

Workshop 4: Teaching Persuasive Writing

Jack Wilde's Reflections

Introducing students to non-narrative writing

The reason that I want my kids to do the persuasive writing is because I want them to have an experience writing non-narratively in fifth grade. Most of the writing that they've done up to fifth grade has been narrative in structure. So they've had that structure—the beginning, middle, and end to build on. But most of the writing that we're going to ask them to do in middle school and high school, as well as adults, is non-narrative in form. So they can't build on beginning, middle, and end. They have to figure out other ways to organize their writing. And because that's the case, I think we need to start them at a fairly young age learning other organizational principles besides just the narrative structure.

However, part of what had to go into my decision, was realizing that if I'm asking my kids to write in a new way, then I had to think carefully about the topic that they were going to write about and also their connection with it. So the topic that I've chosen is to write about school—something they know intimately. And what I've asked them to do is think about some way they would like to either change the school or something they would like to keep as a way to get them connected, because every kid in my room has very strong feelings about lunch, or recess, or certainly some part of their school day. So I've got the connection. I've got them writing about something they know about so we can really hone in on the structure, on how to organize the piece, because that's going to be part of the real challenge in their writing.

Description of the persuasive unit

The way I start that, the persuasive writing piece, is that they write about—because every kid in the year 2003, or every American kid, is a born persuader, oral persuader—I get them to write about how they've gotten their parents to go from saying no to something, like having a sleep-over or getting to buy something, to saying yes. Then we bring in those stories and we share them. And then we start to mine those stories for ways in which, what are their strategies in persuading people, persuading their parent to make that decision. And almost always we realize that the number one way to persuade them is to beg and plead. But then they begin to realize, because I change the set-up a

little bit when I say to them, now instead of doing it orally, if you had to write it, would that strategy work, and they realize, no. If they just wrote, "please, please, please, please, can I have it, can I have it, can I have it," their parent would stop reading it and it wouldn't work.

Some of the other things that come up in that piece, though, are things like arguing from fairness—"my friends get to do it, so I should get to do it"—and we realize, well that's something that we could probably use in our written persuasion. So I've got the continuum. We've talked about the oral part so they realize persuasion isn't something that's completely foreign to them, but we're now going to have them do it in a way that is foreign. So we're going to go from persuading orally to persuading in written form. They then start to brainstorm so they work through different possible topics, different ways to change what they think of to change the school and go into a number of different steps to get them invested in the piece and get them so they've got material to draw from in doing the actual writing.

When they finish writing the piece, when they finish the first drafts of two pieces and they've conferenced those pieces all along, then what they're going to do is decide which one of those pieces they want to publish. Again, they decide that in large part in meeting with their peer partner. The piece they decide to publish they're going to revise, make revisions in, and then they submit it to the whole class because our audience for the piece has all along been the building principal, and I explain to them that the building principal doesn't have enough time to read 80 persuasive pieces coming from all four fifth grades, or 100 for that matter. So each classroom only gets to send four pieces. And the reason I want that kind of funnel at the end where we're winnowing down from 22 to 24 pieces to four pieces is to get them to look again at what makes for good writing and for these particular cases what makes for quality writing in this non-narrative form.

So we've been discussing all along—"Is this piece persuasive, what works for it, what doesn't work for it?"—and now we're going to look at each other's writing realizing that we're going to decide these are the four really good quality pieces that will go to the principal, okay, and we're going to base that on these different criteria—like an effective beginning, an effective ending, how they use their arguments for their position, their arguments against their position, the tone of the piece, and lastly, what they're asking for itself.

Reasons for rank-ordering arguments

The reason that I have my kids rank-order their arguments for and against is twofold. So one is to get them to start to think about what are their strongest arguments, because we've generated 10, or hopefully we've generated 10, and almost all of them realize they can't use all of their arguments, that it would be ineffective to use all 10n. So then they have to winnow down the arguments for, and if they've rank-ordered them, then they're starting to think about, you know, I really need to use my stronger arguments. We also get into a discussion about, a positional discussion, about where is the best place to use your strongest argument for. And if they haven't rank-ordered them, then they're less likely to sort of understand that point.

The second reason for having kids rank-order them, and we talk about it, is to get them to start to realize again the power of brainstorming. Because typically, less than half of the kids have as their most powerful reason the first reason they came up with. And very often their most powerful reason is the sixth or seventh argument for their position that they came up with.

So during the course of the year we're also trying to look at the different techniques that we're trying to teach them to write more effectively, and they look initially at brainstorming as more work. But if they can start to see there is a payoff, you know, if I hadn't brainstormed I wouldn't have come up with my strongest argument for because it's reason number six or seven on my list chronologically, it's first in terms of potency. So I think that's important to get them to pay attention to that and then I can get more kids who buy in to brainstorming and spending the time doing that.