

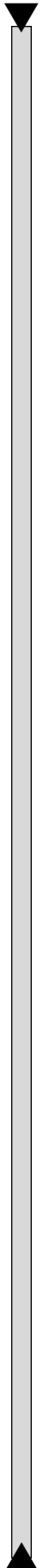
 SCHOLASTIC

Teaching Young Writers to
Elaborate

Megan S. Sloan

NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • AUCKLAND • SYDNEY
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Teaching
Resources



*Dedicated to
Jean and George Sullivan,
my parents and first teachers.*

To Katie and Julia—my sunshine.

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A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING WRITING

“I don’t know what to write about.”

“I can’t think of anything else to add.”

“My brain is empty. There is nothing else important in my story.”

We have all heard comments like these from our students on occasion (maybe more often than we would like to admit). Students often struggle with choosing a topic. Elaborating on an idea can be equally difficult. How do we get students to see that there are great writing topics inside and all around them? How do we teach children to add relevant details and write the kinds of stories that leave us satisfied, rather than confused and wanting something different? Before we can teach students the art of choosing topics and elaborating upon them, we need to lay a foundation for teaching and learning.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

Growing up, I was a gymnast. While training, I frequently had to learn new tricks. My coach never told me, “Just do it.” Instead, he went through a specific sequence to teach me new gymnastics tricks. First, he showed me, talking me through the steps to complete the stunt. Then I tried it, with careful hands spotting me through the trick. As I improved, my coach stepped back a little, spotting less and less, giving me feedback on how to improve. Finally, my coach let go. I practiced the trick on my own, over and over, sometimes falling, until finally I had mastered it.

My coach had used the “gradual release of

STEPS IN THE GRADUAL RELEASE MODEL

- Teacher modeling
- Shared experience
- Guided practice
- Independent practice

responsibility” model of teaching (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) without even knowing it. This is the model I, along with many teachers, use to teach students something new.

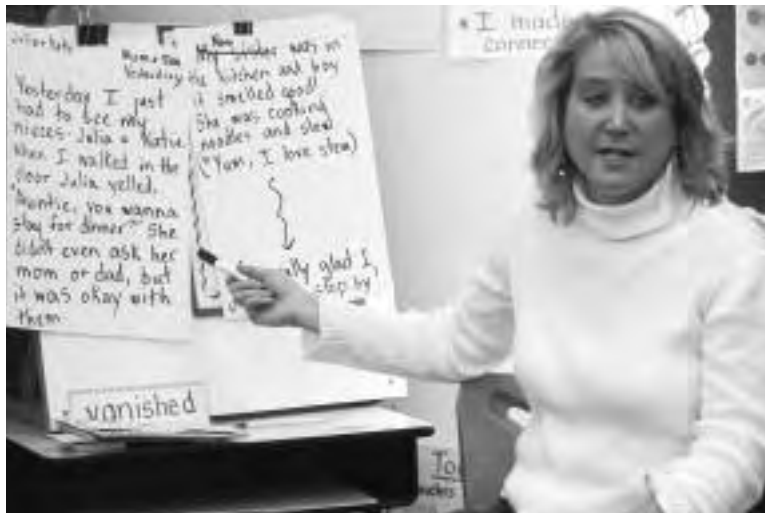
MODELED WRITING

While teaching writing, I always model first. I usually start with a piece of literature, and then I use my own writing. This allows me to show students something specific about writing. Students participate by looking, listening, and also commenting, but this method is very teacher-directed.

MODEL WITH LITERATURE For example, I may want to model how to “slow down a moment” by using one’s senses to describe a scene, some action, or a character. *The Eyes of Gray Wolf* by Jonathan London is great to use as a model because it is filled with rich language.

I begin reading it, stopping to comment about writer’s craft. “Look at how the author stretches this moment.” I reread a sentence describing Gray Wolf’s howl. Then I point out that the author doesn’t stop here. He describes what the howl sounds like as it bounces “off the moon” and where the echo goes.

On another page I stop to let students notice the way London elaborates. After telling us that Gray Wolf senses danger, London goes on to tell what happens to the fur on the wolf’s neck. The author adds more by telling what the wolf sees next. Because this book is packed with wonderful language, I reread it during another lesson to model the use of simile, metaphor, and personification as ways to elaborate.



Megan models writing for her students.

MODEL WITH TEACHER WRITING Books are our best models for what writers do, but students sometimes need to see writing in action. They need to watch someone think of a topic, elaborate on the topic, revise it for clarity, and edit it so it’s as good as it can be. This is where the teacher comes in.

Dear Mrs. Spaetig and
 Your ~~her~~ class,
 Thank you for putting
 the wire on our cans
 so we could make
 baskets! We had fun
 creating our ~~the~~ wire baskets
 making ~~the~~ wire baskets
 We got The beads ~~and~~
 made our baskets look
 cool and beautiful.
 We had a wonderful time
 Love, Ms Sloan's class

~~Dear Mrs. Spaetig and your class,~~
 Thank you for putting
 the wire on our cans
 so we could make
 baskets. We had fun
 creating our wire baskets
 The beads made our baskets
 look cool and beautiful. We had a
 wonderful time! Love,
 Ms. Sloan's class

Figure 1.1
 Shared writing of a thank-you letter (draft and rewrite).

I model writing for students every day. I pick my topics in front of them, thinking aloud about my possibilities. I add details, draw arrows to illustrate that writers add ideas even if there is no room, and revise to use more specific language. I show them that writers need to reread their writing as they write, not just afterward. When students see the process of writing a narrative, a nonfiction piece, or a poem, they understand better how to do it for themselves. When students see me work to elaborate on my ideas by describing what I see, hear, or feel, they have a better understanding of how to do this in their own writing.

SHARED WRITING

Shared writing is just that: sharing the writing. Both students and teacher contribute ideas. The teacher is usually the recorder and guides the writing of the group. This is a wonderful way to let go a little, while still holding onto the reins. Shared writing is a great way to teach elaboration, as well as other skills and strategies. Students participate in thinking of topics and using the various elaboration strategies they have learned. They then revise and edit. In my classroom, I use shared writing to model how to write thank-you (see Figure 1.1) and get-well letters to visitors or parent helpers, fiction stories, nonfiction pieces, poems, and biographies for our classroom library or the libraries of other classrooms. We write how-to guides for using school equipment and introduc-

tion books for new students. Students also decide how the writing should be published. A couple of students are chosen to rewrite neatly or type with correct conventions. Other students check their work before we send off our letter, poem, or book.

GUIDED PRACTICE AND INDEPENDENT WRITING

Now comes the shift. During guided practice, students are doing much more than the teacher. Writing about self-chosen topics, they practice the strategies I've taught in mini-lessons or modeled during shared writing. They may work alone or with peers. I let go. This does not mean that I don't keep a watchful eye on them. I ask questions. I tell them when I am confused by what they've written. I make suggestions. I confer with them so I can support them individually.

Take Joelle. I see that she is working very hard taking notes about different animals. She has been working for a day on this, so I decide to check in with her.

"Tell me what you are working on," I say as I pull up a stool.

Joelle answers, "I am taking notes about cheetahs."

"Oh, what have you learned so far?"

Joelle reads to me some of the facts she has learned.

I respond, "You have some very interesting facts here. What are you going to do with them?"

Joelle answers, "I'm going to make a book."

"That's a great idea. Tell me how you are going to organize it."

Joelle explains that each fact will go on its own page. Here is where I decide to check for learning. "Remember that we have been working on elaborating on ideas. Do you think you could take each fact and add to it?" I show her what I mean with one of the facts she has found. "Here, where you say 'Cheetahs run fast.' Could you tell a little more, like how fast they run, or why they need to run fast?"



Students writing independently.

Joelle confirms that she is planning on doing this. She says she will take each fact learned and add some details by giving some number facts (statistics) and telling why, how, and where.

I tell Joelle, “That is a great idea. I can’t wait to check in with you again and see where you are with your book.” Then I ask, “Do you need anything from me that would help you?” Joelle tells me that she might need help choosing which paper to use for her book. I tell her, “I will gladly help with that. When you are ready to make your book, let me know.”

As we go from modeled to shared writing, and from guided to independent work, teacher responsibility declines and student responsibility rises. If the release is gradual, students are successful.

Teaching Within a Writing Workshop Structure

Teaching writing happens for me within a writing workshop. So what does that mean? According to Donald Graves, when setting up writing workshop in their classrooms, teachers should try to “discover the process they [real writers] go through and the reasons why they write. Then re-create those conditions in your own classrooms” (1994). During writing workshop, students go through various stages as they craft a piece of writing: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing

Regie Routman asks us to “think of it [writing workshop] as a time in which everything that writers do to create a meaningful piece of writing for a reader takes place.” She includes self-chosen topics, writing with purpose and for an audience, conferring, and teaching as key elements (2005).

ORGANIZING WRITING WORKSHOP

Many people have the idea that writing workshop is an unstructured, “anything goes” kind of time in the classroom. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is a very structured time of day. I organize time in my writing workshop as shown in Figure 1.2.

Of course, the times may vary depending on grade level, time of year, and the amount of time a teacher has to devote to writing workshop. Though the times might vary from classroom to classroom, I believe the longest period should always be devoted to drafting or writing.

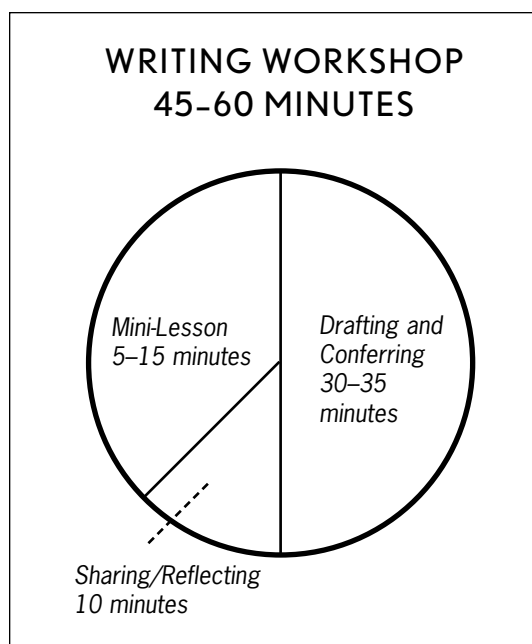


Figure 1.2
A typical workshop schedule.