

Tips for Using *Really Writing!* Activities



Each real-life writing and speaking lesson follows these process writing steps:

- Motivators
- Group Brainstorming
- Group Composing
- Drafting
- Responding to Students' Writing
- Publishing

Use these steps to teach students a composing process that will serve them throughout their lives. You may follow the *Really Writing!* steps in each lesson as described or add, omit, and/or change parts to fit your students' needs.

Let's consider each of these instructional steps.

Motivators



The motivators in the *Really Writing!* activities are designed to prepare young authors to think and communicate. Some motivators require only a few minutes; others take longer. You may pick one or two motivators that appeal to you, or create your own. The most powerful and natural motivator is, of course, to have a real audience and a genuine purpose for communicating.

Classroom Management Suggestions

During the Motivation, Group Brainstorming, and Group Composing steps, it is helpful to have young authors bring their chairs into a semi-circle or double semi-circle around the chalkboard or overhead screen. Even though moving chairs takes time and makes noise, the “pay off” in management makes it worthwhile.

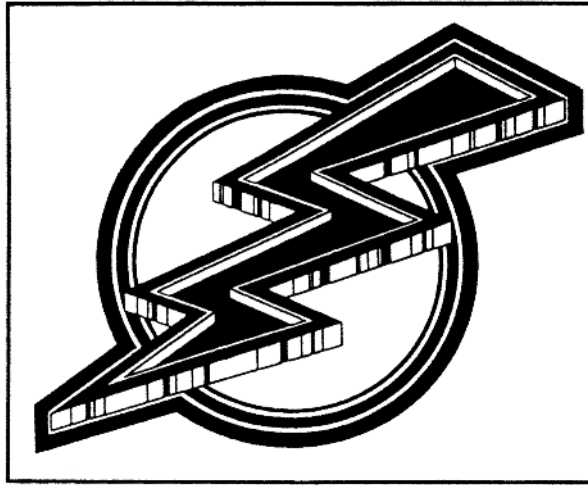
The physical arrangement signals that it is time to think as a group and creates a more intimate atmosphere that involves young authors personally. Later, when young authors return to their desks to individually brainstorm and compose, the change to a new physical setting again energizes students.

Another advantage of pulling young authors up for the Motivation, Group Brainstorming, and Group Composing steps is that when one or more students are disruptive, they can be removed from the group and sent to their desks until they choose to listen quietly, keep their hands to themselves, or share appropriately.

Students with a history of behavior problems may need to be excluded from the group several times before they realize they are missing out on the “fun.” Don’t worry about temporarily excluding these young authors; they will still hear and learn even though they are at their desks. Bring the student back into the group as soon as he or she signals readiness to act appropriately.



Group Brainstorming



Brainstorming is the process of generating a large number of ideas in a short amount of time. The goal is to (1) start ideas flowing before beginning to write and (2) teach young writers how to generate ideas. The rules for brainstorming are:

- Accept every idea. Save evaluation for later.
- The more ideas the better.
- Involve every young author.

One powerful technique for capturing young authors' ideas is brainstorming the different idea categories that are necessary for a particular kind of writing or speaking (genre). While the techniques of webbing, mapping, clustering, and outlining can be useful for advanced writers, they usually fail to help beginning writers generate the necessary thoughts when faced with a new kind of writing.

Genre

When faced with a composing task, one of the most difficult things a writer must do is identify the “idea categories” needed for a particular genre. While effective writers have developed “mental pictures” of what is needed in a particular type of composition, frequently the rest of us must do considerable thinking and/or research to “figure out” the necessary categories to brainstorm.

Here are examples of idea categories that a writer might choose to brainstorm for an editorial and for travel directions:

- If a writer is going to compose a letter to the editor about environmental waste, he or she might brainstorm (1) opinions about waste and (2) reasons to recycle, reuse, and reduce waste.
- If a writer is going to compose travel directions for someone, he or she might brainstorm (1) starting points, (2) directions, (3) distances, and (4) landmarks along the way.

These brainstorming categories are provided in the *Really Writing!* activities on the sample boards and via the questions that you will ask during brainstorming. Your young authors will internalize these categories through frequent use and later invent their own categories.

Four Brainstorming Techniques

To encourage students in generating ideas, a teacher needs four basic techniques: (1) thought-provoking questions; (2) wait-time for students to think; (3) high levels of participation; and (4) responses to students' ideas that support and encourage higher-level thinking.

1. Thought-Provoking Questions. You will find examples of questions that promote higher level thinking necessary for the chosen genre. These questions are written in bold type for your convenience.

Notice that the way questions are worded makes a tremendous difference in how young authors respond. Compare the questions on the left with those on the right. Which questions, in your opinion, encourage more thinking?

Can you tell me who got you interested in your hobby?

Who helped you get interested in your hobby?

Do you have a reason why gum should not be chewed at school?

Why do you think students should be allowed to chew gum in school?

2. Wait-Time. As you begin asking thought-provoking questions, it is important to pause for longer amounts of time before expecting a response. It usually takes time to get comfortable waiting, but the rewards are immense.

Young authors who are accustomed to responding with “correct” answers may also need time to adjust. Students have been taught to avoid being wrong. It is more risky generating and sharing one’s own thinking than it is sharing a predetermined right answer. Before you lead Group Brainstorming, consider telling students they should be thinking during the silence and that when an idea comes to mind, he or she should quietly raise a hand.

3. High Level of Participation. It is important to actively involve all young authors in contributing ideas. Pull quiet students in by directly calling on them. Young authors who can’t or won’t contribute creative ideas can be involved when it comes time to “choose” an idea. For example, you might ask, “Out of all our ideas for clues in our mystery, which clue(s) do you want us to use?” Choosing someone else’s idea from the brainstormed lists is “safer” than sharing an idea of one’s own.

4. Responding. Young authors need to be reassured that their growing abilities to think creatively and critically are on the right track. Here are four simple, yet effective ways:

- When a young author shares an idea, model respect by looking at the student, listening intently, and encouraging other students to look at the idea sharer when he or she is speaking.
- Accept all ideas (99 percent), no matter how strange; otherwise the young author, especially one who has had a history of failure, may not risk sharing in the future. (The main exceptions are obscene language and racial/sexual/gender slurs.)
- Respond by writing all or part of the young author's actual words (on the board or overhead) under the brainstorming category.
- Comment positively on the young writer's idea. Note: When asking questions with a "correct" answer, all the student needs to know is whether the answer was right. When promoting creative and critical thinking, more specific feedback is needed. Of the two columns of praise below, which, in your opinion, reinforces thinking more effectively?

Wow! That sounds great.

Great idea!

Wow! Your reason for chewing gum in school is very convincing.

Your title "Ten Reasons for Putting Off Doing Homework" will certainly catch readers' attention.

Classroom Management Suggestions

While many experts suggest that all ideas that young authors risk sharing should be accepted, in practice there is one type of answer that requires a special response.

If a student uses obscene language or makes a racial/sexual/gender slur, it is best to ignore the comment, then give specific praise to the next few students who are on the "right track." If the student continues in an inappropriate manner, a warning followed by removal from the group is usually effective.

Group Composing



Group Composing is the step during which young authors learn to organize ideas, apply conventions, and understand your expectations. Group Composing makes the drafting step less threatening, improves young authors' attitudes toward writing, and has a tremendous effect on the quality of the final compositions.

During Group Composing, the teacher models how writers select and organize their ideas and leads young authors to collaboratively compose a particular writing genre (such as an editorial, a recipe, or a complaint letter) before releasing young authors to write independently.

Group Composing is also the time when young authors are involved in applying the mechanics of the English language (capitalization, punctuation, spelling, correct grammar, and usage). As you use *Really Writing!* activities, you will find notes if you want to involve your young authors in making decisions about how to apply conventions *in context*. For example: "Which of our landmarks in our directions are names for particular places?" "How do we show our readers this?" (Capitalize the first letter of each proper noun.)

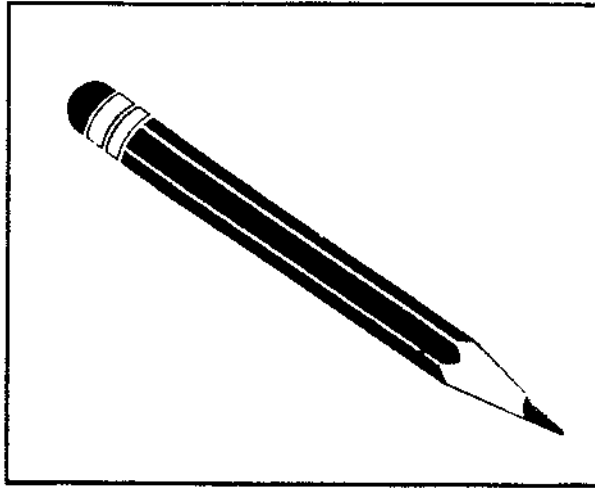
Language Experience

Some lessons can be taught using a language experience approach, for example, by using only the motivation, group brainstorming, group composing, and publishing steps. Kindergarten, first graders, academically limited second graders, English as a Second Language students, and some special education students profit from the language experience approach. You will find the following message to guide you.



If your students aren't ready to write their own compositions, stop after creating the group composition and go directly to Publishing.

Drafting

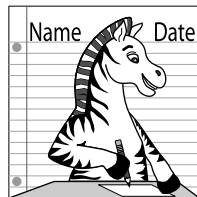


At this point in the writing process, young writers brainstorm individually and then organize their own ideas into a draft. As the young authors begin their rough drafts, move through the room, encouraging and coaching them as they put their ideas down on paper.

Modifications

Realistic expectations are the key to young authors' success and long-term growth. Realistic expectations also reduce boredom and/or stress. At the beginning of each *Really Writing!* activity is an overall learning outcome that every student can master at some level. For example: "Each student will write a compliment for a friend."

Also modifications to encourage *Beginning Writers* and to challenge *Advanced Writers* are provided. Look for these icons:



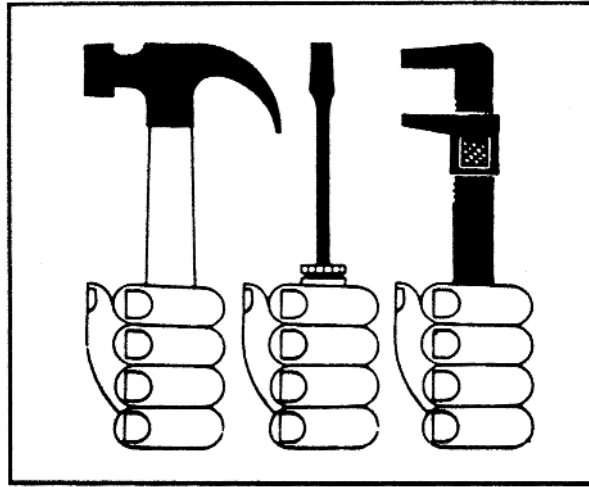
Beginning Writers



Advanced Writers

These ideas will help you modify the learning outcome up or down in difficulty. When young authors do not achieve a *realistic* expectation, re-teaching can take place during the revising and editing.

Responding to Students' Writing



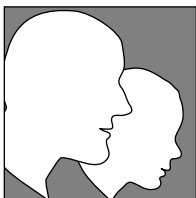
The goal of this step is to teach young writers to assume responsibility for evaluating, then revising and editing their own compositions. It is not the production of “error-free” or “perfect” compositions.

When teaching young authors to self-evaluate effectively, two aspects need to be addressed: the *writer's ideas* and *conventions of writing*. Ideas or meaning should always be addressed first.

- *Revising Ideas*: making sure future readers can understand the main idea(s); improving the ways ideas are organized; adding more creative or valuable ideas that support the main idea(s); choosing “rich,” “powerful,” or “precise” words; and using a variety of kinds of sentences that still read smoothly.
- *Editing/Proofreading Conventions*: locating and correcting errors in punctuation, capitalization, indenting, format (that is, letter form), grammar, usage, spelling, handwriting, and neatness.

If you have worked with the *6+1 Traits*TM (an analytic scoring system developed by the North West Regional Educational Lab to assess good writing), you will find it easy to apply your knowledge of effective writing characteristics through the revising and editing methods provided in the *Really Writing!* activities.

Each *Really Writing!* activity offers three effective methods to choose from to help young writers assume responsibility for evaluating their own compositions: Conferences, Peer Feedback, and Revising Assistants. Use one, two, or all three revising and editing methods. Let's look at each of these methods.



Method #1. CONFERENCES. Conferencing with young writers about their compositions can take place at two points in the writing process.

- *Informal conferencing* occurs while writers are creating their rough drafts. During this time the teacher circulates around the room holding brief one- to three-minute conferences with young authors who need particular attention.
- *Formal conferencing* occurs during the revising/editing step.

Three simple tools you can use during conferencing to guide your students to think creatively and critically are specific positive comments, question and listen, and read back.

Conferencing Tool: Specific Positive Comments. This technique involves praising specific aspects of a composition that are effective. This type of specific response (such as “Cutting down on pollution” is a strong reason to use to convince the public to recycle.) differs from general praise because it focuses on the composition or the intended audience, not on how “neat” the student is.

Feedback That Makes the Student Feel Good	Specific Positive Comments That Help the Student Learn Plus Feel Good
You're incredible.	“Cutting down on pollution” is a strong reason for convincing the public to recycle newspaper.
Way to go! You're catching on!	In your direction “Turn left at the library” you provided a landmark that all the students will know. Way to go!
Outstanding!	You indented all five of your paragraphs. This will really help your readers know when you are shifting to a new idea. Outstanding job!
On target!	You used your spell checker to find the correct spelling of brontosaurus! Now the other students will know exactly which dinosaur you are describing.

Conferencing Tool: Question and Listen. This technique involves asking probing or open-ended questions that encourage the young writer to think creatively and critically. These “who,” “what,” “where,” “which,” “why,” and “how” questions focus on a particular aspect of the composition, yet keep the young author in the role of decision-maker.

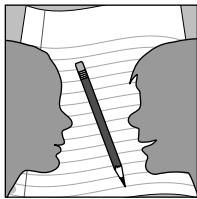
Traditional Questions	Better Questions
Is there a way the dragon could escape?	How could the dragon escape?
Do you know when to stir in the chocolate chips?	When should the cook stir in the chocolate chips?
Do you need a new paragraph here?	How can you signal your readers that you are starting a new idea?

Conferencing Tool: Read Back. This technique involves reading part or all of a composition out loud so the young writer can determine whether he or she has communicated what he or she wishes to say. Two variations that are effective with young authors:

- The teacher, a parent, or a peer reads the composition out loud to the young writer.
- The young writer reads his or her own composition out loud to the teacher, a parent, a peer, or a janitor/aide/neighbor.

A third version, that of an author orally or silently reading the compositions to him-/herself, is less effective until writers are more experienced in revising.

These three tools, specific positive comments, question and listen, and read back, are more effective than the traditional correcting and/or suggestion-giving approaches to conferencing because they teach *self-evaluation* and *maintain student ownership* in addition to improving the composition.



Method #2. PEER FEEDBACK. Peer feedback provides an opportunity for young authors to hear reactions from readers about how well they have communicated.

In the *Really Writing!* activities you will find suggestions to structure peer feedback sessions. The criteria in the conferencing, peer feedback, and revising assistants will remind students as to expectations regarding the final product and teach an organized approach to self-evaluation.



Method #3. REVISING ASSISTANTS. Young authors also must learn to self-evaluate independently. A valuable technique to assist young authors to self-evaluate is a revising checklist.

In *Really Writing!* checklists are called *Revising Assistants*. Each Revising Assistant is tailored for the particular lesson. A Revising Assistant can be completed by the young author, a peer, or occasionally the teacher.




The Revising Assistants promote independence while guiding young authors toward state and national standards. *These standards are listed at the beginning of each chapter.*

In order for young authors to use a checklist they must be taught:

1. How to look in their composition for each item on the checklist, and
2. To make the revision before marking an item off the checklist.

There are two Revising Assistants in each of the *Really Writing!* activities. The top Revising Assistant is for Beginning Writers. The bottom assistant is for your students who need a challenge. You may duplicate and use the page with both kinds of assistants or make a copy of the page and cut and paste so that you have only two beginning Revising Assistants or only two advanced Revising Assistants.

Revising Assistant: How Far Will it Stretch?

- Do you have a title? 
- Does your story have a beginning like "One day ___ decided to see how far his/her rubberband would stretch?" 
- How many prepositional phrases did you use to tell where the rubberband stretched? _____
- Does your story have an ending like "Then it broke! Ouch!" 
- Does your story make sense? Yes A little Not really
How can I make it better? _____

I have carefully reread and REVISED my story.

Signature of Author

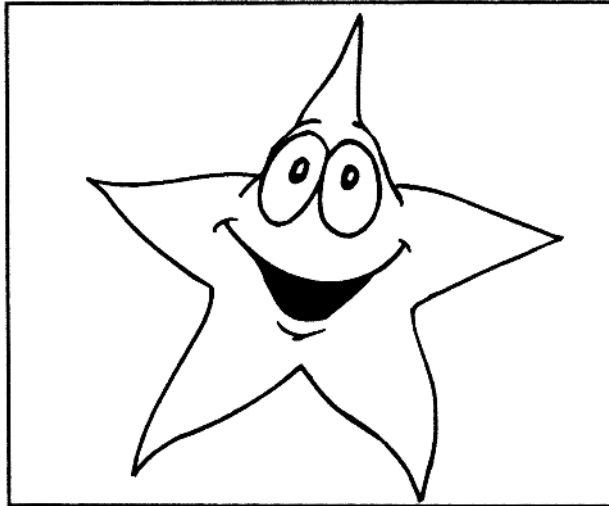
Revising Assistant: How Far Will it Stretch?

- Are the important words in your title are capitalized? Yes Fix it. (Circle one.)
- Does your story have a beginning, such as "One day ___ decided to see how far his/her rubber band would stretch?" Yes Fix it.
- What is the name of your character that stretches the rubberband? _____
- Did you tell where the rubber band started? Yes Fix it.
- Do you have at least ___ prepositional phrases that tell where the rubberband stretched? Yes How many? ___ Fix it.
- Did you a comma after each place the rubber band was stretched? Yes Fix it.
- Does your story have an ending, such as "Then it broke! Ouch!" Yes Fix it.
- Does your story make sense and sound smooth? Yes A little Not really
What needs to be changed, added, or left out to make it sound even better? _____

I have carefully reread and REVISED my story.

Signature of Author


Publishing




Since writing is a form of communicating, having a real audience and an authentic purpose is essential. In the *Really Writing!* activities you will find a variety of real audiences and purposes.

Audiences include family members, other supportive and trusted adults in students' lives, classmates, unknown readers, and, of course, oneself. Having multiple audiences also benefits the teacher, since you do not have time to read and respond to every composition.

Purposes or reasons for communicating in written form include to convey information, to request something, to extend memory, to organize ideas, to clarify feelings, and to entertain.



**Questions Teachers Have
about
Publishing**



1. **Should poor or weak writing be published?** Every student needs the opportunity to publish. Take time to educate students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators that writing is a developmental process and that errors are signs of growth.
2. **Should young authors recopy their rough drafts?** Do not require a "clean" final copy until young authors have become skillful writers. Beginning writers of all ages are rarely motivated to recopy their revised drafts. Most view recopying as a meaningless task and generalize from it that writing as a whole is useless.
Consider saving the requirement of a clean, corrected final copy with excellent handwriting for very special writing occasions. Once students learn keyboarding and word processing skills, a clean final draft often becomes more rewarding.
3. **Where can I find more publishing methods?** One or more publishing methods are suggested in each *Really Writing!* activity. For additional publishing ideas consider this valuable reference: *75 Creative Ways to Publish Students' Writings*, Cheryln Sunflower (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1993).

Independent Writing Prompts



Prompts are included at the end of each *Really Writing!* activity to give your students experience in writing independently and in preparing for state and national writing tests.

While the prompts and rubrics that are used to evaluate effective writing vary from state to state, a well-written prompt includes three or four basic parts: an audience, a purpose or goal of composition, categories of information to include, and perhaps a word (such as “describe,” “tell,” “persuade,” or “compare”) that hints at the kind of composition or the organizational structure being suggested.

To achieve high scores, students need to be taught to recognize these parts before they respond to an assessment prompt.

The most effective way to teach these steps is as follows:

1. Read Prompt. Have your students read the prompt. Then guide students to locate the purpose of the composition, the audience, the organizational structure suggested, and the categories of information that they need to brainstorm.

At first underline the parts of the prompt with your students. Eventually ease out of this and require students to locate the important ideas in the prompt themselves. Poor readers will need special assistance in finding these important ideas.

2. Label Paper with Categories of Information. As students find the categories of information required in the prompt, write this information on the board or the overhead and have students copy it on their notebook paper.

At first some teachers draw a brainstorming “board” for the chosen prompt and duplicate one for each student. Eventually require students to draw brainstorming “boards” on their papers and label them with the idea categories they found in the writing prompt without assistance.

3. Brainstorm Information. Explain to your young writers that they need to brainstorm these idea categories for themselves. At first give your students two or three

minutes to brainstorm for each idea category on their “boards.” This will take ten to fifteen minutes and lots of guidance until students catch on. Suggest they brainstorm at least three ideas for each category. Most students will find this difficult to do because beginning writers want to use the first idea that comes to mind.

4. Draft Composition. Before composing the draft, have students reread the prompt to remind them of the purpose of the composition, the audience, and the organizational structure required. Remind young writers to choose their best ideas and organize these into the chosen composition, *just as they did with you during Group Composing*. Many students will feel restricted by the prompt; explain that this is a test or practice for a test, not “free” writing.

5. Revise and Edit. As students complete their drafts, ask them to reread the prompt and their composition to determine how effective they were in completing the task. Direct students to use this information in revising and editing their compositions.

6. Submit. Submit compositions for assessment.



Since writing to a prompt differs based on the organizational structure of the composition, use these steps to “walk” your students through prompts for narrative, descriptive, persuasive, and directional compositions. Sample prompts are provided for you at the end of every *Really Writing!* activity.

Remember that teaching young writers to respond to prompts does not teach students to write. *Instruction comes in the Really Writing! activities*. Prompts are human creations for assessing growth. They are TESTS. Teaching young writers to write narrative, persuasive, descriptive, or directional kinds of writing comes before teaching them to respond to a prompt for assessment purposes.

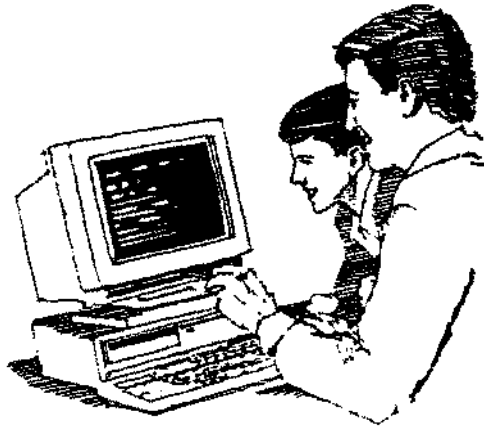
Here’s a possible scenario:

Lots of *Really Writing!* activities
+ one independent writing lesson responding to a prompt
Lots more *Really Writing!* activities
+ one independent writing lesson responding to a prompt
More *Really Writing!* activities
REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT

How do you know whether your students are ready to write independently from a prompt? Walk them through Steps 1 through 5. You will know by the way your students react to the task.

Until you believe your students are ready to respond with success to a prompt, skip independent writing lessons and use with the guided writing process outlined in each *Really Writing!* activity.

Monitoring Long-Term Growth



An easy way to keep track of your students' long-term writing growth is to make copies of writings before young authors share their compositions with their intended audiences.

Evaluate whether or not students met the prompt. Have students place the copies of some of their instructional and independent writings in a portfolio (in a manila folder or in a file on the computer) to document long-term growth.

Once every two weeks or once a month, add a brief, dated note regarding standards mastered and ones still in progress. For ideas on note-taking, review (1) the information in the revising section of each lesson and (2) the "Standards" and "Success for All" at the end of each chapter introduction. You can evaluate students' work during the revising/editing step while conferencing with students or after the final composition is completed. Here is one way to set up a hard copy or computer spreadsheet based on the standards for each type of speaking and writing.

Names	title	topic sentence	inherent		objective of game	# of directions	begin and end		directions in order	clear concise complete	# of transition words	capitalize	period
		objects	players	capital			period						

 A black and white line drawing of a hand holding a pencil, pointing towards the table below. The hand is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the table area.

