A Pen And A Process: Writing Workshop In The Secondary Classroom

Amarillo High School
August 16, 2013

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Writing Workshop Basics

Ralph Fletcher says, “Three basic components should be present in your workshop:
1. **Time for whole-group instruction** (often referred to as a minilesson)
2. **Time for writing**
3. **Time for structured response** (as a whole class or in small groups)” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

**Materials:**
A writer’s notebook of some kind, composition or spiral (can store or make students responsible for) – to experiment with writing techniques, record thoughts, feelings, seed ideas, etc.
A working portfolio stored in the classroom
Your own writer's notebook that you commit to using, if only for ten minutes a day

**A possible weekly structure (for high school) might look like this:**
Monday: Speaking and listening workshop
Tuesday: Reading workshop
Wednesday: Literature circles
Thursday: Writing workshop
Friday: Writing circles (or vice versa if I know I’m going to have a lot of kids out on a Friday)

“Reading aloud can work magic on a classroom community. It creates common experiences that bind us together” (Fletcher, 75)

From “Teaching That Makes Sense” (p. 19)

“Tips for Doing Writer’s Workshop with Middle School and High School Students

• Since time is short, your best bet is to cut back on the mini-lessons. Keep them as brief as possible, and use them only when necessary. They are not nearly as valuable to the students as writing and sharing.
• Even if you can’t teach writing every day, you can teach it on the same days each week. Try for two or three days in a row each week, or every day for a few weeks at a time. At this stage in your students’ intellectual development, writing is a much more valuable skill than reading – especially the reading of fiction which will have very little practical value for the students as they get older.
• If you have to choose between having time for reading and time for writing, favor writing. Writing is the more valuable skill for students trying to get into college or enter the workforce. Besides, writing requires all the skills of reading plus the logical thinking of math. At this age, all of your students should be able to decode text. So favor writing over reading whenever you have to make the choice. It will serve your students better in the long run.
• Encourage students to deal with personal issues in their writing. During their teen years, students have some heavy things to deal with. Tell them it’s OK to write about serious subjects, and create an environment in your classroom that is supportive of this.
• When you do assign writing topics, try to pick things that students can relate to in an authentic way and write honestly about or they will find practical in the years to come. Book reports and other “critical” writing may have been the bread and butter we were raised on, but few of today’s students have much use for it (and neither did we if we want to be honest about it). Think about the kinds of writing young adults need to do in the real world (college entrance essays, job and scholarship applications, business letters, journalism, technical writing, general problem solving, etc.) and model your writing assignments on those things.
• Your best reference for working with students in their teens is of course, Nancie Atwell’s In The Middle, but as students get older, the whole world of adult writing books is open to you and your students. Some of the best are Zinsser’s On Writing Well, Goldberg’s Writing Down The Bones, and Elbow’s Writing Without Teachers.”
**Action/Reflection step:** Take a few minutes and list your goals – short and long term – for your students. Keep your lists short and as specific as possible. Think about how you’re going to provide regular opportunities for student choice in the writing workshop.

What steps will you take to help create a “risk-taking environment”? What are the possible problems? What could you do to anticipate those problems and head them off?

**Writer’s Workshop Using Writing Circles**

The Basics:

A. Groups name their writing circle and choose a common topic.
B. Kids write on the chosen topic using any point of view or genre.
C. Writing circle minilessons focus on management and craft.
D. Writing circles meet.
E. Kids share their writing.
F. Kids respond to one another’s writing.
G. Each circle chooses their next topic.
H. Each writing circle shares their new topic and some of the current day’s writing with the whole class.
I. Kids reflect on what happened in the writing circle and take notes in their notebook.
J. Periodically, kids review their rough pieces and select the most promising one.
K. Writers collaboratively revise, polish, and publish their writing.
L. Circle members serve as one another’s agents, illustrators, reviewers, and editors.
M. Finished works are shared and celebrated publicly.

It is worth spending a week on bonding your groups and teaching them to work as a team. Good strategies for this include building something using the same supplies, completing a tiny task, and interviewing each other. Reflect on the processes that do and do not work and have students create posters for each part of the process. Refer to these throughout the first six weeks to bring students back into awareness of what works.

**What about kids who don’t/can’t/won’t write?**

1. Kids need to have a list of at least three possible topics when they join a writing circle. Spend a class period helping kids to generate ideas. A good lesson for this is Nancie Atwell’s “Writing Territories” lesson.
What has worked in your classroom?

**How many in a circle? For how long? How do you choose them?**

2. Each circle doesn’t have to have the same number of students. I try to never put more than five in a circle if I can help it. I like smaller groups, particularly triads, because they move faster and have higher accountability.

   - I keep my circles together for at least a semester because older teens are notoriously withholding and slow to trust or share with each other. In middle school, I switched out my groups more frequently, usually every six weeks, so kids would have more experience with more able peers.
   - In middle school and high school, it’s best to find out first who kids DON’T want to work with. I usually ask kids during the first week of school to fill out an index card telling me three people they’d like to work with and one that they know they CAN’T work with. I try to match groups accordingly.

   How have you successfully grouped kids in your classes?

**How many times do you meet each week?**

3. In high school, this is tough, but doable. My ESL students meet every day for the first twelve weeks because they need that much support. (They are at an elementary school literacy level). My other students have met on Thurs/Fri because they are warmed up by then. In middle school, you may want to meet three times a week. Try writing circles on one day and then have kids draft and revise during the next day’s writing workshop. Kids need the most time in the circle. Err on the side of cutting minilessons shorter or cutting them all together. This sounds crazy, but you’ll actually get more work out of adolescents when you give them more control over the process.

   - You can assign students writing at home, in class, or both. The consistency of the structure will begin to have kids more eager to have something to share as time goes by. For kids who consistently don’t/won’t write, you may need to have your own small circle with him or her. This writer is most likely to
need heavy scaffolding with their fluency and/or heavy scaffolding with collaborative learning.

• “We want kids to look forward to writing circles, and consistent scheduling (in terms of day and time) helps make that happen” (Vopat, p. 30).

**How about the timing of the circle itself?**

4. This will vary by individual teacher and/or campus, but a general overview looks like this:

   - Minilesson (5 minutes)
   - Kids sharing and responding to writing (15-20 minutes)
   - New topic selection (5 minutes)
   - Whole-class sharing (5-10 minutes)
   - Writing circle notebook reflection (3-5 minutes)
   - Writing time (if available)

“Keeping kids who are essentially ‘finished’ on task while others are still working is one of the major challenges of group work. This isn’t much of a problem in writing circles, however. A circle that finishes choosing a new topic early and has some time before the announced whole class sharing, for example, can either start their new writing or discuss ideas for how to write about the new topic. Discussing their thinking about the new topic invariably gives kids additional ideas and generates enthusiasm” (Vopat, p. 32).

**This makes me nervous. It seems permissive and naïve.**

5. “Writing circles give kids a structure that allows them to relax and explore their writing in a supportive, collaborative environment. From these many drafts emerges the kind of writing kids want to inhabit and make better. The series of drafts ultimately motivates kids to take their writing to the next level. And because the drafting also connects many kids with the realities of writing voice and audience, it helps make them stronger writers. As Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde observe in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools*, ‘the best language-learning occurs when students attempt actual communication and then see how real listeners/readers react’ (1999, 59)” (Vopat, p. 33).

**How do you assess this?**

6. Vopat suggests that kids keep a writing circle notebook. This can be an actual binder, a folder, or a stapled or bound booklet. “The important thing is to provide a way for kids to keep track of their writing circle process p drafts, topics, response strategies, daily reflections, whether they are first writer or timekeeper. Standardized ‘thinking b back’ reflection sheets can be collected, quickly reviewed, and retuned to kids, who then need to secure these sheets in their notebook...they can document their ‘good faith’ effort...Award credit for full participation. Kids are basically engaged in the writing circle work or
they aren’t, and it’s their responsibility to show sufficient work in their writing circle notebook to make the case for such good faith effort…If kids complete the writing circle assignments they get a B; if they’ve done a good job they get an A; if their efforts have been less than good, the grade is lowered appropriately” (Vopat, p. 33).

- You may decide to co-create a rubric with students to describe what good work in the circle looks like. From there, you may decide to co-create a rubric with students that describes how a finished piece of writing will be graded.

How have you assessed group work in your class?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Circles</th>
<th>Writing Circles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kids choose their own reading materials.</td>
<td>Through consensus, each group chooses a writing topic. Each student decides how he or she will write about the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small temporary groups form based on book choice.</td>
<td>Small temporary groups reach consensus on a common writing topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different groups read different books.</td>
<td>Different groups write on different topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.</td>
<td>Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to share and discuss their writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.</td>
<td>Kids use structured ways to share, respond, and discuss their writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion topics come from the students.</td>
<td>The type of response that guides discussion comes from the kids and is usually initiated by the writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.</td>
<td>In group meetings, kids have relaxed, supportive conversations about their writing. There's a spirit of community and collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.</td>
<td>The teacher serves primarily as a facilitator, and when possible participates in a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.</td>
<td>Evaluation is through teacher observation, kids’ “think-back” reflections, and documentation of “good faith effort.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.</td>
<td>Kids are interested in how other kids write about the agreed-on topic—they laugh, clap, or listen in silent suspense. They are engaged in the joy of sharing and responding to writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then new groups form around new reading choices.</td>
<td>After writing a good number of drafts, kids choose all or part of one to develop, revise, edit, and publish. Each writing circle becomes a publishing circle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing Circle Think-Back

Date:  Name:  Writing circle name:

Writing topic:
Type of response:
Draft ready?  Yes/No
Did I share my writing with the whole class? Yes/No
My suggestion for today's new writing topic:
New writing topic chosen by my writing circle:
Reflection on today's writing circle:

For the next writing circle meeting, I am:
First Writer:  Yes/No  Timekeeper:  Yes/No

Don't forget to bring a new writing topic suggestion to the next writing circle.
Texts to Help Create Your Writing Workshop:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKY_7AhnS3o
This video is a great example of a minilesson. While the classroom is an intermediate one, and the lesson is a bit longer (10 minutes) than we can use in secondary, it is a good model.

http://www.learner.org/workshops/middlewriting/prog1.html
This video is for those who want a really in-depth look at how to create a community of writers. It's published by the Annenberg Foundation and is a rich resource for those looking for free, but good online resources.

What you Know by Heart: How to Develop Curriculum for Your Writing Workshop by Katie Wood Ray

Lessons That Change Writers by Nancie Atwell

Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling and Mentor Texts by Kelly Gallagher

50 Essential Lessons: Tools & Techniques for Teaching English Language Arts by Jim Burke

Come To Class: Lessons for High School Writers by Carol Jago
Bibliography


