Launching the Writing Workshop

Lucy Calkins and Amanda Hartman

Photography by Peter Cunningham

HEINEMANN ♦ Portsmouth, NH
Contents

Acknowledgments * iii
Welcome to the Unit * vi

Bend I  We Are All Writers

1. We Are All Writers: Putting Ideas on Paper with Pictures and Words * 2
In this session, you’ll teach students that young writers think of something that they know about and use pictures and words to put their ideas on paper.

2. Writers Know that “When We Are Done, We Have Just Begun.” * 9
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers look back at their writing and see if they can add more to it.

3. Carrying on Independently as Writers * 17
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers come up with solutions to their problems and carry on writing.

4. Writers Call to Mind What They Want to Say, Then Put That onto the Page * 25
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers picture what they want to write about first and then put all of the details onto the page.

5. Stretching Out Words to Write Them * 33
In this session, you’ll teach students that young writers say words slowly and then write down the sounds that they hear.

6. Writing Even Hard-to-Write Ideas * 41
In this session, you’ll teach students that when writers have an idea that is hard to draw or a word that is hard to spell, they don’t quit. Writers keep trying.

Bend II  Writing Teaching Books

7. Turning Pieces into Scrolls and Books * 48
In this session, you’ll teach students that when writers want to teach more, they add more pages to their book.

8. Planning Teaching Books Page by Page * 57
In this session, you’ll teach students that when writers write a whole book, they plan how that book will go.

9. Asking and Answering Questions to Add More * 65
In this session, you’ll teach students that writing partners help each other add more to their writing.

10. Stretching Out Words to Write Even More Sounds * 73
In this session, you’ll teach students that young writers say words slowly, over and over again, to write all of the sounds that they hear.

11. Making Writing the Best It Can Be * 81
In this session, you could teach students that writers pause before they finish a piece, using a checklist to make their writing the best it can be before publishing it.
Bend III Writing Stories

12. Getting Ideas for Stories and Practicing Storytelling • 88
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers get ready to write by telling their stories first.

13. Planning Stories Page by Page: Planning and Telling Stories across Pages • 98
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers plan how their stories will go by touching each page as they tell their story.

14. Adding More Details to Pictures and Stories • 106
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers add details to their writing by thinking about where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing in their story.

15. Stretching and Writing Words: Hearing and Recording Sounds in Sequence • 115
In this session, you could teach students that writers spell words as best they can, stretching out the word slowly, listening closely to the sounds they hear, and then writing those sounds down.

16. Bringing Our Writing to Life: Adding Dialogue with Speech Bubbles • 119
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers bring their stories to life by making their characters talk.

17. Using Everything to Make Pieces the Best They Can Be • 126
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers reread their stories, drawing on everything they know to improve them.

Bend IV Preparing for Publication

18. Editing • 136
In this session, you’ll teach students that writers edit their writing by rereading their words and rewriting them if necessary to make their writing more readable to themselves and others.

19. Reading into the Circle: An Author’s Celebration • 143
In this session, students will have an opportunity to share their writing with an audience and celebrate becoming a published author.
The Beginning of Kindergarten is a time of new possibilities. Kindergartners enter school ready to read and write like big kids, to learn alongside classmates, and to take the world by storm. This first unit of study, Launching the Writing Workshop, capitalizes on that excitement and channels it into writing all-about books and stories. Notice, then, that although most books in this series are about a particular kind of writing—information, narrative, or opinion writing, this book straddles two kinds of writing and focuses especially on launching the writing workshop and launching kids into the identity and work of being writers.

We hope the unit helps you begin your writing workshop at the very start of the year because we know that if the writing workshop becomes part of your everyday routine, the results will take your breath away. Time and again, teachers have said to us, “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed that my kindergartners could do so much—and with such joy!”

The most important thing we can say about September in the kindergarten writing workshop is this: don’t wait! It is tempting to think that children need to know the alphabet before you launch the writing workshop or that they need to be socialized into the rhythms of the school day before you start this teaching. It is not so. You can start on Day One. Writing workshop is made-to-order for the start of kindergarten.

We encourage you to take the brave step of gathering children on the first day of school and inviting them to live like writers. That may seem crazy, given that you know many of your children don’t know their letters and sounds yet. But remember, if you line three chairs up and invite kindergartners to climb aboard your train, they’ll have no hesitation! If you pass the broom to a child and ask him to help you sweep, chances are good that he’ll go at it with eagerness—whether or not he has any clue what to do with that broom! Your children have no problem pretending to be queens and kings, deep sea divers, and astronauts. So the truth is that children find it utterly reasonable to be given paper and some marker pens and to be invited to make an all-about book.

Some children will draw rather than write sentences. However, you’ll find that, with help, a surprising number of children can write some letters alongside their drawings. In Kindergarten Literacy, Anne McGill Franzen reminds us of the research from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) that The National Center for Education Statistics collected and analyzed. According to this data, two-thirds of kindergarten children come to school knowing the alphabet. Depending on the context in which you teach, you may well have many children who are already able to write conventionally. No matter where your students are developmentally, this unit will help them build the foundational skills they need. Those skills are increasingly important in this era of the Common Core.

To be a kindergarten teacher now is to be living in an age of change. Any kindergarten teacher will tell you, it is complicated. On the one hand, kindergarten is only offered half-day in many schools and is not mandatory in many cities and states. Complaints from parents, and occasionally the media, charge that kindergarten is becoming too academic and that childhood must be safeguarded. On the other hand, children entering first grade not knowing how to read are considered “at risk” or “behind,” and in many ways they are. This is an issue of equity. While in one community, nearly all children attend kindergarten and are engaged in rich literacy experiences with books and writing, drawing and storytelling—in another community, kindergarten isn’t even available in the public schools. For decades kindergarten teachers have struggled with how much to expect, academically, from their pint-sized scholars if they aren’t even required, officially, to be in school at all.

Welcome to the Unit
Although primary teachers debate whether it is helpful for kindergarten to be focused on academics rather than play, the Common Core State Standards make it clear that five-year-olds need time to learn to write. The Standards state that young children deserve the opportunity and experience of writing at least three types of text: stories, opinions, and information texts. These standards situate kindergarten as an important starting point for children’s lifelong learning as writers. We agree with this position, although we celebrate the fact that embracing the kindergarten writing workshop does not mean retreating the developmentally appropriate playful kindergarten—far from it!

This unit launches work in both the second and third writing standards (K.W.2, K.W.3). That is, the children write both information books and true stories—writing “as best they can.” In the first half of the unit, children learn how to write informative/explanatory texts—texts that teach readers information about which the children are experts. Then, in the second half of the unit, they learn how to write and record personal narratives. They also are introduced to very early versions of both revision and editing (K.W.5).

Meanwhile, children will learn also what it means to be part of a writing workshop. After all, minilessons and conferences are not just methods of teaching; they are also methods of learning. Your children will learn the roles they are to play in all the various parts of a writing workshop. As part of this, they will learn how to work with each other as partners—planning together, sharing drafts, giving each other help. As children do this work together, they’ll work with reading as well as writing standards. They will learn to ask and answer questions about information texts (RI K.1), and they’ll begin to develop ideas about authors, illustrators, and genre (RL K.5 and RL K.6).

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

This unit is divided into four bends in the road—four sections. During the first bend of the unit, your aim will be to introduce youngsters to the writing workshop. “You are an author,” you’ll say, and you’ll help youngsters understand how to think up a topic, to draw it, and then to do their best approximation of writing. At the start of the unit, you’ll expect youngsters to make a quick piece of writing and then announce, “I’m done!” Soon, then, you’ll teach children to linger longer and invest more in a piece of writing—thus launching an elementary school career of learning to elaborate! You’ll also teach youngsters how to go from finishing one piece to starting another and to do this with some independence.

Welcome to the Unit

One of the most important messages you can possibly teach is that writers start with something to say and then do everything they can to put that meaning onto the page. The writing process starts with a writer having content, an image, and then drawing representationally to put that meaning onto the page. The writer then looks at what’s on the page, comparing that with his or her mental image—the intended meaning—asking, “What have I left out? What should I add?”

In no time, children will use letters as well as pictures to represent meaning. Your youngsters will develop phonemic awareness as they stretch out, listen to, distinguish, and record the sounds in a word. They will learn to use tools to help them with this writing, starting with a name chart to help them record letters and words on a page.

The second bend in the road of the unit is titled “Writing Teaching Books.” During this portion of the unit, children learn that they can reread what they have written, realize they have more to say, then staple on more pages to make a homemade book. The thrill of stapling can lure youngsters to add on, putting more information into their information books. Of course, in just a few days, children will begin approaching their writing with the intention to say more from the start. Children will plan across the pages of their booklets and will elaborate more. You’ll channel children’s eagerness to fill up all the pages in their books into a willingness to label more of their pictures, to represent more sounds in a word, and to make two-word labels. These labels will often include high-frequency words (such as the) or descriptive words (such a big).

Things change dramatically in the third portion of the unit, “Writing Stories.” Up until now, children will have learned that they can write to teach people all about whatever they know. Now, they learn that they can also write to capture true stories from their lives. You’ll encourage children to put the small episodes of their lives onto the page. They will draw what happened first, then touch the page and tell the story, and then they will write the story of that one time. Although the stories you demonstrate will be what this series refers to as “Small Moment stories” of very focused episodes, the important thing in this unit is not to teach children that their stories need to be focused; instead, it is to teach them that they can take the things they do and tell the story of those events in homemade books. Children will learn that to write true stories, writers think about what happened and then draw and write what happened first, then turn the page and tell what happened next and then next. Your children will be eager to learn the tricks of the trade, so you’ll teach some early lessons in narrative craft.
In the last bend of the unit, your children will select a few stories to publish and will learn to revise and edit as they make those stories the best they can be. To do this, you’ll introduce children to the checklists that will undergird every unit of study. With guidance from the checklist and from you, children will make their best writing better. They’ll add details to their writing and they’ll fix up spellings, getting more sounds into their words. Then, to culminate the unit, students will celebrate by reading selections from their writing to the circle of their classmates.

ASSESSMENT

We recommend that you start each school year, K–5, by devoting one writing workshop to having students write a short, timed, on-demand piece that you’ll use for assessment for each of the three types of writing that the CCSS spotlight. That is, we suggest that you ask children to write their best narrative on one day, their best information writing on another day, and their best opinion writing on a third day.

We’re aware that this probably sounds a bit outlandish. “Welcome to kindergarten. Let me test you. And furthermore, let me test you in something you don’t begin to know how to do (nor should you).” But here is the thing: thousands and thousands of teachers have done as we are suggesting and found this to be extraordinarily powerful—so don’t dismiss the idea altogether.

Why has this been powerful? First, when you conduct this assessment, you come to realize that it’s simply not the case that at the start of the year, kindergartners are all at the starting gate. From the start, there will be vast differences in your children’s understandings of written language, and those differences will be immediately apparent. Then, too, capturing what young-sters know and can do at the very start of the year provides you with a dramatic and accessible way to be able to eventually demonstrate your students’ progress.

If you collect baseline data, then on Parent’s Night you’ll be able to say, “This is what your child came to school doing as a writer, and now this is his latest work.” Of course, this means not only that you’ll have bragging rights over your children’s progress; it also means you will have a way to measure the effectiveness of your teaching.

The details of the on-demand assessment, including the specific prompts, are laid out in the book in this series entitled Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5. For information writing, the prompt to the children begins, “Think of a topic that you’ve studied or that you know a lot about.” You’ll want to let your youngsters know that they can use the whole writing workshop (forty-five minutes of actual writing time, plus whatever talking you do) to write the best they can and to fill their pages with as much information as they can teach.

For the narrative on-demand writing, the prompt begins, “I’m really eager to understand what you can do as writers of narratives, of stories, so today, will you please write the best personal narrative, the best Small Moment story that you can write?” This unit will further students’ work in both information and narrative writing, so it is best for you to collect on-demand writing in at least these two types of writing even if you decide not to collect opinion writing at this point.

Because the work that your children produce will end up being part of a K–5 progression, we hope that you are willing to give children some pointers that will not mean anything to most of them yet. In an assessment, it is important that the conditions are kept the same, when possible, so that results can be compared. So although the pointers are not apt to mean anything to five-year-olds, we want to give these prompts now so that everyone, K–5, is given the same prompt, the same opportunities. In any case, the pointers for information writing include, “Remember to name what topic you will teach about, try to give information to help readers learn a lot about your topic, and make an ending for your teaching book. Use pictures and words to help you write.” The pointers for narrative writing, on the other hand, include, “Make a beginning for your story, show what happened, use details, and make an ending for your story.”

As children are drawing and writing their on-demand tasks for assessment, you will want to move quickly among them, asking them to tell you what they are writing and then recording verbatim what they say so that you are essentially taking down a dictation. Usually teachers record the youngster’s intended message on a Post-it® that they later stick onto the back of the writing. Later, when you collect students’ writing and try to understand whether their spelling was somewhat phonetic, for example, you’ll find that the records of what the writers intended to say will help you decipher what they wrote and what the logic was that informed their writing.

You may want to duplicate your students’ on-demand writing so that they can keep copies of their work inside their writing folders (and you keep a copy as well in your records). These will serve as models of what children are able to do at the very start of the year. Children can then strive to do even better as the unit and the year progress—and of course, their skills will grow.
in leaps and bounds this first year. Eventually, you and your students, and their parents, too, will see evidence of that growth by comparing later work with this initial work.

You will use your copies of these initial on-demand pieces to assess where each of your students fall in both the narrative and the information K–5 learning progressions and, especially, to learn where the majority of children fall so that you can plan your upcoming unit of study with that data in mind. Whereas in most grades, you’ll expect that children’s work at the start of the year will reach and illustrate the standards for the preceding year, our assessment system does not provide a checklist for (or benchmark texts for) prekindergarten. You should not expect that at the start of the year your children are anywhere close to performing at kindergarten levels. Those levels are for end-of-the-year expectations.

Still, examining the students’ on-demand work will help you know a bit about what they bring to the unit. It will be significant for you to note whether children are entering the unit with knowledge of letters and sounds. If this is the case, you’ll be more apt to anticipate that from the start, some of them will be writing on paper with lines for their sentences (as well as space for labeled drawings). It will also be interesting to see whether your children, at the start of kindergarten, have any sense that the sort of work they produce when asked to write a story is different than the sort of work they produce when asked to write a teaching text. By seeing what individual students can do in relation to the descriptors for kindergarten, you’ll begin to see some of the specific ways you can support children’s growth.

GETTING READY
Since this is your first unit of the year, it will be important to organize materials so that you can launch your writing workshop well. A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop will help you do this, but for now, we want to mention that you’ll want to make sure you have paper in a writing center that students can use. Most of you will start off by giving children a choice between blank paper and paper with a large picture space with one line. Based on the results of your assessments, some of you may include the option of paper with a line or two. The unit will bring your students toward writing books, so there will come a time, later in the unit, beyond which you will probably not have single sheets available. At the start of the unit, however, it would be best not to provide the option of writing in booklets. Let that come as a surprise a few days into the workshop. Once you do provide booklets, keep in mind that the booklets can have more or fewer lines depending on the amount of writing children are actually doing underneath the labeled pictures.

You will want to provide your students with writing caddies that hold the tools that need to be available on the tables—tools such as pens, a date stamp, a mini-stapler, tape, extra paper, Post-its, and strips and flaps that students can add on to their writing. You will also want to have a pocket folder for each student.

You, too, will need some materials. You will not only want to create your own pieces of writing, but you will want to have some chart paper on which you and your students can write some class pieces together. You will want to have collected a few mentor texts that you can use to show your students how published writers, in your library, create teaching books and stories. We use Donald Crews’s Freight Train and Phyllis Root’s Creak! Said the Bed, and if you’ve purchased the trade book pack of children’s literature that is available with this grade, you have those there.

What you need most are some colleagues who will be teaching alongside you and will join you in learning from what your children do.
Session 2

Writers Know that “When We Are Done, We Have Just Begun.”

W
HAT A TREASURE TROVE OF INFORMATION these early pieces provide! Study them well and record your findings.

The examples of students' work from the previous session will fill you with resolve to teach a thousand things, but frankly, you won't be able to teach anyone much of anything until your children can sustain themselves enough that you are freed from simply managing and are able to teach. This means, for starters, that you will need to teach children how they can sustain their own work. This will be an especially important lesson because chances are good that not many of your children will begin the year with much staying power. You will know that is the case for your students if, during your first day's writing workshop, you experienced the phenomenon of children starting and finishing their work within about ten minutes and then popping up to say, “I'm done!” You will want to teach children the saying, “When you are done, you have just begun.”

Although there are management reasons to teach children to keep going beyond their first draft—and if children can't sustain themselves, you won't be able to interact with individuals and small groups long enough to demonstrate and coach them—the message that writers don't just dash something onto the page and then declare it a day also addresses something at the very core of writing. The writing workshop approach to teaching writing is founded on the principle that even young children can write in ways that are not all that different from the ways that professional writers write. Just as five-year-olds who are studying floating and sinking in science can experience a simplified version of the scientific method, your children will be experiencing a simplified version of the writing process. Even though your children are just four or five years old, they can approximate the process of writing that is integral to the work of professional writers. And for professional writers, nothing is more essential than the rhythm of pulling in to write, then pulling back to reread, to assess, and to think, “Have I really said what I want to say?”

In this session you teach students that writers reread and add onto their first draft, adding more detail and information through pictures and words. And then, yes, writers do move on to more writing.

Session 2: Writers Know that “When We Are Done, We Have Just Begun.”


IN THIS SESSION, you'll teach students that writers look back at their writing and see if they can add more to it.

GETTING READY

✔✔ Student writing from Session 1 (see Teaching, Active Engagement, and Link)
✔✔ Your own writing from Session 1 (see Teaching)
✔✔ Chart paper and markers
✔✔ “When We Are Done, We Have Just Begun” chart (see Share)
Remind children that today and every day, the writing workshop will begin with a minilesson. Remind them of what happens in a minilesson to induct them into their role.

“Good morning, Super Writers! When you come to our meeting area this morning, please bring with you the piece you wrote yesterday. And sit on that writing, so you will have it close by if you need it.”

After children convened and scrunched up close to where I sat, I began. “Writers, I’m glad to see you sitting on your bottoms, pulled close. Thank you. Today and every day, we’ll start the writing workshop with a minilesson. In a minilesson, I will always teach you—I will show you—something that writers do often, something you can do as well. During the first part of the minilesson, your job is to listen and to learn. You don’t talk much during that part. Then after I teach you something, you can all try it on the rug. After that, I’ll send you off to work on your writing, and I’ll remind you that when you write, you might try what you learned today or on earlier days.”

Suggest children recruit family members to write as well. Use that prospect as an opportunity to get them recalling and teaching a pretend grandmother how to write a teaching piece.

“How many of you told your mom or your grandmother or your friend or someone else that you are a writer now?” Children signaled with thumbs up or down. “You might even get those people to be writers too, if you have paper at home. Then you could have a writing club at school and at home!

“Let’s pretend I am your grandma. Here, I’ll dress up as Grandma.” I put glasses on the tip of my nose and wrapped my sweater around me like a shawl. Then, folding my hands like a well-meaning elderly woman, I said, “Good morning. What’s this I hear about being writers? How can I be a writer?”

The kids giggled.

Shifting out of the grandma role, I spoke with urgency to the children, “Quick! Help each other think what you can tell Grandma about what writers do. Turn and talk!”
As the children turned to talk with each other, I moved among them, helping them recall the previous day’s learning—
coaching them to say something to the effect of writers think of things that they know and then draw and write about those things, adding in detailed information.

Returning to my chair at the front of the meeting area, I said, “Eyes up here,” and waited. Then I stepped back into the role of Grandma and said, “So, can you tell me what writers do?”

Kevin started. “First you have to think.”

“Yes, Kevin. I have to think . . . hmm . . . of . . . ?”

“Then you have to think really, really hard. Then you make it.” Emma said.

“I have to think of a topic and really, really picture it in my head and then I just make it on the paper—drawing all the details I can. Is that it?” Shifting out of the Grandma role, I said, “Writers, now I am going to teach you one more thing you can do as writers—and one more thing you can teach anyone you know who might want to be in a writing club with you.”

Name the teaching point.

“Today I want to teach you that after writers write what they know about a topic, they don’t just say, ‘I’m done’ and relax. No way! Instead, writers say, ‘I’m going to look back on my writing and see if I can add more to it.’ Writers revise.”

TEACHING

Set children up to encourage you to look back on yesterday’s writing, seeing if you can add more.

“You and I both made teaching pieces yesterday. Get yours out, and I’ll get mine out as well.” Soon we were all holding our writing. “I have a lot of stuff already in my garden book: tomatoes, a rake. So, writers, do you think after we have put some stuff we know onto the page, we can just say, ‘I’m done?’” To illustrate that alternative, I pretended to fall asleep, nestled against my hand.

“No!” the children called. “You gotta add more.”

“You are right. Writers have a saying: ‘When you are done, you have just begun.’ Now that we are done writing our pieces, we can look back on what we have written, read what is on our page, and think, ‘What else do I know that I could add?’”

Ask children to watch what you do as a writer, and then act out the wrong way to do things—
shoving scrunched-up paper into a folder, leaving open markers in the can, hoarding five markers. Then invite children to critique your behaviors. They’ll laugh, but they’ll also learn.
Demonstrate "rereading" each item in your drawing, pointing as you name the item, and then generating more content to add.

"Watch me do that with my writing, and then you will have a chance to do it with yours."

I looked at my writing and then very deliberately took out my finger and pointed under each item on my page, saying a sentence or two about each, making my oral text feel like an all-about information book. "This is a tomato plant. It is held onto a stick with string so it doesn’t fall over."

Then I shifted. "This is a rake. I wonder what I should do now. I could start a new piece of writing about something new." I gestured toward taking up another sheet of paper. "But wait! I notice I have more space on my paper. Hmm, . . . What can I add? I do know more about gardens. I know! This doesn’t tell about the bugs! I’m going to add the bugs. Worms, too." And I started to draw, then interrupted myself to teach.

Debrief, emphasizing that as a writer, you need to decide whether to add onto a piece you’ve already begun writing or to start a new one.

"Writers, did you see that I reread my writing, putting my finger under each thing on my paper, and then I thought, ‘What else can I add?’ Writers don’t just work on a piece and then say, ‘I’m done.’ Writers have a saying: ‘When you are done, you have just begun.’"

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Recruit one writer to function as a case in point, and rally the class to help that one writer think about things he could add to his teaching piece.

"Derrick, will you come up here?" Derrick threaded his way to the front of the meeting. "Writers, Derrick has a lot of stuff already on the page about our classroom! Let’s pretend he said, ‘I’m done.’ And then, pretending to be Derrick, I feigned falling asleep. “What would you tell Derrick?”

The children chimed in that Derrick needed to do more, to reread, to add on. I agreed. “You all know that writers don’t just do a little writing and then say, ‘I’m done!’ Young writers reread what they have written, touching each thing they have put onto the page and saying what they’ve got on the paper.

“So, Derrick, are you ready to do what writers do?” I asked. And Derrick reread his page, touching the depiction of the classroom and saying aloud, “The kids, the teacher, the flag, and the pencil sharpener.”

I pressed Derrick to tell us what he needed to do next. Derrick answered, “Ask what else should I put?” Nodding, I said, “So, Derrick, what else might you put into your writing to teach people about our classroom?” As Derrick scrunched up his face to consider this, I said to the rest of the class, “Turn and tell the person beside you other things that Derrick could put into his teaching page.”

At this early juncture, what you are instilling in children is a sense of the writer’s process. Even when children are just making scribbles on one sheet of paper and declaring that a finished piece, you can teach revision. Show the writer that he or she can look back and think, “What else can I say?” and then add more onto the page! That’s revision. Adding more. Of course, for many children, this will be adding details to the drawing—seagulls over the beach and shells dotting the shore. For kindergartners, revision first involves adding details into drawings or drawing a second picture, and only later involves adding more words.
I listened in as Owen said, “Uhhh, he could add the hamster cage?” And Zoe, rising up on her knees, added, “Yeah, and the dress up stuff!” Soon several children had shared their ideas with the whole class.

Debrief in a way that highlights the transferable lessons you hope writers have learned.

“How do those suggestions sound, Derrick?” I asked, and in response, Derrick tucked his head down, and started working zealously to add the requisite items to his page.

“Writers, look what Derrick is doing now! He is revising. All the authors of all these beautiful books on our shelves did the very same work that Derrick has just done. They worked hard to put what they know on the page, and then when they were done, they didn’t just say, ‘I’m done’ (and go to sleep). No way! When they were done, they went back to work. They reread what they had written and thought, ‘What else do I know that I could teach people?’ and then they added on.”

LINK

Channel children to decide whether to add onto their teaching piece or to start another.

“Earlier, I asked you to bring the page you were working on yesterday to our meeting today. Right now, will each of you try rereading your own page of writing, as you saw Derrick do? And as you reread, squeeze your mind to think, ‘Is there more I could add?’ Remember, writers, you are in charge of your writing. You need to make a decision about whether your teaching piece needs more or whether it is time for you to move on to another piece.” Kindergartners don’t read silently, so the room was filled with quiet voices. Then, I said, “Tell the people sitting near you what you might add, and show them where you will put the new information.” I listened, and as I identified writers who seemed raring to get started, I sent them to their writing spots.
AS SOON AS YOU HAVE DISPERSED STUDENTS, you’ll immediately want to begin moving around the room, helping settle students into their writing. Try doing this first by relying especially on gestures, as you will find that they are incredibly helpful, and they allow you to be present in all corners of the room within a minute or two. So tap on one child’s paper; put another child’s page in front of her; put a pen in a third child’s hand. Give a child a decisive thumbs up. Make a “What’s going on?” gesture to another.

After two or three minutes of this sort of settling work, you will probably want to do voiceovers. When you do these voiceovers, you are not asking every child to stop, freeze, and look at you. Instead, you are talking like a sportscaster above the hubbub.

If you find a line of students forming behind you, send those students off to continue working. “Wait! Writers need to keep working,” you can say to the line. “Writers need to be in their seats, adding more work to the page. I’ll be coming to each of your tables to admire your work.”

There will be a few kids who are acting out, drawing on their arms, making towers with their markers. Try a positive approach. First, notice what others are doing well and lavish praise on them. Usually the result is as predictable as clockwork. The one child whose behavior was problematic begins to do whatever has earned your attention and praise.

Because your presence will be felt everywhere, children are apt to settle down fairly quickly to their writing, and once they are settled, you will be able to conduct a conference or two. If you have access to the DVD Big Lessons from Small Writers (Heinemann, 2005), see Amanda’s conference with Harold, my all-time favorite video of a teacher conferring with a kindergarten child. In that conference, Harold doesn’t know what to write about (he’s actually writing Small Moment stories, not teaching pages), and Amanda tells him that when she is stuck, she thinks about things that she does. Then she demonstrates, and does so by generating a little list of things that she knows Harold does. “I could write about when I ride my bike, ’cause I do that a lot,” Amanda says. “I could write about. . . .” Sometimes it helps to make the sources of your list really explicit, like suggesting you’ll think about things you do and know about at home and things you do and know about in school. “At home, I know a lot about TV. I know about cooking. Here in the classroom I know a lot about books. What else is in this classroom that I know a lot about? Oh, yeah! I know a lot about blocks.” Notice,
As Students Continue Working . . .

“I see Zoe. She has already started to fill up her page with drawings and writing.”

“Owen is not just making one thing on the page; he is starting to draw something else about his topic.”

“Wow, Sebastian, I just watched how you listened for the click when you put the cap back onto the marker! What a great way to take care of your tools!”

“Remember, when you are done, you’ve just begun! Read what you wrote! Ask, ‘What can I add?’”

“Wow, Casey was about to say she couldn’t read what she wrote, but then she remembered she could point to her picture and read that!”

in this instance, that the teacher helps the writer generate a small collection of topics, giving the writer additional practice at this, as well as a bank to draw upon.

It is sometimes hard to discern the intended meaning in a child’s work. Sometimes children’s drawings will not be very representational, and they’ll forget what they intended to make. Daniel’s piece (see Figure 2–1) may or may not be a representational drawing of something he knows about. Only through a conversation with the writer will you be able to know for sure. In these situations, it is important for you to show the child that readers work hard to figure out what a text says. “That looks like a building. Could it have been the school? Is that your grandpa’s house?” Sometimes the writer’s face will light up. “Yes, yes, that’s it!” You can help the writer add more detail so that another time, it is easier to remember. You may want to scrawl a little cursive note to yourself, off in some corner of the text, cuing yourself in to what the writer told you so that another day, this cheat sheet can help you support the child’s efforts to “read” the writing.

Of course, some children will draw what they know how to draw rather than topics on which they have expertise. You may find yourself noticing that a child has drawn a bird and a heart, presumably because this is his drawing repertoire. “Oh my goodness. What are you teaching us about birds? That is so cool that you know a lot about birds.” If the child’s picture consists of rainbows and shamrocks, you may need to be a bit more clear. Sophie has drawn some things that delight her (see Figure 2–2), and frankly there’s nothing wrong with a little delight! It’s also important for her to learn that her ideas and experiences are worth putting on the page, to communicate with others.

Although much of your teaching will support children as they learn to decide on a meaning and then to use whatever they have at their disposal to encode that meaning onto the page, you will absolutely want to also support children’s oral language. If a child tells you his drawing is a plane, try to use active listening and responsiveness to help the child generate a lot of language about that plane. Say back, “Ah, so it is a plane!” And then wait. Say prompts such as, “Tell me more about this plane.” When the child tells you, “It goes fast,” say that back, and be impressed.
Roll out the system of table monitors.

Once most children were done, I said, “Six of you—one person at each table—have agreed to be our first table monitors. Will you six stand up?” They did. “Table monitors, show us how you can carefully collect your table’s tools and writing, returning them to our writing center. Everyone will have a chance to do this important job, so let’s watch how they do it.” I gave the children a couple of minutes to complete this task. “Wow! Thanks for taking such great care of our writing tools and supplies!”

Introduce the “When We Are Done, We Have Just Begun” chart.

“Nice job, everyone! From this day forward, then, and for the rest of your life, remember the ways writers can work. We saw Clarissa working yesterday, didn’t we?” I said, holding up a photo of her hard at work. “We saw Yatri working today when she reached for more paper and started a new piece, and I saw lots of you adding onto your writing. I started to make a chart of the ways writers work. Up here it says, ‘When we are done, we’ve just begun.’ Down here I wrote and drew the three things I saw people doing today. Can you tell what they are? I’ll read them to you. ‘We can add to our pictures. We can add to our words. We can start a new piece.’ From now on, when you are about to say, ‘I’m done!’ you can look at this chart instead. Pretty impressive!”