



# SECTION 1

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP

**When I began teaching** the writing workshop several years ago, I did not know what to expect. I was an experienced teacher of writing and a writer myself, and I understood and embraced the writing process. But although I had read extensively about the writing workshop, had experienced various workshops, and had gone through in-service training, I was still uncertain. I was concerned that I was stepping into yet another one of those new ideas in education that promises great success but comes up short. I felt I already had an effective writing program and worried that my students would not do as well in a new one. However, I was also drawn to the concept of the writing workshop, which provides a forum where teacher and students become partners in the experience of learning. I started that school year a hopeful skeptic and soon became a believer.

The writing workshop is much more than a program designed to help children acquire the skills necessary for written language. It is a classroom in which you and your students form bonds that become the foundation of learning. In the writing workshop, your teaching becomes individualized as students focus on topics that matter to them and you respond to their efforts. Because students write about their interests, worries, and dreams, the material of the writing workshop arises from the fabric of their lives.

The model of the writing workshop offered in this book (there are a number of variations) starts with a five- to ten-minute mini-lesson, after which your students

work on their own pieces. During writing time, the classroom buzzes with a murmur of productive noise. You circulate to check writing progress, confer with individual students or groups, provide guidance, and answer questions. Your students may be engaged in various activities: prewriting, drafting, reading, revising, editing, or conferring with you, a partner, or a peer group. The entire classroom is used, with activities taking place at the students' desks, at tables, or at your desk.

Writing is a powerful tool for learning. It enables us to analyze and synthesize our thoughts, and thereby discover new ideas. When we write, we become conscious of ourselves. We define ourselves and come to understand our lives better. Through the writing workshop, you will help your students master the skills that will enable them to express themselves with clarity and competence.

## The Writing Process

Traditional writing instruction focuses on teaching students the features of different types of writing through examples. The theory assumes that once students understand the different models—for example, narratives, editorials, essays, and various kinds of fiction—they will be able to write them.

Writing instruction that focuses on the writing process, in contrast, concentrates on the way real writers work. Writing is a process composed of at least five stages: *prewriting*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing*, and *publishing*. Although the stages are distinct, the process is recursive. Authors often move back and forth through these stages as they work.

*Prewriting* is the starting point. It is the period during which an author discovers his or her topic, decides on his or her audience and purpose, generates or researches ideas, and considers a form for his or her writing.

*Drafting* begins when the author starts writing. During this stage, the author switches between writing and reading. She may rewrite some of her work or reformulate her original ideas and return to the prewriting stage.

Next is *revising*: adding, deleting, rewriting, and polishing. Authors may move back and forth through drafting and prewriting several times as they rethink their work and revise.

The *editing* stage is the final preparation for publishing. This is when remaining corrections of mechanics are made and the piece is put into its finished form. Even here, though, writers may decide that more revision is necessary and shift back to some of the previous stages.

*Publishing* refers to the sharing of writing with someone else. For students, this most often is teachers, peers, parents, or the public. It may also include submitting material to traditional and online magazines, newspapers, or newsletters.

## Your New Role

You will become a nurturer, facilitator, and promoter in your writing workshop rather than a mere giver of information. Aside from mini-lessons, you will spend your time working with individual students and small groups. Since modeling can be a powerful motivator and teacher, you may write along with your students from time to time.

You will perform many tasks in your writing workshop. During the class, you might help one student narrow his topic, suggest ways in which another can improve her opening, or listen to yet another as she explains how she intends to develop her narrative about moving into a new home. From there you might meet with a group that is sharing drafts and seeking peer reactions. You will guide, encourage, and applaud students in their writing efforts and help them discover new insights, make connections among ideas, analyze information, and communicate their thoughts and feelings. You will give them personal feedback that reinforces their learning. The accompanying list, “The Teacher’s Role in the Writing Workshop,” suggests some of the many possible activities in which you will be engaged.

Teachers who are starting writing workshops often express three major concerns. The first is that as they circulate around the room helping individuals and small groups, other students will stop working and become disruptive. The second is that the writing workshop may run fine with small classes but not with large ones. The third is ensuring that all students will have an opportunity to learn the skills necessary for competent writing.

A well-run workshop overcomes these fears because the students become involved with their writing. Given the chance and encouragement to express themselves—to share of themselves—students become more willing to write. When students are involved with the class, disruption is reduced, even large classes can be managed efficiently, and students more easily acquire the skills they need for effective composition.

You ensure the dissemination of information and skills through mini-lessons. The material shared at the beginning of each class eventually builds a foundation of knowledge that can be referred to during individual and group conferences. Thus, the material introduced is reinforced throughout the year.

Of course, as in any class, rules must be made and expectations set and expressed. These basics are up to each teacher, and you should establish the rules for your classroom in a way you feel comfortable. At the least, you should insist that talking is to be done in quiet voices, that students conduct themselves in an appropriate manner, and that only writing-related activities may be done in the writing workshop. (For more information on discipline, see “When Discipline Is Necessary” in Section Two.)



## The Teacher's Role in the Writing Workshop

At the beginning of the writing workshop, the teacher may present a mini-lesson and then spend the rest of the period engaged in any or all of the following:

- Helping students find topics
- Helping students focus topics
- Answering student questions about writing
- Guiding students in their research efforts
- Listening to a student read a passage from his or her writing
- Offering suggestions for revision
- Working with a group brainstorming ideas
- Showing a student how to reduce clutter in his writing
- Helping a student organize her ideas
- Writing along with students
- Offering encouragement
- Applauding a student's efforts
- Conferring with students over finished pieces
- Helping a student sort through his thoughts
- Explaining the use of a thesaurus
- Helping students with technology; for example, when using word processing software, moving a block of text during revision
- Directing traffic flow around the room
- Reminding students of classroom rules
- Keeping students on task
- Assisting students in creating a class magazine
- Viewing Web sites for writers with students



## A Model of a Typical Writing Workshop

Every writing workshop reflects the personality and attitudes of its teacher. You will no doubt develop your workshop in a way that best meets the needs of your students and teaching environment. There are, in fact, many variations of the writing workshop; they differ slightly in structure but not in content. The model presented here is one of the more common ones.

The writing workshop starts with a five- to ten-minute mini-lesson that focuses on one skill or concept. The students may use the information of the mini-lesson right away or maybe not for several days or even weeks.

After the mini-lesson, students work on their writing for approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes. They may be writing in journals, searching through idea folders, or writing a story or article. It is unlikely that all students will be doing the same thing. During this time, the teacher circulates around the room and works with individual students and small groups. Along with providing help and encouragement, she also reminds students of the rules of the classroom and keeps them on task.

The last ten to fifteen minutes of the class are reserved for sharing. This may be done using the author's chair, editing partners, or peer groups. For the author's chair, students take center stage and read their work to the class. Students may first describe what they have been working on and then read from their work in progress. The rest of the class listens and may ask questions or offer suggestions. For partners or peer groups, students read their work to their partner or members of their groups, who may then comment on the student's work and offer advice or reactions. (For more information about peer groups, see "Peer Conferences" in Section Five.)

Here is a breakdown for a forty-five-minute period:

1. Mini-lesson: five to ten minutes
2. Writing time: twenty to twenty-five minutes
3. Sharing: ten to fifteen minutes

There is much flexibility within the general framework. Instead of providing a mini-lesson each day, some teachers offer mini-lessons every other day; some prefer to include a ten-minute silent writing time after the mini-lesson and reduce the general writing and sharing time; some schedule sharing only two or three days per week. You should organize your workshop in a way that is most effective for you and your students.

I like to have all students share after each class because sharing provides closure and keeps the students moving forward. Some students, if they find that there is no sharing that day, will ease off in their work. I encourage students to share even if they merely tell their editing partner or members of their peer group how they searched for a topic. Working together like this promotes an atmosphere of friendship and support as well as helps to spread understanding of the writing process. In time you are likely to see a company of writers emerge in your classroom.

## Scheduling Your Writing Workshop

Writing workshops that buzz with the activity of students working on a variety of tasks may appear to the uninitiated to be disorganized and chaotic. In fact, most of these classrooms are built on a firm foundation of efficient management and a practical schedule.

A consistent schedule is the starting point of a successful workshop. While the ideal is to set up your writing workshop for a full period, five days per week, many teachers do not have that amount of time. You can run a successful workshop meeting three or four times a week, but at fewer than three, you will have trouble maintaining continuity and keeping students interested. Some teachers incorporate the writing workshop into their English classes. Assuming they meet five days per week, they may use three classes for the workshop and spend the other two on literature or spelling and other language skills. Here, too, at fewer than three meetings per week, it may be difficult to sustain the thought and emotion necessary for an effective writing workshop.

When students know that they have writing workshop each day or every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, for example, they come to the workshop ready to write. When students meet regularly for writing workshop, their minds become engaged with the writing process.

In schools where it is impossible to meet regularly for the writing workshop throughout the year, the workshop may be scheduled for fixed meetings during part of the year. The writing workshop may rotate with courses like computer literacy, music, art, home economics, or industrial arts for sessions that span several weeks. Regular meetings during an eight- to ten-week period are preferable to irregular or limited meetings throughout the year.

## Promoting Your Writing Workshop

Unless your district has made a commitment to implement writing workshops in place of traditional English classes, you will probably need to promote and explain what you are doing to administrators, colleagues, and parents. You may find some resistance at first, because the writing workshop is quite different from classes in which the teacher stands before the students, offers information through lectures, and then assigns homework that reinforces the skills taught during the lesson. The writing workshop instead fosters a learning environment in which self-discovery and cooperation become paramount.

The best way to explain the writing workshop to administrators, supervisors, and colleagues is to invite them into your class. First, however, refer them to articles about the writing workshop, or provide them with a written description of your own. When they come to your class, describe what is going on and let them see how the workshop functions. Invite them back for additional visits so that they can gain an understanding of the many activities that are a part of your workshop. Sharing samples of your students' writing—either individual papers or class magazines or on class or school Web sites—is a way to show the results of your workshop.

You should inform parents about the writing workshop early in the school year. At back-to-school nights, I tell the parents of my students that I will be teaching a writing workshop instead of the traditional English class. I explain what the writing workshop is and mention that it is being used successfully throughout the country. I emphasize that their children will continue to learn the skills for effective language, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The single greatest concern parents have is that their children may be writing but they are not learning grammar. To many parents, writing and grammar are separate disciplines. I explain that they are inseparable. No one can write effectively without understanding grammar, but knowing grammar without being able to apply it to written language is a useless skill. Sending home copies of student magazines, making sure that the writing of your students appears on school Web sites and in school and parent-teacher organization newsletters, and liberally exhibiting the work of your students on hallway bulletin boards can quicken the acceptance of your workshop.

I always encourage parents to become involved with their children's writing experiences. Their support at home can be a significant factor in their children's progress and overall achievement. The accompanying "Things Parents Can Do to Foster Good Writing Habits in Their Children" on page 11 is an excellent handout at back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences.

In many cases, your students will become the best advocates of your writing workshop. Their enthusiasm for the workshop will be clear, and they will speak well of it to others. That, coupled with samples of their writing, will be your strongest promotion.

When students write about topics that interest them in an environment that supports the risk taking that is vital to conceiving and developing fresh ideas, their minds and imaginations become involved with their material. When they know that their work will be shared, that others will read what they have written, and that their writing matters, students strive for precision and clarity. Of all the advantages the writing workshop offers, perhaps these are most important.



## Enlisting Support for Your Writing Workshop

The following tips can help you build support for your writing workshop:

- Obtain information about the writing workshop to share with administrators, supervisors, and colleagues. Education journals, resource books such as this one, and the Internet are good sources of information.
- Invite administrators, supervisors, and colleagues into your class so that they can observe how a writing workshop functions.
- Write a description of your writing workshop, and make it available to interested colleagues and parents.
- Publish and display the writing of your students as often as possible. Class or school magazines, parent-teacher organization publications, school Web sites, class and hallway displays, and publication in local newspapers provide your workshop with positive exposure.
- If your school has a day when parents may visit the school and observe classes, be sure to invite parents to your writing workshop.
- Write a monthly newsletter keeping parents updated about the happenings in your writing workshop. The newsletter need be no more than a page or two. Having students help write it will result in excellent public relations. Send copies of the newsletter home with students, or, if possible, e-mail copies to parents. If your school district maintains a Web site, post the newsletter there.
- Explain your writing workshop at back-to-school night. Be sure to have several examples of student writing available.
- At parent-teacher conferences, explain the benefits of the writing workshop, and note how it is different from other methods of writing instruction. Show parents examples of their children's work.
- Conduct workshops for parents with the objective of explaining how they can help their children become better writers. This is a fine time to explain your writing workshop and the benefits it provides to students.
- Organize a group of teachers who are interested in learning about the writing workshop and implementing it in their own classrooms. Shared success is effective promotion.



## Things Parents Can Do to Foster Good Writing Habits in Their Children

As a parent, there is much you can do to support the writing efforts of your children both in and out of school.

- Discuss good books and their authors. Also discuss stories, articles, and poems.
- Tell your children about your own favorite authors and what makes these authors (in your opinion) different from others.
- Share your own writing with your children. For example, let your children see you working on business reports, letters, and thank-you notes.
- Show interest in your children's writing. Be willing to read and discuss your children's stories, articles, and poems.
- Help your children understand that writing is a process of several stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (sharing).
- Realize that all writers, and especially children, progress at their own pace.
- Encourage your children to complete all writing assignments.
- Encourage your children to keep a journal and write every day.
- When you are at your child's school, make a point to read displays of student writing.
- Attend back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences. Ask your children's teachers how you can support the school's writing program.
- Encourage your children to always do their best writing.

