The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing

Strategies, Structures, and Solutions

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Portsmouth, NH
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Using the Right Tools

Having the right tools in the writer’s workshop is crucial. By tools, we mean anything that supports the ongoing work of the writers in our classrooms. These tools fall into two overlapping categories:

1. Tools that serve the students
2. Tools that serve the teacher

Of course we’ve created something of a false dichotomy here for purposes of explanation. In reality, if a tool supports our students as writers, it simultaneously supports us as teachers of writers.

Tools That Serve the Students

The Writer’s Notebook

A writer’s notebook is a tool our students use to record the things they notice, observe, and think about. We call each recording an entry. The entries can be any variety of ideas. The most common that we see our students writing are:

* memories
* observations of the things happening around them
* descriptions of people and places important in their lives
* opinions
* wonderings
* wishes
* family stories, hobbies, and other passions

In other words, children write best about the things that are important to them. It is writing that comes from what they know and what they have experienced. For this reason, we usually discourage fantasy, mystery, or fairy tale writing. Instead, we encourage students to be in touch with what’s going on in the world, by paying attention to the meaningful, everyday things that may otherwise go unnoticed and unrecorded.
BEGINNING THE WRITING NOTEBOOK

A writer’s notebook can be a traditionally bound composition book or the fancier notebooks commonly found in stationery stores. We encourage students to personalize them with pictures or other artifacts that are meaningful to them. See Figure 2-1. We discourage the use of spiral notebooks because they tend to give the message that it is okay to tear out pages.

The important thing about choosing a notebook is that the pages are large enough to support plenty of writing per page as well as space in the margin for writing questions, jottings, and notes. When there is an expectation to fill the larger page, we have found the bigger the thinking becomes. Teaching toward “bigger thinking” is especially important for our more reluctant writers who tend to connect “writing more” with the quantity of lines rather than the quality of thought.

With an emphasis on “quality of thought,” we ask students to use only the left hand pages of the notebook for writing entries. The pages on the right are used as students reread their entries, providing space for them to write more. As they return to those entries, we teach students to use new strategies to develop their initial ideas. Such strategies may include getting a new idea from an old one, re-crafting an entry, using questioning to push their thinking, or adding more details to the entry. (Please see detailed minilessons in Chapter 8.) This right-hand space makes the notebook more conducive to this revisiting. Our expectation is that students will understand that their thinking may not necessarily be complete because they come to the end of an entry. The right-hand side is a constant reminder that there may be more thinking to be done on any given idea or topic.

The notebook also offers writers the freedom to conveniently collect ideas for writing. We encourage students to not only use it in school, but to see it as a place where they can capture their thoughts about anything at any time. So even though it is a requirement in school, as they begin to take ownership, our hope is that they begin to see it less as an assignment and more as a personal tool for writing about what’s important to them.

Figure 2-1. An array of notebooks.
WHY USE A WRITER’S NOTEBOOK?
In her book *Writing Through Childhood*, Shelley Harwayne, our mentor and founding principal at The Manhattan New School, presents a powerful invitation when she introduces the notebook to children by asking them to “Imagine doing the kind of writing that you will want to save for a lifetime. When you are twenty, fifty, or eighty, you will still keep these beautiful bound books in a special place because you will always want to recall what kind of kid you were, what you paid attention to, and what you thought about when you were young.” After such an invitation, it’s not unusual to see students go away hugging their notebooks while teachers go away feeling confident that an invitation to students to keep a notebook is an invitation to live like writers—real writers who take time to notice their world and to write about it. See Figure 2–2.

The notebook is a manageable tool in which students keep an ongoing collection of writing. A bound notebook, as compared to a folder or binder, eliminates the worry of losing work and makes the work easily accessible. It houses ideas that writers can return to in order to grow ideas, restructure, rethink, revise, connect ideas, and ultimately choose from a variety of entries to publish for an audience. Our message is that we expect them to publish, and, with that in mind, the notebook is an important tool to support that work.

The following quotes from our students reflect their feelings about keeping a writer’s notebook:

“I think writing is like looking for treasure—ideas are everywhere.” Alexi

“My writer’s notebook is like a timeline of happenings and feeling that happened in my life. I think to myself, ‘When I grow up and look back at my notebook, I’ll know how I felt when I was a kid.’” Dana

“My writer’s notebook is like a long-lost relative. It tells the story of my life and my feelings.” Laura

![Figure 2-2. Sam on the floor writing in his notebook.](image-url)
“My notebook is a carefree place to grow your thoughts and nurture your ideas. And there are no restrictions.” Luca

“I love my writer’s notebook because it goes on and on and writing is a never ending subject.” Julie

“I like using a writer's notebook because it's so organized. I can look back on them and revise or I can leave them the way they are.” Nina

**Mentor Texts**

Shelley not only valued the writer’s notebook as a tool for nurturing student writing but also deeply understood that one of the most important tools we use as teachers of writing is literature. When we set out to learn to do anything, we look to others who are expert at what we are trying to learn to do. Learning to write is no different. In teaching our students to be good writers, one of the first things we want them to be able to do is to anchor themselves to authors and texts they admire. A “mentor piece” is a short text or portion of a text used as a support for the work we are trying to accomplish in the workshop. Most of these pieces are read aloud or shared using the overhead projector. When possible, multiple copies of these are also made available for easy reference. We keep them in labeled baskets around the room so they are readily accessible. Very often, our students’ published writing will become mentor pieces for other writers in the class. After pieces are published, we put them in plastic sleeves and set them in baskets so students can read each other’s work when they need support or we can refer to them in a conference.

What we look for when choosing a mentor text:

- The topic is one the kids can relate to and will spark ideas for their own writing.
- The text not only tells a story, but also addresses an underlying issue that children will be able to readily uncover and write about in relation to their own lives.
- The text is well written and provides many opportunities to teach the qualities of good writing.
- The text is written in a specific genre we are focusing on in a genre study.

As students become more proficient writers with clear intentions for their writing, we expect that students will continue to refer to the mentor pieces we have chosen, as well as seek out published writers on their own for support.

By surrounding ourselves with possible mentor texts, we become informed about which ones will best serve our students’ needs. After some practice, we seem to know the right ones when we see them.

**Magazines and Newspapers**

We order magazine subscriptions to Time for Kids and Junior Scholastic for each of our students and weave them into lessons throughout the year. We find these timely articles help broaden the possibilities for ideas to write about. Newspapers are also subscribed to and used regularly throughout the year.
Writing Partnerships and Response Groups

We would like to meet the needs of all of our students at all times, but the reality of our 30-student classrooms makes it almost impossible. What we can do, however, is set up structures that allow us to manage this task of providing support: writing response groups and writing partnerships. These structures help students realize that the teacher is not the only source they can turn to for help. As shown in Figure 2–3, they can rely on each other for support. Of course, informal pairings frequently occur and are encouraged after minilessons for students to process the strategy learned in the minilesson and talk about the writing work they will do that day. This quick discussion with a neighbor is getting them ready for the work they might do later in a more structured partnership. There are many different ways for forming partnerships and response groups. They include:

Permanent Writing Partner
• The person who reviews your weekly writing and comes to know your notebook work very well. This partnership should be formed based on the supports one writer in the group can give to the other. Since it takes time to get to know the writers in your class, early partnerships are most often formed based on what you notice about work habits. Once you get to know the students better, you can be more informed in creating alliances and base partnerships on writer’s strengths and needs.

Writing Focus Partnership
• This arrangement is usually formed by simply saying to a student, “I think you need to talk to Jennifer. She is an expert at what you are trying to do, I know she will help you.”

FIGURE 2–3. A writing response group.
Study Groups to Research Some Aspect of Writing
• Two or more children work toward a similar goal and come together to research, support each other’s attempts, and share their knowledge of an area of writing they may be studying.

Response Groups
• Students get together in small groups to share their writing and provide feedback that supports the work the writer is attempting to do.

Editing Checklists
We want our writers to understand the difference between writing and editing. Although we do not want them to be bogged down with spelling, punctuation, or proper sentence structure during the process of getting their ideas down in the notebook or in a draft, we do want them to understand that properly edited writing is what we ultimately expect. We use an editing checklist, shown in Figure 2–4, to help our stu-

Editing Checklist

SPELLING
1. I have found misspelled words and tried spelling them in the margin.

TRICKY WORDS
2. I have checked to see if I used the correct homophone.
   • there, their, they’re
   • your, you’re
   • used to
   • which, witch
   • then, than
   • could have
   • to, too, two
   • weather, whether
   • past, passed
   • except, accept
   • its, it’s

DOES IT MAKE SENSE?
3. I have reread my work to make sure I have not left out any words I intended to write.
4. I have checked to make sure my sentences are not too long. If they were, I have either rephrased them or made them into more than one sentence.

PUNCTUATION
5. I have placed periods, commas, question marks, and exclamation marks in places where they belong.
6. I began each sentence with an uppercase letter.
7. I have used uppercase letters for names of people, places, and proper nouns.
8. I have indented each new paragraph as my thoughts shifted.

FIGURE 2–4. Editing checklist.
When I leave my house for vacation, I'm happy and scared. Good and bad things are happening at the same time. I want to leave and have fun but also hope to stay in my house.

When I leave, I walk slowly. I say "Goodbye house." I slowly shut the door. Walk down the hall to the elevator and press the button. Wait. It's too soon or too late. I get in slowly but safely. The elevator makes one or two beeps. At the floors below and then we exit. We get in the car and drive off. On our way to the airport I feel better. When we get on the plane, I am now excited.

I am excited to find our seats and sit in them. I find them and jump into the seat. I push my back pack under the seat. After that, I take my seat and get comfortable. I buckle up and then open it again. I do that a couple of times. Mom asks me if I have to go to the bathroom. I now I buckle up again. I hold on to the rail seats as we start to move. I'm so excited. I ask for my gum. Finally, we take off. Vacation has started.

FIGURE 2-5. Alex's notebook page.
ably better, and when students are editing a piece to be published, they tend to catch more of their own errors and errors when they edit their partner's work. (See Figures 2–4 and 2–5 and Appendices A, B, and E.)

**Student Assessments**

Taking time to reflect on their writing is part of the process that helps students grow as writers and thinkers. While the mentor piece provides a model of good writing, the assessment provides an opportunity for reflecting over their commitment to writing during the previous week and for setting goals for the coming week. For this purpose we have designed a weekly assessment that students complete each weekend (see Figure 2-6 and Appendix B) of the collecting stage of every cycle. On

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT WEEKEND WRITING ASSESSMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name:</strong> Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week of:</strong> 11/11/02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on the goal I set last week, I can say <strong>I did a pretty good job.</strong> I really made sure I read them aloud to my self. There were a lot of things wrong since I read my entries aloud I was able to fix the mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This week:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have written at least 6-8 entries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Each of my entries are at least one page long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I edit my entry each night when I am finished writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have at least three different types of entries. (memories, observations, opinions etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have added at least two new writing ideas to my “Things I Can Write About” list.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have worked on improving my writing. I worked on <strong>thinking about how strong verbs and realistic comparisons can make my writing better</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have reread my entries and have found at least one new idea from an old one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have written more thoughtfully about something I have written about before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have shared my writing with someone else and have carefully considered their feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I have written at least one entry off an article I read in <em>Time for Kids</em> or <em>Junior Scholastic</em> or any other magazines or newspapers I have read. (wonderings, opinions, questions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am using this coming week to focus on <strong>writing three different types of entries. I am writing different types of entries. Mostly everything I can relate to my family. That’s what I do. I will try not to make many entries on my family.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to do this by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ speaking with peers  ☑ conferring with teacher  ☑ finding a mentor piece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s Signature: [Signature]  Peer Signature: [Signature]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2–6.** Weekly Assessment—Alex’s filled-in sheet.
Monday morning we ask students to share their assessment work with a partner. They are not only being held accountable for doing the work but insuring they have an additional pair of eyes, aside from the teacher’s, to give feedback and suggestions for achieving their goal.

After students have published, there is a Writer’s Reflection assessment. This requires students to comment on what they have learned as they moved through the process from notebook entry to published piece, and asks them to reflect on their learning and how it will carry over to all future writing they do. See Figure 7–7k and Appendix C.

The students keep these assessments in their writing folder. At the end of each writing cycle, all assessments are removed from the writing folders and transferred to the writing sections of their portfolios. Before each marking period, we must meet with students individually to review their assessments and our conference notes and to talk about accomplishments and set goals.

**Dual-Pocket Folders**

To help organize the Writing Workshop, we ask that the students keep all loose papers in a plastic dual-pocket folder that we purchase for them at the beginning of the year. We collect the money from the parents later on. Parents are delighted to have us take the responsibility of ordering supplies since we can buy them much cheaper by ordering a large quantity from a local stationery supplier. Of course this is in the best of all possible worlds. Certainly you can buy less costly folders that you purchase from local vendors or ask students to buy them as part of their school supplies. When the folders begin to look shabby by the middle of the year, replace them in the same way. On one side of a folder the students keep copies of excerpts from mentor pieces we are using for that cycle and the current issues of the magazines. On the other side, the students keep the weekly assessment and any writing drafts they are currently working on.

**Portfolio Binders**

In addition to the folder, each student has a portfolio binder containing dividers labeled with each academic subject area. This three-ring binder is meant to display their growth over time in each academic area. We will deal only with the contents of the writing section here. For each published piece of writing, there is a cover sheet. We copy these on different-colored paper so that the reader can know when the work of one cycle is complete and a new published piece begins. This introduces the piece that follows and explains what it is about and why it is included in the portfolio. Next comes the published piece of writing, then the notebook entry/entries from which the piece originated, the drafts, and finally, the assessment that reflects on the work the writer did for that publishing cycle.

**Writing Supplies**

In order to establish an environment that supports our young writers, we make sure that each table is equipped with a basket that contains a supply of pens, pencils, staplers, tape, sticky notes, glue sticks, and paper. In order for our students to be
engaged in the work of writing, it is important that the lack of tools does not become an issue. The baskets are always out and available. We assign the responsibility of keeping them stocked to students.

**Tools That Serve the Teacher**

Organization is the key to a smooth-running classroom. We have emphasized the importance of the availability of tools for our students. It is also true for us as teachers. It is of utmost importance, particularly during minilessons and conferences, to have easy access to markers, chart tablets, overhead projectors, sticky notes, and texts. The flow of a minilesson should never be interrupted because tools are unavailable or not conveniently placed.

**Planning Sheets**

We have already written about the need for teachers to plan. We know we must have a vision of where we need to begin in September and where we want our students to be in June. When Jacqui Getz succeeded Shelley Harwayne as principal of The Manhattan New School, she inspired in us a greater urgency to develop thoughtful, realistic plans based on the expectations and standards put in place by our state curriculum, district mandate, school philosophy, and colleagues on our grade level. Long-term plans must be put in place before we can plan the minilessons necessary to carry out our day-to-day goals in service of meeting those long-range plans.

In order to help us scaffold that work, Jacqui helped us design a number of different planning sheets that help hold us accountable for the work we have set out to do in each cycle. (See Figures 5–1, 5–2, and Appendices F and G.) Although each cycle is planned—knowing where we will start, where we will end, and when we will end—we are constantly taking cues from our students and allowing our conferences to inform our minilessons. This allows us to be flexible enough to rethink our plans so that we are stepping in tune with the needs of our students. This means allowing teachable moments to take over and slowing down when our students are not ready to move on.

Whether you consider using the planning sheets included in this book, adapt them to fit your own needs, or use ones you have created that suit you better, the point is, you must plan. A wise principal in our district prominently displays this sign pinned to her bulletin board: “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

**Conference Sheets**

When we sit down to conference with a student, we have all the necessary tools with us. We carry sticky notes, a text or two that might help us model a strategy for the writers we plan to confer with that day and, of course, our recordkeeping materials. (See Figure 2–7, and also Figures 6–7, 6–10 and Appendix D.) Many of the writing teachers we know who have been at this for some time have tried many different forms of conference sheets. Keep in mind that it is not so much the format of the sheets you use, although easy reference is always a key factor, but that you do keep the records and do refer to them. The recordings about particular students not only
help with the work you do with that child, but inform your teaching and help you
design your minilessons accordingly. The conference sheet we have included not only
provides easy reference for each child in the class, but a space for us to make quick
notes on ideas for minilessons based on our observations. In September, we design
these sheets, filling in each student's name, then photocopy and bind a quantity into
a portable, spiral bound book that we can carry with us to jot notes in as we move
around the room conferring with our students about their writing progress. Seeing all
the boxes in front of us helps keep us honest. If, during the course of a writing cycle,
we see that there are particular boxes blank, we cannot in good conscience ignore the
fact that we haven't yet conferred with a particular student. Our goal, of course, is to
got to as many students as many times during a cycle as possible.

**Teacher Writing**

We have mentioned before how much we value opportunities to bring our own
experiences as readers and writers to help enrich our teaching. When we share our
writing with our students, we are not only giving them a glance into our lives as lit-
erate adults, we are modeling the experience of writing and the process of writing.
Sometimes we purposely compose a piece of writing that will help us accomplish
the goal we have in mind for our students. Other times, we simply select appropri-
ate entries from our notebooks. Over the course of time, we keep returning to these
pieces of writing for different purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WRITING CYCLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aaron</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Natasha</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gianpaolo</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Julien</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zack S.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sometimes we get together with colleagues on our grade level and each teacher will write a different type of entry for the purpose of demonstrating the different ways people might respond to a text. For instance, at the beginning of the year when we first began to use literature, we noticed that so many of our students would write entries directly related to the content of the text we had read. We got together with our colleagues and asked each of them to write entries after having heard the text, keeping in mind that they needed to push their thinking in order to demonstrate for students some possibilities of where our minds can take us. We shared the entries with our students and identified the different ways in which different teachers were inspired to write. We named the strategies and taught them to use those strategies in their own writing. At other times, we have carefully chosen entries from our notebooks, circled the part of the writing that we would like to work on to accomplish a particular goal, and, through a shared writing minilesson, demonstrated what we wanted our students to practice with their own writing.

As you read further into this book, we will explain in greater detail how we use our own writing to help students develop trains of thoughts, to help them dig deeper into memories and family stories, and how we help students master a variety of writing strategies.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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