About the Authors

Writing Workshop with Our Youngest Writers

Katie Wood Ray

with Lisa B. Cleaveland
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We would like to thank several people who helped make this book project possible.

Angie Leatherwood, Lisa’s wonderful teaching assistant. Thank you for helping us with this thinking, teaching alongside us, and always pitching in to take care of the little details along the way.

Lynn Milner, principal of Jonathan Valley Elementary School, who so kindly supports both teachers and children, and who supported our work together right from the start.

Emily Wood, Lisa’s intern from Western Carolina University during the 2001–2002 school year. What joy and energy you brought to our work together. Thank you for helping us see teaching through such new eyes.

Our families, the Brysons and Cleavelands, Woods and Rays, who were excited about our work together and understood the long hours needed to make a project like this happen.

Lois Bridges, editor extraordinaire and friend, from Heinemann. Thank you for guiding us through and believing About the Authors was an important project.

And finally, the authors themselves—all the children in Lisa’s writing workshops the last few years who have taught us so much, and especially those from the 2001–2002 school year: Aaron Barnhart, Kayla Campbell, Colten Chambers, Levi Duffield, Riley Hannah, Jordan Henry, Meagan Hickman, Helena Hunt, Forrest Kerslake, Autumn Macemore, Carlie Mazurek, Ashley McClure, Cauley McClure, Casey Parker, Sierra Perez, Tayler Price, Taylor Reid, Jared Rigdon, Joshua Shuler, Michaela Stiles, and Clay Wightman.
No matter what, just let them write every day. Even if you’re not sure what to teach, just let them write. They’ll do fine."

These were Lisa Cleaveland’s parting words to the long-term substitute teacher who would fill in for her for the twelve weeks of her maternity leave during the 2002–2003 school year. And this is the belief—no matter what, let them write every day—that has guided Lisa’s teaching in kindergarten and first grade for years. Even when she felt unsure about what to teach, she believed young children needed to take markers and paper in hand every day and explore the wonderful possibilities of written language.

We introduce this book with this belief because it is the point of departure for everything we have learned about teaching very young children to write: no matter what, let them write every day. We say it is a point of departure because it is a starting place only, not a destination unto itself. With lots of teaching surrounding them, we believe young children who have time to write every day can grow in all the important ways anyone who writes every day will grow. We believe, with lots of teaching, they can develop important understandings about what it means to write, useful strategies to guide them in the process of writing, a sense of form and genre and craft in their written texts, and a good beginning control of the conventions of written language.

We have written this book really for two reasons. First, we wanted to share with others what we’ve learned as we’ve explored teaching writing to very young children. What does this teaching look like? What
needs to be in place in the classroom for this teaching to happen? And how does this teaching make sense in the context of five-, six- and seven-year-olds’ writing? This book will address these questions from a variety of different entry points, including getting a writing workshop under way, preparing units of study, conducting minilessons, conferring, and assessing. And in Section 3, “An Overview of Units of Study,” we share a variety of teaching resources for getting started that we hope readers will find helpful.

The second reason we wanted to write this book was to address perhaps an even larger question: Should we even be concerned whether very young children are developing in all these important ways as writers in the first years of school? Is this a developmentally appropriate concern for us to have as teachers? We have thought a lot about this question and we believe our thinking about it has helped us refine our teaching of young children in so many ways. Perhaps if we share this thinking, it will help others as well.

While we’ll address the question of developmentally appropriate concerns from different angles throughout the book, we just want to say here that we aren’t concerned at all that children develop as writers in all these ways. Nothing about how we work with young children has grown from our concern about their development as writers. We believe that curriculum that grows from concern has the potential to be curriculum that is shoved down on students who may not be ready for it.

Our work has grown, instead, from a fascination with their development as writers. We have seen again and again that when we get those markers and that paper in their hands, worlds of possibilities simply open up for all kinds of interesting development that feel natural and joyful and absolutely appropriate. We believe that the curriculum that follows these possibilities is a “shoved-up” curriculum, pushed upon us as teachers when young children show us what they are capable of doing. We hope that our fascination, and the respect we have for the young children who instill it, will shine through in every chapter of this book.

So, who are we? As we write this, Lisa Cleaveland is in her fifth year as a first-grade teacher at Jonathan Valley Elementary School in Haywood County. Haywood County is a mostly rural mountain county in the southern Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. Before coming to Jonathan Valley to teach first grade, Lisa taught kindergarten for seven years in another school, so she has experience with writing workshop in both kindergarten and first grade. Katie Ray is a former associate professor of language arts education at Western Carolina University, and it was in this capacity that she first met Lisa and became interested in her teaching of young children. For several years,
we have put our heads together to think through the teaching of writing in Lisa’s kindergarten and first-grade writing workshops. This book has grown from that thinking.

The we voice we use to write this book certainly includes Lisa and Katie in its antecedent, but we hope it includes our readers as well, all teachers of young children in all kinds of settings who want to think deeply about the teaching of writing into their classrooms. We hope that the possibilities we offer readers will transcend the differences we may see in the students we teach. We hope to get to the heart of what it means simply to be a young child who’s learning to write and a teacher who’s learning, every day, what it means to teach that child. We hope that readers of this book will find, as we have found in the process of writing it, that none of us will think about the authors in quite the same way again.
One morning before writing workshop begins, we overhear Cauley explaining to one of his classmates an idea he has for the book he’s working on at the time. The book is about snakes, and Cauley says, “I was thinking last night that in my book, if the snake makes a mistake, I could call it a missnake. Get it, a missnake?” We smile, both at Cauley’s wonderful way with language and at the evidence that he’s using the writing process just as a much more experienced writer would use it: he’s thinking about what he’s working on when he’s not actually at his desk engaged in writing it.

Ever since Donald Graves and his colleagues first pushed many of us in the early eighties to look closely at what experienced writers do when they write, the study of writing as a process has been informing the teaching of writing in significant ways. Over the years, we’ve continued to look to experienced writers as we’ve explored what it means to choose ideas, prewrite, draft, revise, edit, and publish writing, and we’ve deepened our understandings about this very complex, recursive process in so many ways. And as teachers of our youngest writers, we find ourselves constantly trying to understand what this process looks like when these very inexperienced writers use it and, perhaps even more challeng-
In this chapter we want to share some of what we’ve learned about what the writing process looks like when our youngest writers use it. The teaching that we do during the year to help them refine this process—which we’ll discuss in later chapters—must begin with our understanding how they use it. Before we walk through the process itself, though, a few big ideas seem worth noting.

First, we should make it clear that we don’t teach students the process before we have them begin writing. We don’t even quickly name the steps of it before they start; we probably wouldn’t do this at any grade level, actually. Instead, we would begin a writing workshop by handing out the paper and the writing tools and asking students just to get started and go ahead and make something with writing. We expect them to use whatever process they are able to use to get that done. Once they are up and writing, then we’ll begin to watch them very closely and teach into what we see them doing (and not doing), helping them refine all the ways they go about writing—from ideas to finished pieces.
We do this because we know that the process as we know it didn’t exist before people were writing. We came to understand the process of writing because people were already writing. We watched what they did and named it as a process. But the process existed before anyone named it, and it makes instructional sense to us that it should exist in our classrooms before we begin teaching about it. We want students to be engaged in using some process (after all, you can’t make a book without using some sort of process), trying their best to make a piece of writing, and then our teaching should help them refine what they are already doing to get writing finished.

Related to this, while we know that all writers find ideas, prewrite, draft, revise, edit, and publish, we also know that there are lots of different ways that writers go about using this process effectively. There is not some set list of steps or things to do that always works for every writer on every piece of writing. Essentially, the goal (again, at any grade level) is for writers to find a process that helps them go from an idea to the best piece of finished writing they can possibly produce, not for them to jump through management hoops we’ve set up in the name of process. This is why we believe we need to see how they are going about getting their writing done first, then the teaching of process involves suggesting options they might try to help them do it better.

Approaching the teaching of process in this way perhaps feels a little less organized than if we had procedures for them to follow for each step of the process, but we feel like it more closely matches what writers actually do. We believe students need to get in there and muck about inside the process to find ways of working that are right for them.

Finally, it’s important that we understand that the process is one writers use for composition. We use writing for lots of reasons in our lives, and especially in our learning lives—to fill things out, jot things down, give answers, reflect on ideas. We want children to use writing for a variety of these purposes every day in school. But writing used in this way is not the same as writing used to compose. It’s a whole lot easier, for one thing, and it doesn’t involve the complex process that writing as composition does. In *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (and They’re All Hard Parts)* (Ray with Laminack 2001), Katie defines composition in this way:

> Writing as composition is writing that begins with an idea a writer wants to communicate. The idea is developed in the writer’s thinking, and then, at some point, the move toward composition is made. This move is the beginning move toward an audience, toward readers. This move means that the writer will now have to take this idea he or she has developed and begin to shape it with
genre, form, sound, and the conventions of the language system all working together to produce a piece that has the desired impact on readers. This move begins the very complex act of writing as composition. (19)

Children in classrooms where writing is mixed in with everything else often aren’t getting much experience with the actual process of composition, because most of the mixed-in writing doesn’t require it. Writing workshop is a place where we want children learning to use a process to compose writing for an audience, reason again to start them all out making picture books, the kind of composition most familiar to them.

So let’s look closely now at the different aspects of the process of writing as it is used by our youngest writers. As we go along, we’ll keep in mind the understandings we have about process from our studies of what professional writers say and from our own experiences with writing. We need these understandings because they give direction and vision to our teaching. We don’t expect six-year-olds to engage in the process as experienced writers do, but we need to know where they are headed so we can provide the teaching support to help them get there.

Prewriting
Finding Ideas for Writing Projects

One morning during writing workshop, we overheard Ashley saying to the other children at her table, “I just don’t know what I’m going to work on next.” While the problem she expressed is common enough, the language she chose to voice it is indicative of a very important understanding. Being concerned about what she’ll work on next is different than being concerned because she doesn’t know what to write about. The words show that Ashley thinks of writing as projectlike work. The ideas for writing are not just things to write about; they are ideas she’ll use to make something.

We believe that the process of writing begins with finding ideas for the kind of writing you are planning on doing, for a writing project, so to speak, so this is where we’ll expect students to begin. When we start writing workshop, students know what kind of writing they’ll be doing—just as experienced writers know this—because we’ve told them that they’ll make picture books at first. We believe that having this vision of what they’ll make gets them searching for bigger ideas than just “something to write about.” They need ideas for “something they’ll make a book about.” The difference is subtle, but it helps us get them leaning toward that understanding that experienced writers have, that the kinds of ideas we need have a lot to do with the kind of writing we are
going to do; that is, memoirists need different kinds of ideas than fiction writers, who need different kinds of ideas than poets . . .

Our youngest writers are expected, from day one, to make their own decisions about ideas for writing projects, and we find that they go about choosing their ideas in many of the same ways experienced writers do. They write about things they know about from everyday life—their families, pets, friends, play times, school. They write about their interests and passions—dinosaurs, animals, Barbies™, video games, fishing. They write about the same things over and over in lots of different books, and sometimes they make books for specific people and occasions in their lives. Our youngest writers also get a lot of ideas from each other—"I’m going to make a book about snakes, too, just like Cauley is making"—and this seems to be much more acceptable to them than it is to older students. Often, we find they work side by side on these books about the same exact topics.

And of course, it’s important to remember that they don’t need a new idea every day. Because they are making books, they have an investment in their ideas that is bigger than a single day’s writing. Following through on the guidelines for finishing a piece of writing takes most of them several days, and many of them have pieces in their folders that they work on in starts and fits over a very long period of time before they are finished (and some pieces never get finished). While we don’t want them endlessly taking paper and starting new books that they never finish, we think it’s fine for there to be some books in their folders that they work on off and on over time.

So, what support do we have in place for helping children with this part of the process? Some of our whole-class teaching off and on during the year will be about how writers get ideas for writing. In Section 3 (pp. 155–231) you’ll read about a unit of study devoted specifically to this part of the writing process, and, of course, all genre study has some teaching about how writers of a particular genre get their ideas.

Other than this study, though, the biggest support comes in the form of talk. We are always talking about what the children are writing about and where they got the ideas for the books they’re making. If we’re looking at something a child has written during the minislesson or share time, we talk about the idea behind it. As we confer with individual children, we talk about where they got their ideas for the writing. When we look at published writing by professional authors, we talk about where we think the writers may have gotten the ideas for their books. As things are happening in our lives, we are thinking about what we could write about those happenings. And of course, the children talk among themselves as they work on their writing, and they get lots of
ideas from each other. We also see that this talk is often extended beyond writing workshop time as they plan together—out at recess and on the bus and at lunch—what they might do with writing. That sort of planful talk is only possible when they know they can count on having writing workshop time every day.

We really just don’t see many students struggle for very long to find ideas for books, and we think this is related, again, to the project-like nature of the work they do during writing workshop. When a student is struggling to get started with something, we might encourage her to walk about the room and see what other children are working on in their books. This often helps get ideas going for a writer. We might encourage the child to look through her folder and see if there is a piece there she could revisit. We might also have a conference with the child and help her find an idea using the understandings we know professional writers use to choose their ideas. If we came to a place in the year where lots of children were struggling with finding ideas for books, we would likely readdress the issue with another unit of study on finding ideas for writing.

**Prewriting**

**Growing Ideas for Writing Projects**

Most experienced writers actually live with ideas for writing projects for some time before they begin drafts. While they are in this living-with-an-idea part of the process, they grow their thinking about the idea by
collecting all sorts of related, random thoughts, and sometimes by writing reflectively and extensively about the idea. If the project idea demands it, writers may be doing research to get specific information they’ll need to do the writing. They may be reading to get a sense of the kind of writing they are planning to do. And most writers talk a lot about an idea for a writing project before they actually begin a draft of it. Often, with a draft in mind, they begin to organize their thinking in some way so that it starts to take shape.

Many experienced writers use a writer’s notebook as a tool to collect all this thinking they do while they are living with an idea. The notebook is especially handy for quickly jotting down all those thoughts that come to writers when they are away from their desks and computers. Notebooks often travel with writers everywhere for just this reason: to capture that thinking. The writer’s notebook is kept because the writer plans to do published writing from the material gathered in the notebook. This sense of future published writing is what sets the writer’s notebook apart from a diary or journal that is kept just for the sake of keeping it.

For our youngest writers, for several reasons, we don’t introduce writers’ notebooks as a tool for future published writing at the beginning of the year. First, most of the children don’t yet write fast enough to quickly jot down their ideas or to use writing to think out an idea because the idea comes so much faster than the writing. If they did write as fast as they think, they probably wouldn’t be able to reread it, and then it wouldn’t be a very effective tool. They’ll need to develop some fluency before the notebook makes sense as a tool in this way.

The children also need to have a clear sense of what the notebook would be used for—published writing—for it to make sense as a tool for that. It would be very difficult for them to hold some vision of future writing they would do from the notebook writing if they’d never done anything but write in a notebook. So we need them to have made lots of books before we introduce them to a tool to help them make books.

And finally, developmentally, our youngest writers live sort of in the moment, so we don’t expect them to live with an idea for very long before they begin the actual writing. As a matter of fact, most of the time they go directly from having an idea for a writing project right to the first page. During the year, we’ll expect our teaching to nudge their development in this area somewhat. We’ll teach them to talk a lot about an idea before they begin to write it, for example, and we’ll encourage them to think about ideas when they’re at home for books they are working on in school—as Cauley was doing with his missnake idea. We’ll also teach them to do research for nonfiction and collect things to
write from in poetry and memoir. But the bottom line is, until they
develop the fluency to write fast enough to capture their thinking with
written words, we have to stay focused in this part of the process on just
using talking and thinking to grow their ideas.

In Section 3, as you read about units of study, you’ll see that later
in the year when children have lots of bookmaking under their belts, we
might introduce the writer’s notebook as a very specific kind of tool—a
place to write facts to use in nonfiction or to capture observations for
poetry, for example. It’s still not writing to think yet, but it’s certainly
writing to gather and a starting place for understanding the notebook as
a tool for published writing.

**Prewriting**

**Planning for a Draft**

As we said earlier, when they first begin writing, most children go
straight from having an idea, to announcing they have it (“I’m gonna
make a book about NASCAR.”), to beginning the first page. And once
they start, they make a lot of it up as they go, moving seamlessly between
talking the idea, drawing the idea, and writing the idea. For our youngest
writers, the intellectual and fine motor demands of *any* writing are such
that to make some distinction between prewriting and writing seems a
little ridiculous. It’s all writing to them and it’s all challenging and when
they’re doing it, they’re just doing it—they’re not getting ready to do it.

During the year we will teach children a little more about this part
of the process and we’ll help them see that there are some things they
can do to get ready to write. But the challenges of this teaching are to
keep it real—to keep it grounded in what we know about this part of
the process from experienced writers—and to keep it developmentally
appropriate. And it is the combination of those two challenges that
causes us not to push too far into this part of the process with our
youngest writers.

We know that experienced writers use a variety of strategies to get
a draft started—everything from just starting it and seeing where it goes
to planning it out in great detail—and that very few writers use the same
strategy for every piece of writing. Sometimes, the getting-started strate-
gies have a lot to do with the kind of writing it is.

Our youngest writers are pretty good at just starting it and seeing
where it goes. But when we think about the other extreme—planning a
piece of writing out in great detail before starting the draft—it just
doesn’t make much sense for them. For one thing, their pieces of writing
aren’t that long. An exhaustive plan for writing is usually made when
there will be a lot of volume to the writing and a lot of different parts
the writer will have to manage. Another thing is that many of the books our youngest writers make are really just lists of ideas about a topic, separated into different pages. How would they outline that? What would be the difference between outlining it and just writing it? If they don’t like the order of it once it’s written, then a staple remover can solve that problem.

We know that in many classrooms, children fill out little story frames or graphic organizers before they write. We have just not found these to be very useful because we believe we give up more than we get in children’s understanding of process when they use them. We get nice, orderly pieces of writing from story frames. But, as we said before, we know that experienced writers don’t have some set way that they always start a draft—they have a variety of ways of doing this—and we just don’t want to use a tool for writing that might communicate an oversimplified message about this to children. We would rather the children do what writers really do, and do it like six-year-olds in all their wonderfully approximated ways, than to give them some artificial tool to use until they become experienced. We also don’t want to limit them just to writing pieces in the mold of a few select frames. This also oversimplifies the process because deciding how something will go is an important part of the evolution of writing.

Probably our biggest teaching into this part of the process is our close look at different ways to structure texts. As children learn that texts are structured in different ways and they begin to try out different ways of structuring their own texts, many of them begin to think ahead about how the whole book will go. Katie happened upon Jordan one morning when he was working on a book about his dog, Sunny, using a question-and-answer structure that is very common in the predictable books he was reading at the time. He was only one page into the book, but when Katie asked him what he was working on, he proceeded to tell her how the whole book was going to go up until the end, where you would find Sunny tied up to a tree.

The idea of having a structure for his writing had given this very beginning writer a sense of his text as a whole, and he used it to see into the future of his writing. This is so critical. We believe that the planning experienced writers do comes from them being able to see into the future of their writing, and we have come to believe that the best work we can do with our youngest writers (in terms of planning) is to give them visions of what’s possible in texts. While we’ll still do most of this planning with talk, as the year progresses, we’ll talk more and more about what we’re going to do in our books, and this talk will be the mainstay of our prewriting diet.
FIGURE 4.3 Jordan’s question-and-answer book about his dog, Sunny. (1) Where is Sunny? Illustrated by Jordan and words by Jordan. (2) Where is Sunny? Is he in his doghouse? No. (3) . . . is he under the bed? No. (4) . . . is he running around? No.
Drafting and Revision

Drafting and revising, that slippery part of the process where we get our ideas down on the page and work with them until they’re just the way we want them, is challenging for even the most experienced writers. But imagine meeting that challenge when you also have to think about the spelling (and the formation of individual letters) for almost every single word you put on the page—something that is so automatic for experienced writers that they think almost nothing about it when writing. If they are using word processors, they think about these mechanics even less. In many ways, beginning writing really feels more like beginning spelling, and we guess because of that, some believe we should just teach them to spell first and let their skill with composition come later. We don’t believe that, of course; we believe the two can develop simultaneously, but even so, we can’t ignore the developmental importance of getting the words down on the page in beginning writing. Understanding this important stage of development leads us in a number of instructional directions with our youngest writers.
Getting the Words Down on the Page

First of all, early in the school year, we’ll need to help the children think a lot about how they’ll get words down on the page. Now this is drafting work, not editing work yet, and our goals for it are simple. First, we want the children to be able to generate a spelling (it needn’t be conventional) for any word they want and then be able to read that word back after they’ve written it. And second, we want them to be able to do this with as little disruption to their thinking about their ideas as possible. We want them to be able to do it quickly, in other words. It takes some experience with writing before they consistently meet both these goals. Some will come to us in first grade with that experience already, but many of them won’t, so at first we just need to get them working in that direction with writing.

To this end, in her first unit of study, Lisa introduces her young writers to a few simple, universal tips for getting words down on the page. She tells them

• Think about what the word looks like. If you think you’ve seen it before, try to picture the letters in the word.
• Think about what the word sounds like. Say it aloud slowly and listen to the sounds in the word and think about the letters that could represent those sounds.
• Think about whether it is a long or short word. Do you need just a few letters to make this word, or a lot?
• Think about other words you know. Is this word anything like another word you know?
• Ask yourself, Is this word somewhere in the room where I could easily find it?

She encourages them to use these strategies to get the best spelling down that they can and then keep going with the idea. She also teaches them to reread what they’ve written often so they can keep the flow of the idea going and so they can remember what the words say. Again, doing this successfully and consistently is something that will take time for many of them. We know that in the beginning, many of them may write words one day that they aren’t able to read (nor are we) the next day. If we’re there when they encounter this problem, we help them reconstruct, as best we can, what it likely says and keep them going. In addition to this, when working one-on-one with children, we’ll often jot a transcription in our notes of anything we think might be a problem for later rereading.
As children begin using strategies to help them get words down on the page, we must watch very closely to see that they are maintaining a productive level of attention to spelling. We don’t want them to be so overly conscious about it that they’re writing very little, and we don’t want to see them not thinking about it all and just randomly putting letters on the page.

Our youngest writers know thousands and thousands of words and have made these words a part of their oral speech. Many of these words are not ones they would recognize in print yet in their reading, but we want them to be able to use these words in their writing. To help nudge them to do this, Lisa has developed a simple ritual for celebrating when children tackle words that are challenging to spell. A chart in the room reads “I’m not afraid of my words!” and when someone is caught being a fearless speller, the word the child tried is listed on this chart. During share time the class will look at the word and the writer will explain how he or she thought of the spelling. Then Lisa will show the children the conventional spelling and they’ll either celebrate how close the writer came or marvel at how different the spelling is from what the writer thought it would be. It’s a celebration either way, because the focus is on not being afraid to try a hard word you know, not on getting the spelling right.

So a lot of our earliest teaching about drafting is about getting the words we want down on the page. But as soon as we have almost everyone up and at least trying to do this, we are going to turn our attention to giving students a strong vision for what they might do with these words.
**Revision Begins with a Strong Vision**

For most experienced writers, revision is a fairly intense process of reading and rereading and rereading a text. The writer is listening for where the writing sounds right and where it doesn’t, where words and the ideas they represent ring true and less than true. “Is this really what I meant to say?” The writer is focusing on the meaning of every single sentence and making sure that one sentence leads as effortlessly as possible to the next. The writer is looking at the big chunks of ideas and making sure the journey from beginning to middle to end works in the way the writer intends. The writer who is revising is riding on a time machine of sorts as he makes the move from thinking of the text as something he is writing (present), to thinking of it as something that will be read (future). He is trying to understand the text as it exists in both these times. It’s a very complex thought process.

Some experienced writers revise a lot as they are drafting; others prefer to get the whole draft down and then go back through and revise. Most writers do some combination of both, making the lines between drafting and revision rather indistinct. In the process of revision, there are really just five things a writer can actually do to a text: change (rewrite) something, add something, take something out, move something around, or chuck it all and start over. Deciding which of these to do and how and where to do them is the intense part of revision; the mechanics of actually making the revisions has been made incredibly easy with the technology of word processing.

As we said earlier, getting the words down on the page the first time is intense intellectual work for our youngest writers. It follows, then, that since they are not writing on word processors yet, the mechanics of making revision changes, particularly of rewriting something by hand, is a big, big task. Recognizing this, and the complexity of thought that leads to revision decisions, we simply do not push our youngest writers to do lots of revision work, particularly rewriting. Instead, we focus on text changes that are mechanically easy to make, and we teach hard toward a strong vision for the first—and often only—draft.

Once children are up and writing, we can introduce them to the idea of adding something by simply adding words underneath or above those already written, using a caret to insert words inside a sentence, using a sticky note, or taking the staples out and adding in whole new pages. We may also show them that moving pages around (so they are in a different order) or taking something out is as simple as taking staples out or casting a line through something. As we show students these revision possibilities, we will likely talk to them about the reasons writers have for making these kinds of changes. We might even slow a certain
kind of revision thinking down—such as when to add to writing—and address it as a unit of study.

Again however, we recognize that knowing when to make changes like these requires a whole other layer of complex thinking that is difficult to maintain while you are thinking about so many mechanical issues as you generate text. Sometimes children will decide to make these kinds of revisions on their own, but more often than not they make them with some guidance when we are conferring with them. As they talk with us about what they’re writing, we listen to see if any natural revision possibilities present themselves and if they do, we sometimes suggest the child try something. For example, for Jordan’s book about Sunny that we saw earlier in this chapter (Figure 4.3), suppose Jordan showed us what he was working on and told us that it was very dusty under the bed where Sunny sometimes hides. We might suggest he add that detail so it would read, “Where is Sunny? Is he on the dusty floor under the bed?” We would explain how it would make a different impression on the reader if it were clear that Sunny might be in all that dust.

Young children’s talk around their writing is always bigger than the actual words on the page. We embrace this developmental truth and let them talk and talk about the bigger ideas that are connected to their writing but aren’t represented with words. Our goal is never to get the writing to capture all the details of their thinking. That would be too overwhelming. But we do know that contained within this talk, there are many opportunities to help them do a kind of simple, additive revision. The challenge is to recognize when to start nudging them to add and how much nudging is enough and how much is too much. We try to make this judgment based on the child’s developing fluency, recognizing it might take as much as several years of experience before children can really be expected to make their written texts as big as their thinking around them.

Of course, many books get written and we aren’t there in a conference as the children are writing them, and of course, we don’t always suggest a child try some revision work in our conferences, so many books are written during the year with no revision work done on them at all. We are careful in the work we do decide to do with revision to help children develop healthy attitudes about this part of the process. We don’t want them to think of it as something they need to do because they didn’t try hard enough the first time. We want them to think of adding in, moving around, and taking out as another interesting part of the work of making books.

The other main way we work with revision is to help children have a strong vision for the writing they are doing when they set out to
get it down on the page the first time. Most of the writing you see in this book was written with little or no revision, but with lots of vision. Take Josh’s piece about mammoths in the very opening chapter, for example. Think again about how clear his sense of what kind of thing he’s making is, and of all the specific visions he has for what’s possible in this kind of writing. In a very real sense, we believe that all the mini-lessons we teach that show children possibilities for ways to craft their writing are in the service of helping them draft with ever-clearer visions of what’s possible in texts. And the clearer a writer’s vision is as she’s drafting a text, the less revision she will need to do later.

Editing

We’ll use the word editing to refer to a writer’s work on the most mechanical aspects of writing, much as we would use the word proofreading. Most experienced writers edit their writing continuously as they are also drafting and revising. They aren’t concerned about it as they’re in the heat of drafting, but most of the time when they see little changes that need to be made—a missing or an extra word, an apostrophe left out, a pronoun that doesn’t agree with its antecedent—they will quickly make these changes right away. There is usually a last round of checking to be sure everything is in order before something is sent away, but often many bugs have already been addressed. Sometimes there is another experienced writer who gives a piece one last editing check.

There are two important things to remember about how experienced writers engage in this part of the process. First, in the real world in which we write, technology takes care of a whole lot of this editing work for writers, checking both spelling and grammar and offering helpful, specific suggestions for changes that can be made with the touch of a button. This technology has revolutionized this part of the process even more than it has revision, because with revision the writer still has to do the intense thinking about what changes need to be made. Not so with editing. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing for the state of the language is a matter of personal belief, but the fact is, experienced writers have to pay far less attention to editing than they did when everything was written by hand or on typewriters. The children we are teaching will grow to be experienced writers in this world, not the one many of us knew as students. And who knows what other writing technologies might become available to them in their lifetimes?

Understanding this about how experienced writers edit simply helps us keep this part of the process in what we think is proper perspective. Certainly we want children gaining more and more control over the conventions of written language, and we’ll address this off and on.
often throughout almost every school day. After all, the more writers know about how the language works, the easier technology will be to use. As a matter of fact, we hope someday the children we teach will be smarter about language than their grammar checkers! But we also know that this is the one part of the writing process that will always be very easy to get help with. Learning to write well-structured, engaging pieces of writing that build big ideas, communicate specific information, or tell compelling stories is much harder writing work and something no computer can—as of yet—do for a writer. And so as teachers of our youngest writers, we try to always keep this understanding at the forefront of our work and spend the balance of writing workshop time on these more complex aspects of composition.

The other important thing to remember is that, without the help of technology, a writer can’t edit for what he doesn’t know about how the language works. In other words, we can only fix things we know need fixing. A writer completing a piece by hand who doesn’t change a *me* to an *I* (when this is the convention) may not yet understand subject and object pronouns. She can do her most careful editing and reread the piece dozens of times and never catch this because she just doesn’t know this convention. It follows, then, that the editing fixes we do make on our own are for things we had the understandings to have written conventionally the first time, but inadvertently, as we were in the heat of drafting and revising, didn’t get down on the page that way.

Now, this understanding about experienced writers is incredibly important in our work with young children. The challenge in this teaching is always to discern whether or not children have the necessary understandings to make their writing more conventional when they reread it. When they first start writing—sometimes in kindergarten and often even long before that—they don’t really own any firm understandings about language or spelling conventions with which they might edit, and so it would be very inappropriate to ask them to try. But with time and experience writing, and especially as they emerge and take off as readers, their understandings about these conventions will grow and we’ll want to start nudging them to use these to do some beginning editing.

So as we work with our youngest writers, our guiding question as teachers will be, “What’s in this piece of writing that, with a little specific attention, I think this writer would be able to make more conventional on *his* own?” Notice the language here: “make more conventional.” When our youngest writers edit, it doesn’t always mean they make changes that make the writing right in the same sense it would be if an experienced writer edited it. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t editing; they are still thinking like people who edit if they reread and alter some-
thing in the text because they want to make it more closely match what they understand about how writing goes down on the page. For example, the child who rereads and—probably based on visual memory—adds an e to his spelling of fet (feet) but adds it in the wrong place, fete, is in fact editing. We strongly encourage good intentions in editing when children first start trying it. We know their good intentions will lead to better and better results the more experience they get with both reading and writing.

We may actually start teaching the habit of mind of editing—rereading to see if everything is as it needs to be on the page—with some simple things that have more to do with the layout of the books the children are making than with real understandings about the conventions of language. For example, we may ask them to check things such as these:

- Are all my pages in the right order?
- Do I have a date stamp and my name on the book?
- Do I need anything else in my illustrations?
- Did I make a title page for my book?

Questions like these can initiate children into the understanding that a writer goes back over a piece of writing carefully before finishing it, an essential understanding for them to become good editors.

Beyond this, we know it’s time to start nudging children to edit for actual language conventions when we see a few key understandings manifesting themselves consistently in their writing. These understandings give the children a starting place in their attempts to edit. These understandings are the ones we’ll talk about and demonstrate again and again as we look at and use writing all day long in many different contexts. These understandings are the ones we’ll often help children learn to control as we work with them side by side in conferences as they’re writing. And when we really see them begin to write with these understandings comfortably guiding them, it’s time to introduce editing. Some of them will come to us ready for this at the beginning of first grade, and others will take most of a school year to really own these understandings.

**Editing for Spelling**

First, we need to see that they are spelling with a variety of strategies—using visual memory of a few high-frequency words, sound-symbol knowledge, word length, knowledge of other words, and so on. Their writing needs to show a clear sense of “wordedness,” with spaces separating the words. When these two understandings are in place and seem
to feel comfortable for children, we can begin to ask them to look for two things when they reread a piece:

- Do I have all the words I need on this page? Am I reading words that aren’t actually there? I can use my finger to move underneath each word I say to check this. I need to add in any words I realize I meant to write but didn’t.
- As I’m reading what I’ve written, do I see any letters that seem to be missing or need to be changed in any of my words? If I do, I can add these on the end, squeeze them in the middle, or strike a line through some and write new letters above them.

We’ll begin with these expectations, but over time as children become confident spellers, we’ll want to be more specific. We’ll introduce the children to the concept of high-frequency words and let them know we want them to use their visual memory, the resources in the room, and strategies like have-a-go (trying the word several times to see which spelling looks right) to get these spellings under control. We’ll also explain that if there is a challenging word they are going to use again and again in a book, perhaps a word like camouflage, they might want to get help with spelling that word since they’ll be using it often. It is important to note that we don’t expect first graders to finish pieces of writing and then edit for all the spellings in the whole piece. Instead, we want to see that they have done a good job of editing for spelling using the beginning understandings they have. Beyond this, we realize that if they are writing with all the richness of the words they own in their oral vocabulary, many of these will be words they’ve rarely if ever seen in print. We believe the burden of having to fix the spellings of all these words is developmentally inappropriate.

**Editing for Punctuation**

Once it becomes clear that children understand there are marks in writing that aren’t letters but do another kind of writing work—punctuation marks—we can begin to ask them to think about these marks as they reread. Our first charge to them will likely be a very simple one like this:

- As I’m rereading my piece, do I see that I’ve used enough punctuation in it to help people know how to read it? If not, I need to add marks where I think they will help.
We are not at this point aiming for consistent accuracy in the use of punctuation, but for thoughtfulness about its use and evidence of ever-deepening understandings about it.

Once we see that children understand the sentence as an essential unit in writing and they are punctuating sentences fairly consistently with end marks, they are ready to begin editing for capitalization. Of course, they also need to understand the difference between lower- and uppercase letters to do this editing work. Our charge to them for capitalization will be something like this:

- As I’m rereading my piece, do I see that I begin my sentences with capital letters? If not, I need to strike a letter out and capitalize it. Are there any other words that are names for things that might need to be capitalized?

These really feel like the beginning editing essentials and they get at all the expectations for editing listed in our state’s standard course of study for first grade. We’ll look for ways to help children make these kinds of editing changes easily. We don’t mind if their books are messy with editing changes—strikeouts and letters and words squeezed in between others. In fact, we like to be able to see the evidence of their editing. We also introduce sticky notes as a tool for editing, especially for spelling. That’s what Tayler used to edit the spellings of two high-frequency words on a page from her book *I Went Everywhere* (see Figure 4.5).

Just as with revising, we’ll work with children around editing a lot in our individual conferences with them. We’ll use what we know about them as readers and writers to help us discern when and where to nudge them to reread and try to make their writing more conventional. And, again, our goal is not to have perfectly edited pieces of writing when children are finished. Our goal is to see in a piece that a child has deliberately used what he knows about the conventions of spelling and language to write this piece as well as he can.

Our hope is that by the end of the year, we’ll have most of the children writing fluently and controlling these most basic editing skills fairly consistently. If we can get them to this developmental place where they are comfortable with these basic conventions of written language, then they’ll be ready in the next years of school to begin thinking about the more sophisticated language understandings that writers use to edit—subject-verb agreement, pronoun usage, specifics
of punctuation—understandings that will develop over time as they read and write more and more each year in school.

**Publishing**

Many of the books the children finish are not published in any more formal way. They are simply finished and shared and that’s the end of it. Remember that we have set the children up to put a lot of energy into the production of books right from the start, so to ask the children to reproduce them in the name of publishing in the end just doesn’t make much sense. As a result, many of their end products will look very much like something six-year-olds have written. Some of these books will go to the audiences for whom they were written, some may go in different places about the room if they’re a good example of some craft technique or smart work, and some will simply stay in the children’s folders until we clean them out and they go home.

Some of the children’s finished writing may go out in the hallway. We know that the culture of hallways in schools varies a lot. We are lucky that in the hallways at Jonathan Valley Elementary, it is OK for the work posted there to look like six- and eight- and ten-year-olds did it.
It is OK for it to look like the work of children who are learning how to write.

When the children’s work is put in the hallway, it’s a good idea to put a note underneath it directing readers’ attention to what’s really smart in the writing, something like, “Look . . . Tayler wrote her book and used a repeating line to tie vignettes together.” If it’s a variety of work from different children from a unit of study, there may be a note about the study, something like, “Our class has been studying text structures. Look at the variety of ways we’ve learned to structure our texts!” And then underneath each child’s piece, we can name the structural device used. Posting children’s writing in this way can do a lot of work to educate others who don’t really understand the writing work we are doing in our classrooms because it directs their attention to the smartness in the work.

One option that does exist in Lisa’s writing workshop is that of “fancy” publishing. All this really means is that a book gets typed out on the computer. Once Lisa is comfortable that a child has done all she can with a piece of writing, the child may opt for fancy publishing. This is usually done with an adult. The child takes the piece and the two sit side by side at the computer and make decisions about page layout, font, size, color, and so on as the text is entered into a word processing document. All the spellings the child didn’t fix on her own during editing are fixed, and there is often a lot of talk about where the punctuation should go as the text is being entered. The talk around fancy publishing is actually a rich teaching opportunity as the child and the adult look closely at how the text will go down on the page. Children can certainly use the computers on their own to fancy publish, and if they do, the end product will look like six-year-olds using computers to write. Once the pages are printed out, the child reillustrates the book.

In most years, we have not found that there are more children wanting to fancy publish than Lisa and her assistant, Angie (and the occasional classroom volunteer or university intern), can handle. Most of them finish lots of books and show no desire to do this more formal type of publishing. If there were lots of them wanting lots of fancy publishing, we would simply make a rule limiting the number of pieces a child may choose to publish in this way.

Sometimes we encourage children to fancy publish a book because we want this publishing to support their reading and writing development. Jordan’s nonfiction book Guinea Pigs Need Room to Play was a book we encouraged him to fancy publish. The book showed several sophisticated understandings Jordan had learned as we studied nonfiction and text structures, so it was an important benchmark in his learning for
FIGURE 4.6 Two excerpted pages from Jordan’s guinea pig book—first as he wrote them, then fancy published.
the year, but the book was difficult for him to reread. Publishing it on the computer gave him access to it as a reader and allowed him to join more easily in the abundant sharing of nonfiction we did around this study.

We should note that many of the most beginning writers finish books during the year that are difficult to reread. We aren’t uptight about this and don’t ask them to fancy publish all of these. We encourage a child to do this (if he hasn’t decided to on his own) only if the piece is an important book for the child to come back to again and again for some reason, or if the piece is going to an outside audience who would be completely baffled by the child’s approximations in the original writing.

Closing Thoughts on Process
The children in Lisa’s writing workshop don’t follow the steps of the writing process as if they were following the kind of incredibly specific directions you get from MapQuest when you are going on a trip. Instead, the process for them is a mostly joyful, meandering journey they take from having an idea all the way to completing a finished piece of writing. We walk along beside them or just behind them as they wander on this journey, helping them when they seem to need a little help finding their way, and always, always marveling at the fascinating writing destinations to which they lead us.
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