

The “Writer’s Workshop” Organizer

★ MINI-LESSON 5-15 Minutes

A mini-lesson is a short piece of direct instruction focused on a single topic. Mini-lessons fall into three categories:

Procedures: Anything writers need to do to participate effectively in the workshop: How to get paper; How to store and organize writing; How to request a conference; How to conduct sharing, and so on.

Strategies Writers Use: This is the “how” of writing, as in “How do I pick a good topic?” or “How do I write a good lead?” These lessons are best organized around the writing process.

Qualities of Good Writing: These lessons are designed to introduce students to examples of good writing. They involve reviewing and analyzing models of good writing using the language of your classroom criteria. These kinds of lessons often come up naturally during reading time or teacher modeling.

Mini-lessons work best when: 1) They are suggested by the students; 2) They are taught in the context of authentic student writing; 3) The teacher models for students as the lesson is delivered.

YOU DON’T NEED TO GIVE A MINI-LESSON EVERY DAY!

★ CONFERENCING During Writing Time

During writing time you have a chance to work individually with students who need specific help. The keys to successful conferencing are good management and consistent execution.

Management: The key to all successful management is having good procedures in place. Students need to be able to: 1) Know when the teacher is available for a conference; 2) Request a conference in an appropriate way; 3) Be specific about what they want help with; and 4) Have all materials ready.

Execution: To keep conferences brief and make the most of your time, keep these things in mind: 1) Model conferences on whole class sharing; 2) Ask permission and/or start out with questions before you make recommendations; 3) Work on one thing at a time; 4) Before you leave the conference, make sure the student knows what to do.

Conferencing works best when: 1) Students know how to do it; 2) You stay focused on one thing at a time; 3) You keep conferences to less than five minutes; 4) You check back with students from time to time to see if they’re following up on what you conferenced about.

CONFERENCING IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING TIME!

★ STATUS OF THE CLASS 2-5 Minutes

Status of the class is a quick way of finding out what students will be working on that day. There are several ways to do status of the class:

Out Loud: Students tell the teacher and the class what they’re working on. They can tell the title, the topic, the form or genre, or the stage they are at in the writing process. Title, topic, and writing process stage are usually the most useful pieces of information.

Visually: Students indicate on some kind of chart in the room what they will be doing that day. Most of the charts I’ve seen allow writers to indicate where they are in the writing process.

Recorded on Paper: Circulate a sheet of paper and ask each student to indicate what they will be doing that day. Some teachers record status even when it’s done out loud.

Status of the class works best when: 1) You do it out loud; 2) You do it regularly; 3) Everyone can hear everyone else; 4) Students choose their own topics, forms, and genres, and manage their own way through the writing process.

STATUS OF THE CLASS IS A GREAT WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY!

★ SHARING 5-15 Minutes

Sharing gives writers a chance to address a real audience and get valuable feedback about what and how they’re doing. There are several ways to do sharing, each has its advantages and disadvantages:

Whole Class: Gives authors their best chance for feedback, but it takes a lot of time. On most days, you’ll only be able to listen to a few kids. Best tool you have for building classroom community.

Small Group: Time efficient, but hard to manage. Very noisy. Kids easily get off track. Monitor each group by participating as a member.

Partner: Most time efficient but, with only one person in the audience, the feedback the writer receives is often not that valuable.

Sharing works best when: 1) It is voluntary; 2) The author asks the audience to listen for or help with something specific; 3) Kids with long pieces read only a short section; 4) You take an active part as an author and an audience member; 5) Students make constructive comments using the language of the classroom criteria; 6) Everyone knows that all comments, even yours, are suggestions only; 7) Students ask questions instead of making comments.

SHARING MUST WORK FOR BOTH AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE!

★ WRITING TIME 20-40 Minutes

Writing time is the centerpiece of the workshop and the longest workshop section. During writing time, students write. The teacher can::

Model: Work on your own writing. You can write at your desk or at the board or overhead. Allowing students to see what you write as you write it is very good for them. You will often discover your most valuable mini-lessons when you write in front of your students because you’ll have to tackle the same problems that they do.

Conference: Work with individual students on their writing. This is your most valuable teaching time.

Small Group Mini-Lesson: While the majority of the class is writing, you can take a small group of students and deliver a mini-lesson.

Catch Up: Spend a few minutes on other work you have to do.

Writing time works best when: 1) Students have internalized effective classroom procedures; 2) Students write frequently, and for long periods of time, on a regular schedule; 3) You write with your students for at least a few minutes during most class periods.

WRITING TIME IS THE HEART OF THE WORKSHOP!

★ TIPS ★

- ★ Concentrate on classroom management by focusing on procedural mini-lessons at the beginning of the year.
- ★ If you have less than 40 minutes, drop the mini-lesson and sharing; start with a quick status of the class and get right into writing and conferencing. Writing time is the most valuable time.
- ★ Teach the students to run their own workshop, so you don’t have to run it for them.
- ★ Keep a list from your reading program of things your students like, and then use that list as the basis for your mini-lessons.
- ★ Encourage shy kids to share by asking if you can share their writing for them.
- ★ Keep an in-class library of published student writing for students to read. This helps them get ideas and allows them to compare their work privately to the work of other students.
- ★ Have fun every day.

IT TAKES ABOUT A MONTH TO GET THINGS RUNNING WELL!

Management Strategies For Writer's Workshop

★ SO WHAT DO I DO WHEN?

If you talk to enough people or you read enough books, you'll probably bump into the idea that Writer's Workshop is a certain thing that has to be done a certain way. In my experience, that's not only not true, it's not valuable. Writer's Workshop is as dynamic and flexible as you choose to make it. And that's the main reason I like it: it gives teachers a variety of ways to manage their classroom within a basic structure that students can easily internalize and come to rely on.

The essence of workshop-style teaching—what makes it “workshop” as opposed to “traditional”—is not in what you teach, but how you teach it and how you relate to your students. If most of your class time is spent with kids writing on their own topics, if you participate as a fellow writer in the community, if everyone shares writing regularly, if you follow the kids and teach to their needs instead of to a pre-planned curriculum, then you've probably got a Writer's Workshop going.

In the four columns directly to the right, I've listed four “approaches” to getting started with Writer's Workshop. Remember: these are guidelines, not mandates.

★ LOGISTICS

Organizing Student Writing in Grades K-2: The best approach I've seen has involved giving each student a wide-ruled spiral notebook for pre-writing and drafting plus a simple two-pocket folder. On one side of the folder, students keep writing ideas and teacher hand-outs. On the other side, they keep on-going work. The teacher keeps a third set of files—one for each student—to store published work.

Organizing Student Writing at Grades 3 and Above: Many teachers I work with are using a three-ring binder with divider sections named for each stage of the writing process. As students move a piece through the writing process, they store their work in the appropriate section of their binder.

Desk and Seating Arrangements: The best approaches are based on semi-circular arrangements where all students have an unobstructed view of the primary sharing and teaching positions. Please don't seat your students in rows and columns, it isn't good for anyone.

Scheduling: In the elementary grades, it's absolutely vital to have writer's workshop every day. For more advanced writers at the secondary level, three days a week is sufficient. The ideal amount of time to allot is an hour, but writer's workshop can be done well in as little as 40 minutes if both the students and the teacher are well organized and understand how the workshop is supposed to be run.

★ TRADITIONAL ★

- ★ **Mini-Lesson**
- ★ **Status**
- ★ **Writing Time**
- ★ **Sharing**

This is the way most people start off because it is most similar to traditional teaching. This format gives the teacher the most control. I use it when I need to regain control of the class, set the stage for lesson content or a goal that I feel is particularly important, or start everyone off on a specific type of project. Some people use this format every day.

★ SHARE FIRST ★

- ★ **Sharing**
- ★ **Mini-Lesson**
- ★ **Status**
- ★ **Writing Time**

This is my favorite of the structured approaches to Writer's Workshop. The kids usually love starting out with sharing, and I get a chance to collect my thoughts about what I want to do. As kids share, I listen for specific things we could work on. When something comes up, I ask the kids if they'd like a lesson on it. That's how I choose my mini-lesson.

★ NO LESSON ★

- ★ **Status**
- ★ **Writing Time**
- ★ **Sharing**

This is a good approach when you're short on time or don't have a lesson you want to give. It's actually quite good to do this fairly regularly because it lets kids know that they have to get right down to business as soon as class starts. I find that I use this organization more frequently later in the year after everyone knows the class procedures and has heard most of my best mini-lessons—or when the kids just want to work.

★ DYNAMIC ★

- ★ **Give a MINI-LESSON when:** 1) There's something you think the class needs; 2) Students request help; 3) You detect via conferencing that 3 or 4 students have the same problem.
- ★ **Take STATUS OF THE CLASS when:** 1) You don't know where the kids are; 2) The kids don't know where they are; 3) You need to survey for an appropriate mini-lesson; 4) You need to survey for conferencing. 5) You think kids are slacking off.

- ★ **Go to WRITING TIME when:** 1) The kids want to work; 2) You want the kids to work; 3) You need to confer; 4) You need a little peace and quiet.

- ★ **Go to SHARING when:** 1) Writer's need feedback; 2) You need to hear what the kids have done; 3) You want to check on the effectiveness of a mini-lesson; 4) You need to plan a mini-lesson.

Each of the four sections of the workshop can also be used simply to change the tempo of the class. I often switch from one to the other just to settle kids down if they're getting a little noisy.

This is my favorite way to do Writer's Workshop because it allows me the most flexibility and gives me the best opportunity to serve the needs of the students.

★ ADVICE ABOUT SHARING AND CONFERENCING

DON'T CORRECT...

- ★ **INSPECT the writing closely.** Read or listen thoughtfully and thoroughly.
- ★ **DETECT those parts that work and those that don't.** What do you like? What would help you enjoy the writing more?
- ★ **REFLECT on why some parts work and some parts don't.** Why do you like certain parts? How would improving other parts make the writing better? Use the language of the classroom criteria to explain how you feel.
- ★ **CONNECT your reactions to the author's intent.** What is the author's purpose? Why did the author choose to write this particular piece?
- ★ **INJECT your own opinions.** Be honest. Communicate using the language of the classroom criteria so that everyone can understand you. Remember: this is just your opinion; it's not the “truth”.
- ★ **RESPECT the writer's reactions.** Listen closely to what the author has to say about your comments. Remember that the author does not have to make the changes you suggest.
- ★ **PERFECT the communication between audience and author.** Do you really understand each other? Make sure you're both using the language of the classroom criteria. Review the author's purpose and main idea.
- ★ **EXPECT to repeat the process...** as long as the author wants to continue or until the audience understands what the author is trying to communicate.