The writing workshop is such a rich learning environment, you won’t want to wait until later in the year to begin. We strongly recommend you start early in the year, as soon as your students’ back-to-school heebie-jeebies have calmed down a tad. There’s more than one way to launch a writing workshop. In this chapter we’ll suggest the simplest approach we know.

Launching the Workshop

Loosening the Soil

One teacher was surprised the first time she observed a writing workshop. “You mean they just . . . write?” she asked.

Well, yes. But before they actually start writing, you might spend time reading to them. Reading a number of short texts (poems,
narrative passages, or picture books) will help “prime the pump” for your student writers. Books like *Fireflies*! by Julie Brinckloe, for example, or Judith Viorst’s *The Pain and the Great One* will remind students that real writing has its roots in everyday experiences. (See Appendix G for other suggested books.) Don’t get hung up on trying to find brand-new books they’ve never seen before. If your students already know a book you want to share, so much the better!

After you read these books aloud, you can ask: “Does this book give you an idea you could write about?” This will generate discussion. Students can start their own individual lists of ideas for their writing.

You might also encourage your students to tell personal stories, either to the whole class or a partner. James Britton, whose books have had a seminal influence on current literacy studies, once commented that in a classroom the writing and reading “floats on a sea of talk.” Students come to school with a long suit in talking. A typical elementary school student can write only ten or fifteen words per minute, but he or she can speak two or three hundred words per minute! Storytelling takes advantage of this oral fluency.

When students tell stories, they draw on the familiar and can quickly get comfortable with their own voice. Becky Holder, a storyteller in upstate New York, asked a group of first graders if they wanted to tell a story. Those who did raised their hands. Becky used a simple rhyme before calling on the students: “Apple, peaches, pumpkin pie, is it true or is it a lie?” One by one the students sat in the Author’s Chair and told a story. When each student was finished, the other kids were asked to extend their fingers if they thought the story was true, or cross their fingers if they thought some part of the story was not true. When kids tell stories out loud to a supportive audience, it won’t be long before they are itching to write.
Surviving the First Day

This is meant as a tongue-in-cheek heading. Survival sounds dramatic, tinged with danger, but you may be surprised to find that it’s not as scary as that. In fact, beginning a writing workshop can be a lot of fun. For once you won’t have to generate all the content and struggle to teach it to passive learners. The writing workshop puts students on the spot and requires them to be active learners. If it’s done right, your students’ inexhaustible energy—their stories, interests, passions—will fuel the learning environment.

The Minilesson

Begin by asking your kids to join you in a meeting area. We often like to start by saying: “A writer is someone who makes decisions: How will you begin? What words will you use? Who do you want to read your writing? How long will it be? Your first decision is—what are you going to write about?” We will return to the idea of writer as decision maker many times in future workshop sessions.

You might start by sharing two or three personal stories from your own life. Keep your stories short. Usually one of your examples will spark ideas for your students to write about. Choose stories with different emotional content—strange, sad, funny. If you tell about the time your cat got run over, you’ll likely get twenty-five my-cat-died-too stories!

After you’re finished sharing, ask the kids: “Those are my stories. But what are you going to write about? Take a minute and think.” Then you could say: “Please turn and tell the person beside you what you plan to write about. Don’t tell the whole story, just the main idea. If you’re not sure, listen to what your partner is going to write about.”
Give students a minute or two to exchange their writing ideas. Then ask four or five kids to share their ideas out loud. Being supportive is always important, especially at this crucial moment.

Next, invite students to choose what kind of paper they want to write on. If you provide a variety of paper choices (lined, unlined, large, small, premade books) each student will feel more comfortable as he or she gets started. Now they can begin to write their stories. We tell kids that writing is “chatting on paper.”

“Tell me your story,” we might say. “I can’t wait to read it.”

Let them know what to expect: “We’ll write for thirty-five minutes, then we’ll gather again right back here.”

Writing Time

Find a seat and write with your students. Begin a piece of your own writing, even if you only want to write for five minutes or so. You’re giving your students a powerful image: a grown-up doing what they’re trying to do. You’ll be surprised to see how such a simple thing—writing with your students instead of supervising them—has a remarkable way of setting a serious tone.

After you spend some time writing, you’ll probably want to get up and confer with your students. Writing conferences bring you close to the act of student writing. Pull in close. You may want to kneel, sit, or squat so you’re at the student’s eye level. You’ll want to immediately signal that you’re in a listening mode: “How’s it going?”

Peter Elbow, author of many books on the teaching of writing, once remarked that a good writing teacher is “half-host, half-bouncer”—in other words, both inviting and demanding. Those are two distinct approaches, and they are both important. Early in the year you want to err on the side of being a good host. Many kids
already have their writing phobias, and they will drag them into your workshop. The best way to defuse them is by projecting an encouraging, appreciative attitude. Try to be there as a reader before you're there as a corrector. You’ve got the entire year to help them polish their writing and refine their technique. Now is the time for you to lavish unconditional support and appreciation.

Keep these conferences short and punchy. Engage, listen, react as a human being. Find something to celebrate in their writing and point it out to them. Then make your exit.

The most predictable problem on the first day: kids with blank papers! Nothing to write about! Expect this problem so you’re ready to deal with it. You might interview such students, asking questions to help them find a subject, such as:

- What do you know lots about?
- Do you play sports? What about other activities like dance or chess?
- What number are you in the family? Oldest? Youngest? Middle?
- Who’s your best friend? Or a good friend?
- Is there a special relative you spend lots of time with?
- Do you collect stuff?
- Ever go to the hospital?
- Did you ever move? Did you have a best friend you left behind?
- Do you have a pet? Do you wish you had one? What kind?

Ask these questions briskly, without dwelling on any one, and jot down the answers on a sheet of paper. Often kids have a wealth of rich experiences they could draw upon for their writing, but for some reason they censor themselves. When you write them down,
they can see all the possibilities. You might suggest: “Read over this list. See if there’s one idea that tugs at your sleeve, that makes you want to write about it. I’d suggest you pick an idea where you’ve got lots to say about it.”

A student interview usually works, but it takes up valuable time. You can also help a student by pairing him or her up with another student. Let’s say Trey has nothing to write about. You know that Trey’s best friend is Josh, so you call Josh over. Use an understanding tone when you explain the situation: “Trey is having a problem that writers have all the time. He’s having trouble coming up with something to write about. Josh, don’t give Trey a topic, but get him thinking and talking about what he knows lots about. And Trey, you can use Josh as a sounding board to help you figure out what to write about. You guys find a quiet place in the class. Take three or four minutes, and see if you come up with a writing idea for Trey.”

By pairing up two writers, you free yourself to meet with other students. And you help kids solve a problem without you. This usually works three out of four times.

Be patient with kids who don’t instantly start writing. Certain people take a bit longer to warm up their engines.

**Share Sessions**

As you’re conferring with students, keep an eye out for writing that you’d like a student to share with the rest of the class. When the writing time is done, ask the kids to stop writing. (Linda Rief, middle school teacher and author of *Seeking Diversity*, asks kids to stop wherever they are in their drafts, even if they’re in the middle of a word.) You might inquire: “How many writers are not finished? Raise your hands.” Usually, most of the kids raise their hands. “I’m not surprised,” you can tell them. “It takes time to do good work. We don’t want to rush our writing.”

*Writing Workshop*
Use the last ten or fifteen minutes of workshop for sharing time. Before having the kids reconvene at the meeting area, pick two or three students to share their writing. Only those students should bring their papers to the meeting place. The rest should be empty-handed (no notebooks, pencils, or pens). We talked about sharing time in Chapter 2. But there are special considerations the first time you do this with kids.

The share gives them a real audience for their work. Like many aspects of the workshop, share time seems both simple and complex. On the one hand, it’s a time to affirm the work of your writers. The tone should be positive and celebratory. But it must be handled carefully, especially at the beginning, because you are setting a tone for the workshop. Be careful as you select the writing that gets shared early on. When silly, superficial, or offensive writing gets read aloud, other kids are encouraged to produce similar writing. On the other hand, if pure excellence is your main criteria, your weaker writers may feel that they will never get to share. On the first day, pick a few kids of differing abilities whose writing models the kind of writing you’re hoping other kids will produce.

Kids don’t have to be finished with their writing in order to share it with the class. There’s two advantages to asking kids to share unfinished work. First, it encourages them to stay with their writing, to revise, and not rush to completion. Also, when you catch young writers in the process of writing they are more likely to see a draft as tentative, not chiseled in stone.

During a share, the student reads a piece out loud. (If it’s a long piece, you may suggest a particular page or passage gets read.) Other students listen carefully so they can respond. When the writer has finished reading, ask the class members to respond to questions like these:

- What did you learn from this piece of writing?
What did this writer do well?
What questions do you have?

Keep the share positive. When your kids answer these questions, they will tend to talk to you: “I like how he described his uncle’s fishing boat.” Encourage them instead to respond directly to the student writer, or the child sitting in the Author’s Chair. After the student writer has received a dose of feedback, you might say: “The class has given you lots of ideas. What are you going to do next with this writing?”

Here’s an alternative way to have students share. Instead of putting one student on the spot, you might ask each class member to read aloud one sentence from his or her writing. It could be a favorite sentence, or it could simply be the lead sentence. It’s probably best to respond nonverbally at this point, but even so try to project a positive response to each sentence they read. As they each read, and “ante up” a bit of their writing, they break the silence. Next day, or the day after, they might be willing to read aloud their entire draft.

After the first writing workshop only, you might collect the unfinished drafts. Read them over after class, so you can let the kids know you’re aware of the range of writing topics.

Take a deep breath. Congratulations: you survived day one!

Day Two

Begin day two of the writing workshop by bringing your students to the meeting area exactly as you did on day one.

“Remember how yesterday we started with a minilesson before we wrote? We’re doing the same thing today. We’re going to do that
whenever we begin the writing workshop. After we talk, we’ll go back and write. And then we’ll have our share time.”

Early on it’s important to reinforce rituals so kids know what to expect. It won't be long before this three-part rhythm—gathering for the minilesson, writing, engaging in share time—becomes second nature to them.

On day two, kids will be finishing up their writing from day one. If you don’t prepare for this, you’ll have a roomful of students popping up like toasters, yelling, “I’m finished! I’m done!” And you’ll be running around the room trying to get them started on their second piece of writing. You can anticipate this situation in your minilesson.

You might say: “Yesterday we talked about the decisions writers need to make. You all decided what to write about. Today you’re going to have a new thing to decide. Am I finished? Have I said all that I have to say in my writing? Or do I need to take time to add more?

“How will you make that decision? By rereading what you’ve written. I’m going to hand back your papers. I want you to read it over and if you’ve said all you have to say, put the piece of writing in this finished box. If not, continue working on it. When you’re done, get going on your next piece of writing.” Other strategies for having kids move through this process independently are discussed in the section on classroom management in Chapter 3.

If you are working with young children, you might hold up their work so the class can watch as individual students consider this question of whether they are finished. If you do this, you’ll want to start with two or three students who will continue writing. Then send them off to write.

Although writing workshop is not a rigid, rule-based structure, you might begin day two by writing a few simple rules on the board:

1. Use quiet voices.

Launching the Workshop

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2. *Please don’t interrupt.* You can explain that if someone is tapping on your shoulder, it will be hard for you to listen to the person you’re conferring with.

3. *Everybody writes.* Student choice is an important component of writing workshop, but it does not include choosing whether or not to write. In gym, everybody gets sweaty. In math, everyone works on math. During writing workshop, everybody writes. That doesn’t mean that kids are actually writing down words the whole time. Thinking, rereading, editing, engaging in a peer conference are all part of the package.

In these first two days you’ve put important rituals in place. A purposeful tone has been set and you’ve eased the biggest management snag—helping students over the hurdle of what to do when they are done.

Don’t be overwhelmed by the amount of writing your students produce. In the early weeks, students can write fast, moving quickly from one topic to another. As the weeks progress, the topics of your minilessons and conferences will give them the help they need to linger longer in a single draft, to return, reread, and revise, to develop bigger projects for themselves. In time your workshop will find a rhythm that feels right for you and your students. In the meantime, appreciate their energy!
Set aside a time where kids can tell personal stories. Structure this time so that each student gets positive feedback (no criticism or specific suggestions) on the story told.

Collect a handful of short stories, picture books, or poems that model everyday-experience writing ideas.

Think of three different stories you might tell your students to get their writing gears moving. The best stories reveal something about you—the time you shoplifted a candy bar and got caught, a terrible haircut you got from your mom, a keepsake given to you by a special aunt. Practice telling these stories aloud, and keeping them short.

Decide what choices of paper you will offer writers.

Set up writing folders for holding works in progress and finished work.
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