons and with strategies he's taught them in prior conferences, giving them targeted feedback on their writing, and offering them a strategy that will help them most today. He takes notes on each conference and follows up with students on past teaching. Some days children meet with writing partners, and most days the workshop ends with a gathering that he calls a "share" where students learn from each other.

Mr. Rivera loves the way he knows each of his writers. He feels confident that he's giving them support they need and he and his students enjoy the time they spend in conferences. What nags at him is how infrequently he's able to meet with students. In a class of twenty-eight fifth graders, with conferences averaging 5–7 minutes each plus a little time to travel from student to student and take some notes in between, it takes him seven class periods, or about a week and a half, to get back around to each student a second time. In that time, kids have often moved through multiple steps of the writing process, and many opportunities for individualized feedback have passed him by.

Incorporating small groups, and balancing small groups with individual conferring, will help him to maintain the valuable individualized instruction he's able to accomplish with conferring, but double the number of children he's able to see each week. He might start with one type of small group that feels like a conference—a strategy lesson—and pull a few children together at a time.

**FROM THE  
WHOLE CLASS  
WITH THE  
SAME GOALS  
TO BALANCING  
INDIVIDUAL  
NEEDS**

**Mr. De La Fuente** is trying to prepare his eighth graders for the sorts of academic writing they'll need to engage with next year in high school, specifically literary analysis and essay writing. He's painstakingly crafted a detailed rubric detailing what each student's piece needs to have, and he has offered a list of three thesis statements to choose from that align to the novel the students have just studied as a class. Each day, he gives a short lecture on one criteria from the rubric, and students work on a portion of their piece at their seats. While they work, he responds to raised hands, answering questions and giving help as students ask for it.

After a week, he asks all students to leave their drafts on his desk at the end of the class period. During lunch, as he looks through the drafts, he sees their needs run the gamut, although every student heard the same lecture each day. There seem to be a few that could use work on their introduction paragraphs. Several students still need to properly cite sources. Some are going on for way more sentences than necessary in each body paragraph, and it's cluttering the writing. Some seem to be including

details from the text that aren't relevant, and it's muddying the focus of their piece.

He knows he's *taught* it all, but clearly they haven't all learned at the same pace. He offered to answer any questions that came up, but he realizes that it's likely that some didn't know enough about what issues they had in their writing to ask for help.

Incorporating small groups as students revise will allow him to target each area he's noticing students need support with, and go from having whole-class goals to finding individual goals for each student.

## FROM WHOLE- CLASS SHARED PRACTICE TO SMALL- GROUP GUIDED PRACTICE

**Ms. Walker** believes in the power of writing instruction to help her first graders write better—and read better. She makes time every day for a whole-class lesson where her students help her compose a text. Some days they work on a new text; other days they return to previously written texts and make revisions and edits.

When teaching a writing lesson, she gathers her twenty-five first graders onto their classroom rug and directs their attention to the easel with chart paper. Sometimes she does all the writing, calling on children to give suggestions, or inviting them to turn and talk before sharing what a friend has said. Other times, she invites children up to write a letter or whole word on the chart. She feels that these shared and interactive writing lessons are very helpful in providing children with language models and examples of the genre they are practicing writing, and the students seem to enjoy them. But every day, she feels that although a portion of the children are completely with her, there are some who are bored (they know all the things she's pointing out and could just write it on their own) and others are confused (the lesson is moving too fast, or the sorts of strategies they are practicing aren't within their current grasp). When she sends children off to do some of their own writing, she sees her lessons stick for a portion of the class, but she knows many children need something else.

Incorporating small groups during the time when children are doing their own writing, and balancing these small groups with some of the whole-class lessons she has children engage in, will allow her to more carefully fine-tune and target what students need. They will get more support and specialized feedback on their specific pieces of writing and their strategies and processes. She can even use some of the same methods—shared writing and interactive writing—in small groups, and also try out some new methods for different purposes.