

Introducing the Writing Workshop

Mark Hardy, Teacher
Third Grade
Partnership Elementary, Raleigh, NC

Background

It's the first two days of school, and Mark Hardy is introducing his new third-graders to the rituals and routines of the writing workshop in his classroom. At this stage, he doesn't expect his students to produce high-quality writing; his purpose is to help them write their first published piece and learn how to function independently in the workshop setting.

By having his students publish quickly, Mark gives them a chance to gain an experiential understanding of what it's like to have their writing go into the hands of an audience.

To foster independence, Mark encourages students to choose the writing form they "know and love best." This way, they can use what they have learned from reading as the basis for their first writing pieces.

Instruction and Activities

Day One

Mark begins by establishing the ritual of gathering on the rug at the start of each day's writing workshop. Since it's the first day, Mark introduces the concept of a workshop. He asks the students to describe a workshop, and he compares a writing workshop to other types of workshops where things are made. He asks students what they think writers do. Mark reinforces the idea that the students will "make things" in their writer's workshop, things that can be shared with other people.

Next, Mark generates a discussion about the different types of things writers make, and records the answers on chart paper. The students come up with a wide variety of "things writers make," such as stories (real and "made up"), chapter books, picture books, letters, poems, "how-to" pieces, surveys, cookbooks, plays, etc.

Mark has his students look at the list they have generated and think about what they want to start making. He introduces a quote by writer John Gardner that will help the students decide what to make: "You should write the kind of thing you know and love best." Mark returns to this theme throughout the year, believing that students should have many opportunities to choose their own genres as well as topics.

To demonstrate how his students might approach their first writing task, Mark begins with a picture book he wrote himself, a "story that really happened," and describes how he drew the illustrations first and then waited until the next day to finish the story. Mark reads several other pieces that former students began on their first day of school. His examples include a variety of genres: short stories, picture books, plays, and poems.

Before the students begin writing, Mark instructs them to answer two questions: What kind of thing will I make? and What will I write about? Once the students have answered those questions in their minds, they are free to leave the rug and begin writing. Mark works individually with students who remain on the rug to help them choose a form and topic.

When all the students have started writing, Mark circulates around the room, asking questions and providing input. He confers with some students and encourages others to "unstick" themselves if they can. As he circulates, he uses a notebook to record what each student is writing.

Mark ends the writing workshop by bringing the students back together on the rug to talk about the work they did that day. He collects the students' work to review overnight.

Day Two

Mark begins the writing workshop by gathering the class on the rug. As he returns each piece to its writer, he describes it for the class. The next activity will be talking about the piece with a partner, so Mark asks one of the students to help him model what this conversation might sound like. Using a letter he began the day before, Mark demonstrates two types of peer conferences. In the first type, each student reads his or her piece; in the second, students talk about their pieces to each other. Mark allows students to choose which type of conference to have and provides a few minutes for the students to confer.

Next, Mark teaches a mini-lesson on how to get started writing each day based on where students are in the writing process. He divides a piece of chart paper into three sections: "I'm just starting my draft," "I'm continuing a draft I started yesterday," and "I just finished." Under each category are actions the students can take.

The class returns to their individual writing, with Mark circulating and conferring as needed, again keeping a record of each student's progress. The writing workshop ends at the rug with students sharing their work or their successes and challenges.