

Short-Term Goals

Curriculum. It gets written by a group of teachers, inserted into plastic binders, and too often stuck on a forgotten shelf in a corner closet. Which is not to say that curriculum isn't valuable. It can be, especially when it is informed by careful observation of our students. Writing curriculum tends to focus on long-term goals such as:

- writing in a variety of genres: narrative, descriptive, persuasive, etc.
- deepening the connection between reading and writing
- learning the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, etc.
- mastering the conventions of print

Lists of long-term goals tend to be pretty detailed, so much so that your eyes quickly glaze over reading through the pages. Either that or you feel a rising sense of panic as you wonder how on earth anyone could possibly cover so many items.

Before we stress out over long-term writing goals, we have to consider our short-term goals. Our list of short-term goals for the writing workshop is mercifully brief:

- getting students to love writing time
- establishing a safe environment so that kids can take risks in their writing
- setting up a workable management system to handle the flow of paper, folders, and so forth

That's it: three short-term goals. In fact, the first two goals are so entwined you could probably collapse them into one. Students will love to write if they believe they are in a safe place where they can do so.

Many teachers lose themselves in the first month because their eyes get focused too far in the distance. Instead of working on these simple short-term goals, they focus on trying to improve the quality of the writing, or getting students to make substantial revisions. These are appropriate long-term goals, but they will sink the workshop if they become the focal point too early in the year. What are we aiming for in those first few weeks we establish a writing workshop? Let's look at how can we best achieve those short-term goals, one by one.

Fostering a Love for Writing Time

“We’re going to write now,” you tell your students. But if they respond by groaning or grumbling, you’re in big trouble. You’re dead in the water.

How do you make it so your students open their notebooks, pick up markers or pencils, and really want to write? There’s no magic answer, and it’s a fact that certain kids will stubbornly resist the invitation to write. But it starts by giving them regular time, real choice, and your genuine interest in what they put down on paper.

“Choice leads to voice,” literacy consultant John Poeton says when talking about writing. We know that young writers work best when they feel a sense of ownership—personal investment—in their writing. We want them to care about their writing, to have a this-really-matters-to-me feeling as they write.

We touched on the issue of student choice in the last chapter. Choice is not an absolute right, a blank check giving kids a right to write about gruesome, offensive subjects, or subjects that might violate another person’s privacy. Still, student choice is the crucial fuel that drives a healthy workshop. And choice isn’t limited to deciding what to write about. We invite students to have choice in length, audience, and the pace with which they write.

Don’t be surprised when kids decide to write about topics that don’t fascinate you. Because their topics are self-generated, the writing workshop truly has a “kid” feel to it. It is flavored by the passions, voices, idiosyncrasies, media influences, and peculiar humor of kids. In a fourth-grade class, you might find one kid feverishly working on “A Most Disgusting Joke Book.” Another kid is working on a biography of a professional WWF wrestler.

That's par for the course. When you come right down to it, it can't be *your* writing workshop. If you want it to be alive, truly alive, your kids have to feel that, in the most fundamental sense, the writing workshop belongs to them.

"Do you like to write?" I (Ralph) once asked a fifth-grade boy.

"Yeah," he replied. "Cept when we have to write for punishment."

"Does that happen often?"

"It happens all the time," the boy said.

"I try to get kids to write about what they know, what's important to them, what they care about," I told him.

"That's our best subject," he replied, nodding.

Establishing a Safe Environment

When we talk about a safe environment, we mean an atmosphere that encourages kids to take risks in their writing. This might include a boy tackling a sensitive subject, or a girl trying out a new literary technique that will make her writing different from her friends' writing. In many classrooms, students instinctively support each other's writing. But in other cases, you may need to take a more active role in making the workshop a safe writing place. For instance, a third-grade boy reads to the class a poem about his dog, which had recently died. When he finishes, another student mutters, "Oh, how touching," his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Who would want to share personal writing in such a hostile environment? Negative comments like that destroy the feelings of

respect and positive support that are so crucial to any classroom community.

Creating a safe environment starts by giving kids choice in what they write. But it doesn't end there. Here are some other ways to foster this kind of environment:

- Give specific praise. You can do so either in a one-to-one writing conference, during the minilesson, or in a group share. When you praise specific elements in their writing—"What a great verb!" or, "That's an amazing lead!"—they begin to open up. After a few weeks they may actually be receptive to your suggestions about how they could improve the piece of writing.
- Let primary children draw. Many students in kindergarten, first and even second grade will spend lots of time drawing pictures during a writing workshop. Lots of teachers get impatient and want to wean kids from these drawings and move them to "real writing." But beware about doing this too early or abruptly. Many kids find drawing to be a safe way to create symbolic representations of what they want to say, what stories they want to tell.
- Read aloud "from-the-heart" pieces of writing. Look for short, powerful texts you can share with your students as models of the kind of writing you're hoping they might do. The poems from *There Was a Place* by Myra Cohn Livingston, for instance, show kids that writers can explore difficult topics. When you read these poems, or a picture book like *Tight Times* by Barbara Shook Hazen in which Daddy loses his job, you show students that strong writing has its roots in the real stuff of life. At the same time, balance this with poems or picture books that show a range of emotions. Students should get the message that they

can write about ordinary, everyday events as well as joyful, embarrassing, or poignant moments.

- Use a writer's notebook. Many professionals consider a writer's notebook essential to their process of writing. It is an excellent tool for young writers, as well. Artie Voigt, a literacy consultant in New York, refers to the writer's notebook as a "low-risk, high-comfort" place for students to write. The writer's notebook is a particularly good fit for upper-grade students.
- Write with your students. This may be the most important strategy of all. Nothing creates a supportive writing tone as when you walk in the shoes of a writer yourself. When you take even a few minutes during the workshop for your own writing, you give kids something they rarely see—a real live adult actually writing! Even if writing isn't your strongest suit, you can use your writing as a model for your students. At the same time, you send a powerful message: We're all writers. We're in this together.

Creating Workable Classroom Management

A writer is somebody who writes a lot. If you tell that to your students, and give them regular time to write, don't be surprised if they hold you to your word. Many young writers rise to the challenge and start producing a great quantity of work. The sheer volume of writing is a nice problem to have, but it can be problematic just the same. It's essential to come up with a workable classroom-management system to handle all the paper that gets generated. Otherwise you'll get swamped.

The crucial word here is “workable.” The management system you set up has to work for your students, but it has to work for you too. If it is too cumbersome, complicated, or ambitious, you’ll probably end up abandoning it. When it comes to classroom management, every teacher has to devise a system that reflects her or his own personality.

The writing workshop runs best if students can work as independently as possible. If they keep interrupting you whenever they need extra paper, or the stapler, you’ll be so distracted you’ll never get down to the important work of conferring with your students. You want to set up a “decentralized” classroom-management system. Although there is no single management system that does this, here are a few suggestions for the short-term.

A Finished Box

Most of us can remember the days when everyone started a writing assignment on the same day and handed it in to the teacher *X* number of days later. Back then, our teachers thought in terms of “batches” of writing. But the writing workshop recognizes that each writer will proceed at a particular pace, and that this pace may change from one piece of writing to another. You’ll want to structure your workshop to incorporate the reality that not all students will be finishing at the same time.

Some teachers use a box or bin and have students place their writing there as they finish it. By using the finished box, a student will not have to interrupt one of your conferences to give a piece of writing to you. The student puts the finished draft into this box, gets some paper, and starts the next piece of writing.

After each writing workshop, or at the end of the day, you will want to empty the finished box and take a close look at the writing you find there. Each of these completed drafts is a real “act of

literacy” that will give you a window both into your class and into a particular young writer. You’ll notice strengths, weaknesses, surprises. You may notice how short their pieces are, or how much of the writing seems to imitate popular TV shows. You may find rich writing you can use in a minilesson to model a particular technique.

The term “finished” will evolve over time. Early in the year, finished means that the writer is done and has no more to say about the topic. Later, when you introduce a proofreading checklist, you’ll teach kids to self-edit a piece of writing before it gets placed in the finished box. Some of these pieces will eventually be read by a larger audience.

Unfinished Writing Folder

This is a handy folder that you and your students will use in various ways. Students will use it to contain their works in progress. Our friend Martha Horn, a teacher and staff developer, suggests that these un-

finished writing folders be color-coded by table, so they can be quickly passed out at

the beginning of the workshop and collected at the end of the workshop. Students might create a personalized list of writing ideas, tape it inside the folder, and add to it throughout the year. This form may be as simple as Topics to Write About (see Appendix A), or you could use a form that invites students to brainstorm in a few specific areas (see Appendix B).

The diagram shows a folder labeled "Topics to Write About" containing a form. The form is divided into four quadrants by a vertical and a horizontal line. The top-left quadrant is labeled "I am an expert at:", the top-right "Things I will always remember:", the bottom-left "Topics I feel deeply about:", and the bottom-right "Kinds of writing I would like to try:". The folder is shown at an angle, with the form slightly offset to reveal its edges.

Figure 3-1 Example entry from Conference Notes form

<i>Record date of conference.</i>	9/12/01 Spider Works ST: Suggested jotting a table of contents to help orgainize. Will do more research before drafting.	
<i>ST = strategy. Here I note a strategy this writer can use again.</i>		
<i>Brief notes on the content of the conference.</i>		

Title of student work.

Just as a doctor writes notes on a patient's chart, you can use the unfinished folder to keep track of your writing conferences with each student. Use the back of the folder. Jot down the date and the gist of what was discussed (see Appendix C). An example of such an entry is in Figure 3-1.

You might find it helpful to use a sheet that has one column for notes on revision or content conferences and another for conferences that deal with editing skills (see Appendix D).

Finished Writing Folder

This is a place where each student can file pieces of writing that have been finished. By having a finished writing folder, we are telling students that this writing is important enough to keep together in one place. In some classrooms, kids put a table of contents inside the

folder that lists these pieces. It might be a simple list of titles or it could ask students to record what final form the piece of writing took (see Appendix E). A sample completed form is in Figure 3–2. Teachers may also want to use a form to help kids self-evaluate each finished piece. Such a form might ask them to judge their work on a scale of 1 to 5 as in Figure 3–3 (see Appendix F).

While you won't hand out the finished folders at the start of every workshop, make sure students have easy access to them. You may encourage students to go back and reread their finished pieces every so often, and use them as springboards for more writing on the same topic.

There are many other management structures that help the writing workshop to run smoothly. The ones you use should respond to the particular quirks and chemistry of your students. Imagine, for example, that a first-grade teacher has too many students eager to share their writing each day. That teacher could create a simple chart with a list of class members, which is checkmarked after each one shares. Kids understand the concept of fairness and taking turns. A chart like this gives kids a visual reassurance that they'll get their turn in the Author's Chair.

At the beginning of the year, you may devote several minilessons to the particulars of classroom management. These may include how to use the space in the room, the need to return materials to the Writing Center, things to do if you need a conference and the teacher is occupied (find a friend, reread your work seeing if you can solve your own problem, write in your notebook while you are waiting), how to use quiet voices in a peer conference. This is time well spent. After a while, when kids internalize these procedures, they will become second nature to them. Then they can devote all their attention to the work, and play, of the writing itself.