

# Writing With Kids

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## Introduction

I don't have an English degree (though I've taught English courses), it's been a few years since I was in the classroom, and I don't teach from what I learned (at least not directly) in the dozens of educational classes I've taken. That particular brand of writing jargon is no longer at the tip of my tongue. Now it's the writing itself—and the real-life processes I use to get it down—that I savor. I teach from how I write. I teach from who I am.

In my writing group, we don't allow disclaimers. This isn't one. I fully embrace the quirky, opinionated path I'm navigating here. And if you're appalled that I would write about teaching writing with sentences that aren't always complete, or thoughts that express an irreverence for certain teaching practices, you might want to stop now and find a more whitewashed writing-teaching experience. To bail before you've been forever ruined. Like me. But I know I can be right and so can others, even when we're making conflicting statements. Life and writing are like that. We just keep revising as we go.

In the eighties, I wrote my master's paper on teaching writing, and I've taught writing to teachers, students, and other writers ever since. In that project, I quoted the gurus, included statistics and examples, sited research, and wrote that book-length piece in a well-developed, grammatically correct and educational fashion. It helped me develop as a teacher and writer, but you won't see anything like it here. And you won't hear that voice. What you get here is Me—an author and teacher who has integrated my own work and the work of others into a practice that works for me and those I mentor. It's not academic (and yet it is).

A mid-winter retreat pushed me to begin this project. Sharing what I consider the gems from my experiences in teaching writing has been a goal since my master's project almost 30 years ago—"A Writing Classroom: Process to Product." This new impulse to begin again in a different fashion was conceived, nurtured, and supported in a lovely retreat setting with compassionate, thoughtful people around me. This yearly gathering of alumni from Christina Baldwin's "The Self as the Source of the Story" course has produced a variety of products and furthered countless writing careers.

Besides being a mom and children's author, I've been a certificated teacher for over thirty years. I moved from teaching music into fourth and fifth grade classrooms, then on to becoming an elementary librarian and later a founding director of a small school. In each position, I borrowed and built on what came from the others, filtered all incoming ideas, thoughts, and knowledge through my internalized lie detector, and allowed the remaining gems to resonate and mix with my own brand of knowing, revising and evaluating until I discovered what was true for me and my students. This process was especially evident in developing my beliefs about teaching writing. I still teach kids whenever I have the opportunity, through school author visits, writing residencies, workshops, and Young Author events. I need that kid fix, which is also why I'm back in a very part-time elementary library position this year.

I'm now glad I trusted my instincts to not publish a version of my master's paper years ago, but this one demanded to be shared. The pendulum has been stuck at one side of the clock for too long now, out of reach of children who were indeed left behind, and it's craving balance. Teachers are craving balance. Parents. Kids. The whole system is out of balance in some ways, and you know it because you're in it.

The teaching of writing, in many instances, has become compartmentalized, chopped up and dried out to the point that kids can't swallow it. Some of us have remained steadfast throughout all the testing pressures, time crunches, and elimination of that which smells creative in order to make sure kids get in enough test-item practice. How do we convince the nonwriters who decide what kids need to know about writing that it doesn't work to teach elements of writing without actually applying them to the process of writing? "But I don't have time!" my teacher students tell me. And they don't. But you know that teaching writing before getting kids interested in writing is like teaching phonics without ever giving kids a chance to transfer it to their reading. I'm sure you're one of the hearty who keep on, or you wouldn't be here, right? If there was time and energy, you'd be staging a mutiny, right?

We traitors let kids write. We let them have choices. We get out of their way. It's not that we're against testing. We know tests give us valuable information. We do, however, question the value of tests whose purpose is solely to rate schools, or teachers (Really? You can tell a good teacher by student scores?), rather than to assess and assist students. Time and tests. Maybe we'd have more of one without so much of the other. Or maybe it's that we know there's much more to learning than what is assessed on a test. I'm guessing you've been sneaking in creative writing wherever you can. Or you'd like to. You probably know that even essays and personal narratives (as we call them in the

teaching world) can be written creatively without a preconceived formula. We'll touch on that later, too.

As you can tell, I have opinions. Opinions based on experience and research. Opinions based on trial and error. I've been there, done that. I have the experience, know the jargon, created writing rubrics, developed rating scales, evaluated countless student papers, incorporated state standards, blah, blah, blah. I can teach the way I was taught to teach. No, I can't, actually. That's what this is really about. Somewhere along the way, as I said earlier, I started thinking about what I did as a writer, and that changed how I taught.

It might be summer while you read this. That's when I read as a teacher. If so, pretend I'm a friend sitting next to you by the pool. (Can I borrow your sunscreen?) If you're reading this during the school year, you probably are thinking you don't have the time for all my opinions. You catch yourself saying, "yeah, yeah, I know. Now give me something I can use tomorrow morning." That's okay. It probably means you're as opinionated and intuitive as I am, so you have my permission to jump ahead and find the activities you need now. Go on! That's how I was as a teacher, too. You, me, all of us can pool our ideas. When you see something that triggers an activity you can use in the classroom or a discussion you have with your students, share it with me. I'll add it in a revision or post it on my website for others to use (with your permission of course).

So, I think you know me now. At least this part of me. This philosophy that believes in the need to nurture a love of writing. It's all important—the evaluations, the

### **What do we want?**

As teachers, parents, caregivers and leaders of children, we want to know that what we do matters. That what we teach and share has the power to affect the children in our lives. When we are asked what we want for our children, what do we say? As blasphemous as it may seem to the values of our culture, I don't know any parent or teacher who would answer these questions with words and phrases such as high test scores, good grades, or even eventual placement at a good college. A friend of mine tells me she knows plenty of people who would give those answers. Though many people see grades and other public symbols of achievement as stepping stones to success, The only answers I've heard from teachers and parents are ones that reflect on their students' and children's quality of life. "I want her to be happy." "I want him to be surrounded by people who love him." We want them to follow their passions, to find their voices, to be productive, to serve others, to know who they are.

Those of us who teach and care for children are pressed for time. Pressed for energy. The dictators of education and childrearing push us to push our children. Excel, achieve, compete. Get the goodies. Make sure your kid gets a head start so they can be ahead of the other kids before they know what hit them. We know better, but we don't know what to do to stop it, so we buy in, just in case there might be some truth in it. After all, our

children have to live in this world, they might as well know how to play the game, right? What game is it we want them to play? What is the world we want them to live in? Is there a way to provide sanity and balance to our children's lives, to support their love of learning instead of stripping away their desire and curiosity?

Sit back, nod your head when you agree, and let's look at the power of story, the role of the teacher (parent, leader, mentor), and practical ways to get kids writing.

## **Story power**

Story is how we make sense of our lives. We know who we are by the stories we and others tell about us. We learn who others are by listening to their stories. The creation of stories is how we're known. What better reason could there be for helping students tell their stories?

I grew up in a small town in northern Minnesota. My sister and I got up on sweltering summer mornings and pulled on our swimsuits. Our bare feet burned on the few paved roads leading to the beach at Spirit Lake, just blocks from home. Painful gravel was a welcome break between pavement and the beach's searing sand. All this made the water more welcoming. Blisters raised on my sunburned shoulders, even wearing the T-shirt my mom insisted I wear over my suit (There was no sunscreen back then)... I tell you about my past, you tell me about yours. The details are different, but with each story, I hear more, learn more, and live into the relationship we're building.

What do kids do when they get to school? They share stories. "Guess what happened last night!" "I'm so mad at my mom..." Stories create pictures of the people and events we encounter. New stories are filtered through the fabric of the stories we've already heard. When I tell you of the time I was in 100 degrees below zero wind-chill, when my car tires bumped down the road from the flat spot created where they were frozen on the ground, and the radio announcer warned about skin cracking in that cold, it gets pieced in with the earlier summer heat story to create a bigger story of where I grew up. Story upon story, we learn who we are.

Teachers tell stories. They teach their students to tell stories. And they give them the means to record them—writing. The concept of students telling their stories to make sense of who they are wasn't new to me. It intuitively made sense, and I used it not only for writing practice, but also for getting to know students, and for them to get to know each other. The piece I didn't have in place back then, however, was how the story of who we are can be revealed through the fiction we write as much as it can through personal narrative or memoir.

My daughter Sandra is adopted from Haiti. She came to us as a six-year-old and began kindergarten two months later. She not only learned English that year, but began reading, soaking up everything she could. As an eight-year-old, she loved fairy tales, and started to write her own. Prince John, in one of her stories, lost his mother, and had to leave his

father to go to a different land. His task was to find a princess to marry in order to become king some day. He had a lot of hardships along the way, of course, and others assisted him in overcoming them. It was the story of Sandra's life, though she wasn't aware of it. A couple years later she started her autobiography.

In the novel I'm working on, a boy lives in post-earthquake Lisbon with the widow his father quickly married before he set off to sea. The father has been missing for years, and the boy's search for information leads him to a new world and the truth. My own father was present, but had to deal with issues that were often too big for him. He did the best he could at the time, just like my character's father. As story creators, we pick themes from our lives without always being aware of the connection.

When I talked with a St. Paul bookseller about my passion for helping kids figure out who they're meant to be, she said, "What does that have to do with *Dinosailors*?" I think I was more surprised than she was to hear my answer. I knew I had put together a rollicking rhyming book (and now series) that kids loved, but as I answered her question, I discovered it was more than that. I didn't hesitate long before saying, "You have to figure out 'who you are not' before you can learn 'who you are.'" My dinobooks send this crew of gargantuan goofballs on lots of journeys as they search for the right one. And isn't that what we all must do?

Before a school visit presentation for 8<sup>th</sup> grade inner city kids, the librarian suggested I not read my son's birth story, *Tell Me My Story, Mama*. He thought I'd lose them because the story seemed too young for them. I knew he was protecting me, not the kids, but during the reading, even the toughest-looking kids in that crowd leaned in, glued to my words like any other group I'd visited. There was not a sound in the room except for my voice.

After reading the story, I told them how some people think kids their age wouldn't appreciate the story. I said I had a hunch they would, and asked them if they could guess why. A girl raised her hand. "Because it's our story, too."

I couldn't get over her words. I couldn't have said it better. She was right. It didn't matter that all the details were unique to my son's birth. Because of the details, anyone can relate to it. When my editor said *Tell Me My Story, Mama* was a universal story, I said, "No, it's specifically my son's." I hadn't understood the full power of details yet.

That's what makes Story so powerful. And like those kids, we yearn to hear our own story.

Whenever I read the book to adult groups, I would always hear someone's birth story afterward. They would hear one version of the universal birth story, and feel compelled to share their own. When my son used to read the book with me, reciting the kid's half of the conversation with the mom in the story, people would be in tears. It's all in the details. Details that can trigger someone else's own details.

Story happens whether we teach it or not. We might as well point to it, use it, and harness its power, whether it's folktales, fiction, or embellished creations on the playground.

Story takes time. Writing takes time. Story isn't on the tests.

Our young learners will get it anyway, right?

I think that used to be true. Back when we took time for story. Back before television had unlimited channels, when it still had uninterrupted scenes with dialog and action. Back before "accessing information" seemed to exclude books for some teacher-librarians. (Thank goodness for the countless ones who understood and still understand the importance of both printed text and online information.) Before texting, face time, and the ever-growing social media sites. Our students are used to instant gratification, pictures changing before their eyes in flashes of light and sound. They speak and write in code, not sentences, any moment, anywhere, and we might feel like giving up because we know we can't compete. They expect entertainment, and we're not on their list of favorites. How do we get them to tune in? We make it real. We make it meaningful. We can't make it big, electronic, or eye-catching florescent. We can only appeal to something deeper if we want to hook them.

### **Why teach?**

What is it that keeps teachers working with kids, day after day, year after year? How can they—you!—sustain the energy when so much of the time seems filled with managerial and behavioral issues? It's not a job where the pay-off is often readily noticed. Much of the effects of what teachers do may not ever be visible to them. Teachers don't do this work for praise or gratitude. Students may not ever realize the difference teachers have made in their lives. And if they do, it's not often communicated. Sometimes we're thanked in other ways.

It could've happened to any one of us, but thanks to being a bit more accessible these days, one of those "thanks" found its way back to me. Years after leaving my last Minnesota teaching job to live and work on Whidbey Island, my past team-teaching partner noticed a column in a local paper written by an old student of mine.

DaNette was a quiet girl, but thoughtful, as in "filled with thoughts." She analyzed, questioned, shared opinions, all in a calm, respectful manner. This particular column was titled "Who's your Hero?" In it, she stated that her fifth grade teacher, Ms. Lund was her hero, along with (this is my favorite part) Walt Whitman. DaNette wrote, "Ms. Lund was one of the first teachers who taught me what life was about...She proved to me everyone can make a difference."

The next part made me smile, because I often felt the same way myself as I started each school year. "The first couple of days of Ms. Lund's class made me skeptical of whether I would enjoy her teaching style. But it didn't take me long to realize Ms. Lund was

teaching from her heart, not her books. She had us write stories and poems of our life and how we as 10-year-olds looked at it... Ever since fifth grade, I have pursued writing. Ms. Lund was the founder for my interest and will always be held in highest respect by me as well as my fifth grade classmates.” DaNette went on to invite others to write about their heroes.

DaNette was one of those kids that you don’t realize is there until you see the fire behind their eyes. Quiet. Studying. Cautious and contemplative. I was moved by her words about me, and thought about my teachers—like Mrs. Enney, my own fifth grade teacher—who sent a poem of mine in to be published in a volume of student writing called “Wonder Writers.” It was a simple little rhyming piece, not as sophisticated as the ones my students write, but it gave me my first taste of publication.

A much-later friendship helped me put DaNette’s relationship with me in perspective. I was first introduced to one of my “heroes” through her first book. In the seventies, I discovered *One to One* by Christina Baldwin, a pioneering book on journaling that prompted the Library of Congress to come up with a new designation—one that better suited this new vision of journaling.

Christina did a week long author-in-residence in a good friend’s classroom in another Minnesota school district. My request to observe Christina’s teaching that week was turned down, but I heard daily reports of how she worked with the students. Many years later, across the country, Christina and I found each other living just a few miles apart on Whidbey Island. She’s a first cousin of one of my husband’s best friends. Due to a historical snowstorm when my husband’s sister couldn’t make it to our son’s birth, Christina was one of the women who came to help us. As I often say, she was my mentor long before I met her.

It’s humbling to think I inspired DaNette to choose a writer’s life. After receiving the article, I sent her a note through the newspaper. She responded, amazed that her piece found me. Then, a dozen years later, as I began writing this and wished I could talk with DaNette (not knowing her location or last name) I got an email from her. She had been walking through a Target store and caught a glimpse of my name on a book.

*Dinosailors* had been selected to be a Target promotion. All their bookstores had copies face out. Seeing my book lead DaNette to an online search and my website, where she was able to email me. It’s not just appreciation I feel for her thankfulness. She has inspired me as much as I inspired her. She validated what I felt about teaching writing, and she helped give me the confidence to speak out for students and share what I know. Now I regularly hear from students and teachers who tell me how my presentations during school author visits have inspired them, but this will never be a privilege I take lightly. It’s an honor, even when the comments are not what I hoped to hear—and I treasure every response I’ve received.

Think about the teachers and mentors who made and make a difference in your life. What qualities do they have? What did they do to make you feel that way? How do we emulate their compassion and commitment?

## **Teach Who You Are**

Writers are people who write. Christina Baldwin once told me she wanted to put that phrase on a T-shirt. Recently, when a mutual friend of ours shared a piece of writing with us, saying she wasn't a writer, we responded in unison with that phrase. I had used the saying with my students for years. I no longer know if I borrowed it from Christina or came up with it on my own, like so many of those ideas that seem to land in multiple places, including my writing and teaching practices. We take on what feels right for us, which is what I want you to do with what you read here. Make my words and ideas your own or toss them aside.

Mike Seymour, director of the Heritage Institute, the institution who sponsors this continuing education course for teachers, periodically offers a retreat called "We Teach Who We Are." It's a heart-felt look at the messages we send through the methods we use. It not only acknowledges that "who we are" impacts our students' desire and ability to learn, it validates that teaching from who we are is a "best practice."

You are the most valuable part of your class's educational experience. Your passion and compassion, your views, and your commitment make learning come alive for your students. They'll know they're learners, that they're writers, because your interactions with them show them you see them that way.

We all know stories about teachers, principals, and community leaders who impact others and change the course of lives just by being "who they are."

One of our local characters here on Whidbey is an aging earth-loving scientist. He lives out on a rural piece of property in a simple house surrounded inside and out with his wood and metal creations. He's been teaching science forever, or so it seems. We hired him to teach at Cedar, the alternative school I founded and co-directed, because his lessons are hands-on, experiential, with high kid-interest.

Leonard would bring in batteries, chemicals, machines he made or altered to demonstrate a scientific principle he wanted the kids to remember. He's everyone's favorite teacher, has been for decades, and kids learn to love science because of their interactions with Leonard. It doesn't hurt that their studies may conclude with activities like taking apart electronics, hooking up batteries to homemade contraptions, or sending up homemade rockets. My son, years later, still talks about all he learned from this gentle, creative, risk-taking, rule-breaking man.

One of the greatest compliments I received happened years earlier when Leonard and I taught in the same program. A parent told me her son (Let's call him Kyle) had been



changed because of two teachers who were passionate about what they taught. Leonard and me. This was especially meaningful because at our first meeting at the beginning of the school year, she said Kyle was a “reluctant writer.”

## **Reluctant Writers**

At the start of each new writing class or school year, I loved to hear parents who were new to my style of teaching say their child didn't like to write. I knew those kids. The kids who never learned to play with words, to put themselves on paper, to dream on the page. You knew and know those kids, too.

They are the kids who know writing is boring. That the teacher is their only audience. That the writing better pass the teacher's test for topic and word choice, format, and sentence structure or it isn't deemed good. That their writing better have complete sentences and clearly identified paragraphs, no matter what the writing has to say.

Spelling counts. (And it does, but there's a time and place for everything.)

Those kids knew the routine. Their capitalization and punctuation errors would come back corrected in red. It's kind of funny if you think about it. No one ever writes in all the correct math answers in red, hands the papers back, and expects kids to know their math any better. These are the kids who think or say, “This is stupid. I hate writing.”

Kyle was one of those kids, but by the end of the quarter at conference time, when Kyle's mom was asked by a learning plan consultant at the school, “so, how is his reluctance to writing?” she responded, “What reluctance?” She was animated as she told me this story and thanked me for making writing an adventure for Kyle.

These “reluctant writers,” once unleashed, are the kids who often have the most to say, and the most unique ways of saying them. Their voices are fresh. They find unusual formats and ways of organizing their thoughts and writing. They chose to shut down rather than write what they think the teacher wants. Why didn't they write? It wasn't safe. They no longer trusted the system enough to put their selves on the paper. They would come into my class, sit back with arms folded, legs out, or other body language that dared me to get them writing.

“What do we have to write about?”

“Anything you want.”

“How long does it have to be?”

“Until it's done.”

“When is it due?”

“When you’re done with it.”

These are the questions and answers that happened early in my classes. Students either thought they’d hit the jackpot or wondered how they were going to keep their obvious place on top when there wasn’t an opportunity to turn work in first, or to have a point value written out in teacher red at the top of their assignment. You could almost read their puzzled thoughts. “How will everyone know mine was the best?”

The funny thing is—that overachiever with the safe writing voice and close-to-perfect structure and conventions was who I was as a kid. The drive to succeed had nothing to do with sharing my stories, my knowledge and interest, my voice and passion. As one of the ones who looked solely for teacher approval, letter grades, and recognition from classmates of my superiority, I would have been lost in the writing classes I now teach. Initially. And then, perhaps learning at a slower pace than the rest of the class for the first time in my life, I’d learn how to let the real me out. I meet these students all the time. They want to know all the required details, and you can almost taste the panic they feel when not enough of the parameters (from their viewpoint) are delineated for them.

They ask the same questions as the reluctant writers, for different reasons.

The seemingly lax answers don’t mean there’s no evaluation, no teacher interaction, no direction or structure. Those are necessary when teaching anything. This doesn’t mean that kids don’t have to write, or that their writing isn’t as powerful. In fact, with fewer imposed limits and a safe place to take risks, students go beyond offering only what’s necessary for the grade, only what’s outlined in the assignment, only what they think the teacher wants to hear. They learn to give up perfectionism, trust their voice, their individuality, and the belief they have something valuable and unique to say.

## **Free Writing**

So, trusting you have something unique to say is great, but how do you really get kids to write? In my introduction, I mentioned free-writing. It’s been called by lots of names, used in a variety of ways, but it’s basically just writing nonstop, not allowing yourself to be critical—just keeping the pen moving on the page, or the fingers tapping away on the keyboard. Voice happens that way. There’s no right or wrong way to free-write. Just keep moving. Even if you have to write nonsense at the beginning. I encouraged my students to use the old “I don’t know what to write” phrase if they couldn’t come up with anything else. I’ll never forget Paul (not his real name), a fifth-grade student of mine. He was determined not to write. His paper went something like this...

“I don’t know what to write. This is stupid. I hate writing. I hate writing. I hate writing... She says I have to keep my pen moving. Fine. I’ll just keep saying the same thing. I hate writing. I hate writing. I hate writing. I can’t wait for school to get out. When I get home, I’m taking my skateboard to the park. I’m sure Billy will be there. He’s always there. We

started skateboarding about three years ago...” And off he went on a topic that wouldn’t have revealed itself so quickly and strongly without free-writing. Paul became a writer in spite of himself.

DaNette got it. She used it often, and learned to believe in herself because of it. She knew the value of getting the words down. Here’s a piece she wrote as a fifth grader:

### Don’t Let it Fly

Color the pages with words.  
Let them drop out of the sky  
Like rain. Don’t let them  
Fly away. Let verse by verse,  
Word by word trace the other.  
Let the idea taste your tongue,  
Let your nerves say yes! And  
Write them down. Don’t let one  
Idea fly away or be taken.

### **Risk to Write**

Sam was a jock. Well, as much as a fifth grade boy can be a jock. Writing, to Sam, was not a cool activity. And this week, we were exploring poetry. I had shared poetry with them, material by well-known poets, some of my own poetry, and some by past students as places to start. I had modeled a process I call piggyback poetry, using words, themes, formats, voice, or other aspects of existing poetry as a jumping-off point for a new poem (more about that later).

Though he had already publicly renounced poetry to his classmates, Sam quietly turned to his notebook after hearing something in a piece I read to them. We had played with metaphors, had unearthed clichés, explored the school grounds on a “simile” walk (identifying objects and creating similes for them), and only then would Sam finally let himself give it a try—at least enough to come up with a title he liked.

At the top of a new page, Sam wrote “Diamond Rain.” He didn’t make any of his usual groans and grunts or pencil-tapping put-down announcements. He abandoned his “too cool” stance for the moment and focused on the page before him. Sam had the class trained well to validate him for his irreverent remarks, but this time, he seemed to sense that he couldn’t risk it, that he was on to something and couldn’t blow the opportunity. I recognized that from my own battles with new pieces. A thoughtful look of contemplation on Sam’s face was enough for me to be pleased, enough for me to stay out of his way, even if he didn’t write down a single word. But he did. Sam stared at his title awhile, then finally dug into the body of the poem.

## Diamond Rain

I see the water gushing  
over the waterfall.

It trickles over the  
dark stones and washes away  
their hard fierce cover.

It washes the sparkling  
stones to their fullest shine.

It makes the rain  
look like falling diamonds  
waving their way to  
the ocean.

As I read pieces to the class (with student permission), I didn't identify the writer of "Diamond Rain." It was the only way Sam agreed to let me read it. I let the other students soak in the language, let Sam hear their sounds of wonder, appreciation, enjoyment, all without their knowing he had written it. When I did get permission to identify the writer, some thought it was a joke. "No!" "What?" "Who really wrote it?" "Did you write it for him?" Sam was used to getting recognition, but it wasn't for this, wasn't ever for academic or creative work, unless you count his creativity in classroom banter. Sam was hooked. Nothing hooks a kid like Sam more than finding yet another way to get approval from his classmates. And those classmates were stunned.

However much he loved the approval from the rest of the class, Sam's own approval is what moved him the most. "How does that feel, Sam?" Not, "I'm proud of you, Sam." It's not natural for me, but I try to direct the student's focus away from what I think as the teacher, and put it back on the student. It helps them own their writing. As teachers, we're so programmed to offer positive feedback. We want to shout out, "That's great!"—but that's judgment coming from us. I want kids to evaluate their own writing, to make decisions not based on what the teacher will think, to trust their own judgment.

With one poem under him, Sam tried for a second. He stared at the page, couldn't write. As the others wrote, Sam fidgeted his fingers around the edges of a mostly blank page, and then crumpled the paper, adding it to the others with unwanted titles at the top. He fell back into whining about how stupid it was. I reminded him about his past success and asked him what was up. He said, "I can't think of a title."

"Just write," I said. "You don't need a title before you begin." I quoted Tennessee Williams. "The title comes last." Still he stared at another blank page. "I can't write without a title." We discussed working titles. Then I told him about the feeling I have after completing each story I write. How it feels like the last creative thing I'll ever do. I know better intellectually, know that the ideas and words will come again, but at the

moment, the well feels dry. I tell him that eventually, the water seeps in from the aquifer, and I can write again.

Sam relaxed, jotted a working title on a new page, and again, the words came. At first I found myself wanting the outcome I had envisioned—that Sam could get started without a title, but he was writing, and I moved on to the next kid. Later, he waved his arm to get my attention. We huddled at the side of the room designated for impromptu critiquing with friends. This is what he read to me...

### Cold Night Wind

I look out my window at night  
And watch the trees shivering in the  
Cold.

Their branches waving like scary ghost arms trying  
To get you.

Their shadows haunt  
the lake.

And they will stand there  
Bold,  
Fierce,  
in the Cold  
Night Wind.

Sam found his own solution, which wasn't mine. That's how it should be. Letting go of outcomes is a biggy for us teachers. We really do care about these people whose education is entrusted to us. We feel responsible for what they learn academically, socially, personally. We crave their success.

There are often up to thirty or more students in one classroom, each dependent on the teacher. During writing workshop times, I didn't go anywhere in the classroom without my clipboard, jotting notes about how each student was doing—their needs, interests, accomplishments. I'd flip to the page with the name of the student I was hovering over. That was until I required each student to attach a "conference" list on the inside cover of their writing folder, and to have it open on the desk during our writing time. I gave them the responsibility to keep our consultation notes.

Under the student's name were three columns for recording information about these little visits. Date, Content, Goal. I fill them in with the students, asking them what I should write to summarize our short visits. Content—needing a title to start writing. Goal—start writing without a perfect title. Looking back on my experience with Sam, I smile. I, too, need at least a working title to begin.

## **Write to Teach**

So, how do you get kids to know they're writers?

You write with them for starters. You share the writing experience with them. You let them see your thoughts, your struggles as a writer. You show them material you're working on week after week. They watch you revise, revise, and revise again. You ask them for suggestions, tell them the options you're considering. You struggle with them as they write, ask them if they're ready for comments and suggestions.

Give your students options, but let them know they are the authors, not you, and that they should incorporate the suggestions that feel right to them, and I'm talking about word choice, content, and other subjective areas of the writing process here. There are situations where rules can be bent or broken, and others where the only respectable path is to follow them. To know you're a writer, you need to own your writing, not craft it according to how someone thinks it should sound.

What are we afraid of? What makes us think we can't write in front of our students? I believe part of the answer lies in our consumer-based system. We think we can only expose our children to the best of everything. A hundred or more years ago, people would gather in homes and halls and sing together. Fiddles, whistles, and voices came together, shared at whatever level of expertise each person possessed. Now we cringe at the idea of singing in front of people. We think that the only way to go is to purchase the best CD's for our kids to hear. Only the best for them.

Guess what, people – “only the best” means those kids walk away knowing that music is not for the masses. Not for them. And when we only show them clean, polished writing, they learn writing is not for everyone. Okay, so they already know that, but maybe they should first learn that it's an option for them. How many would-be writers out there have never creatively put a pen to paper because our methods of teaching writing made the task too daunting to attempt? Why do we continue to think they first have to know everything about writing before they can jump in and share their stories?

When toddlers try out new words and sentences, we don't stop them to make corrections. We listen, smile, nod yes. We don't make them practice those words and phrases in isolation until they get them right. We let them “talk” to us with the tools they have. That's how they learn this complex language of ours.

## **Risky Spelling**

And then there's spelling. More red ink. This is a hot topic for many parents. I remember one mom in particular. She came into my classroom waving a piece of paper in my face—a story her son had written. “How could you send something home like this?” She

had corrected the spelling words I had obviously overlooked. And now she was in here to tell me how to do my job.

I explained my philosophy, talked about how fragile the writing ego is. Asked her how she felt about writing herself. Asked her what she did when she didn't know how to spell a word she wanted to use... "I use the dictionary." "Really?" I asked. "I find a way to reframe the sentence using a different word to say the same thing, but it's rarely as good as it would've been if I had used my first thought." I told her I've learned to get around that now, how spell-check has helped with that, but our beginning writers don't always have access to spell-check. I saw the shoulders go down, the tension start to drain from her face. And a deep breath came when I told her this...

"Your son took risks in writing this. He didn't limit his word choice to the vocabulary he has already mastered in his writing. He borrowed from his speaking vocabulary, which is always greater than the one we use in writing. He felt safe to do this. Read the piece again. Can you hear how sophisticated it is compared to his earlier writing?" She left more relaxed, and though I didn't get an apology or acknowledgment that she understood what I had said, nothing more was ever said about it.

But back to modeling, because this is the key. We must write. We must let them see the garbage. Let them see our willingness to write the garbage. There's a long line of writers ahead of us that taught us how to free-write, how to write nonstop, how to let it pour out on the page without stopping. How to let our individual voice jump in there and be heard. It has to do with word choice, our particular ways of seeing things, our background, experiences, and temperament.

We try to help our students develop "voice," but a more accurate way of looking at it in my opinion, is to help them "let out" their voice. To stop controlling it. Stop judging and editing as they write. To tell that critic inside them to be quiet and leave them alone. I train my students to say "Be quiet!" inside their heads when they hear the ugly voice pop up and tell them they can't do this. As adults, we have options like writing classes and groups, books, and our common sense and experience to see us through the initial terror. These kids need us to give that little bit of peace to them. To say it's okay.

### **Taking the Oath**

I've adapted a practice from a Natalie Goldberg line. It looks like this. The kids raise their hands and repeat after me. "I give myself permission..." Go ahead, say it with them. No one's watching as you read this. "To write the worst junk in the world." Your turn.

There are always giggles. Sheepish looks. And of course, the ones who refuse to raise a hand. That's when I tell them that some people's inner critic is so strong that the person can't even get their hand up. Hands inch up the sides of bodies and sneak into the stream of hands in the classroom. I use the pledge with adults, too. Telling them the story about

my students, of course. Letting them put their guard down as they pretend they're the kids they or I work with. We review the pledge when necessary.

My students get to see my junk. As a classroom teacher, I wrote at the overhead while they wrote at their desks. That was before technology made it even simpler. I didn't talk about it, just stood there, crossing out words and phrases, writing in the margins, messing up the pages, pulling out the gems to transfer to the next day's work.

They'd look up from time to time. Often I'd see a grin as they watched me, followed by a quick drop of their head as they went back to their paper, trying one of the techniques they just witnessed, or maybe just seeing that writing didn't come easy for me either. That writing has to start out messy. I can't tell you how many times people have told me "but writing is hard for me." It's hard for anyone. The problem comes when we interpret "hard" as "bad." While it's true that we all experience different levels of success, I don't know any writers who do not struggle with their writing. But, like our characters, we keep trying until the problem is solved.

When I was a school librarian, students heard me analyze stories from a writer's perspective. They got to hear editor's comments on my stories. I'd show them revisions, week after week, month after month. They learned about the gritty process of getting a book published. They saw many versions of the same story. Not just revisions, but new takes on the same themes. Characters disappeared, came back. Changed from human to mice and back again in succeeding versions.

We talked about how the books we read have gone through that same process. That their own first drafts will never sound like a published book, and that the first drafts of the authors they read don't sound like published books either. They (and we) think they're not good at writing because it doesn't sound like the books we read. I talk to them about how our writing skills always lag behind our reading skills. How writing is rewriting—over and over and over.

### **Courage to En-courage**

It's not easy to circulate among a classroom of young writers and feel like you're getting anywhere. They all seem to need you at once. Some don't want to take a step without your approval. Teaching a whole-class lesson is so much easier than training them to be independent writers. With the one-lesson-fits-all approach, we never really know what they've taken in, but we can imagine that they heard, understood, and can now apply all the wisdom we just fed to them. We know better, but we're tired, we don't trust that another way would be any better, or we're afraid to take the risk. The risk of lack of control, the risk of criticism for not "teaching" them, the risk that the kids won't trust us enough to go with us. I've been there, many times, even after numerous successes with teaching writing as a writer.



I remember moving from Minnesota to Washington, to a new marriage, a new life, and a brand new school. The principal was hired the year before the school opened, and was given permission to hire the staff of her choice.

I had come from a Minnesota school where my principal supported my educational philosophy. He let me put the reading series aside. Let me teach writing in my own style. The compromise was that my kids would still be required to take the computerized quizzes. We were instructed to read the questions to the class as they tested. I remember one that focused on compound words. Something like “Jane lives on a \_\_\_\_\_.” One of the answers was “houseboat.” My kids gleefully called out “houseboat” for all the remaining questions I read to them. We laughed until we cried. They were amused at the low level of testing. They knew their understanding of writing surpassed the expectations of that particular reading series. Fortunately, they marked the correct answers on their computer cards in spite of the silly answers they threw back at me.

I was on the leadership team at that school, in the full sense of the phrase. We didn’t just get to do the work the principal didn’t want to do, which is sometimes the case in schools that profess having team-based leadership. We made the big decisions that affected the running of the school.

Our team was selected by the state to mentor schools in other districts, and we were given several training days each year with subs provided so we could stay on the edge of what was possible with team-based leadership. We presented at conferences, and I became used to speaking up, to being heard, to negotiating and reaching consensus. .

My years of teaching and serving on that leadership team had changed me, helped me grow into a stronger, more capable presenter and teacher. I was no longer the person who my student-teaching supervisor wrote about. “At first meeting, Deb may appear to be withdrawn and shy. Disregard that, because in the classroom...” When we’re encouraged, supported, trusted, and given expectations and responsibilities, we blossom, and as you know, that goes for kids as well.

I was terrified that the freedom I had been given to disagree, to make policies and educational decisions that affected my peers and a large school of students would backfire in a new setting. I decided I wouldn’t fit in this Washington school, that they’d get tired of this mouthy Minnesota transplant telling them how to do things. But I knew it was too late to go back in time and give up my voice.

Thankfully, my concerns about how I’d fit in weren’t a problem. Our principal loved strong leaders, teachers who took risks, and compared to many on the staff, I was more mousy than mouthy. And the real gift was finding out that because I was a new fifth grade classroom in the district, they didn’t have materials for me. It would be weeks before textbooks arrived. I approached the principal. “Does this mean I can teach whatever I want in whatever way I want?” She grinned. “It sure does.” I was going to like this new school home.

Still, it was a trying year for me. My fifth grade classroom that first year in Washington was a challenging bunch. Because it was a new school, everyone on the staff didn't always know the students, and some of the care that may have been taken in separating students or equalizing the types of kids placed in one room didn't happen.

That year I questioned all I knew about teaching. I had 34 students in my class. There was the girl who talked baby talk, peed in her pants, and had tantrums regularly, the boy who was later expelled because of an incident with the large knife he hid inside his pant leg, the boy who was continually abused by his mother, the angry one who pushed any and everybody's buttons in order to start a fight, the one I regularly sent to the office "for his own good" before someone, hopefully not me, would do something they regretted. I say these things, but they're the kids who moved me. The ones who need an advocate and some healthy boundaries established for them.

I set up my writing program. Many of my students didn't have the self-discipline or self-worth to start. There were too many needy kids vying for attention. I kept trying, regrouping, pleading with them, using all my previously successful techniques and lessons. I threatened to go back to more controlled ways of teaching, but knew in my heart I would never be the queen of reams of worksheets. I was going home with headaches, sometimes with migraines that made the oncoming cars look like they had only one headlight.

That classroom was loaded with kids who knew they could never succeed. Who resisted every attempt to be coaxed to write. It was a Navy town, and some families raised their children in the same fashion they were treated as enlistees, or how they treated others in the military. Having choices was a new concept, requiring an uncomfortable shift for some of my students and their families.

One father, seeing me years later on a few different occasions repeatedly tells me a story about his son yelling at the class to be quiet, and how I told his son that it wasn't his job. I don't remember the incident, or perhaps the one I do remember is just another version of it. What I do recall is his son's display of anger at another student. The father pretends it's an amusing story, but I hear the anger behind his words, his decision that his son had to save the class from my inability to handle a misbehaving student. It's like I tell my own children. I can't take care of the issue if your response to it creates a greater issue.

The father says a few more words he thinks are suitably disguised, but I know what he's saying. That good kids should be praised and bad kids should be punished. That I was supposed to recognize his son, applaud him, set him up as an example of what all children should strive for, whether it's an attainable goal for the rest of the students or not. His son was a model student. I'm sure he's now a model young man, though I imagine there might have been a little rebelling from all the expectations that were set up for him.

The interesting thing was that this "good" student had as much trouble adjusting to my teaching style as the reluctant learners. He was used to being the best at things, and when

the sky is the limit, It's too hard to know you're the best. Even with the exercises and questions I gave them to create their "idea lists," he didn't know where to begin. They took the oath, attempted free writing in their journals, but his entries were stilted and technically perfect. No red marks would have appeared on his paper from any teacher he might have had, but the writing was sterile and voiceless.

I was ready to quit trying. Had decided my sanity needed to come before what I knew to be true about writing, what I knew to be true about teaching. It was about then that I noticed small changes. The boy who had never written a thing in his life got down a couple sentences. Another kid poked his friend and slipped him a paper. It wasn't a note that needed to be confiscated. It was a story beginning he wanted to share. When the girl who talked baby talk wanted to read me her story, I told her I could only hear it in her real voice. The boy with the knife and the one with the abusive mother quit fighting after I got them together and helped them tell each other their stories. And the model student discovered a slightly irreverent side that had a voice. A voice he may never have shown his parents. And instead of his earlier please-the-teacher smile, the grin I got was real.

What caused the changes? More than anything, I think it was that these students were no longer writing for a teacher. I worked hard to eliminate judgment in my comments about their writing. If they asked me what I thought, I gave them specific feedback or asked them what they thought about it. They wrote for themselves, and when that happens, you get more writing, better writing, writing that is real and fun to read.

### **Take the Time**

That experience from my first year of teaching in Washington has become my standard for new situations. I now know that it usually takes me three weeks before students really start to understand what I'm asking of them. Three weeks to trust enough to give it a try. And if I hadn't already had success in teaching this way, it would probably have taken me more time.

Of course it's going to take time. Writing is scary territory. I remind myself of the years I spent getting myself to write. How I avoided it by doing anything except writing, all in the name of learning to write. I read books about writing. When a great writing idea popped into my head, I'd find another book to help me with it. I took classes about writing. I felt awkward coming to the page. Didn't trust my words. They appeared ordinary and bland.

Back in those early days of writing, as I began to create a writing classroom that more resembled what I did as a writer, I shared their belief about my writing not being special, not being anything anyone would want to hear, When I read my writing to my students, they wanted more. Praised me for being such a great writer. But they were kids, not peers. And when peers complimented me, they were "just being nice." I didn't let their comments sink in. I didn't know yet how our own voices often feel inferior to us because it's the voice we hear over and over. The words we choose and the order we put them

in—our voices—sound ordinary. Of course they do. We’ve lived with those voices our whole life.

Teachers don’t write. There’s too much to do. Too many other things to think about. We don’t have time. When we go home, we bring our work with us, if not in piles and bags, then in our minds. Obviously there are exceptions to the non-writing teacher phenomenon, but from my experience, teachers don’t write outside of the requirements for their job. Obviously, there are exceptions to this, including many authors. I wrote as a teacher, but not seriously until I requested and received a sabbatical from my school district.

### **Take a Break**

We need breaks. You need breaks. Teachers have one of the most stressful jobs around. The word “sabbatical” comes from the same root source as “sabbath.” It’s a time to stop, refuel, reenergize. To take care of ourselves while there’s still hope that we’ll return to our jobs, especially in this high burnout field of teaching. I’ve taken sabbaticals in many forms, and I encourage others to drop out, reflect, and rejoin the world with the new gifts you’ve garnered.

Yearlong sabbaticals for teachers are traditionally used to attend classes in masters’ programs. I already had my masters when I applied for a sabbatical from my teaching position. My master’s was an applied liberal studies degree from Hamline University in St. Paul. Courses in this unique program were taught by two instructors with backgrounds and methods that complemented (or contrasted) each other. These were courses such as “Discovering Order in Chaos,” team-taught by a neuropsychologist and a philosopher. It was here I was first challenged to think and to explore in directions of my own choosing in an academic setting, to defend my thoughts, and to write, write, write.

I was lucky to happen upon a program like this that met so many of my needs. Intellectual stimulation, writing, exposure to others with progressive ideas, all challenging me to not accept the status quo. Hamline was where I had completed my Orff-Schulwerk training, a music teaching method that integrated singing, playing instruments, speech, movement, dance. The Orff philosophy taught me that integration, the arts, and quality musical experiences would kindle a love for music. Later, this realization evolved into an understanding that integrating the arts could provide a basis for learning anything. It eventually led to the creation of a small alternative arts-based school that was part homeschool, part disciplined arts classes and lessons, and all experiential.

Some school districts are no longer offering paid sabbaticals, but the growth potential in giving yourself a break is too valuable to write off as decadent. New projects or directions have a way of appearing once we slow down our minds. Sound like more work? Could be, but if it’s work that comes out of rest and allowing space for it to grow, it will be work that feeds you. Work that feels more like play. It may be that you go back

to the same job, renewed, a new perspective that brings you full-circle back to the place where you first chose your teaching career. Back to your desire to share your love for lifelong learning.

## **Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning begins when we create, integrate, and understand at a basic level. That's how learning becomes internalized. We don't get that with isolated drills, worksheets, tests. Kids don't learn that way, and they can't be creative with their writing that way. How can they get a sense of telling their story if they have to progress from words to sentences, to practicing paragraphs? Why do we often ask them to perfect all of this before telling their stories? Okay, let's back up again. Back to my music teaching, back to my sabbatical.

With the wooden xylophones and other instruments we used in Orff-Schulwerk, we could remove the dissonant intervals that made notes sound "wrong" to our Western ears. Kids could improvise, create, and enjoy their work without a big person bending over them telling them it's wrong. They could sense the rhythm and tones they wanted to hear, and move their mallets over the bars accordingly. Their faces showed the pleasure in hearing their own music.

When kids have opportunities to explore, they're more likely to develop an interest in the subject, whether it's music, science, math, or writing. Exploration kindles curiosity. I wonder what would happen if...? Those of us who know how kids are put together understand we can't make them wait to write the things they have to say. To follow their curiosity after they complete worksheets. That's too late. And there's too much for them to learn now. So many choices and paths to explore. There's too much to learn, they can't learn it all, and we have to focus on supporting them as they develop their own love of learning, with room for their own interests.

But here I was, wanting a sabbatical opportunity, but already holding a masters degree. The district didn't know what to do about me. I talked with the superintendent, wrote out my proposal to the school board. I wanted to explore writing and how to make it more relevant to my students. I wanted to write, to determine what I could use from the experience that would help others. They wanted hard information, a list of classes and conferences, reading material. I wrote out my own program, as complete as I could, knowing I'd be revising as I went, adding what fit as I moved through it.

It was a year of growth and change for me. I was forty. My sabbatical plan was accepted. My father died. I discovered I was pregnant. My first children's manuscript was accepted for publication. Everything I experienced strengthened my belief that writing could only be truly taught by writing. It seems absurd to me now to even hear myself say those words. Of course you have to write to be a writer. Of course you have to write to understand how to best teach writing. What bizarre practice did we create and call the teaching of writing? Or the teaching of science, math, or any other subject. Even reading.

What are we really saying by telling our students to “do as I say, not as I do.” We need to do that which we teach.

Once you achieve a true sabbatical, it seeps into all you do. Your goals nestle in and wait patiently for your next move. Your own rekindled love for learning brings your awareness to your own life, your own direction, your sense of what may come next. When you return to the classroom, every ideal, every thought and emotion you harbor about teaching will still be challenged, but your perception will have shifted. You’ll stretch and grow with each pull as you let go. Those students surrounding you once again become your teachers.

### **Read to Write**

Our education system was based on the factory line. Break everything down into the smallest part, teach them the small parts, put it back together, and you’ve got knowledge. That was the plan. We forgot about how it felt along the way. It’s most visible to me in the ways we’ve taught reading and writing. Not that math didn’t get its share, but that’s a different book, and someone else is writing it, has written it.

When our son was learning to read, he would sit with his daddy, who had been trained to teach reading using the step-by-step method endorsed by the school district. Kaj refused to participate. He moaned, whined, spread his body out on whatever surface they sat at whenever Karl attempted to teach Kaj using that method. It’s not a bad process, it just didn’t work for Kaj. A year later he decided to read and jumped quickly from beginning readers to novels. The controlled vocabulary methods did work well for our other children, but that doesn’t mean those kids wouldn’t have learned to read using Kaj’s more holistic method. I believe that if we had pushed Kaj, he would’ve fought learning to read, and may not have become the hungry reader he is now.

Remember back to the Carnegie report “Why Johnny Can’t Read?” A later study showed that it wasn’t that Johnny couldn’t read. Johnny was choosing not to read any more. Around third grade, he figured out reading wasn’t fun. Years ago, Jane Hansen discovered that kids were reading about 12 minutes a day in their hour-long reading classes. That might work for the kids who are encouraged to read at home, whose parents have modeled reading, and who have already learned that reading is fun. There’s a chance that their early experiences at home might be enough of a buffer that we won’t totally destroy their love for reading with our fabricated ideas.

What about the kids that didn’t have that support before they came to school? The ones who are reluctant readers, suspicious of those of us who can’t seem to get enough of it? Guess what. Those kids, the ones who may need an extra boost in the learning-to-love-reading category get even less. We pull them out to give them even more non-reading reading class time.

I don't want to give the impression that whole language is the only way to go. I was a phonics kid. My grandmother helped bring in that era as a first-grade teacher. It's important for kids to understand the basic phonics rules. However, it's not effective to teach them in isolation. Introduce the reasons and rules as students need them. Let them enjoy Story. Keep them craving more, loving the words, ready for the next page, the next book, the next years of reading.

So, why talk about reading in the middle of my diatribe on teaching writing? Because, as Jim Trelease will tell you, reading is input, and writing is output. If you're not familiar with Jim Trelease's book *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, you can find a revised version of it every five years. Ask your school librarian to order a copy. I felt myself squirm when I first heard Jim's input-output line. I had been a classroom teacher who incorporated writing into everything, and here was Trelease standing before me telling me my writing integration may not be as important as reading. And if you really want to learn about reading and how to best learn it, check out *The Power of Reading* by Stephen Krashen, a sweet little gem that's an easy read and great validation for those of you who instinctively know when to get out of a student's way in order to get them reading.

My students had more writing time than reading time. They did math "exit slips" in order to go outside. I'd require a short paragraph where they'd explain a math concept or solution to a problem. In my science lessons, the experiments always had a written version of how they used the scientific process. Social Studies units were prime candidates for written work focused on their reflection of the learning. Yes, reading was important and absolutely necessary in order to write well, but was it as critical as Jim claimed? What about the success people were having with "write to read" programs? That seemed to say just the opposite. Colleagues and I debated. One decided to run her own test.

### **Read First?**

My friend Lynn is an amazing writing teacher. I felt good about what I was able to do with my fourth and fifth grade classrooms, but Lynn gets first graders writing. One year, she did her own little experiment to test the reading/writing connection. Instead of working on writing all year like usual, Lynn focused on reading. I was their school librarian at the time. Lynn sent in kids to get books throughout the week, not just at their designated time. We had both flexible and set schedules for our younger students, and Lynn was one of the teachers who made use of the opportunity.

Lynn's theory, if it worked, was that the extra push on reading would make up for the lack of writing focus. A couple months before the end of the school year, she added writing practice to their day. In a short time, the students' writing ability was equal to or better than the writing of students she had in past years. Of course, it's impossible to create a control group based on two different groups of kids, but it amazed us all.

So, do we just give them more reading time and expect writing to improve? Of course not, although it would certainly help. I don't think we need to cut one of them short in order to made gains in the other. We can teach reading and writing simultaneously, confident they will each support the other. But talk to those primary teachers. They'll tell you that getting a kid to read is everything.

## **Read & React**

My middle and high school students helped me find the way with the reading-writing connection. I had been teaching classes for a home-school support program. They wanted me to include reading as well as writing. My library background gave me the courage to discern what I did as a reader, just as I had previously analyzed my writing in order to teach writing. Having been trained in methods to teach both of these, I knew where they failed in the true-life test. I was a writer, and I was a reader. What do good readers do? Can it be taught?

I had asked my fifth grade class those questions years earlier, "Who considers themselves readers?" Several hands went up. When I asked, "What do readers do?" they came up with this list:

- Readers have a book with them a lot.
- Readers recommend books to others.
- Readers read.
- Readers own books.
- Readers go to libraries.
- Readers make time to read.

These were kids I had with me all day every day. Now I was working with older kids that I saw once a week. How was I going to influence their ideas about readers in an efficient manner? Once again, it would be by modeling the behavior I wanted to get from them.

Knowing the research that shows reading to children of all ages is beneficial, I gave myself permission to read to these older kids. I was hesitant at first, thought they might feel like I was treating them like little kids, but they loved it. They leaned in, gave me their attention, focused on me instead of their peers.

More and more as I read, I'd stop to point out the things I was seeing as a writer, the choices made by the author. Initially, they'd roll their eyes during these breaks, ask me to keep reading. "Do you have to stop?" they'd whine. But once they had a vocabulary to express what they were experiencing, they interrupted the reading more than I did.

We analyzed how authors revealed character and set the tone through setting. We noticed how sentences varied, where "rules" were broken, how voice was achieved. Book after book, we dove in, the discussions becoming more lively each time. Eventually it was me who wanted to move through the text more quickly. Instead of stopping each time



someone had something to say, I'd read awhile until they were getting too antsy trying to keep their comments in their heads. I'd put the book down. "What are you thinking?"

As time went by, I realized that our comments came mostly in the form of questions, loaded details, turning points, and recurring images, often leading to predictions. They learned what authors do by reading, but the details aren't usually assimilated as directly as they can be with this type of classroom discussion of reading. One of the students, an honor-roll junior, said, "I've always been a good reader, but I never really knew about what I was reading until now."

Try these strategies on yourself with the next book you read. See what you notice. If it helps, use a little "cheat sheet." Questions? Details? Turing points? Images? Predictions? Other?

I tried to take anecdotal information on students during our discussions. That was a little unwieldy at times, so I'd periodically hand them a "Read & React" sheet to jot notes on their reading. It contained spaces for date, title, author, pages read, and comments on each of the areas of your "cheat sheet" above.

We often test kids before teaching them. How many times do we have them read pieces, then ask them questions? We didn't model how to find them, how to analyze the text. We too often jump in and do things the way they've always been done instead of thinking about how the task is really accomplished in real life. This is one we can do. Teachers are readers. We may not always have the time to read as much as we like, but we read—even if it's mainly in the summer, like I mentioned earlier. My book list would grow during the school year, and I wouldn't get a cover cracked open until June. We know what good readers do. We can share that with our students. Math programs are finally including the "short cuts" and alternate problem solving techniques daily employed by people who are good at math. We can do the same for reading, and for its sister, writing.

## **Reading to Critiquing**

When students understand the choices an author makes, these choices become tools they can apply to their own writing. They can also critique the writing of others using those same tools. Adding reading observations to the writing strategies I regularly taught to students increases their repertoire for helping each other. Critiques could then include the items on their "Read & React" sheets as well as writing tips we previously covered in class with examples from the literature we read together. I'll cover critiquing a bit more later, but I wanted to bring awareness to the link between analyzing a published author's choices and analyzing the choices of classroom authors.

My writing classes at Cedar were comprised of kids from the length of Whidbey Island, many choosing to travel out of their own school districts to attend our arts-based program. The school year was well under way, and I had taught the same group of students in a weekly 1-1/2 hour class. The superintendent dropped in to watch me

teach—one of my required teaching observations. Students took turns reading their pieces. Comments flowed nonstop after each reading.

“Your details about all the sights, sounds, and smells made me feel like I was right there with him.”

“I want you to write more about your mom’s reaction. Wouldn’t she be angry?”

“The beginning tells us too much. I didn’t get into it until the next page. The action really starts at paragraph five. Can you just piece in that other stuff as we need it?”

I didn’t say much that day. I’ve always had the feeling that kids learned in spite of me as much as because of me. I try to get out of their way when it’s working without me. When they’ve had enough modeling to take it from me and run with it. When they’re fired up and interacting, it’s time to step back and enjoy. When the period was over, the superintendent sat there for a moment, and then shook his head. “That was more like attending a conference than visiting a classroom.”

That’s where I want my students to end up—taking ownership, risks, analyzing and evaluating, developing passion for their self-expression and a sense of community with their writing peers. I can’t imagine where I would be now if I had that opportunity at a young age. I have it now. My writing groups, the organizations I’m in, the conferences I help with, the workshop settings where I teach—I have a supportive network that encourages me to get beyond my fears, put forth my best effort, learn all I can about writing, and to never stop myself because of insecurities and thoughts about publication.

My path has led me into research about creativity, training as a creativity coach, and teacher of writers of all ages. I definitely have opinions, passionate ones, and I love having those questioned, reflected on, and widened by the passionate opinions of others.

### **Where Do You Get Your Ideas?**

You’ve made it this far, so I’m guessing you’ve been modeling writing, but you may be thinking it takes too long to come up with topics. And to help all your students come up with topics. What can you do to shorten the idea-gathering time?

When I visit schools, the question I get asked the most, both from students and teachers, is “Where do you get your ideas?” I’ve heard the same thing from other authors, and the most honest answer is “everywhere.” All writing is autobiographical. You’ve probably heard that statement before. Even when I’m creating a fantasy that I think has nothing to do with my life, I start seeing threads and theme that reflect my experiences. I alluded to that earlier. For me, it often just happens because I move to my computer when an idea presents itself. But, there are many ways to prime the idea pump.

We're often told, as teachers, to have students write "what they know." That's a start, and it was where I started with my students. I would have students list their interests, activities, favorite books and movies, etc. It gave me a piece of them I could mirror back when they felt lost. They also started "idea lists" that they kept in their writing folders. That way they could turn to it at writing time and have a place to begin. Often, though, they found, as I have, that an idea will come out of nowhere, or from an event that just took place. It's all good.

I've tried to track ideas many ways. I have a file where I throw in ideas. It doesn't matter what I've written them on, as long as it's two-dimensional. Scraps of paper, napkins, post-it notes, edges of newspapers... Then there was the hand-held recorder I kept in my car. An idea would appear and I'd get it down instantly. The recorder was great for walks, too. My problem was transferring it later. It just didn't happen. I had better luck carrying a post-it note pad and pen in my pocket, though writing this makes me want to try it again. I think I'll resist. Collecting ideas is no longer one of my problems.

When you write consistently, you learn to be an idea hunter. My family even gets in the game. We watch something happen, and someone will say, "You should write a book about that." A kid does something funny, and my husband will give me a knowing smile. "Picture book?"

I keep many versions of idea holders going. The file, the recorder, a list on my computer, notebooks, and even lovely wooden box with drawers just the right size for sheets of paper. Recently, I laminated scrapbook pages (just the patterned sheets with no scrapbooking) with the titles Novels, Picture Books, Teaching & Writing, and Other. They're up on the wall in my writing room. I slap up post-it notes on them. I lead a chaotic life with three busy kids who have busy parents, and I'm finding more success with this strategy than with the others. It's not tucked away out of sight, and I can include ideas or more specific thoughts on pieces I'm already writing.

I've seen writers use electronic devices for recording ideas. I've tried several of those as well. Some writers use wipe-off whiteboards, or notecards they toss into file holders—you can get one to attach to the side of your desk—or special containers like small boxes they've decorated. Instead of trying them all, save time and money by thinking through your strategies first.

Your students may need their own way to track their ideas, but even if they come up with their own plan, you need them all to use the same format in order to help them decide what to write. I tracked students' ideas in three-ring notebooks, on clipboards, and in file folders kept in a crate we could both access. They were never where they were supposed to be. I didn't have success with until I stapled the idea lists on the inside of the students' writing folders.

This won't be an exhaustive summary of all the possibilities for organizing your writing program. There are many folks far more capable and interested in that topic than I am. What you'll get from me is a few comments here and there of what helped me survive

and thrive in writing with students. If you are struggling with an issue on this, please write a note to me on my Writing With Children blog (accessed from my web site, <http://www.deblund.com>) where others may respond as well.

## **The Idea Bank**

You've heard about all the idea gathering plans that didn't work for me. Now I'll tell you one that is a combination of idea generation and idea tracking. I've had several books become a reality because of this process, but first a little background.

Think of the books you love, whether they're picture books or novels. What are they about? A friend of mine recently got a contract for *The Dinosaur Tooth Fairy*. A few of my titles are *Monsters on Machines*, *Dinosailors*, *Dinosoaring*, *Dinofire!*, and *All Aboard the Dinotrain*. I remember a couple picture books about orchestra animals, and others that combine topics, issues, and themes.

Vampires and romance, history and fantasy. Steam Punk is its own combined category. You see where I'm going, don't you? To make a manuscript stand out, to avoid the often-used "slight" designation by editors, it helps to combine and layer ideas into your story. Creating an Idea Bank is a way to do it, and it will work for both you and your students.

When I've taught this in schools during writers-in-residence programs, this is one of the activities that I hear about later. Students email me to say what they combined and how it worked. Teachers say thanks. And it's so easy you'll wonder why you didn't think of it yourself.

In a notebook or a computer document, start listing the topics you may want to write about. This is your list, so working together won't help you. Piggybacking on someone's idea, however, is fine. When I have students making their lists—and these are just one-word topics at this point—I ask them to call out ones their classmates might want to use, too. "Soccer!" "Piano!" "Pizza!" They add on to their lists until they've exhausted all their favorites. I show them a screen listing categories to help them come up with more. Food, Hobbies, Holidays, Weather, and Issues are among the ones I show them.

Once they have a list generated, I explain the logic behind combining the topics to create ideas. They randomly merge their words until they find the combinations that tickle them. Just saying the two words together will often bring giggles. They're motivated already.

You can have them each create a document with three or four columns to enter their words. When they "sort" them by "paragraph" they'll have an alphabetized list of topics to use. Remember to stress that they should only add topics that they are personally interested in writing about. Bigger is not better when it comes to writing ideas. Play with your Idea Bank and tell me stories about how it worked for you and your students.

## **The Rest of the Story**

The rest of the story? That's what you're going to tell me. But first, let me just repeat a few things I've already said. Humor me. They're things I've had to remind myself about, so consider yourself pre-reminded.

There's too much to teach. You've been saying it for years now, right? You can't get to everything, and the amount of material balloons bigger and bigger every year. That's why it's important to teach how to learn, how to write, how to communicate.

Treat the young writers in your care as writers.

Respect their choices. Ask questions. Comment on details. Evaluate only what has been taught in a lesson, unless you're evaluating purely for seeing where a child is at with their writing and what steps they might need to take next. Focus on supporting them as they develop their own love of learning.

Write. If you're going to be a writing teacher, you need to write. You know that now, and probably knew that long before you heard it from me, even if you weren't doing it. If you give an assignment, take the time to do it yourself. You'll be amazed at what you learn. You'll experience not only the writing process, but also the feelings that go along with each step. Teachers often tell me they feel uncomfortable writing with their students. They're nervous about sharing their work. My standard response is, "If you're scared to show your writing to a student, imagine how they feel sharing their writing with a teacher."

Thanks for your passion, for your brave steps. Writers are people who write. As soon as you pick up a pen, you are a writer. Keep reminding yourself until it feels real. Because it is real. And when it's real for you, it becomes real for your students.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. Keep on doing what's best for kids. Write, model, and be vulnerable and validating as you write with your students. This document is a work-in-progress. Some day it will include activities, examples of lessons, and anecdotes from teachers like you. Please share your successes and class stories with me. And if there's any support you want from me, just let me know. Because you are the rest of the story, and it's a privilege to share my opinions with you who are still in the classroom every day, doing what you do to the best of your ability, knowing it will never and can never be enough. And yet it is.

Best wishes always,

Deb