

Guiding K-3 **Writers** to Independence

The New Essentials

Patricia L. Scharer & Gay Su Pinnell

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We dedicate this book to teachers whose efforts ensure that their students not only learn to read and write, but also become lifelong readers and writers.

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Cover design: Jorge J. Namerow
Interior design: LDL Designs
Acquiring Editor: Lois Bridges
Production Editor: Carol Ghiglieri

ISBN-13: 978-0-439-88449-5

ISBN-10: 0-439-88449-7

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Printed in the U.S.A.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 40 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

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Writing Workshop: A K–2 Photo Journal

by Barbara Joan Wiley

One afternoon, I was to videotape kindergarten teacher Andrea Waselko’s classroom as part of my research project that documents what good teachers do. I was late, and I walked into the classroom during writing workshop. As I set up my camera, I was struck by how industrious the children were—they were all busy writing. This scene reminded me of a conversation I had recently had with a friend, Susan Lear. She told me she had just attended an in-service, offered in her school district and given by an educational consultant, whose topic was, “Raising Test Scores for All Children.” The consultant said she could tell who in a classroom would achieve by watching the children for five minutes and noting which ones had their “chins to their chests.” The idea was that children who can attend, who have focused attention, are the ones who will be successful. How do Andrea and other good teachers make writing workshop an effective context in which teachers can initiate and support children to be independent writers who are focused and industrious?

This chapter documents with words and photos the definition and structure of writing workshop, and describes how to create a supportive environment for writing.

Following a Structure for Writing Workshop

Writing workshop is the time of day in a classroom when children write independently on topics they choose themselves. Teachers support their students’ writing by teaching mini-lessons, conferring with individual writers, and interacting around children’s writing. Typically, writing workshop begins with a five- to ten-minute mini-lesson, moves to a time for writing, and then ends with sharing time.

The greatest amount of time is spent as the students independently write while the teacher confers with students as needed. Sharing lasts from five to ten minutes (see Figure 1-1).

Mini-lessons may focus on (1) procedures, (2) strategic actions or skills, or (3) writers’ craft. The procedural mini-lesson focuses on something that writers need to know, such as where to find sharpened pencils and extra paper. A strategic or skills-related mini-lesson may focus on how to spell a frequently misspelled word, such as *said* or *because*, or on the strategy of saying a word slowly more than once to hear more sounds in it. A craft mini-lesson focuses on ways writers choose words such as using exciting words or adding dialogue. At times, especially in kindergarten, the element of interactive writing becomes the



mini-lesson. For example, in January, kindergarten teacher Kecia Hicks noticed that many of her students were writing so quickly that they were forgetting to put in spaces. So, Kecia conducted an interactive writing lesson in which the community retold the story of *Old Black Fly*, a book by Jim Aylesworth, with a teaching focus about including spaces between words (see photo below).

As the children write in writing workshop, the teachers confer with children who need help. For instance, kindergarten teacher Andrea Waselko first makes sure that everyone has something in mind to write about. Then, she makes a point of conferring with her low-progress writers as they begin to write independently. Her conference becomes a guided

writing lesson that helps them to achieve more than they could have written alone. For example, she might say, “What story do you want to write today? Say that sentence again so that you will remember it. What is the first word? Say it slowly. What sounds do you hear? Write them down.”

Teachers analyze one-fourth of their students’ independent writing each day and jot down their findings. Teachers also make a point of getting around to every student regularly, so that they are familiar



with their students’ changing strengths and needs and can use this information effectively. This helps them determine which students need a conference. For example, a teacher might help a student decide what kind of dialogue to add to a story and discuss how to set it off with punctuation. Teachers also keep notes on the conferences they have to inform later teaching decisions. Clearly, these conferences are not conducted haphazardly; they are conducted for a reason.

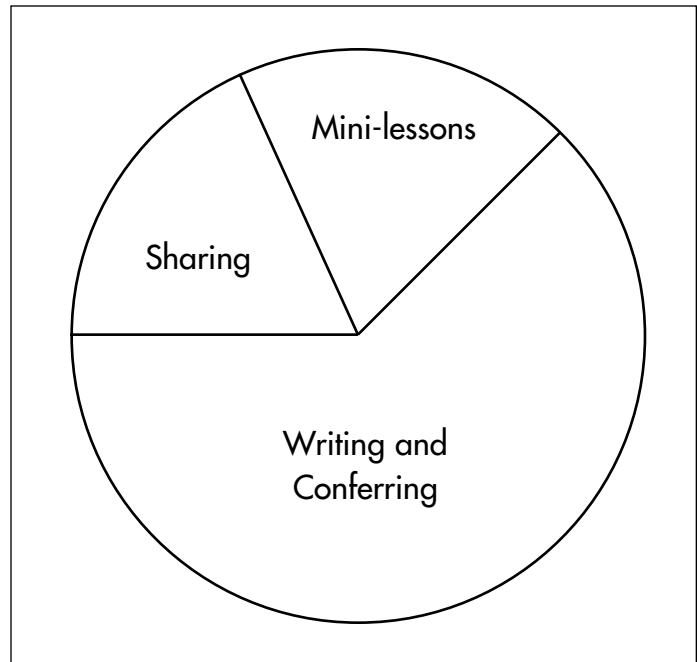


FIGURE 1-1. Writing Workshop: Time Allotments



A few children are asked to share their work at the end of the writing workshop. The teacher invites these specific children to share for a reason, such as because they have successfully tried what was taught in the mini-lesson and the teacher wants to highlight this achievement so that other students will take it on. In this way, sharing time becomes another powerful time for teaching. For example, one day, Andrea asked John to share because he had a two-page story, and her mini-lesson had been about how authors can write more by rereading what they wrote the day before and then adding text to the original writing. When John is finished reading, Andrea responds, “Thanks, John. I notice that you’ve written more and that your story is so much more complete than it was before. Did anyone else try adding to their story?” Sharing time is also a time in which class members celebrate their friends’ writing with responses such as “I think” or “I wonder” or “I appreciate.” Additionally, at sharing time, students might ask to share because they want help. They might want to know how to make confusing sections clear or they may need ideas to formulate satisfying endings.

Creating a Supportive Environment for Writing Workshop

Writers write best when they have everything that they need close at hand. A good writing center is like the dashboard of a fine car—everything that may be needed is provided. In the case of writing workshop, this means everything from sharpened pencils to a variety of paper. Resources that may be needed are also readily available, from name charts to word walls to dictionaries (see Figure 1-2).

Teachers provide materials that are most supportive to the writers in their classrooms. Appropriate materials are scaffolds. A scaffold helps students do more than they can do alone. For example, the type of pencil offered can be a scaffold. Emergent writers need to be taught to cross out rather than erase, because erasing takes too much time and destroys paper. So, they should be offered pencils without erasers on the end. Transitional writers, on the other hand, use erasures and crossing out effectively, so they can be offered pencils with erasers. All writers, however, are encouraged not to erase extensively, so that they can return to their original thinking when there is a need.



FIGURE 1-2. Writing Center



WRITING CENTER

Materials that are housed in a writing center reflect the current needs of the students in the room. Writing centers for emergent writers are full of many kinds of writing materials such as pencils, markers, and crayons, and a variety of paper—some white, some colored, some with lines, and some without (see Figure 1-3).

Early writers need a variety of writing materials as well as



FIGURE 1-3. Emergent Writing Center



FIGURE 1-4. Early Writing Center

picture dictionaries, premade blank books, staples, and rulers (see Figure 1-4).

As children take on writing, the writing center becomes well stocked with all of the supplies a writer might need, from dictionaries and thesauruses, to papers, and pencils, and pens (see Figure 1-5).



FIGURE 1-5. Advanced Writing Center

WORD WALLS

Word walls (Cunningham, 1995) change, both throughout a school year and across grade levels. For example, the word wall in a kindergarten classroom might start in September as a group of high-frequency words the class has learned by tracing letters with crayons (see Figure 1-6). Later, it may become a chart titled “Words We Have in Our Heads” (see Figure 1-7). Later still, it may become a group of words displayed alphabetically across a wall in the classroom (see Figure 1-8).

Emergent and early writers can be more fluent writers when they carry the resources they need to spell around with them in their heads. The teaching foci for these writers will be to (1) accumulate a core of known words and to (2) say words slowly and write down the sounds that you hear. Too much emphasis on searching the room for the spelling of unknown words teaches dependency.

“Word walls in a first grade classroom are living things that are added to and taken away from as the need arises,” states Al Amore, a primary teacher. “For example, when all of the children in my classroom knew how to spell a word without looking then the word was ceremoniously ‘retired’ from the word wall,” he continued. “That’s about when I put a chart of ‘Kindergarten Words’ up in the ABC Center [see Figure 1-9] and later a

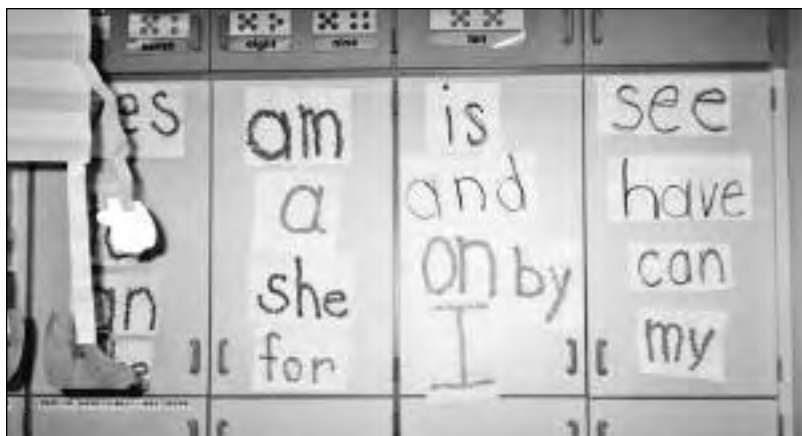


FIGURE 1-6. Word Wall of High-Frequency Words



FIGURE 1-7. Word Wall in a Kindergarten Classroom

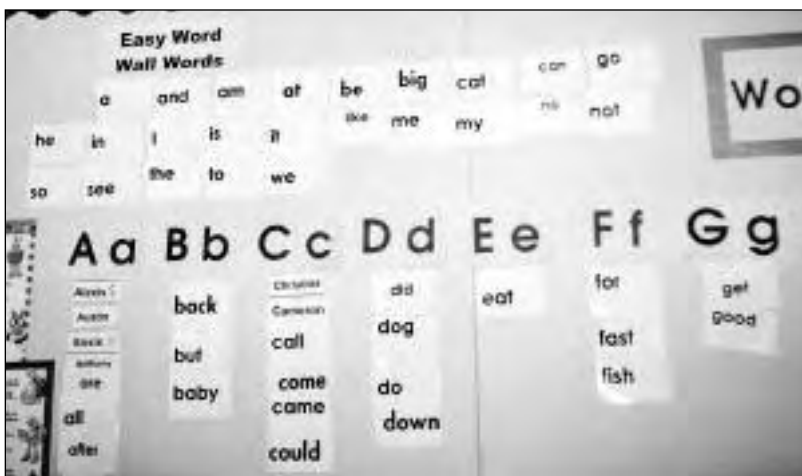


FIGURE 1-8. Word Wall Arranged Alphabetically



'We Can Read 100 Words' chart [see Figure 1-10]. When children are writing many personal narrative stories, the word wall needs to contain such words as *father*, *mother*, *cousin*, and *friend*. As children begin to write longer pieces with greater details, they will begin needing words like *because* to aid their writing."

In second grade, when children begin to keep a Think Book in which they write



FIGURE 1-9. Word Wall of Kindergarten



FIGURE 1-10. Word Wall of 100 Words

their responses to books, social studies projects, or science experiments, words such as *appreciate*, *observe*, and *result* might appear on the word wall (see Figure 1-11). Second- and third-grade transitional writers need words that relate to their content area reading—words such as *evaporate*, *vitamins*, and *communities*.

NAME CHARTS

Name charts help students make connections between what they know and what they need to know. For example, if they are trying to spell the word *bread*, they can connect it to *Brandon's* name to identify the first two letters. It is important to consider clarity, format, and position when making and using name charts (see Figure 1-12).



FIGURE 1-11. Advanced Word Wall

Guidelines for Making and Using Name Charts

- Let the children have a part in making the name chart. For example, in kindergarten, create the name chart with the children offering their own teacher-written names to be glued to the chart.
- Write names in large, clear, black print using markers.
- Place name chart within pointing distance of the literacy easel.
- Place small versions of the name chart in strategic places around the room (e.g., in plastic frames on tables, in the writing center, in writing folders).
- At first, you may need to consciously force yourself to refer to the name chart as a resource. Later, its use will become a natural part of your instructional repertoire. At the same time, the children will be initiating the link.
- Consider how the name chart may change appearance and use over time in relation to the students' needs (see photos).
- Using names is powerful, because children are learning through analogy to move from known to unknown and go beyond the information given.

Whatever form these resource charts take, they need to be available to support the children in the room to do just a little more than they can do alone.

Figure 1-12. Guidelines for Making and Using Name Charts

In a kindergarten class, the names might be printed in large manuscript letters on cards that can be moved in and out of a pocket chart with a picture of the child attached (see Figure 1-13).

In some classes the children's first names are grouped alphabetically; in others, they are not.

In a first-grade class, there may be one chart with only first names, one with only last names, and one with first and last names (see Figures 1-14 and 1-15).



FIGURE 1-13. Kindergarten Name Chart

WRITING PAPER

Think about the type of paper you offer the children for writing. If the children are just beginning to write and use a huge amount of time and effort to form letters, then give them unlined paper. If the children can easily form letters but are having a difficult time keeping their lines straight on the page, then you may want to introduce a paper with baselines as a scaffold for the children. If the children are beginning to write more and more text at one setting, then you may want to offer them lined tablet paper rather than story paper, which provides 50 percent of the page for writing and 50 percent for illustration.



FIGURE 1-18. Writing Paper for Writing Workshop

If the children are taking on the writing process that moves from explaining, to drafting, to editing, to publishing, then they appreciate paper that addresses their needs (see Figure 1-18).

When teachers monitor the instruction and materials they provide their students so that they reflect what the children are currently learning, then the instruction and accompanying materials support young children's advances in literacy—and they are helpful and used! It is this type of responsive structure within a supportive environment that creates a context that, in turn, encourages literacy growth and achievement through focused attention, industrious students, and “chins to chests.”

Suggestions for Professional Development

Working with your colleagues, use the following ideas to help all of you reflect on how you see yourselves as writers.

1. Ask everyone to think about the following questions and respond by quickly writing their thoughts for each.
 - How did I learn to write?
 - How do I feel about writing?
 - How often do I write?
 - Why do I write?
 - What kinds of things do I write?



- Do I consider myself a writer? Why or why not?
- Have my writing habits changed over the years? If so, how and why?
- What would I change about myself as a writer?

Share at table level and then with the whole group. What insights does this give us about the teaching and learning of writing?

2. Ask each participant to write a ten-minute story about himself or herself.
3. Have everyone work with a partner to role play conducting a writers' conference concerning a piece of personal writing. (You can use the writing from the suggestion above.) Use the following questions as criteria to help you determine what this writer needs.
 - Does the story make sense?
 - Does the story follow story structure, including an introduction, a description of something that the character wants, obstacles that get in the way of the character getting what he or she wants, a turning point, and resolution?
 - Is the language powerful?
 - Is the writing conventional?

Then, ask the partners to switch roles. Afterward, discuss what you learned about conferences as a writer and as a teacher. Ask participants to rethink, revise, or edit their pieces of writing in the next five minutes, applying what they learned in their conference. Have one or two teachers share their writing with the whole group, and ask the audience to respond. What was learned? How did the writers feel during the conference? While revising? What are the implications for writing instruction? ↩