

# **“Slice the Pie” To Help Writers and Learners**

Dr. Charles Whitaker

As teachers helping student writers, we share many goals. Though widely shared and valued, however, not all of the goals are easy to reach, especially when the writers are young, new to writing, or just simply reluctant to write. Some of the shared goals I wish to emphasize here are as follows:

- student ownership as writers
- membership in a community of literate learners
- the ability to write for a variety of purposes and readers and in a variety of forms
- the ability to think from the inside about their writing
- student learning through writing

Most importantly, we want our students to be engaged — engaged as writers and as learners. In fact, I sometimes think that influencing students’ desire to write is our most important service. While all these goals are admirable, they can be difficult to achieve. How can we do a better job in helping students become more proficient writers and learners?

You may have experienced a scene like this: You have given John in your fourth-grade class a writing assignment: to write a persuasive letter. He stiffens, looks up at you, and asks, “But what do you want? I don’t know what to do. How do I start?” His eyes express sincere frustration, and you wonder if this student is about to choose NOT to enter the doorway of the literacy club! John may not reach any of the goals we wish him to.

What more can we do to help all of our students reach important goals as writers and learners? It is a question even experienced teachers are likely to pose. I’m not sure we have the magic wand, but a strategy I have used and have helped other teachers use has served very well. I call it “slicing the pie.” One of the virtues of this practice is its flexibility; it can be used in many ways and with students at all levels. Here are the fundamentals of this practice, with a slant toward its use with elementary students.

## **“Slicing the Pie”: A Good Pre-Writing Strategy**

“Slicing the pie” is a pre-writing strategy in which the teacher and students use a graphic organizer, called a pie chart, to help the students define their own writing tasks and develop as writers and learners in the process. In most cases, this activity will be used at a point in the unit after which students have had a chance to study the subject matter for a time. They will have had an opportunity to read, talk, share experiences, and connect their learning to their lives. Students’ writing, thus, will emerge from and will support their learning, which makes this practice especially useful to teachers who want to focus on content-area learning, including learning in English/language arts.

It’s a good strategy for elementary teachers who seek to link the different subjects they teach — for example, helping students develop as writers and readers by focusing on a science-related subject. The practice also can be used in a writing workshop structure,

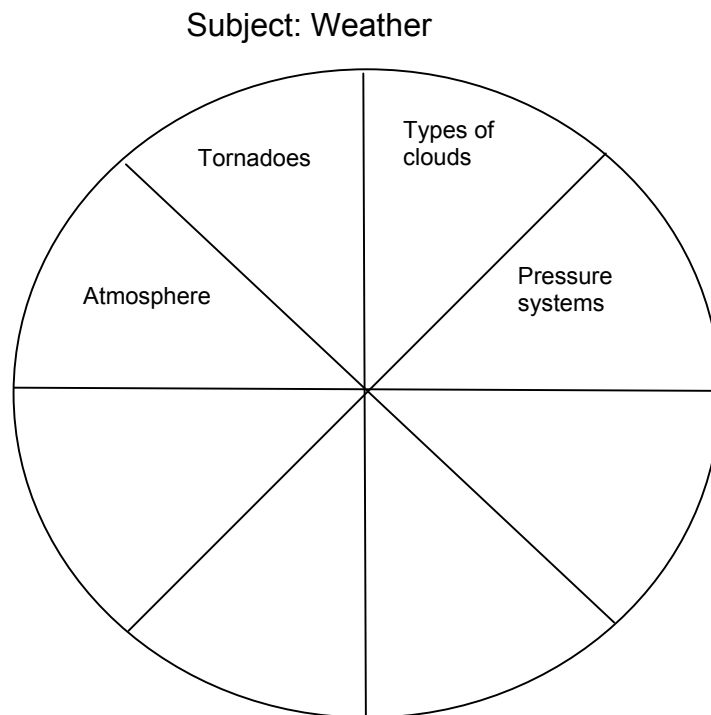
where the focus is on writing and perhaps reading, rather than on a content area such as science or social studies.

Although the strategy can be used to help students write in any genre — personal narratives, memoirs, poems, short stories, etc. — the examples and discussion that follow concentrate on informative or persuasive writing.

### **What Is a Pie Chart?**

A pie chart is used to organize information. It consists of a circle divided into sections like slices of a pie. The circle represents the broad subject matter, while the sections represent categories or individual topics within the subject. The subject matter may be determined by the teacher or the students. Either way, the pie chart helps students make decisions about a specific writing task and guides them in developing as writers.

The example below is the beginning of a pie chart:



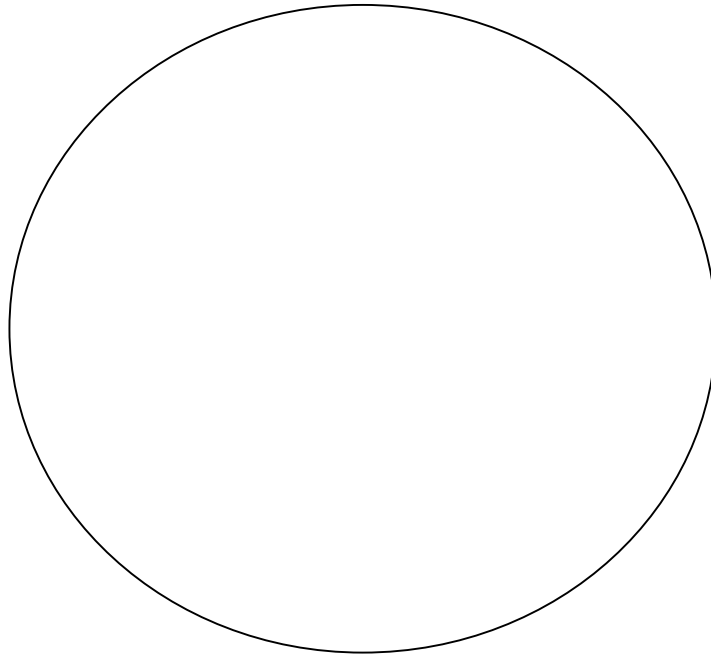
The pie chart can be printed on a handout, entered in a writer’s notebook, drawn on the board, or projected through a transparency or computer. When I “slice the pie” with students (and demonstrate the practice with teachers), I like to use a transparency and overhead projector so that all students can see how the slicing develops — and so that they can contribute and be involved. This approach engages students and promotes the sense of community I want to nurture in my class.

### **Choosing a Subject for Your Pie**

The first and most important step is to choose the subject for your pie that serves your goals as a teacher and that likely will engage students. The subject of the pie might be

based on a unit in science, such as “The Basic Needs of Living Things,” or a unit in language arts having to do with setting. It might also be an event, a problem, an issue, a goal, or a need. In the example below, the chosen subject is “What are the important events and discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition?”

Subject: “What were some of the most significant events and discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition?”



Naming the pie with an open question is a good way to stimulate students’ thinking and engage them as writers. For example, “How can we protect ourselves and others in bad weather?” or “What more can we do to improve safety in our school and community?” It also puts the student writers in the role of inquirers and learners and provides a meaningful basis and powerful motivation for writing.

The subject of the pie will vary, of course, from teacher to teacher. The main point to remember is that the subject should be broad enough to offer many different writing tasks, while still leading students to make connections with their learning and experiences.

### **Collaborating With Students in Slicing the Pie**

Once the subject matter of the pie has been determined, students are invited to discuss it among themselves. The teacher and students then collaborate in “slicing the pie.” This means, of course, that lines are drawn through the circle, creating pie-shaped wedges that represent topics within the main subject of the pie that students could focus on in their writing.

At first, the teacher models one or two possible topics, revealing his or her own thinking as a writer and fostering a sense of community in the classroom. Then the slicing continues as the teacher engages with the students to brainstorm more possibilities. As more topics are identified by students, the teacher records them in the slices of the organizer, while students do the same on their handouts or in their writer's notebooks.

Subject: "What were some of the most significant events, people, and discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition?"



It is important that the students identify matters they find truly interesting and important and that are also relevant to others. Conveying this message helps young writers recognize that they should write not only with ownership, but also with the reader in mind.

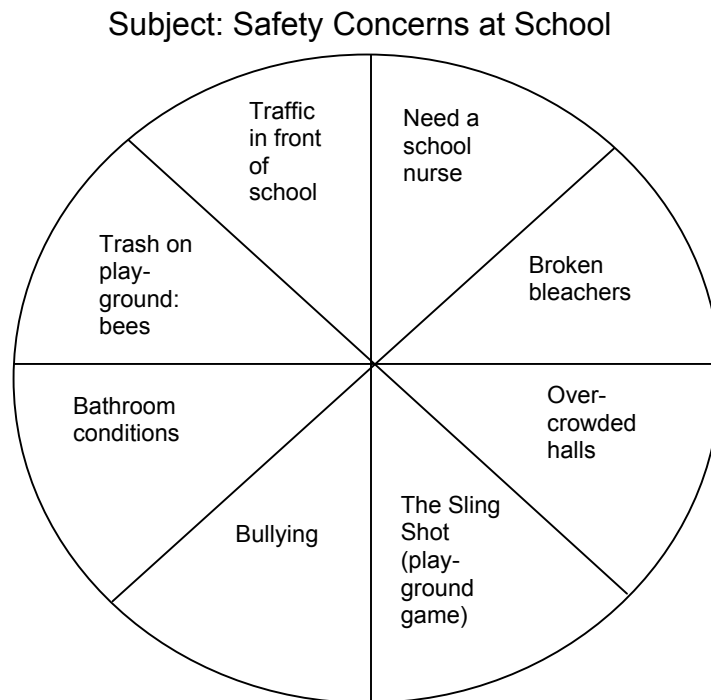
Encourage students to identify slices, even if they do not intend to write about them. The more slices, the greater the writing options for the rest of the class. The teacher may have additional ideas as well but should let the students themselves slice the pie. As many slices as the students and teacher think useful may be noted on the organizer.

Eventually, of course, students will choose a slice of the pie that they want to focus on as writers. In some cases, there may be only a few slices, but from my experience, I have been happily surprised at how many slices students can come up with for a given topic, including slices that I had not thought of. And when students perceive that they truly have freedom to identify slices they find important, the classroom community is energized. People start thinking authentically about their writing.

In sum, slicing the pie is an excellent way to promote variety in the students' writing and to endorse diversity and ownership, even if the students are writing about the same broad subject.

### A Real-Life Example

Sandy Adams, an elementary-level teacher in Kentucky, has used the "slicing the pie" strategy extensively and successfully. In a recent unit, she wanted to address state standards in the area of practical living, and designed a unit of study focused on safety. The subject matter is part of her curriculum, as of course is writing, so she decided to link the two: writing about safety was a good basis for engaging students in meaningful writing. Here is an example of a pie chart created by Sandy and her students:



In the example, we see that Sandy has created a basis for writing that is more than just an exercise; students are writing to accomplish authentic purposes, purposes that the students themselves find meaningful.

They also are beginning to experience a sense of ownership that will help them develop as writers, learners, and thinkers. The teacher has used a strategy by which the students, themselves, choose a slice of the pie they find interesting and important to focus on in their writing. At this point in the activity, students are also focusing on matters relevant to learning in the unit, and they are beginning to develop reader awareness.

In practical terms, the process is helping students like John, who might have been “stuck” outside the door of the literacy club, not because he is not intelligent but because he is unsure of what is expected — a common situation in our schools. Through the activity, John sees possibilities offered by classmates, and he has a chance to offer some ideas

himself in a safe environment. This strategy emboldens students to take risks and explore, without fearing that they have to come up with the “right answer.” When students define their own writing task, the odds for student engagement and ownership vastly improve.

There are other benefits of using this strategy. The collaboration between students and teacher in slicing the pie not only broadens the possibilities for writing, it fosters the sense of working in a community of learners and writers, and this sense of membership in a community not only engages students but leads them to help others and to gain help themselves.

In addition, writing becomes easier and more meaningful. Through the slicing, students may see options they had not considered. The activity energizes the students, stimulating talking and thinking about the pie and the amazing number of slices it may contain. When the writing is particularly relevant to their study, imagine the learning that can take place as students convey their ideas and information about different aspects of the “pie.”

At this point in the process, what we have is a pie that has been sliced — mostly by the writers themselves — to indicate a variety of writing possibilities. Students see that they do not all have to write about the same thing, and they are beginning to assume ownership of their writing. As the process continues, students may well want to slice up the pie some more. But for now, there are plenty of options to choose from.

### **“Defining Writing *Bigly*”**

An important goal for all of us, and a national standard in writing, is that students will write for a variety of purposes and audiences and in a variety of forms. This goal is necessary in preparing students to write effectively in the vast array of contexts they may face in their lives.

I sometimes refer to this goal as “defining writing *bigly*.” By this I mean that we arrange for students not only to gain experience in writing for a variety of contexts and purposes and in a variety of forms, but to make decisions about the purposes, forms, readers, and methods of development of their writing. Slicing the pie can serve this goal very well. Let’s look at the next steps in the process, again using Sandy Adams’s work as an example.

### **Choosing a Slice**

After students have sliced the pie thoroughly, the teacher will ask them to select the slice they want to focus on. Teachers might think that the next step after that is simply to ask the students to begin to create a draft. And some writers may want to jump right in to drafting a piece about the slice of the pie he or she has selected. But deciding on a particular slice of the pie is not the only step a writer must take in defining his or her writing task. I think some important additional steps can help students even more in developing as writers.

## Determining a Purpose for Your Writing

Writers do not merely write about a topic; they write about a topic in order to accomplish a specific purpose. Recognizing this important principle about writing is sometimes hard for young students, but teachers can improve the odds by taking slicing the pie a little further.

Recall Sandy Adams’s work in the unit on safety. She chose a “pie” that lends itself easily to writing with a specific, authentic purpose; the purpose for writing is built into the nature of the subject itself: to improve school safety. But Sandy asked students to state specifically what they want their writing to accomplish. She might have said, “Let’s jot down some ideas for focused purposes. Look at a slice of our pie and tell me what the writer’s purpose might be.” She may have had to model one such purpose.

As the students responded, Sandy would have jotted her notes on the organizer, still displayed for all to see. One way to do this is to write the word *Topic* below the circle, and then under it the word *Purpose*. Sandy wants her students to learn that there is an important difference between a topic and a purpose. Students, with nudging from the teacher, begin to generate ideas for purposes.

Here are some examples that could be entered on the graphic organizer for Sandy’s unit:

Topic: The Sling Shot

Purpose: The Sling Shot is fun, and lots of kids at our school play on it, but students have been hurt, so we should remove it.

Topic: Bee Problem Around Overfilled Trash Cans

Purpose: My purpose is to find a solution to the bee problem. Some of my friends have been stung.

Or: Because we have bees around the trash cans on the playground, we need to empty the cans more often.

Or: My purpose is to answer the question, “What can we do about the bee problem around overfilled trash cans?”

As ideas such as these are noted on the organizer, students are progressing in getting ready to write. They also are participating both as individuals and as members of a classroom community in learning how to think about writing.

## Writing About the Same Topic in Different Ways

What if more than one student wants to write about the same slice? If that happens, the teacher can encourage the students to write with slightly different purposes (or for different readers and in different forms). Doing so will encourage students to recognize an important principle about writing: that different writers can write about the same topic in different ways. This is helpful especially to young writers, who sometimes think they all have to say the same thing in the same way to get the “correct” answer. Knowing that a given topic can be approached from different angles fosters more independence and ownership as writers and it also fosters thinking in greater depth about subjects.

So, using the organizer, the teacher simply notes the different purposes students name for a given topic. With luck, students will begin to make decisions to “own” their writing: to select a particular slice of the pie, and then to write about a slice to accomplish a particular purpose. When students define their writing tasks in this way, the writing classroom becomes very interesting.

### **From Purpose to Controlling Idea**

Slicing the pie is a remarkably flexible pre-writing activity. At this point in the process, the teacher can ask students to move from identifying a purpose in their writing to stating the controlling idea.

A controlling idea is the main point the writer is trying to make. Some students might think that the purpose *is* the controlling idea, and in some essays it may well be. Still, if the teacher wants to help students understand the concept of a controlling idea, she can simply ask the students to answer a couple of questions and enter the answers on the organizer. For example:

- What’s the most important thing you want your reader to understand about this topic?
- What do you want to see happen as a result of your writing?

Example:

Topic: Bullying on the Playground

Purpose: By writing, I want to stop the bullying.

Controlling Idea: Teachers should supervise recess more closely and try to prevent bullying.

As the teacher writes examples of controlling ideas on the organizer, she should remind students to keep the idea in mind so that they do not wander in their writing. Of course, as the writing develops, a student well may change their slice, purpose, or controlling idea. Our activity serves to get students going, and it also prompts students to think about some key matters as writers.

### **Sharpening the Focus with a Title**

Suppose that the teacher asks students to write a nonfiction article for a school newspaper or magazine. The next step in slicing the pie, following the brainstorming for a purpose and perhaps a controlling idea, could be for the students to brainstorm ideas for titles.

Here’s an example from another teacher’s work in a science unit titled “Basic Needs of Living Things.” Following the same process described above, her class produced this graphic organizer entry:

Topic: Taking Care of a German Shepherd

Purpose: I want to use what I know about science to help kids take care of a pet German shepherd.



Controlling Idea: To take good care of your German shepherd, you should know about the basic needs of living things — and you should know about this kind of dog.

Title: “Take Good Care of Your German Shepherd”

Some teachers may not want to take the activity this far, but doing so offers some advantages, especially in helping students establish a sharp focus in their writing.

### **Reader Awareness**

Next, the teacher raises some provocative questions that all writers need to answer:

- Who do I want to influence by my writing?
- Who is likely to read my writing?
- Who can help me accomplish what I want to happen through my writing?
- Who really needs to know what I have found out about \_\_\_?

The answers to these questions will help students identify reader awareness, or the audience for their writing. In some cases, the teacher may actually designate the readership: “Let’s write to the principal to share our ideas about ways to improve our school,” or “Let’s write an article for a class magazine that will help people protect animals and plants.”

A teacher who wants to control the readership for students’ writing certainly may do so. In the “real world,” writers do not always choose their readership; audience is set by the context in which they work. Still, to help your students think from the inside as writers, there is good reason to give them experience in making decisions about their readership. Doing so prompts them to think in more depth about how they will work as a writer and how they will be effective in communicating with certain readers.

To give them practice, return to the graphic organizer and ask students to determine possible readers for the different slices. As the students identify readers, list them on the organizer. Doing this helps students recognize the importance of considering readership early in the writing process, even if the writer decides to change his or her mind later.

Recall that Sandy Adams wanted her students to write for authentic purposes and readers and in realistic forms. She encouraged student ownership. So, in slicing the pie, she and her students considered a variety of readers. She asked questions about readers like those listed above, and her students made decisions. She brainstormed with students about possible readers, discussing why one reader might be more appropriate for the writer’s purpose than another. Then she recorded the information on the organizer:

Topic:

Purpose:

Controlling Idea

Title

Readers:                      school principal  
   school council

parents  
other students  
teachers at the school

At this point, some teachers may be concerned about the amount of time involved in slicing the pie. If the time is used to reach a number of important goals, it is time well spent. However, let me remind teachers that this practice may be modified, and some teachers may not include all parts of the activity. Still, slicing the pie offers some important benefits.

### **Choosing an Appropriate Writing Form**

So far, we have used the pie to help students choose a topic, determine the purpose for their writing, state a controlling idea, and identify the reader. This may be the point in the process for students to start their drafts. However, some teachers may want to review the characteristics of the different forms of writing and have students consider the form best suited to their purpose and reader.

To get started, the teacher might ask something like this: “If you want to write for the purpose and reader you have chosen, what would be a realistic form you could use?”

Again, the teacher could model what she might do as a writer, and the students could collaborate in identifying forms. A list of options could then be added to the organizer. (If the pie has become so full that it is hard to add any more to it, then use a new pie.)

Once again, recall that Sandy Adams sought to engage her students in writing for authentic, realistic purposes. So she led her students to write in what some teachers refer to as “real world” forms. Sandy also wanted students to learn more about realistic forms because they were called for in her curriculum and in her state’s writing assessment.

Here are some examples of the forms generated by Sandy’s students for the topic of safety in the community and school:

- letter
- memo
- article
- proposal
- editorial

The next step would be for students to discuss the merits of the different forms. Then Sandy would lead students to choose the form they wished to use.

It may be necessary for the teacher to provide samples of the different writing forms for students to look at. You could also review the characteristics of the different forms by conducting mini-lessons, by organizing small groups of students who are using the same form, and by conducting conferences with students.

If the teacher decides to specify the form, that’s fine. He or she would simply note the chosen form on the organizer.

### Defining Your Writing with a Planning Form

Now let's say that the teacher wants the students to begin a draft. As the last step in slicing the pie, the teacher might provide students with a planning form, a handout that each student can use to define his or her writing. The handout can be included in a writer's notebook. On the handout, students would be asked to complete the following statement:

I am writing a \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_  
Selected Form Audience or Readership  
in order to \_\_\_\_\_  
Specific Purpose or Controlling Idea

This statement is not intended to be the first sentence of the writing; it simply is intended to allow the student to focus sharply on what he or she wants to do in this writing. If necessary, the teacher could model how she would use this form to define her writing task.

Writing the statement and sharing it with classmates can give a student like John reassurance in what he is doing. The statement can also keep a student from losing track of his or her purpose — a common problem among elementary-level writers. However, as a student progresses in the writing process, he or she might choose a different purpose or approach for the writing. So this statement is not intended as a contract. It is simply a way of helping students get started.

### Developing the Piece

Slicing the pie helps writers think about what they will focus on (which slice of the pie), a specific purpose for writing, a controlling idea, a logical readership for their writing, and a form that is appropriate for their purpose and reader. Another important matter is how the writing will be developed. By *develop* I mean the way the writer goes about building the writing to accomplish the writer's purpose and be effective with readers.

Our slicing-the-pie exercise can help here, too. The teacher likely will need to model how she would develop her writing. Playing the part of a student, she might say, for example, "If I wanted to develop my writing aimed at showing one or more problems with the school's our playground equipment, how could I do it?"

I could:

- use photographs
- give examples
- describe conditions
- tell what happened to students or to me
- say what I have seen or heard
- give results of a survey or interview
- use what I have learned in health, math, science

These options can then be jotted down at the bottom of the planning form. (Sometimes I refer to this as a “Support List.”) The point of this exercise is to help students think about how they might develop the piece. Some students may see options they had not thought of or thought were not available to them. Taking this step also gives the students insight into how writers think about their work. We are not merely helping students complete a piece of writing; we are helping students develop as writers and as learners.

Teachers may also have students include some ideas about what they need to know more about or are interested in and how they could find those things out. It’s a good idea for students to share their plans, and teachers may encourage them to work with a partner or in small groups to help each other in completing their plans.

At this point, students are ready to start a draft of their writing, and the class functions in a writing workshop structure. Keep in mind that the “slicing the pie” strategy may not work with all students all the time. However, in many classrooms, it has succeeded in creating a supportive community for writers, helping writers establish ownership of their work, guiding students in thinking and learning about writing, and using writing to extend learning. Slicing the pie is a scaffold to help students develop as writers and as learners.

### **Writing: An Act of Discovery**

A final word from the National Commission on Writing:

“Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning. . . . As a nation, we can barely begin to imagine how powerful K-16 education might be if writing were put in its proper focus. Facility with writing opens students up to the pleasure of exercising their minds in ways that drilling on facts, details, and information never will. More than a way of knowing, writing is an act of discovery.”

**Dr. Charles Whitaker** is a retired professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky, where he taught for 30 years and has been recognized as an ECU Foundation Professor. He has taught writing for more than 30 years, including graduate courses in composition studies, and has published articles and a textbook on writing. He administered the writing program in his department for 10 years; and for the past 20 years he directed two National Writing Project sites — ECU and the Mountain Writing Project, conducted in collaboration with Hazard Community College. Dr. Whitaker has served on the Kentucky Writing Advisory Committee for more than 10 years and has worked closely with the Kentucky Department of Education to develop the state’s Program of Studies in English/Language Arts, materials used in statewide assessment of writing and statewide professional development in writing instruction. In addition, he consults with school districts and schools throughout Kentucky to improve instruction and test scores in writing. Dr. Whitaker received his BA, MA, and Ph.D. in English from Purdue University.

## Slicing the Pie: A Summary

1. Decide how you will lead the students to their writing — for example, through a unit of study or through an “open” writing task.
2. Give the students an opportunity to read, talk, and learn about the subject matter, and to connect their learning with their experiences.
3. Ask the students to share their ideas and information with others.
4. Display a blank pie chart and name it to indicate the broad subject for writing.
5. Collaborate with students in “slicing the pie,” or brainstorming a variety of topics within the broad subject for students to write about. Write one topic in each slice of the pie. Have students discuss what they find interesting about each topic and why the topic might be interesting to readers.
6. Have students choose one slice of the pie (topic) to write about.
7. Lead students to determine the purpose in writing about their chosen topic. Talk about the difference between topic and purpose.
8. Help students write a controlling idea for their topic.
9. If students are writing articles, show them how to create a title that fits the purpose and controlling idea for their topic.
10. Help students think and talk about reader awareness — who their audience is.
11. Decide whether you want students to write in the same form or choose their own form of writing. Discuss why some forms are more appropriate than others for particular topics.
12. Provide students with a planning form to use in defining their writing task.
13. Discuss ways to develop the writing — for example, by stating facts, providing examples, citing references, reporting results of surveys or interviews, giving personal observations, and so on.
14. Arrange for students to share the writing task they have defined for themselves.
15. Organize a writing workshop for drafting, revising, editing, etc.

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