

Coming Back to Essentials in Teaching Writing

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We are coming back to school changed human beings. We come back from living inside for months with family, from learning how to learn and teach on computer screens, from frustrations and fear of failure, from missing our students and colleagues, and for many, from fear of illness and death.

Everything is different, and nothing can go back to exactly how it was before. And though there would be comfort in returning to familiar patterns of how to do school, those patterns will not work in our new world, and in some ways, we know they didn't work in our old world, either.

Some might recommend that a "return to basics" will be necessary as schools reopen to compensate for the "learning loss" that occurred while children were away from desks, bells, paper, and pencils. When people cite a need for "basics" in writing, they often mean the rules of capitals and spelling, of

paragraph lengths and complex sentences. Although we agree that language conventions matter, we believe they can be learned through daily writing practice. When we think about how to teach young people to write, we mean teaching how to express, to connect, to want to make sense of the world and to make it a better, safer place for all. The "basics" help produce comprehensible writing, and we will teach those, but what we hope to remember are the essential conditions necessary for all writers, before the world changed, and even more so as we adjust to how things are now.

We believe that when we come back to school this particular year, after discomfort and continuing uncertainty, we must begin, slowly and simply, to reestablish important relationships with the children in our care.

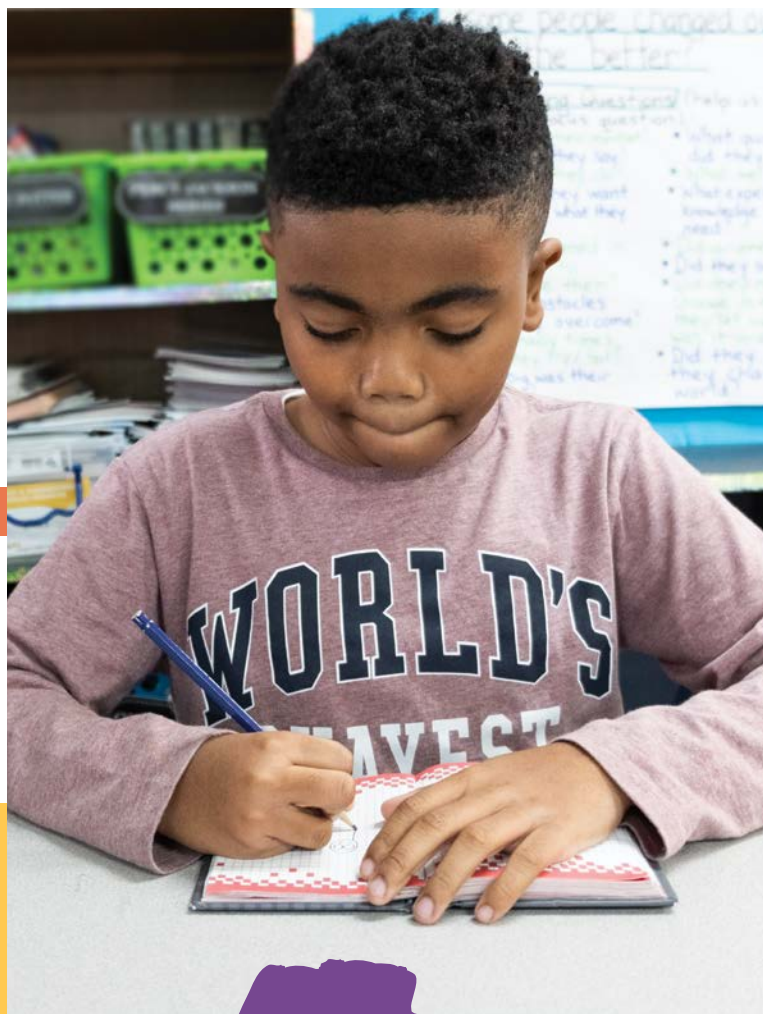
Then, we can reflect and ask ourselves what works in the teaching of writing. And what we have known since the early work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and others is that, beyond packets of grammar and handwriting and strategy worksheets, writers learn craft and conventions and discover energy to compose when they have uninterrupted blocks of time to write, when they choose what they are excited to write about, and when they have real readers and audiences in mind to write for.

Time

Choice

Response

Into these three learning conditions, we can tuck dozens of things to teach about writing, such as features of genre, how to ask for and give specific feedback, how to reread constantly to revise for meaning and edit for conventions, when they appear necessary for our students. With these three building blocks, we can design schedules, space, and curriculum to give our students from pre-K to college what they desire and what they need to learn to write.



Time

Rather than race through a list of language standards to “catch them up” and fill in presumed gaps in our students’ understanding, we must guard with our whole beings anywhere from thirty to forty-five minutes each day to relax into writing together. With a short lesson and time to share at the end, writing workshop takes from forty-five to sixty minutes.

When we maintain a consistent, uninterrupted bubble of time for writing every day, we help our students discover who they are and what they need as writers, inside a structure we can use to model composition strategies and the nuts and bolts of craft. Daily writing time allows for continual practice, for gaining ease with producing numerous drafts, and for looking back, rereading with a pen in hand to revise and see the writing improve across time. Our ultimate goal, across weeks and months, is to fashion independent writers, who know what they do beautifully and what they struggle with in their writing work.

When we make time to deeply listen, interact, and watch without judgment as they work, we connect with our students and find how best to teach them as writers.

Our daily writing workshop becomes a time to learn about each other as human beings and to build a community that inspires and supports each writer.

Consider making time for students to . . .

- have a routine block of daily, uninterrupted time to create texts with pictures and words
- work on projects across time that involve writing to think and discover, plan, collect information, draft, revise, edit, and publish
- talk about writing in true discussion around things that matter to the people we share a room with each day
- celebrate and elevate the process of writing happening every day, and not just the products created at the end.

Choice

Our classrooms, whether physical or virtual, can invite all sorts of authentic, child-invented choices to make writing feel vital and engaging. We often worry that children feel stuck, so we grab at clever prompts and assignments we find on the internet. We must let go of the urge to prompt children's thinking because every time we tell or even suggest what kids should write, we take away their inner compass, their personal power, their sense that they have lives worth writing about, and the tools necessary to find their own topics.

We might worry that children are choosing topics that feel repetitive or inappropriate for school, such as stories clearly lifted

from video games. But since our goal is for students to love to write, to compose coherent, engaging texts and make them clear for readers, their content could be almost anything. We can teach powerful narrative features whether the story is about softball or mermaids or meeting a best friend. When students enjoy their topics, and they have information at their fingertips, they are more comfortable turning thoughts and ideas into well-written text.

What matters is that children learn how to manipulate language and form and make it clear for readers, no matter the content. When kids love what they are writing about, it feels like important work—a place where their voices can be heard on topics and issues that matter to them, and where they are in the driver's seat.

What matters is that each young person develops a process that works for them.

This process will be one they can navigate for any writing tasks they will confront in school and work, one that sets them up to be creators and producers of literature, analysis, opinion, reflection, and information.

Consider offering students the choice of . . .

- what to write about, whether it is fairy gardens, fan fiction, rants about unequal access to technology, or a memory of a pet cat riding the bus to school
- what genre or form the writing will take
- what mentor text to study, imitate, and learn from
- who will be partners and/or small groups to share with throughout the journey of a piece of writing
- where to put their bodies in the classroom to feel comfortable and get writing work done
- who the audience will be and where they will publish their writing.



Response

Writers need an audience for their work. It feels good to be seen, heard, and appreciated for the thought and energy put into making the work the best it can be. Young writers also need and desire constant feedback to their growing literacy skills. When we respond with specific comments, they begin to internalize the features that make writing enjoyable and readable. Celebrating before an audience at the other end of the act of writing gives students a reason to write and to write well.

In our individual writing conferences, in the way we respond to students as human beings, we lean on relationship as the fundamental learning condition. We actively assess, in these beautiful five minutes of full attention we give to each student's thinking and writing, something that will guide them to extend and revise their work. The first thing we ask is for students to talk about what they are thinking as they write. This helps them articulate their process and feel safe to point out places of confusion and struggle. We listen intently or glance at the work that sits between us and name for them what they are doing brilliantly as writers. In the naming, we are also *teaching* students what they already have and can use forever in their writing. We then urge them to extend what they can already do, to risk trying some new way to organize text or add detail to a sentence using a relative clause. Although we are responsible for helping our students know and be able to use multiple skills in writing, we do not have to teach in a robotic fashion, devoid of tenderness and awe.

In the writing workshop, we also give students daily opportunities to collaborate with peer partners and/or small groups to provide multiple chances to talk about what is going well with their pieces and what sticky spots they would like

help with. As kids learn from our modeling in minilessons and conferences how to talk kindly and constructively about writing, they become truly authentic and crucial audiences for each other's work.

Finally, we publish and celebrate students' writing. We invite families and guests to the party and provide treats. We post writing online to share with the world. We host readings at bookstores and cafés. The most powerful way to ensure our students have an audience for their writing, which can then lead to an intention to make their writing better, is to plan a number of writing celebrations, community ceremonies across the school year.

Consider ways to build in more response to writing by ...

- making a plan to confer one-to-one with every student across a week
- teaching students how to talk about writing with a partner or in a small group and making time for those discussions to happen daily
- planning celebrations every few weeks: the poems, stories, plays, and essays students produce; a favorite entry in their writing notebooks; the process they took from idea to draft to final piece; or the revisions that made their drafts better
- teaching family and community members how to respond to student writing by giving them a template for naming something they admire about the piece.

As the world sheltered in place this past spring and summer, we discovered who and what are essential to our lives. When loved ones' lives are threatened, the essential becomes crystal clear. For many, writing, and reading what others have written, has been a lifeline. As we come back to our common spaces and communities of learning, writing rises up again as a critical art and skill to carry into our lives. Writing is a tool for thinking and making sense of everything students learn across the day. Writing is an important part of many jobs and careers, as well as a primary tool for communicating with others, especially as we commune globally online. Writing creates beauty and meaning in human lives, and it can be a spiritual and a healing act. It feels essential, therefore, that we give our students all the time, choice, and response possible for this life-giving act.

Writing can be the first thing we do together as we come back to our classrooms and what will hold us together through the year.



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