

# Why Cauley Writes Well: A Close Look at What a Difference Good Teaching Can Make

*Teachers create a community of practice that makes a difference in both the writing and the writing lives of students.*

Katie Wood Ray

## I Am the Snake

*(Dedicated to my beloved Charlotte Reid McClure)*

*I am a coral snake. As I slither through the grass I see a possum. I slither really quiet. I'm close to him. hhhHHH. Now! I'm ready for supper.*

*I turn around. There is a diamond back rattler. hhHHH. I hiss at him. He rattles his tail. I show him my red, yellow, and black. He slithers away. I chase him. I clearly warned him. No more Mr. Nice Guy!*

*I slither away. He's gone as I slither.*

*There is a boa constrictor in the tree. He is eating a mouse.*

*That looks good. I can see him squeezing it. HH.*

*It's getting dark and time for bed.*

*I turn around again. I'm surrounded.*

*Millions and millions of coral snakes fall out of the tree. We hiss. We bite. We fight. We chase. They are gone. We have all worked hard today. Scorching hot lava comes down the hill. The rattlers are gone.*

*I hear something hissing. An anaconda through the grass. I see a rat. hhhHHH. How it was.*

It is a late winter morning in Cauley's first-grade writing workshop. He gathers some clean paper, finds a place to work, and begins writing "I Am the Snake," which he

dedicates to his pet spider ("my beloved Charlotte Reed McClure"). After this dramatic beginning, he adds pages of factual information and technical photographs about snakes that are printed off the Internet (see Figure 1). The text reflects numerous interesting decisions made by this beginning writer, and in many ways it is this—the clear intention of the writer to craft the piece—that makes it so striking. How does a seven-year-old come to write with such intention and such confidence? There is not, of course, one simple answer to this question. What we can do is describe the classroom context in which Cauley came to write this piece and use it to understand as much as we can about why he is writing in this way.

In this article, I'll consider several of the important factors I believe help Cauley write well, strategically considering the actual content of the teaching last as it stands on the shoulders of everything else that is in place when it happens. As I describe Lisa Cleaveland's first-grade writing workshop, I am reminded of what Lucy Calkins (2003) has said about "wise" teaching: "Decades of

work in the teaching of writing have convinced me that wise methods of teaching usually do not emerge ex nihilo from a single gifted and talented teacher. Wise methods of teaching do not come from our genes alone but from our communities of practice" (p. 3). Lisa's ever-evolving sense of values as a teacher of writing has developed inside a larger community of practice as she has read professionally, interacted with colleagues, and learned from her own experience. She holds fast to what this community has tried and found to be true, even as she stretches into new understandings that make her a stronger teacher of writing with each passing year.

## TOPICS THAT MATTER

One of the reasons Cauley is writing so well in this piece is he is writing about one of his passions in life—snakes. He spends a lot of time thinking about snakes, and he brings his passion for them to the table in his writing workshop. He's a living, breathing example of Stephanie Harvey's (1998) claim that "interest and curiosity breed engagement" (p. 12). Lisa encour-

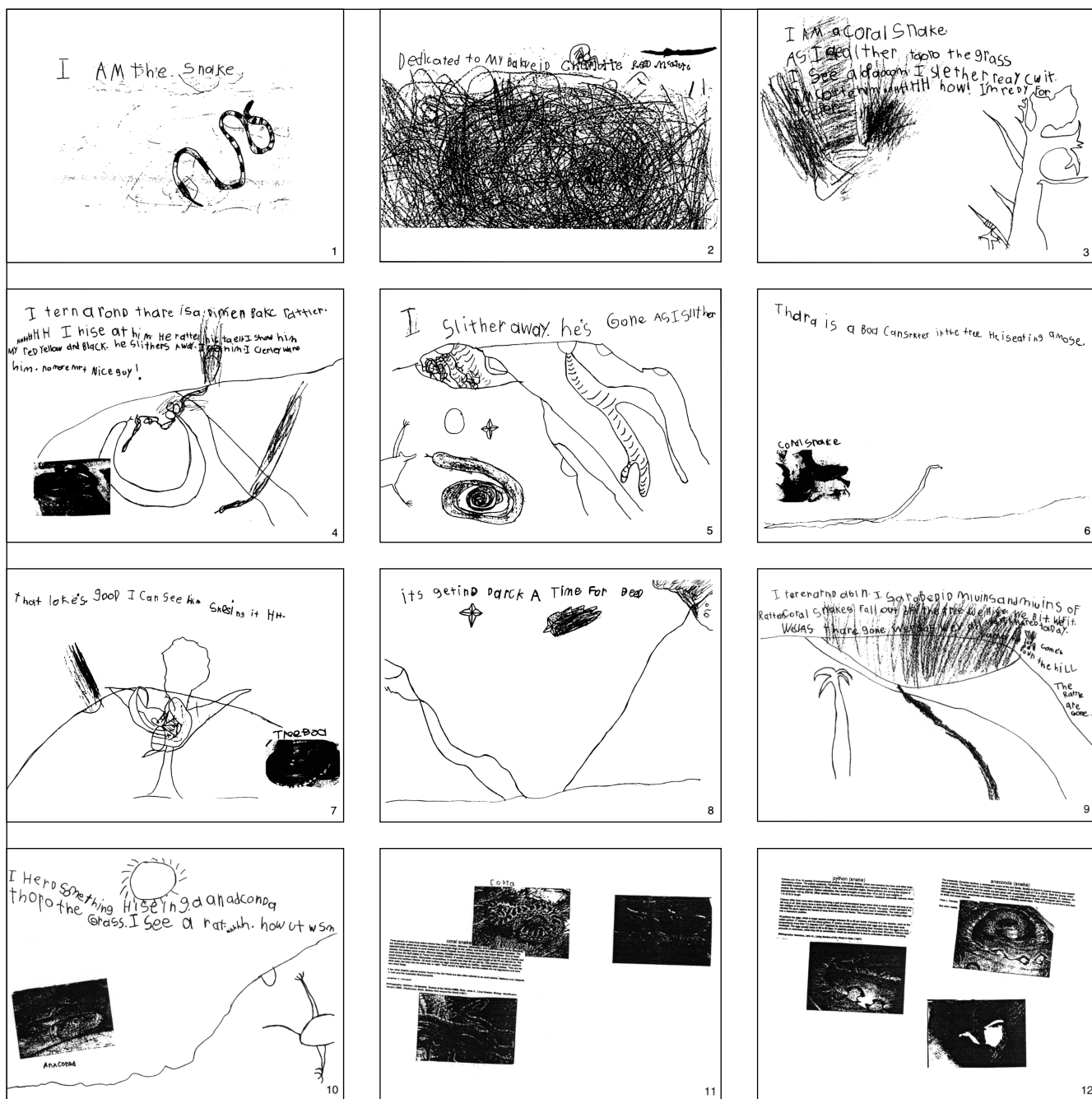


Figure 1. Cauley's book about snakes demonstrates intentional and interesting decisions by a beginning writer.

ages Cauley and his classmates to choose topics that matter to them, to write about the same topics again and again in different ways, and to share their writing with others who

share their passions. She knows that before she can ever expect them to care deeply about *how* they write, they must care deeply about *what* they are writing.

Learning to choose topics for writing in thoughtful ways is an important part of the curriculum in writing workshop. Early in the year, there is a series of lessons focused

on how writers get ideas and decide which topics to pursue in writing. Using quotes from book jackets, authors' notes, dedications, and interviews with writers, Lisa and her students develop understandings about this important starting point in the writing process. For example, in the "about the author" blurb for

**Lisa wants them to understand that writing workshop is a *time*, not a task.**

Mary Lyn Ray's book *Mud* (1996), it says the author "lives on an old farm in South Danbury, New Hampshire, where there are five seasons to every year: spring, summer, fall, winter, and mud." After talking this through, Lisa helps the children understand that *an idea can come from something that happens often in our everyday lives*, and then she helps them imagine finding an idea for their own writing in this same way.

Throughout the year, Lisa asks her students how they have chosen their ideas for writing, teaching them—in the very asking of the question—to think of themselves as writers who make thoughtful, intentional decisions about what they will write.

## DEVELOPING THE STAMINA FOR WRITING

Another reason Cauley is writing well is that he has put a lot of time into the writing. He composed and illustrated "I Am the Snake" over the course of about five days of writing. He and his classmates are accustomed to spending 30 to 40 minutes each day working on their writing. This time is more than just an important part of the instructional frame for writing workshop. Learning about time is part of the curriculum of writing, just as learn-

ing about topics is. While there is much variation in how writers engage in all the different aspects of the writing process, the one non-negotiable seems to be *time*. People who get things written know how to sit down and stay with the writing—for just a few hours, or sometimes over weeks, months, and even years—until it is finished. Over a year in a writing workshop, students should come to understand that writing is something someone sits down and works at for an extended period of time. The workshop should help them develop the stamina it takes to stay with writing.

In the first few days of writing workshop, students learn that they are finished each day when the kitchen timer rings and indicates workshop time is up, not when they come to the end of their work on a piece of writing. Lisa wants them to understand that writing workshop is a *time*, not a task, and she wants them to learn to manage themselves through that time. As Randy Bomer (1995) has said, "The management of energy and attention in the writing process is an individual matter and is in many ways the central reality of the process" (p. 42).

A few key factors seem to help children as they are learning to manage their "energy and attention" in the "central reality" of time in the workshop. One is that children see their work as being more project-like in nature. They don't just write things, they *make things* with writing (Ray, with Cleaveland, 2004). Cauley's sense of what he is doing is that he is making a book and this is big work for him, work that carries him through most of a week in writing workshop. Another factor is that most children have more than one piece of writing they are working on at any given time, and they are permitted, even encouraged, to move seamlessly between them

when they feel the need to do so. Lisa has learned that writers often need to put pieces away for a while, gain some distance from them, and then come back to them and write better because they have "new eyes for the work at hand. And finally, students are allowed to finish something and start something new without teacher intervention. Together, these factors create a template on which students can begin learning to manage themselves through time in the workshop.

## TALK AS A SUPPORT FOR WRITING

Cauley is writing well in part because he has talked himself into writing well. Natalie Goldberg (1986) says that "Talk is the exercise ground for writing" (p. 77), and Cauley and his classmates get lots of exercise. They talk before they write, while they're writing, and after they write, and there are several kinds of talk supporting their writing. One is talk about their topics. Choosing to work on a particular topic in writing gives you license to talk about that topic with others, so children are often drawn to topics they like to talk about. They are asked to talk a lot about the writing itself and what they are planning to do next with it. During the year there will be some teaching to support this kind of talk, a series of lessons designed to deepen the understandings children have about how they can use talk to support them as they're writing. And finally, there is lots of "why and how talk" that happens after they've written. "Why did you decide to write it this way? How did you know you were finished?" Questions like these help children grab hold of their processes and become both more articulate and more intentional in their work because over time they come to expect that they'll be asked to talk about how they did their writing.

## A CLEAR WRITING VISION

Cauley produced “I Am the Snake” just as you see it. This first and only draft is the product almost exclusively of *vision*, not of revision. A big part of why he is writing well is that he writes with a strong vision for the kind of thing he is making. He is making a picture book, and it’s clear he knows that. The sound of the writing is very different than what you might read in, say, a daily journal. If he’d written about snakes in a journal, it would sound more like this, “I like snakes. I think they are cool. Anacondas are the best . . .,” and after the first day of writing about it in that way, the topic would likely be over for him because he’s already said the big idea—*he loves snakes*. No, Cauley has a clear sense that he is making a book and that the writing should sound like something you read in a book.

Cauley and his classmates know that when it is time to write, they are supposed to make something with the writing, and it should be like something they have read in the world. Since picture books make up so much of their reading diet at this age, and since drawing is still a big part of the composition process for many of them, much of their writing

is produced in that format. As they expand their horizons as readers, they will have new visions of different kinds of texts they might make.

Cauley’s vision for his writing actually extends beyond the fact that he is making a picture book. He is trying to make a particular *kind* of book. He and his classmates have been studying a genre of writing they call “wow nonfiction,” which is distinct from dry nonfiction that simply feeds the reader facts. With wow nonfiction, the writer gives facts about a topic, but also works to engage the reader and make him or her think, “Wow, this is a really interesting topic.” The class has been reading and studying books like this from a basket full of them, and Cauley is trying to make a book that could go in that basket. The basket includes books such as *Gentle Giant Octopus* (1998) by Karen Wallace, *Atlantic* (2002) by Brian Karas, *Sophie Skates* (1999) by Rachel Isadora, *Red-eyed Tree Frog* (1999) by Joy Cowley, *River Story* (1998) by Meredith Hooper, and many others.

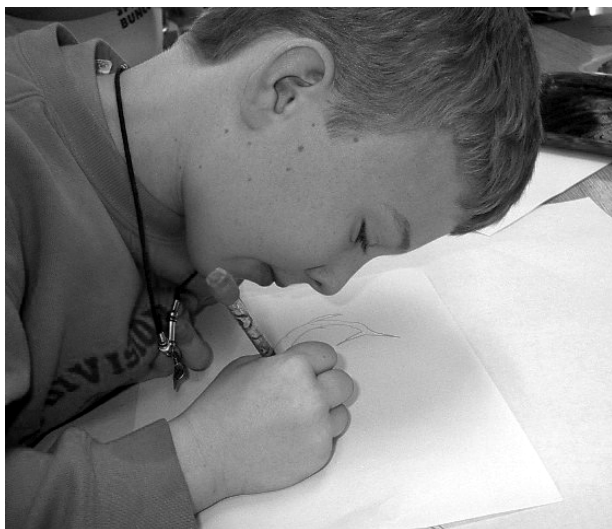
While this genre of picture books is appealing to first graders, this kind of writing is exactly what you find in feature articles for magazines and newspapers. Randy Bomer (1995) defines a feature article as some-

thing written “to inform readers about a topic they never realized could be so complex and interesting” (p. 175). Think about feature articles, especially in magazines, that often have insets of factual information, graphs, and charts that support the main running text. Cauley has information about snakes at the end of his book that works

in just this way, and he’s seen facts included like this in many of the picture books they’ve been studying. Writers write well when they have a clear vision of the kind of thing they are trying to make with the writing. A standard question for writers across all grade levels should be, “What in the world have you read that is like what you are trying to write?” And writers should be expected to give fairly specific answers such as:

- This is a review of a new Outkast CD like you would read in *Entertainment Weekly*.
- This is a sports feature piece like Rick Reilly writes in the back of *Sports Illustrated* or like they have in the Sunday sports section of the paper.
- This is a short story like you’d find in a collection of short stories like Angela Johnson and Gary Soto write.
- This is an interview like they sometimes have in *People* magazine as a feature piece on a famous person.
- This is a how-to piece about making dolls like you’d read in *Southern Living* or *Good Housekeeping*.
- This is a memoir that would probably work well as a picture book.

There are as many answers to this question as there are kinds of writing. The question is really one of both genre and format. Genre has more to do with the writer’s purpose for the writing, and format has to do with where we actually find this kind of writing in the world—picture books, magazines, newspapers, collections (short stories, memoirs, biographical sketches, etc.), chapter books, and Web sites are some of the most common publishing formats. Magazines are a good place for our more experienced writers to get visions because many different genres are found in them, and the pieces are often the approximate length of



what we would like students to write. “How long does it have to be?” is really not a question we can answer for an entire class, because the answer has to do with what the writer is trying to make: “How long is this kind of writing in the world?”

Sometimes a classwide genre study (Lattimer, 2003; Calkins, 1994) answers the question of what genres are being made available for everyone in the room. Together with their teacher, students study a short stack of texts representing good examples of a genre. Students self-select their topics, but they are each expected to write a piece that fits into the stack of texts they’ve been studying. Cauley wrote “I Am the Snake” during a study like this. At other times during the year when his class studies topics that aren’t genre-specific—topics such as where writers get ideas, how to use punctuation in interesting ways, or how to structure texts—he decides the kind of writing he wants to make.

## READING WITH A SENSE OF IMMEDIACY

When writers have a strong sense of the kind of thing they are making, they read that kind of thing differently. Add to this the expectation that they will make something like this very soon, and they read even more deliberately. This is true for writers of all experience levels. Last spring a friend of mine asked me to write a forward for her upcoming book. I said yes, of course, even though I had never written one before. The week before my forward was due to the publisher, I knew I had to get started writing it. I started, but on the first day I didn’t write a word. I sat in my office and pulled my professional books off my shelf and read the forwards in them one by one. Many of them I had read before, but I had never read

them like someone who needed to write one by Friday! That’s a whole different kind of reading entirely; it’s reading to get a clear vision for the kind of thing we want to write.

Cauley and his classmates do this kind of reading all the time. They think about more than just what picture books are about; they also notice and think a lot about *how* they are written and *how* they are illustrated (Harwayne, 1992; Ray, 1999). One morning when the class was looking at Joanne Ryder’s book *Earthdance* (1996) and talking about how some of the words are written so that they wrap around an illustration of a mountain, Kayla said, “Hey, I could do the words like that inside the wheel in my hamster book.” Kayla and Cauley think of

“I Am the Snake” is full of decisions Cauley has learned he can make when he writes.

themselves as people who make books, too, because that’s what they do every morning in writing workshop, so they can’t help but look at books as insiders. The interesting “moves” they see writers and illustrators making are available as immediate possibilities for them in their writing because their writing work is always at hand. They write every day and their writing projects are ongoing. Kayla was reading a book with the class about the Earth, but back at her desk was the hamster book she was engaged in writing. This is a powerful combination—this sense of self as writers and this sense of immediacy about their ongoing writing work.

“I Am the Snake” is full of decisions Cauley has learned he can make when he writes. He’s learned them from looking at books and then en-

visioning possibilities for his own writing based on what he sees professional writers and illustrators doing in their books. Here’s a list of some of the decisions Cauley made as he wrote his book. After each one is an example of a book where Cauley could see a writer making this same decision, though in most every case, he has seen these decisions made in numerous books.

- Facts in a text like this are often placed at the end and they relate to what happened in the story line. (*I Call It Sky*, 1999, by Will C. Howell)
- One way to approach a topic like this is to use first-person narration and give your topic a voice. (*Atlantic*, 2002, by Brian Karas)
- A writer can create a spelling to match a sound he wants heard in his writing. (*Tiger Trail*, 2000, by Kay Winters)
- A text like this can be written in present tense as if it’s happening as you’re reading it. (*Bat Loves the Night*, 2001, by Nicola Davies)
- A text can be written to follow the movement of something, in this case the snake. (*Red-eyed Tree Frog*, 1999, by Joy Cowley)
- A series of very short sentences with strong verbs can show dramatic action (pp. 4, 9). (*Gentle Giant Octopus*, 1998, by Karen Wallace)
- The feeling of some time period ending (in this case, the end of a day) can bring a sense of closure to a text (p. 8). (*Welcome to the River of Grass*, 2001, by Jane Yolen)
- The way the print goes down on a page can be manipulated to make meaning (p. 9 “scorching hot lava comes down the hill”). (*Earthdance*, 1996, by Joanne Ryder)
- An illustration can run (in this case, literally!) off the edge of a page (p. 10). (*Rain*, 2000, by Manya Stojic)

Cauley's clear vision for the writing he is doing is not something he's mysteriously acquired; Lisa can trace each of the decisions he's making back to conversations around books she's had with the class during the year. Many of these books are not ones Cauley and his classmates can read independently. Our youngest writers need a richer diet of books to support their writing than they can read independently, so Lisa reads these kinds of books to them, and they revisit them often to see what new visions they can get for their own writing.

## A RICH WRITING LIFE

Before I describe the teaching that weaves its way through this rich context for writing, let me first make it clear that Cauley doesn't need any teaching in order to carry on as a writer. He and his classmates each have a folder with books they're working on, and they can get themselves up and going on that work on their own. When Lisa was leaving for a 12-week maternity leave last January, she told the long-term sub who was taking her place, "No matter what, just let them write every day. Even if you're not sure what to teach, just let them write. They'll be fine." And they were fine. They carried on as writers because by that point in the year they had rich writing lives full of work they found meaningful. They went out to "make books" each day with the same kind of energy they take to Legos™ and sand and blocks. Lisa needs them to be fiercely independent because the teaching in the room is meant to *support* the work her students do out of their rich writing lives; it's not meant to *become* their work. This is such an important distinction. The teaching fills the room up with interesting possibilities for things they might

try in their writing and things they might think about as they engage in the writing process. There is a clear expectation that they should be trying things they are learning, and some days they are asked to try something very specific, but most days they are simply expected to go out and write "under the influence" of the teaching.

Lisa wants her students to make their own decisions about how the writing will go because she knows that decision making is an important part of becoming a competent writer. The goal of her teaching is to help them develop a repertoire of strategies, techniques, and understandings from which they can make decisions. For example, the chart you see in Figure 2 is filling up with things they are learning as they revisit the basket of wow nonfiction texts they are studying. By the end of the study, the chart will be full of possibilities they've found, and the children will write out of the fullness of these possibilities. They know they will have to explain the different decisions they make, and Lisa will be listening to see what sense they've made of her teaching and how they have figured out, on their own, to use it to support their writing work.

## A CLEAR TEACHING VISION

Cauley writes in a room where his teacher has done a lot of thinking about him as a writer, and this is another reason he is writing well. Instead of beginning by thinking about specific things she wants him to know about *writing* at the end of the year—the qualities of good writing, mechanics, genre differences, etc.—Lisa thinks about

Cauley and his classmates and how she wants them to be as *writers* at the end of the year. She knows that the point of her teaching is to lead them towards becoming the kinds of writers she envisions. She knows that over time she wants to see them developing:

- a sense of self as writers, as well as personal writing processes that work for them
- ways of reading the world like writers, collecting ideas with variety, volume, and thoughtfulness
- a sense of thoughtful, deliberate purpose about their work as writers and a willingness to linger with those purposes
- their membership in a responsive, literate community
- ways of reading texts like writers, developing a sense of craft, genre, and form that they use to write their own texts
- a sense of audience and how to prepare conventional writing to go into

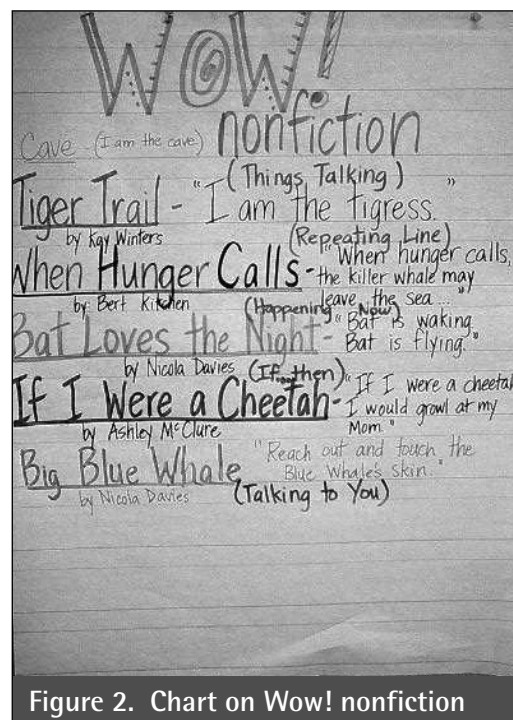


Figure 2. Chart on Wow! nonfiction

the world (Ray, with Cleaveland, 2004, p. 109).

It is more than just a matter of semantics to say that Cauley's teacher teaches writers, not writing (Calkins, 1994). Teaching writers causes her to look for different outcomes than she would if she were teaching writing. For example, let's say that she wanted to work with her students on understanding structure and organization in writing. She might decide to use picture books to introduce them to four or five different structural possibilities for texts in a series of minilessons (see Figure 3). But the point of her teaching is not to see that they can write something using each different text structure she teaches, because the structures themselves aren't the point. The goal of the teaching is for her students to *become writers who understand that they need to think and become intentional about the organization of their texts*. The range of structural possibilities she has presented to them is simply a means to that end, not an end in itself.

So, very specifically during the series of lessons on structure, and off and on again throughout the year (because the need for organization is never ending even though the specific teaching about it stops), Lisa will expect her students to make decisions about how they will organize their writing, and she'll ask them often to explain these decisions. She will look for evidence that they are using her teaching—and what they are learning from their own reading lives—to be intentional about this aspect of writing craft.

## TEACHING ORGANIZED FOR WRITERS

Cauley is writing well in part because he is writing out of the luxury of deep, intense study of a particu-

- A text fashioned as a series of questions and answers  
*Do you know what I'll do?* (2000) by Charlotte Zolotow  
*Winter lullaby* (1998) by Barbara Seuling
- A text that moves through a physical place (takes the reader on a tour)  
*Let's go home* (2002) by Cynthia Rylant  
*My New York* (1993) by Kathy Jakobsen
- A text that moves predictably back and forth between two kinds of content  
*Before I was your mother* (2003) by Kathryn Lasky  
*The two Mrs. Gibsons* (2001) by Toyomi Igus
- A text with a repeated phrase that ties vignettes together or is a transitional devise  
*In my new yellow shirt* (2001) by Eileen Spinelli  
*Mothers are like that* (2000) by Carol Carrick
- A text that moves through a natural time period in the world (days of the week, months of the year, seasons, etc.)  
*Diary of a wombat* (2002) by Jackie French  
*Here comes the year* (2002) by Eileen Spinelli

Figure 3. Five examples of text structure possibilities to present to children

lar kind of writing. Across the year, he and his classmates have engaged in a variety of different studies, and during each one there has been the feeling of "we're studying this big thing together right now." Because Lisa takes the stance that she teaches writers rather than writing, she thinks about the organization of her teaching from that stance as well. She doesn't begin by thinking of individual lessons she wants to teach, she begins by thinking about big topics of interest to people who write, especially to people who write in the ways she envisions her students writing after a year in her workshop. She considers her state curriculum guidelines, the needs of this year's students, and her own evolving knowledge base about writing to plan units of study—series of minilessons and inquiries lasting two to five weeks (Nia, 1999; Davis & Hill, 2003).

This language, "big topics of interest to people who write," is important language. While there is so much specific content inside one of these units of study, the specifics of the content aren't the point of the teach-

ing. Helping children write and make sense of this big topic in their own work is the point; specific content is simply a means to this other more important end. Thinking of the studies in this way causes Lisa to frame her outcomes with writers in mind.

We'll take as an example the year of study Cauley experienced in first grade. Underneath each study, the general outcome Lisa had in mind is listed to give a sense of how the study is designed to teach writers, not writing.

**Study 1:** *The kinds of things writers make and how we'll make them in this room*

**Goal:** To launch children into book making and help them envision some possibilities for kinds of writing they might try.

**Study 2:** *Where writers get ideas*

**Goal:** To help children understand that writers get ideas for writing in a variety of ways and to help them begin to become intentional in their own decisions about what writing projects they'll pursue.

- Study 3:** *How to read like writers*
- Goal:** To teach children to notice how things are written and to show them how to take what they notice and envision it as a possibility for their writing.
- Study 4:** *How to find a writing mentor*
- Goal:** To help children understand that professional writers can be their mentors and to show them how to study the work of a writer whose style they admire.
- Study 5:** *How to structure texts in interesting ways*
- Goal:** To help children understand that texts are organized in some way and to introduce them to a beginning repertoire of interesting text structures they might use to organize their writing.
- Study 6:** *How to make illustrations work better with written texts*
- Goal:** To introduce children to a beginning repertoire of illustration possibilities they might use to help them become more intentional as they compose with illustrations as well as written text.
- Study 7:** *How to have better peer conferences*
- Goal:** To help children develop some beginning understandings about the kinds of help writers might solicit from other writers, and to encourage them to seek out this kind of help.
- Study 8:** *Literary (wow) nonfiction*
- Goal:** To help children understand the potential of this genre and how to write it well.
- Study 9:** *How to use punctuation in interesting ways*
- Goal:** To help children understand that punctuation is a flexible, interesting tool a writer can use to craft a text, and

to give them a beginning repertoire of punctuation understandings they might use to craft their own texts.

**Study 10:** *Poetry*

**Goal:** To help children understand the potential of this genre and how to write it well.

**Study 11:** *Revision*

**Goal:** To help children understand this important part of the writing process, develop healthy, positive attitudes about it, and begin using just one important line of revision thinking: “What might I add to this to make it more interesting?”

While each year looks a little different depending on a variety of variables, there is some consistency in what is studied because the “big topics of interest to people who write” really don’t change that much. The topics are going to relate in some way either to how the writing gets done (process) or the writing itself (product). *What a Writer Needs*, as

Ralph Fletcher (1993) so aptly named one of his best books on writing, is not a mystery; it doesn’t change much from grade level to grade level either. This frame for a year of study could just as well be a frame for a sixth-grade writing workshop—all that would change would be the sophistication of the content inside the study and the expectations for student work under the influence of the study. Figure 4 lists other examples of “big topics of interest to people who write” that might be studied across grade levels in a year of study in writing workshop.

Studying writing in these big ways helps Cauley and his classmates grab hold of many of the big ideas behind each study. They are working on this big idea—say, they are learning to use punctuation in interesting ways—and they *know* they are working on it. There’s usually a big chart where Lisa is listing the content they are learning as they go, and all their talk in minilessons and share times and many of their writing

**Process Studies**

- Living a writing life, and getting and growing ideas for writing
- A writers’ work other than writing: research, observation, talk, etc.
- An overview of the process of writing
- Revision
- Editing
- Using a notebook as a tool to make writing better
- How writers have peer conferences
- How writers get published
- Studying our histories as writers
- How to coauthor with another writer

**Product Studies**

- An overview of the kinds of writing that exist
- Specific genre study: memoir, fiction (of all sorts), editorials, poetry, feature articles, essays, reviews (of all sorts), drama, etc.
- General craft study: Looking closely at good writing and naming the qualities we see
- Specific craft study: Zooming in on some specific aspect of craft—structure, punctuation, word choice, leads, endings, paragraphing, description, etc.
- How to make illustrations work with text (for young writers)
- Finding mentor authors for our writing

**Figure 4. Examples of other “big topics of interest to people who write”**



conferences is directed at what they are studying. The teaching has the feeling of “bigness” to it. Sometimes when there is a “hit and miss” feel to the teaching of writing, children pick up little things along the way, but nothing has a chance to add up to something larger and lasting, something that will really make a difference for them as *writers*.

## GROUNDING TEACHING

I believe Cauley is writing well in part because the teaching he’s received is so grounded in the real world of writing. Lisa forces the issue that students should be *making* something with their writing, and then she supports their work by grounding all her lessons in what real writers actually do when they write and craft texts.

If she is teaching children about some particular aspect of the writing process, she has one main curriculum resource for this teaching—quotes from people who write. She collects quotes from professional writers where they talk about engaging in that part of the process (as we saw with the Mary Lynn Ray quote). When she shares a quote with the children, she makes sure she ends by helping them envision possibilities for their own writing derived from what the writer has said. And the quotes don’t have to come from professional writers. Sometimes she shares an insight about process from her own writing experiences, and sometimes she shares from something one of her students has said about the process. The bottom line is, she knows that for her students to learn about the process of writing, they need to write, and they need to hear from others who write about how they go about it all.

For any teaching she wants to do about the products of writing, Lisa always begins with a stack of texts that have the potential to show stu-

dents good examples of what she wants them to learn. If she wants them to use punctuation in interesting ways to craft their texts (Angelillo, 2002), she might gather *Roller Coaster* (2003) by Marla Frazee, *Eaglet’s World* (2002) by Evelyn Minshull, and *Hoptoad* (2003) by Jane Yolen. If she wants them to understand how to be more descriptive in their writing, she might gather *Night in the Country* (1986) and *Tulip Sees America* (1998) by Cynthia Rylant and *Twilight Comes Twice* (1997) by Ralph Fletcher. If she wants them to understand the wonderful potential of memoir, she might gather *The Trip Back Home* (2000) by Janet S. Wong, *The Two Mrs. Gibsons* (2001) by Toyomi Igus, and *Grandma’s Records* (2001) by Eric Velasquez. Lisa doesn’t begin by thinking about what lessons she’ll teach about punctuation, description, and memoir; she begins by looking for writers who are doing what she wants her students to learn to do.

With these short stacks of good examples in hand, she shows students some things, but she also asks them what they notice about the punctuation, description, and memoir. Over time as they talk about what they see these writers doing, they will fill a chart (or two or three) with new insights about the topic they are studying, and the children will go out to write each day filled with visions and possibilities for their own writing. They will also go out knowing their teacher expects them to use these possibilities intentionally in their decision making—a challenge that ends most every day’s lesson.

Lisa believes it is important to ground her teaching in this way for several reasons. First, she is teaching children an important habit of mind—to read like writers. She is teaching them that if they want to know how to do a certain kind of writing, they need to look at good

examples to figure out how to do it. This is a lifelong habit that never stops being useful; it’s exactly what I was doing the day I read forwards in my office so I could write one myself. Second, she is keeping it honest. Lisa’s not in danger of making up things to say about how to describe well or punctuate effectively. She won’t tell students something about writing if she doesn’t have some writing backing her up. And finally, she is nourishing her own learning almost as much as the children’s. She finds that they often have insights about texts that she never even considered. As she adds a few new texts to her teaching repertoire each year, Lisa sees more and more new potentials for writing.

## GOOD TEACHING DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Cauley is in third grade now. The year he spent in Lisa’s workshop and the following years of writing instruction have helped him continue to grow as a writer. The grounding he got right from the beginning when he learned that writing is a continual process of decision making, that writing takes time and stamina, that writing is best when he has a clear picture of what he’s making, has served him well. As a researcher of the teaching of writing, I continue to be fascinated by the difference good teaching makes in the writing and the writing lives of students. I know that as a “community of practice,” we still have so much to learn about the layers and layers of understandings that support good teaching. But we’re getting there.

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### Author Biography

**Katie Wood Ray** is a professional consultant and the author of five books on the teaching of writing.

### 2002 WINNER OF THE NCTE DONALD H. GRAVES WRITING AWARD



Lisa Cleaveland, the teacher featured in this article, is the 2002 winner of NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award. Lisa teaches first grade at Jonathan Valley Elementary School in Waynesville, North Carolina and is the first recipient of this award. The award was established by Donald H. Graves to recognize teachers in grades 1–6 who demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in the teaching of writing. Applicants for the award submit three portfolios of student writing, each of which contain three to five selections showing change from earlier to later over the year. The award is administered by the Elementary Section Steering Committee of NCTE. Further information on the award can be found at [www.ncte.org/elem/awards/graves](http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/graves).