

Book Study Suggestions

Learning is inherently social. Though sometimes we feel isolated as teachers, most of us know the benefits of taking time to engage with colleagues. It is in these conversations that we find our own ideas clarified and enriched. This is particularly true when we consider how we can help our students develop into successful writers. As new literacies evolve, our students are finding more and more ways to use their writing as a means to create online communities and social networks. Laura Robb's *Teaching Middle School Writers* offers teachers an opportunity to study together and explore the age-old topic of teaching writing in the context of a brand new world.

While there are many ways to structure a study group, it is most important to foster a climate in which teachers feel free and safe to participate in the ongoing conversations and exchange of ideas. Other guidelines can make book study more productive. Here are a few things you might consider.

Watch Group Size

You may want to kick off discussion with a general question and then break into smaller groups. Often the optimal number is four or five to ensure there is time for all to exchange ideas. The larger group can reassemble at the end to debrief.

Use Study Questions

Some groups find it more comfortable to start with a few questions to get the conversation going. There are various ways to use questions.

- ✓ Put three or four questions in an envelope and randomly pull them out for discussion.
- ✓ Create a chart with two or three starter questions and ask the group to generate more, tapping their own personal interests and needs.
- ✓ Decide on three or four questions and divide the group by interest in the various topics. This allows for a more in-depth study.
- ✓ Make copies of the suggested questions for everyone and invite discussion without deciding where to start.

Create an Agenda

Make sure you have planned a beginning and ending time and *always* honor those times. Teachers are busy and knowing there will be a time to start and a time to end is important.

Stay Focused on the Topic

Plan a procedure that is transparent. You might start by saying something like, "Let's decide on a signal to use when we feel the discussion is drifting and then have everyone agree to help stay focused."

Include Everyone

Keep groups small enough so that even the quietest member is encouraged to speak. Active listening on everyone's part will help. Remember that periods of silence should be expected when people are thinking.

Share Leadership

Rotate group facilitation. Identify several “duties” for the facilitator. Examples might include a discussion format, suggesting a big idea from a chapter or group of chapters, and synthesizing or summarizing at the end. Remember that in a study group, *everyone* is a learner. This isn’t the place for an “expert!”

Create a List of Norms

Simple expectations that are transparent often make study groups function with greater ease and increase the potential for success. These can be simple and might include ways to invite a tentative member into the conversation, expectations about listening, start and stop times, and a procedure for refocusing.

Set Dates for the Next Meeting

Always leave knowing when you will meet again and who will facilitate.

Engage in Reflection

Stop from time-to-time to reflect on what you are learning and how you might make your group’s interactions more productive.

Celebrate Learning

Make sure you take time to enjoy one another and celebrate your learning.

Chapter by Chapter Overview

The following questions relate to the content in each chapter. These are suggestions. Many more concepts and ideas are presented in each chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter 1: Narrowing the Gulf Between Writing for School and Writing for Self

1. Discuss what you know about your students’ writing outside of school.
2. Look over the seven categories on page 8 into which Robb’s survey items cluster. How might you use these to inform your own teaching?
3. Reflect on the survey highlights on pages 13–14. What can we learn about students and their writing?
4. Students report “only 8.7 percent of students surveyed report that their teachers know about their out-of-school writing.” What can educators learn from this finding?
5. Look over the questions in the chart on page 20. How might these serve as an inquiry project for your grade-level team or school to increase student engagement?

Chapter 2: Improving Students’ Creative and Analytic Writing

1. Look over Robb’s demonstration lesson for students, beginning on page 36. Discuss how Laura scaffolds students’ thinking and supports their writing.
2. How do personal connections to texts increase students’ willingness to write? Look over the ideas and connect your own experiences.
3. Robb cites the statistic “70 percent of students in grades 4 through 12 are low-achieving writers.” How can our current teaching practices evolve to change that statistic?
4. Read the Daniel Pink quote on page 43. Discuss the impact on our teaching of writing.
5. How can you establish trusting relationships with students so that you can interview them and gain greater insights about their writing in and out of school?

6. What do you notice about the reasons and purposes for writing at school in Table 2.1 on page 48? What changes might need to occur to increase students' engagement and interest in writing in school?
7. Analyze the strengths and opportunities for improvement in Kevin's writing on page 59 with colleagues. How do your findings compare with those shared in the book?

Chapter 3: Using Mentor Texts to Arrive at Compelling Reasons to Write

1. How do mentor texts foster students' awareness of the reading-writing connection?
2. Robb discusses how students' inquiry fosters reasons to write. How might you incorporate inquiry-related writing opportunities in your own classroom?
3. Louise Rosenblatt suggests that our first encounter with a text is an aesthetic, emotional response. Only after that response do readers move to a more analytical or efferent position. How might we slow our teaching down to offer time for students to first aesthetically engage before asking them to analyze?
4. Robb states "I never call for complete sentences when I ask students to think of ideas." How might postponing the focus on form allow students to spend more energy on ideas?
5. Teachers can learn a great deal when they meet to study students' writing. How might you incorporate the practice into department or team meetings? What benefit might it have on your teaching and students' learning?

Chapter 4: Making Powerful Writing Happen Day to Day: Routines that Work

1. Reflect on the "Six Fundamental Needs for Teaching Middle School Writers." Which are already present in your own teaching? Are there others you might incorporate?
2. Robb states "skills in isolation do not improve the quality of students' writing." Do you agree? Share your own experiences.
3. The workshop model has long been part of our writing pedagogy. Laura makes some suggestions for "tweaking" the routines on pages 112 and 113. What are your thoughts about the suggestions?
4. Much has been written about explicit teacher demonstrations. Discuss what a quality teacher demonstration might include.
5. How might incorporating writer's notebooks support your own students' journey as writers?

Chapter 5: Making Powerful Writing Happen Day to Day: Lessons that Work

1. Compare the approaches of the two teachers Robb describes at the beginning of the chapter. What do you notice about each? What might you increase/decrease in your own teaching from studying this example?
2. Consider the role of conversation in the writing process. How might increasing students' opportunities for talk enrich and strengthen your teaching and their writing?
3. Reflect on the "Four Key Writing Lessons." What possibilities do you see for these in your own instruction?
4. Robb quotes William Faulkner, "Read, read, read." How can you link students' reading more closely to their writing?
5. How might you scaffold students in creating and using written plans in their writing? What advantages do you see in helping students create "on-the-paper" plans?

Chapter 6: Setting Criteria, Revising, and Editing

1. Robb suggests we can learn a great deal from our students. What are some ways you might include time and also foster the classroom conditions to learn from and about your students?
2. Share your own experiences with rubrics. In what ways have they supported student writers? Are there ways in which they have created obstacles for you or for students?
3. Consider the use of genre-specific criteria. What strengths do they offer?

4. Revision is often an area that puzzles teachers and disengages students. How can choice make the process more satisfying and successful?
5. Laura offers teachers “The Big Ten Revision Strategies.” Discuss the values of implementing the “big ten.” Study the editing lessons that begin on page 187. How might they help students develop into more proficient editors?

Chapter 7: Conferring: Answering Middle Schoolers’ Needs to Collaborate

1. What benefits have you experienced from conferring with students?
2. Discuss ways a mix of peer-to-peer and student-teacher conferences increases support for all students. Look over the list on page 214 entitled “Keeping Other Students Engaged” to expand your thinking.
3. Review the guidelines on page 202 Robb offers for weaving conferences into daily classes. Are there ways to incorporate these in your own classroom?
4. Laura suggests several different types of conferences—each with a different purpose. Connect your own experiences with conferring with those offered in the book.
5. How might they guidelines offered on page 203 increase the potential of conferring in your classroom?

Chapter 8: Writing Conferences in Action

1. Robb shares conferences that have different purposes. Read through the conferences from pages 225 to 237 and discuss how the different conferences support students’ particular needs throughout the writing process.
2. Self-evaluation is a powerful stance to help students develop. Consider how and the ways in which you might add more opportunities for students to reflect on their writing.
3. Writers have unique needs and sometimes need support in the form of interventions. Look over the chart that begins on page 243. Think of your own students and how the scaffolds and interventions might increase their success.

Chapter 9: Analytical Exchanges Online: Blogs and Beyond

1. Reflect on how our lives are vastly different from our students’ in the use of new technologies. How can we use our students’ varied writing done *outside* of school to increase engagement *in* school?
2. Consider Andrea Lunsford’s findings on new literacies and Robb’s suggestion of incorporating texting into our students’ writing. Share your thoughts about the possibilities.
3. Discuss how incorporating varied genres and techniques not only expand students’ understanding but also offer opportunities for tapping their creativity.
4. Using new technologies requires attention to nurturing the classroom community. How might you put safeguards in place to open up new opportunities for students?
5. As teachers, how we support our students’ out-side school writing in new forms and use it as a seedbed for in-side school writing? What opportunities might await us and our students?