

HOSTING A WRITING WORKSHOP



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What is it?

Kids learn to write by writing, so the bulk of a writing workshop consists of...writing! A writing workshop is a block of time set aside in the school day to focus exclusively on the writing process. Writing workshops take various forms, but the basic components are the same. In most cases, a writing workshop consists of a mini-lesson teaching a particular skill or concept, a much larger block of time devoted to writing and conferring, and an activity that allows students to share their writing with the group.

Why is it important?

To help students learn to write, give them time to write. The writing workshop allows students time to work through the entire writing process from first drafts to revision to final published pieces. Donald Graves, in *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994), discusses the need for ample writing time in this way:

If students are not engaged in writing at least four days out of five, and for a period of thirty-five to forty minutes, beginning in first grade, they will have little opportunity to learn to think through the medium of writing. Three days a week are not sufficient. There are too many gaps between the starting and stopping of writing for this schedule to be effective. Only students of exceptional ability, who can fill the gaps with their own initiative and thinking, can survive such poor learning conditions.

When should it be used?

Many teachers plan for their writing workshop at a time that is least likely to be interrupted, but it can be scheduled for any time during the day. The workshop should be a consistent, structured, uninterrupted block of time where students can concentrate on the writing process. Some teachers prefer to schedule the writing workshop just before or after the reading workshop to provide an extended literacy block. In this way, a teacher can take advantage of the reading and writing connection by extending and transferring the skills and concepts learned in one workshop to the other.

How can you make it happen?

Although the writing workshop won't look exactly the same in every classroom, many elements are common. The simplest structure for a writing workshop starts with a mini-lesson and a much larger block for writing and conferring.

A "typical" writing workshop might look like this:

- The teacher conducts a mini-lesson on a specific skill or concept (5-10 minutes)
- Students write while the teacher confers with individual students (45-60 minutes)
- Selected students share completed pieces or works-in-progress with whole group (10-15 minutes)

- Students complete final edits and publish their works when they are finished.

Structure

The keys to a good writing workshop include scheduling it regularly so that students know that they will have a given amount of time to develop their pieces. You may think you need a highly creative, ever-changing environment to stimulate young writers. The opposite is actually the case. Lucy Calkins, in *Lessons from a Child* (1983), found that children thrive best when they can depend on a set structure within which they can work:

It is significant to realise the most creative environments in our society are not the ever-changing ones. . . . They are deliberately kept predictable, so the unpredictable can happen (Calkins 1983).

Materials for a writing workshop often include a writer's notebook, which is a place for students to collect thoughts, ideas, questions, and wonderings from which longer pieces will grow. It is a place to experiment and make mistakes.

Mini-Lesson

The mini-lesson is a critical part of the writing workshop. It is a teacher's chance to directly teach a particular skill, concept, or strategy to the group at a time when it is most needed and will be of most use. Sample mini-lesson topics include writing strong leads, developing interesting characters, descriptive writing techniques, editing, how to give useful feedback, and reasons to write: to inform, to persuade, or for personal expression.

Writing and conferring

When conferring with students, start by asking them what they are working on, and then listen. What actually happens in a conference will depend on what a particular student needs. Don't try to get to every student every day, but be sure that you have an individual conference with every student on a regular basis. Some teachers keep a checklist, a sign-up list, or another record-keeping system to ensure that they have had time with each student at least once or twice a week.

The long-term goal of a writing conference is to provide each student with the tools to improve his or her own work and to provide help in looking critically at the writing. Lucy Calkins discusses conferring with young writers in her 1994 book.

The art of teaching writing

In order for young writers to learn to ask such questions of themselves, teachers and peers need to ask them of young writers. Teacher-student and peer conferences, then, are at the heart of teaching writing. Through them, students learn to interact with their own writing (Calkins 1994).

Peer response and editing groups

As the writing workshop progresses, students can begin to form peer response groups to provide feedback about one another's works in progress. As students begin to bring their pieces to completion, establish peer editing groups that focus on mechanics such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalisation. Peer editing can serve as the second level of editing after students edit their own work.

Group share sessions

Many teachers end their workshop time for the day by having some form of group sharing. A few students can share a significant piece or excerpt of a story that they are working on. For example, if the focus of the day's mini-lesson is led, you should encourage students to share their favourite leads of stories they have written.

Publishing and publication celebrations

It's important for writers to bring works to a formal conclusion by publishing their pieces. Stories can be published and added to the classroom or school library or submitted to a Web site that features student writing. In addition, a letter concerning a community issue can be sent to the local newspaper. Inviting other classes, faculty, parents, and/or community members to a celebration of students' writing validates the students as authors.

How can you measure success?

The overall success of the writing workshop can be measured by the depth and quality of your students' writing as they progress through the year. As you confer with individual students, take note of their progress and challenges; this will give you a clear idea of what next steps they need as developing writers. Portfolios can also help to document students' progress in writing throughout the year. The portfolio should include a student's final published pieces as well as various drafts of some pieces to show the evolution of their work.

Source: