Crafting True Stories

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Welcome to the Unit

THIS BOOK IS AN IMPORTANT ONE because it introduces third-graders to the upper-grade writing workshop. It channels children who are accustomed to writing a book a day to work on longer writing projects that require a much more multifaceted writing process. Meanwhile, the book also is written to exactly align with the Common Core State Standards and to benefit from all that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has learned during the past decade of working with an earlier iteration of this unit.

Those of you who know the original unit, Launching the Writing Workshop, will see both continuities and differences. Many of the differences involve our renewed commitment to helping students work with enormous productivity and increasing independence. You’ll see attention to teaching in ways that increase the degrees of cognitive challenge in students’ work and that support students working toward crystal clear goals with concrete and helpful feedback. You’ll see a deep effort to support small-group work and differentiation and to help students set goals and self-assess.

September in a third-grade writing workshop is an exciting time. You’ll establish a well-managed, productive workshop, luring children to invest in a familiar genre, and meanwhile induct these young writers into a version of the writing process that is, in fact, quite different from that which they knew during the primary grades. That is, in third grade, instead of students thinking about a piece and sketching it, then immediately writing it, we generally suggest that students invest more time in rehearsal for writing, collecting lots of quick drafts of possible stories in notebook entries, then selecting just one of these to put through the writing process, resulting in publication.

At the same time that you induct your youngsters into this more adult writing process, you will also help them continue to draw on all they have learned in previous years. Third-graders who have grown up in writing workshops will already know that it is important to focus on narrative, to write in sequential order, and to include the details that bring the episode to life.

This unit also provides you with the opportunity to teach your class the work called for by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for narrative writing. The emphasis on writing standards is parallel and equal to the emphasis on reading in the CCSS. These narrative writing standards support a writing process approach that emphasizes the importance of students rehearsing, drafting, revising, and editing their writing. They also describe a progression of skill development that is expected across grades in a spiral writing curriculum, one grade building upon the next. As you prepare for your entering third-graders, read the second-grade end-of-year expectations for narrative writing, noticing what is similar and what is new. You will quickly see how the CCSS raises the ante for third-grade writers. Then you will want to look ahead to the fourth-grade standards, which become more specific and nuanced, to become aware of future expectations. This also helps ensure that students always have something to aspire to—a challenge to strive toward.

For example, while both second-graders and third-graders are expected to write narratives that include details, use temporal words, and provide a sense of closure, third-graders are also expected to “establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally” (W.3.3.a), and fourth-graders are expected to “orient the reader” to this situation (W.4.3.a). This is the first time the word character is mentioned in reference to narrative writing. When you look at the reading standards for third grade, you will see that children no longer merely “describe characters” while reading fiction, but are now asked to “explain how [characters’] actions contribute to the sequence of events” (R.3.3), then in fourth grade, also “drawing on specific details in the text.” There is a certain reciprocity in this, and the standards seem to be calling third-grade writers to develop a story that is
more than just plot-driven, but instead is driven by characters’ experiences (and responses to those experiences). Third-grade writers are expected to “use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations” (W.3.3.b).

In this unit, students’ knowledge of language and its use is especially highlighted when the class studies mentor texts for word choice and literary language (L.3.3). You’ll continue to emphasize these reading-writing connections, channeling your students to engage in close reading of complex mentor texts such as Come On, Rain! by Karen Hesse, to learn more about narrative craft. You will especially highlight the importance of “show, don’t tell.” Learning how to write effective narratives will help children engage in purposeful, deliberate revisions. These revisions will tend to feel a bit like carpentry as youngsters scissor apart their drafts to add a blank page at the heart of the story, attach flaps on sections that need elaboration, and tape new versions of leads or endings on top of existing ones.

Since editing is integrated into each bend, many more of these language standards are also addressed during this first writing unit. Children learn to use simple verb tenses and produce simple and compound sentences (L.3.1.e, i). Punctuating dialogue, using conventional spelling for high-frequency words, using spelling patterns, and using reference materials to check and correct spellings (L.3.2.c,e,f,g) are all introduced during this unit, with the understanding that children will continue to work on them until they master them by the end of third grade. Like the standards, we have high expectations for students, and our goal is to accelerate student achievement in authentic and engaging ways.

This unit also supports many of the expectations in the areas of the speaking and listening standards. Writing partners can listen to and read each other’s writing, asking questions, giving each other feedback, and explaining their ideas, all the while following “agreed upon rules for discussions” (SL.3.1.b). During each share session, writers are encouraged to come prepared to discuss some aspect of writing or the writing workshop (SL.3.1) or to listen carefully to a piece of writing being read aloud and to ask and answer questions (SL.3.2, 3.3). And implicit in all of this is that children are encouraged to speak in full sentences, elaborating and clarifying as needed (SL.3.6). This unit introduces many of the skills third-graders will need to become skilled collaborators as the year progresses.

One of the hallmarks of this unit and of all units in this series is the emphasis on productivity—on sheer volume of writing. Third-graders should be able to write a page-long entry in one sitting. For children who enter third grade writing in a word-by-word fashion, taking a break after every word or two, this is a monumental challenge but an important one. To support fluency, the unit sets students up to “flash-draft” an entire story in a day several times over the course of the unit and to cycle through the writing process several times, too. Without doing this, third-graders, who are not apt to find it easy to write a sequence of entirely new drafts, might come to expect that writing a new lead and ending constitutes a day’s work.

Students will cycle through the entire writing process in Bend III: generating new entries and selecting one to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit. They will then have two finished pieces from which to choose as they prepare for final publication. The ultimate goal of this first unit is for children to develop increased independence and dramatic growth in the level of their writing as they become confident, engaged members of a larger, caring community of writers.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

At the start of the year, you will want to move heaven and earth to recruit your young writers to become invested in the writing workshop, so the way you launch this unit is critical. In addition to establishing the structures and routines of a third-grade writing workshop, the first bend sets children up to make discoveries about what third-grade writing looks like by examining actual examples of writer’s notebooks, to share these observations with each other, and to make New Year’s resolutions, imagining the kind of writing they want to make and setting goals for themselves. As children learn ways to generate personal narrative entries that they will capture in their writer’s notebooks, you will invite them to reflect on what is going well, what is hard, and how they might ramp up their work a notch by looking closely at a mentor text, Come On, Rain! by Karen Hesse, to study storytelling moves and by using checklists and rubrics to help them self-assess. For some children this will mean increasing their volume and stamina; for others it will mean writing with more attention to conventions or to craft. This first bend, then, provides a vision for the kind of writing third-graders can do, builds upon what they could do as second-graders, and sets clear expectations, all in a celebratory, can-do way.

Bend II introduces children to what is new and different about keeping writing in a notebook versus a writing folder. Children will learn to reread all
their stories, select a seed idea, and then develop that seed idea by story-telling over and over again. As they do so, they will try out different ways the story might go and sound, which includes drafting several different leads. Then it is out of the notebook and into a drafting booklet, where you will show them that writers draft by writing fast and furiously, working to relive the moment on the page. The beauty of this fast draft is that children can spend more time on revision. Specifically, they'll study a mentor author, Karen Hesse; they'll investigate how she makes her storytelling voice so good, name precisely what she does, and then try out these discoveries in their own drafts, revising as they go. This bend ends with you introducing your third-graders to paragraphing as a way of organizing and grouping related sentences. You’ll show them, too, how to elaborate on their paragraphs, adding step-by-step actions, dialogue, thoughts, and feelings. Throughout this bend, children will work with partners as they wade together into these new writing waters and splash about.

The third bend emphasizes independence and initiative. You’ll remind children that when writers finish one piece, they don’t just sit with their hands folded and announce, “I’m done!” No way. Instead, writers finish one piece and begin the next right away. This allows students to transfer their knowledge to a new story and apply all that you’ve taught to higher levels of expertise and independence. Going through the writing process more than once, quickly, provides the repeated practice writers need to become more fluent. You’ll set a deadline by which all children need to be done—temporarily—with their first piece of writing and move on to the second. As children revisit their writer’s notebooks to collect more entries, choose a new seed idea, and write another draft, you’ll encourage them to become their own job captains, drawing on all they’ve learned. This means referring to the charts as reminders and helpful tools, looking at the goals they set along the way, and using mentor texts to craft their writing. Much of what you teach during this time will depend on what you observe when you compare your students’ writing with the narrative writing learning progression and the student-facing rubrics you have developed. Chances are you’ll continue to emphasize the importance of storytelling versus summary, as well as focus and detail. Besides this revision work, you’ll introduce students to the conventions of punctuating dialogue.

Once they’ve written this next draft, you’ll encourage writers to look between their two pieces, asking, “Which is the best? Which is good enough that it deserves to be revised and edited for publication?” During this final bend, after students have selected the drafts that they will publish, you will want to rally them to tackle a whole new fast draft. They’ll need to rehearse for this just as they rehearsed for the first draft, envisioning the story in a way that unfolds bit by bit across the pages. You’ll also be holding students to carry forward all they’ve learned so far about writing process and writing craft and applying that expert knowledge to every minute of their writing. Then you’ll teach children, once again, to look to professional authors to learn ways writers deliberately craft the endings of their stories. Children can then try out these techniques as a way of improving their own stories. Finally, you’ll show students how to use an editing checklist to do a final edit of their drafts in preparation for the publishing celebration. You will create a special bulletin board that has a space for each child in your classroom to hang up his or her published writing, and then you will invite the public to read and admire all the efforts put forth by these blossoming third-grade writers.

**ASSESSMENT**

In this unit, you’ll strive toward two goals—increased independence and dramatic growth in the level of your students’ writing. You will want children to see that it is usual for their writing to improve in obvious, dramatic ways with each new unit of study. These two goals are utterly interrelated because essentially you need to organize a writing workshop within which students work with great investment toward clear goals and within clear structures. To hold yourself and your students to these goals, it is critically important that you start the year by devoting a day to an on-demand writing assessment that will provide you with a baseline and create a starting point for your students. Such an assessment will ensure that as the unit unfolds, your instruction is calibrated around this data and that you make sure the students’ work gets progressively better.

You can make this on-demand writing feel celebratory by giving your students a chance to show off what they already know about narrative writing. You can use the prompt from the book *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5*, which goes like this:

“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? Make this be the story of one time in your life. You might focus on just a scene or two. You’ll have only forty-five minutes to write this true story, so you’ll need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting. Write in a way that allows you to show off all you know about narrative writing. In your writing, make sure you:
“Make a beginning for your story
• Show what happened, in order
• Use details to help readers picture your story
• Make an ending for your story.”

You might offer children varied paper choices if this is something they were accustomed to in second grade. During the writing time on this day, be sure you do not coach into what they are doing. Don’t remind them to write with details or to focus. You want to see what they do in a hands-off situation, and frankly, you will want to be in a position to show great growth from this starting point. Your students come to you with competencies and histories as writers. You cannot teach well unless you take the time to learn what they already know and can do, and the data in hand that you collect by doing an on-demand writing assessment will be invaluable.

Once these on-demand writing assessments are complete, it will be helpful to sit with your grade level team to assess student work to ensure consistency across the grade. Together, using the Narrative Writing Learning Progression from the Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5 book, you can choose a piece of student work that exemplifies the levels of writing you find in your grade (for example, one piece for level 2, one piece for level 3, one piece for level 4). The conversation that ensues during this process will help you to make sure all teachers in the grade are consistent in how they assess writing using the learning progressions. This will also make it easier for each teacher to get a quick read on his or her children, so it doesn’t become an arduous process. Then decide at what level the majority of your class is, because this is where your teaching must begin. Your assessment of each student’s work will help you make plans for individuals and small groups of children, informing the trajectory of work they do.

The next step will be to help students understand what is expected so they can set goals worth striving toward. In this unit, you’ll give students the opportunity to study examples of what they are aiming to create by providing third-grade exemplars to study closely, annotating and noting the qualities they want to replicate, as well as engaging in close reading of mentor texts to learn more about narrative craft. Use the checklists for children that are based on the Narrative Writing Learning Progression to help students reflect on their own writing, develop their goals, and note places of growth as they move forward in the unit. This work, combined with your close listening and observing, will help you meet the needs of each and every writer in your classroom. In the end, hold yourself to the challenge of strengthening their work and plan to repeat the on-demand assessment after the unit to measure this growth.

GETTING READY

Because this unit is the first time children will be using a writer’s notebook, you will want to create a certain fanfare around this very grown-up, professional writing tool. You will also want to make sure you have your own writer’s notebook filled with various entries that have been sparked by thinking about memorable moments with special people or events that happened in special places. (If you don’t have one, make one or borrow one or find a famous writer’s notebook on the Internet!) If you plan to have your students decorate their notebooks with photos and pictures that might spark stories, then you should decorate yours also in a similar way. If you want your students to carry their notebooks with them always, then you should also, sharing stories of how you were able to jot down events right after they happened or how disappointed you were when there was a time you didn’t have your notebook with you. You will probably be the first living, breathing author they know first hand, so everything you do as a writer will inspire them to do the same.

You will also want to gather examples of third-grade writing so your students have a vision of the kind of writing they will be doing at the start of the year. You can find some examples on the CD-ROM, but the best are examples that come from your own students or the students of colleagues because that way you know the inside story behind the stories, which children always find intriguing. In addition, throughout the sessions, we suggest returning to the same familiar author, Karen Hesse, and familiar text, Come On, Rain!, so that children can become used to reading closely like a writer. Of course, you can choose any author and book you love that has the qualities of good writing you hope to teach, but in either case, the important thing is to have an author who becomes like your co-teacher in the room, sitting on your shoulder, whispering writing advice into your ear and eventually into your students’ ears.
Today you will teach students a second strategy for finding ideas for personal narratives, and in doing so, you will also teach them that writers carry a toolkit of strategies, choosing the one that makes best sense for them. That is, the most important part of this minilesson may be the ending of it, when you send children off and remind them that they can draw upon either this session or the previous session’s strategy—or they can invent yet another strategy. In our professional development work with teachers, my colleagues and I often point out that one of the ways workshop instruction is different than traditional instruction is that in workshops, writers have intentions and make choices based on those intentions. Explicit instruction equips writers with a repertoire of strategies to draw upon and with a knowledge of goals—of qualities of good writing—but whenever possible, students are encouraged to pursue goals as writers, to make plans and decisions, and to do so by drawing on the growing repertoire of strategies that are explicitly taught to them. Minilessons rarely channel all students to do whatever the subject of the minilesson has been. Instead, minilessons are more apt to add to students’ repertoire of possible strategies and conclude, “Use this strategy when...” In this instance, for example, the strategy that is being taught is only useful if the writer struggles to come up with ideas for a story, and even then, there is no reason why today’s strategy is better than yesterday’s—or than strategies children may have learned in previous years.

In the previous session, you taught writers that they can think of a person who matters to them, list small moments spent with that person, choose one, and write the story of that small moment. Today you teach writers that they can start not with a person but with a place, collect small moments spent in that place, choose one, and write the story of that one time. However, instead of suggesting students list the small moments they recall spending in a place, you suggest they can map those small moments into a quick sketch of their place.

For me, this particular idea for generating stories is a really terrific one. My life is filled with places that brim with memories. What a treat to be able to recall all the stories that are attached with the nooks and crannies of my childhood home! Of course, it will be
important to rein myself in, spending more time listening to children’s stories than sharing my own. But I do want to bring the lump in my throat with me to this session and let children know that these aren’t just “kid” strategies. Instead, they are ones that will work for any of us.

*Students are encouraged to pursue goals as writers, to make plans and decisions, and to do so by drawing on the growing repertoire of strategies that are explicitly taught to them.*

It is helpful to keep in mind that any strategy—today’s, yesterday’s, or a strategy youngsters have brought with them from previous years—can be used in more or less sophisticated ways. For example, a more mature writer will weigh whether a story idea feels like a good one (or not) before adding it to the list, and the more mature writer will also have criteria for assessing a story idea. “Do I have strong feelings about that story? Is it somehow, in some way, important to me?” “Is that a time I remember with crystal-clear clarity?”

Early in the session, writers will need to decide whether they want to find story ideas in the people or in the places of their lives. Later, toward the end of the session, you will help writers know that they have even bigger responsibilities. The problems they encounter during writing time are ones that require problem solving. You’ll help youngsters know that they can not only choose strategies from a growing repertoire of options, but they also invent their own solutions to problems rather than waiting for someone else to do this.
MINILEsson

Drawing on a Repertoire of Strategies
Writing with Independence

CONNECTION

Establish the systems you will use every day to convene the writing workshop, and then channel children to share their writing and their plans for writing with increasing volume.

Before the children convened, I said, “Please remember to check the section of the board that says ‘Writing Workshop,’ because every day it will tell you what you need to bring to the meeting area. That way we won’t waste one precious minute on logistics. Today it tells you to bring your notebook with a pen tucked inside to the meeting area.”

Once children had convened, I said, “Writers, can I have your eyes and your attention?” I waited for them. “Yesterday was a big day, wasn’t it? For most of you, you started writing in your first writer’s notebook! I wonder if writers like James Howe and Beverly Cleary can remember back to the day they began keeping their writer’s notebooks. I bet so. Will you show the person sitting beside you what you wrote yesterday? Show that person your resolutions, too, and talk about whether you worked hard to meet them.

“Writers, you are telling each other about your story ideas, and that is wise. But will you also look at how many lines you wrote? You might even count them. Remember, yesterday we talked about writers being like athletes. They have goals and push themselves to meet those goals. Tell people near you whether you think that today, you might be able to write an even longer story. Talk about tricks you might use to push yourself to write more.” The children talked for a minute about this.

Remind children that writers draw on a repertoire of strategies for generating writing.

“Although we did great work in writing workshop yesterday, it was also hard work. At the start of writing time, some of you sat with the blank page in front of you and thought, ‘Nothing happens to me. I don’t have anything to write.’

“This happens to every writer. So today I want to teach you that writers do not have just one strategy for coming up with ideas. They have a whole bunch of strategies for finding ideas.” I gestured toward the chart we had started the preceding day.

MINILEsson generally begin by contextualizing the lesson by referring to the previous day’s lesson, to children’s related work, or to the prior instruction upon which the minilesson builds. You’ll also find that I often get kids engaged from the get-go by asking them to quickly turn and talk or share a bit of their work with a partner.

It is important to teach the kids that first a person has a need for a strategy, then that person reaches for the strategy. Help kids recall times when they have been stuck, unsure of what to write about, and then introduce the idea that writers profit from having a repertoire of strategies for generating personal narratives (or any other kind of writing).
Session 3: Drawing on a Repertoire of Strategies

**Name the teaching point.**

“Today I want to teach you that writers sometimes think not of a person but of a place that matters to them and list story ideas that go with that place, choosing one story to write. Sometimes, instead of listing stories that happened in a place, they map them, and then they write, write, write.” I revealed the next bullet on our chart.

**Finding Ideas for True Stories**

- Think of a person who matters to you, list small moments, choose one, and write the whole story.
- Think of a place that matters, map small moments, choose one, write it.

**TEACHING**

Name the context that might lead a writer to use today’s strategy and demonstrate reaching for the strategy.

“I’ll show you what I mean when I say writers sometimes map story ideas, and then later today some of you might use this strategy to get yourself going on your writing. Others might choose to go back to yesterday’s strategy.

“Remember, too, that if an idea for a great story pops into your head right away, you don’t need to use this chart (‘Finding Ideas’) at all. No way. A writer can just start writing. But if you are stuck, if you are thinking, ‘I just don’t know what to write,’ then you can look up at this chart and take any strategy from it.” I gestured to and read the second bullet.

**Demonstrate the strategy in a step-by-step fashion, tucking in some tips.**

“So first, we need to think of a place. It should be one we know well, because writing is always better if the writer is an expert on the topic. Are you all thinking of a place you know? Hmm, I know. I’ll take the backyard at my old house.” I started quickly sketching and labeling the place. Soon my map showed a hill. “That’s Guts-Smasher Sledding Hill,” I said. “One time, when I was sledding there, I got going really fast and smashed into a tree. I’m going to jot a note here on my map reminding me I could write about that time when I was sledding. At the bottom of Guts-Smasher Hill, there is a swamp. I could also write about the day I found frog eggs there.”

When you write your own teaching point, be wary of the tendency to merely name the topic you’ll be illuminating. A teaching point that says, “Today I’ll teach you another strategy for generating stories” doesn’t actually teach at all. I urge you to spell out the essence of the mini-lesson. “Out with it,” I say. This means that by the end of the connection, kids have a good grasp of what they will be learning. When we have already named the strategy in the teaching point before entering the teaching component of a minilesson, this reminds us that naming the strategy is not teaching it.

Outside of writing time, try to read texts to children that resemble those you hope they will write. It is important to immerse students in the language and sound of texts similar to those they will write. Gasp over writers who put the truth of their lives onto the page. Say things like, “She writes with exact, honest words, just like so many of you did today!”

As I teach particular strategies for finding a topic, I am also conveying some very basic expectations for narrative writing, showing children their stories will probably celebrate everyday life moments.
Debrief. Name exactly what you did and explain that writers often find true stories hiding in places that matter.

“Did you see that I first needed to think of a place, one I know well, and I started quickly mapping the place. Then I jotted notes on my map about the stories that I can locate on the map. Now I have even more small moments I can write about in my notebook.”

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Set children up to try the strategy you’ve just taught. Scaffold them through the first step, teaching them to sketch a map and label it with small moments.

“So let’s try this together. Pretend you are stuck, not sure what to write about. You look up at our list of strategies,” I gestured toward the chart, “and decide to think of a place that matters. Right now, think of a place that matters to you.” I was quiet, giving students time to think. “Give me a thumbs up when you have thought of one.

“Okay, writers, you saw how quickly I sketched my map. (It took about one minute.) In your notebook, quick, quick, make yourself a map, too, and then jot story ideas onto your map.” As children worked, I said, “It will be like a treasure map, only instead of mapping hidden treasures, map hidden stories.” I moved among the children.

“Writers, can I have your eyes and your attention?” I waited for silence. “What treasures you are digging up in these places! Abraham sketched his parents’ jewelry shop. Danielle sketched her grandmother’s house. These are places that hold not only lots of powerful stories but also lots of powerful feelings. You are bringing such heart to this work, it gives me goose bumps!”

Remind writers that listing or mapping story ideas is merely a way to warm up for the important part—the actual writing of one of those ideas.

“Writers, do you think it would make sense to spend a whole writing workshop mapping stories? No? You are exactly right! Listing or mapping story ideas takes five minutes and is a way to warm yourself up for the stories you are going to write. Then comes the important part: writing, writing, writing. Right now, mark the story idea you’ll write today.” They did. “Now, remember what you do to start writing a story? You think, ‘Where was I at the start of this?’ Do that now.” I left students in a pool of silence to sit beside a partnership, coaching them to think, “What did I say or do at the very start of this? Now, writers, start your entry. Write what you are remembering you did or said.” I turned and started my own story on chart paper as they began scribbling away in their notebooks.

When you shift from the demonstration to debriefing, students should feel the different moves you are making just by the way your intonation and posture changes. After most demonstrations, there will be a time for you to debrief, and that’s a time when you are no longer acting like a writer. You are the teacher who has been watching the demonstration and now turns to talk, eye to eye with kids, asking if they noticed this or that during the previous portion of the minilesson.

In the active engagement, I could have suggested each member of the class think of a place that matters to him or her and jot that down. Then I could have prompted each child to list a couple of small moments connected to that topic. I could even have asked children to star the one Small Moment story that they particularly care about and tell this story to a classmate. That active engagement would have started each child on that day’s writing. Try this if many children are staring at blank pages during writing time, or if you are teaching a class full of struggling and reluctant writers.

Notice the predictability of workshop instruction. Day after day, we use the same attention-getting device to ask for children’s attention.

Sometimes when children list small moments, they try to use a single word to represent an episode, writing “soccer” instead of “the day my dad embarrassed me at the soccer game.”
“Look out below!” I called as I jumped belly-down onto the sled. In an instant, I was careening down the hill, my face inches above the snow, my hands gripping the toboggan’s sideboards, I . . .

I paused and looked back over the class to observe who was writing, who was thinking, and who appeared stuck, making a mental note of who might need more support.

**LINK**

**Restate today’s teaching point, setting it alongside the previous session’s teaching.**

“Writers, from this day forward and for the rest of your lives, remember that whenever you are sitting in front of an empty page, feeling stuck over what to write about, you can use either strategy that is on our list, or you can use a whole different strategy. Today, how many of you don’t need these strategies because you already have a story to tell?”

**Remind children that whenever they want help thinking of a true story, they can draw from their growing repertoire of strategies. Send them off to write.**

“Let’s watch how quickly and quietly the writers in the back row get started writing,” I said, and gestured for those writers to move to their seats and get started.

In a stage whisper, so the entire class heard me, I said, “Oh, look, Joe is rereading what he wrote yesterday. That’s smart. . . . Look, Danielle is writing—fast and furious. . . . Do you think the rest of you can zoom to your places and write up a storm? Remember, you’re going to be writing fast and furiously, more than yesterday! Go!”

Notice that I start the story with dialogue and run with a very precise action. If you channel children to do likewise you may prevent them from starting a story with summary statements such as, “I remember one time when I crashed into a tree when sledding. It was scary.”

A fiction writer once said, “The hardest thing about writing fiction is getting a character from here to there.” The same could be said for teaching. It is very important that, at the start of the year, we purposefully teach kids how to use every minute of the writing workshop productively. This sendoff is one way to do so. Even with very young children, transitions do not need to be full of dillydallying!
Listen in Ways that Help Writers Know They Have Stories to Tell

Today, you will no doubt want to start by doing all that I discussed in the previous conferring and small-group write-up. Move about the room, settling the children into their writing. Then use quickly fashioned, urgent small groups (and table compliments, see Session 4) to address the biggest challenges you see.

But meanwhile, you will also want to begin making time for the deep listening that is absolutely essential in any writing workshop.

Donald Murray, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author who is regarded as the father of the writing process, describes teaching writing this way:

“Tired but it is a good tired, for my students have generated energy as well as absorbed it. I’ve learned something of what it is to be a childhood diabetic, to raise oxen, to work across from your father at 115 degrees in a steel drum factory, to be a welfare mother with three children, to build a bluebird trail . . . to bring your father home to die of cancer. I have been instructed in other lives, heard the voices of my students they had not heard before, shared their satisfaction in solving the problems of writing with clarity and grace.

I feel guilty when I do nothing but listen. I confess my fear that I’m too easy, that I have too low standards, to a colleague, Don Graves. He assures me I am a demanding teacher, for I see more in my students than they do—to their surprise, not mine.

I hear voices from my students they have never heard from themselves. I find they are authorities on subjects they think ordinary . . . Teaching writing is a matter of faith, faith that my students have something to say and a language in which to say it. (Learning by Teaching, 1982)

I was one of Murray’s students, and I can still recall the great hope that welled up in me when he leaned toward me, listening with spellbound attention to my stories of growing up on a farm, struggling to find my place among the brood of nine Calkins children. Could it really be that I had stories to tell and lessons to teach that might matter to someone? If you can give your children just one thing right now, it must be this: your unconditional faith that each one has a story to tell, a lesson to teach, and your rapt attention to what it is that your children know.
Because the one-to-one conference is at the heart of teaching writing and because listening is at the heart of those conferences, you may want to begin now to protect some time during the hurry of your workshop to really, truly listen. To do this, start by noticing ways even your body language can convey that you are listening. Sit alongside the writer, eye-level, and insist that the writer literally maintain control of the paper. The writer, not the teacher, holds the text. This is easier said than done.

It helps to listen first to where the student is in his or her writing process, to how the student is feeling about an entry, to what helps the student feels he or she needs. I am apt to begin a conference with research, setting the writer up to tell me about his or her work. I might, for example, start a conference by saying, “I want to help you with your writing. Can you give me a tour of your writer’s notebook and fill me in on what you have been trying to do as a writer, on how it’s going, and on the sorts of help you are needing?” Listening to each writer’s intentions and self-assessments and plans will be important. Charlotte Danielson reminds us that we can collect data that helps us reflect on our own teaching. You might then note how much of the talking you do, and how much the child does in a conference. Aim to be the kind of listener who leads the youngster to elaborate, to say more. To grasp the importance of this, imagine your principal coming to observe your teaching, and think about the preconversations you hope will occur. You probably hope that before the observation, your principal will ask, “What have you been trying to do in your teaching? What have the hard parts been? What do you want help with?” You probably hope your principal listens with such attentiveness that you find yourself saying more, thinking more, than you’d expected.

As this unit and this year unfold, I’ll help you begin your conferences by researching what the writer has already been doing and what he or she is trying to do. You’ll learn to tailor your teaching in response to what you learn. But this week, as you try to recruit your children to love writing and to feel safe enough to put their stories onto the page, I want to stress the importance of simply listening. Listen deeply and responsively to the stories your children tell, and to their reports on their writing goals and plans.

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**FIG. 3–2** One student starred her favorite true story ideas.

**FIG. 3–3** This student filled his Small Moment story with details.
Supporting Problem Solving

Brainstorm problems and organize clusters of kids to meet in corners of the carpet to problem solve those writing problems.

“Writers, can I have your eyes and your attention?” I said, waiting an extra-long time and sweeping the room with my eyes to convene children. “Writers, I need us to gather now in the meeting area because we need to have a serious conversation.” Once children had gathered, I said, “Lately you’ve been restless and distracted. I’m wondering if I could ask you to shift from being writers, for a minute, to being writing teachers. I think that underneath your restlessness, there are a bunch of problems—challenges—that many of you are running into in your writing. I have been trying to rush from one of you to another, helping you solve those problems, but I don’t always know how to solve them. I am wondering if maybe you would be willing to try coming to some solutions. Let me list for you a few of the problems that I’ve been seeing and then see if some of you would be willing to think about how to solve each of those problems.”

I revealed this list:

FIG. 3–4 “The Hard Parts of Writing” chart is based on teacher observations of students during writing workshops.

At the start of the year, you need to induct children into the norms and mores of a writing community. Unless your children are accustomed to a writing workshop, you’ll find they want to do a bit of writing, then stop for the day. You need to explicitly teach them to keep going. It is crucial for them to learn that when they finish one entry, they start the next one, which removes any incentive to finish entries quickly by writing in a cursory fashion. When you push for volume, you push for making the workshop a place for productive work, and this helps with classroom management.
Pointing to each of these problems, I asked, “How many of you feel like your main problem is that you kind of run out of gas halfway through writing time? How many of you think your main problem is that you can’t think of more stuff to say in a story?” And so forth.

“How about if we form problem-solving think tanks?” I divided the carpet into quarters and convened a small group in each quarter. I assigned facilitators and distributed clipboards to each group so they could record their solutions. The children talked, problem solving, and I charted what I heard. “You have chart paper and markers in front of you, and you’ll have just five quick minutes to come up with some suggestions, which we’ll then share with each other.”

Reconvene the children, sharing a chart you made of solutions one group generated and suggesting similar charts be made showing other groups’ ideas.

“Let’s meet as a group,” I said. “While you were talking, I listened in, and these are solutions I heard to the first problem, the fact that you sometimes run out of gas. Later today, I’ll help a member of each of the other groups make a similar solution chart.”

When I Run Out of Gas as a Writer, I Can . . .

- Draw a quick sketch to help get my mind going.
- Reread good writing that others have written to warm myself up.
- Set a goal for myself, like writing to the end of the page without stopping.
- Look at the charts in the room and see if they give me an idea.

Name the bigger principle: Children can be problem solvers, not relying on the teacher to help at every turn.

“Writers, the bigger lesson I hope you learn is that you can solve your own problems. Like let’s say your pencil broke, and you feel totally stuck. What could you do?”

Children chimed in: “Sharpen it!” “Get another!” “Get a pen!”

“And what if you want my help and I am busy? What could you do?”

Again, children chimed in some answers. I nodded. “And the bigger point is—this is your writing workshop. When you run into problems, you can solve them.”

We continued this work for the other “Hard Parts of Writing” categories, adding to our chart.

FIG. 3–5 The suggestions generated by one of the focus groups

Be sure that children date each day’s writing, and that one entry follows the next, gradually filling the notebook. If they jump hither and yon, you’ll have a hard time keeping track of their progress and their volume. (Perhaps they are onto this and this explains their propensity to jump around!)
“If . . . Then . . .”

This page will help you diagnose and address underlying problems of your writing workshop. Based on your assessment of how things are going, use this chart to help differentiate your instruction or make revisions to your unit as needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If . . .</th>
<th>Then . . .</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IF your room is too noisy during writing workshop . . .</td>
<td>THEN try to get at the root of the problem. The noise is probably a symptom of another issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IF your students need more strategies for coming up with ideas to write about . . .</td>
<td>THEN perhaps being given five minutes for everyone to talk to someone, coming up with story ideas together, would channel the need to talk into the accepted time, while also helping kids get past resistance to writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IF the noise comes after twenty minutes of writing time, and the issue is that your children don’t have stamina as writers yet or the expectation that they’ll produce much . . .</td>
<td>THEN perhaps for a while your students need a shorter writing workshop until you can build their stamina gradually, or perhaps instituting a regular ritual of a turn-and-talk partner share, maybe embedded into the mid-workshop teaching, would give kids a chance to refuel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IF the congestion seems to revolve around a small number of students, and you decide the issue is that those students aren’t clear about how to get themselves started working with independence . . .</td>
<td>THEN you might regularly ask a cluster of children to stay behind at the end of the minilesson so you can help those youngsters get themselves started on their work before you release them from the meeting area. With these children, resist the temptation to deliver each child his or her own personalized pep talk and instead help the group of children think of a strategy or two for getting started, and then voice over to the group while they do that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IF the writing workshop has just started, and within a few minutes it is like popcorn with children springing up to say, ‘I’m done!’ . . .</td>
<td>THEN teach students that during the writing workshop, there is no such thing as finishing early and then doing something else—drawing, reading, or just waiting. When a writer finishes one entry or one draft, he or she starts the next. Of course, it is also possible for a writer to shift from writing to revising, but it is easier for students to write several underdeveloped stories than to write one good one, and for now, the important thing is for children to work productively, putting their lives onto paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IF you notice your students growing careless with their writer’s notebooks . . .</td>
<td>THEN you might spend a minilesson or a share session teaching your students how you expect them to take care of their writer’s notebooks. “Writers, yesterday at lunch time I was reading through your writer’s notebooks. I can’t think of a better way to spend my lunch hour than reading your stories. But you know what? Some of them are beginning to look messy. There were pages with missing dates, some pages were skipped, some notebooks even had pages that were ripped out or crumpled up! I was so surprised, because a writer’s notebook is this amazing tool for writers. So today, I want to teach you that we treat a writer’s notebook like we treat a book from the library.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>If . . .</td>
<td>Then . . .</td>
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<td>If your students are having trouble thinking of stories from their lives . . .</td>
<td>THEN you may decide to weave storytelling into your days so that each child is simply bursting with stories. Perhaps you’ll want to begin or end each school day (at least for a while) by suggesting children story-tell to a partner. You might start storytelling time by simply letting the children know that you are dying to hear their stories. “Let’s tell stories from times in our lives that for some reason are very clear in our memories,” you could say, and then choose your own story to tell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you find that a cluster of children writes incredibly slowly, producing only half a page or so in a day . . .</td>
<td>THEN gather these youngsters together and tell them you’re going to help them double the amount of writing they can do in a day. First, these writers need to be clear about what they intend to write. Make sure each child has a story to tell and is proceeding chronologically through that story. Don’t worry about the quality of writing just now. To focus on fluency and speed, these children need permission to lower their standards (temporarily). Now help children dictate a full sentence to themselves and write that whole sentence without pausing. These children are apt to pause at the ends of words or phrases. That won’t do! Then help children dictate the next sentence to themselves and write it quickly, too, without rereading in the midst of writing.</td>
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