

Writing Workshop

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

Ralph Fletcher

JoAnn Portalupi

HEINEMANN

Portsmouth, NH

The Essentials of Time and Space

Many of us can recall method courses we took during our pre-service teacher education programs. There were courses on reading, math, the sciences, and such. A few of us took a course on teaching writing, though such courses are offered only sporadically at teacher preparation institutes across the country. We probably took a course on discipline and management. It's odd how little attention was given to those two areas that so greatly influence teaching and learning in schools: time and space.

How does our use of time influence what students can and cannot do? How does the physical environment of the classroom affect the way students learn and teachers teach? What do time and space have to do with kids learning to write?

Time

Through his books and his research, Donald Graves has had a major impact on the teaching of writing. One day a teacher asked Don, “How should I teach writing if I can only sandwich it in one day a week?” “Don’t bother,” Don replied bluntly. “One day a week will teach them to hate it. They’ll never get inside writing.”

It is crucial for students to have frequent, predictable time set aside for them to write. Plan to schedule a minimum of three days a week for about an hour each day. Four or five days is even better. It’s important that students know when the workshop is scheduled so that they are ready to meet it. When students know they’ll have a specific time to return to a piece of writing in progress, they think about that work when they are away from their desks.

When we were in school, most of our teachers randomly assigned writing assignments: “Okay boys and girls. We’re going to write today.” No wonder it was so hard to get the engine going! And once it did start humming (*if it did*), there was little reason to keep it going. Few of us had the chance to discover what happens when you get into a rhythm of writing regularly.

You may be thinking, with a sense of panic, “Okay, but I don’t have three hours a week to spare!” Of course not. Yet many successful writing teachers have found ways to hurdle the time issue. They’ve done this by scrutinizing their schedules and pruning out other, less effective methods they are using to teach students writing skills. These include discrete language arts lessons, taught in isolation, and writing assignments connected to curriculum but disconnected to one another.

A teacher might say: “But I already do a lot of writing with my students. They keep journals and we work on class writing proj-

ects as an extension of our social studies and science units. I also do a big poetry unit every spring that the kids and I love. Do these fit with writers' workshop?"

To answer this question, it's important to carefully consider the purpose of each of these writing activities. Consider journal writing. If you use journal writing mainly as a way to communicate with students (i.e., they write each day, you read and respond), then journal writing serves a purpose other than those met by writing workshop. You may decide to continue using it. But journal writing used this way alone will not develop your students' writing skills.

On the other hand, if your purpose for journal writing focuses on helping students feel comfortable with writing, you may find that journals serve the same purpose as writing workshop. True, journal writing may be more manageable because it keeps the writing in one place and creates a nice history of students' growth. But you could forgo the time devoted to journals and instead have students use writer's notebooks within the writing workshop. The writer's notebook differs from a journal. Encourage students to use the notebook to experiment with writing techniques as well as a place to record important thoughts, feelings, seed ideas, and dreams.

Let's assume you have tackled the time demon and carved out regular class time for the workshop. It's also important for students to plan how they will use *their* time. The wording here is deliberate. When we suggest you schedule time to write, three days a week, we are referring to a workshop environment where student choice is prevalent; where students decide when a piece of writing is finished; where students set their own agendas and their own pace.

Why is choice so important? Let's get right down to it: while the teachers may determine what gets taught, only the student can decide what will be learned. This is true for learners of any age. We learn best when we have a reason that propels us to want to learn.

When students have an authentic purpose for their writing—whether to document an important event in their lives, get classmates to laugh, or communicate a message that matters—they pay attention differently to instruction. Our students know best which topics and purposes for writing matter most to each of them. Letting them choose their own topics and set their own purposes makes it a lot more likely they'll be engaged and receptive.

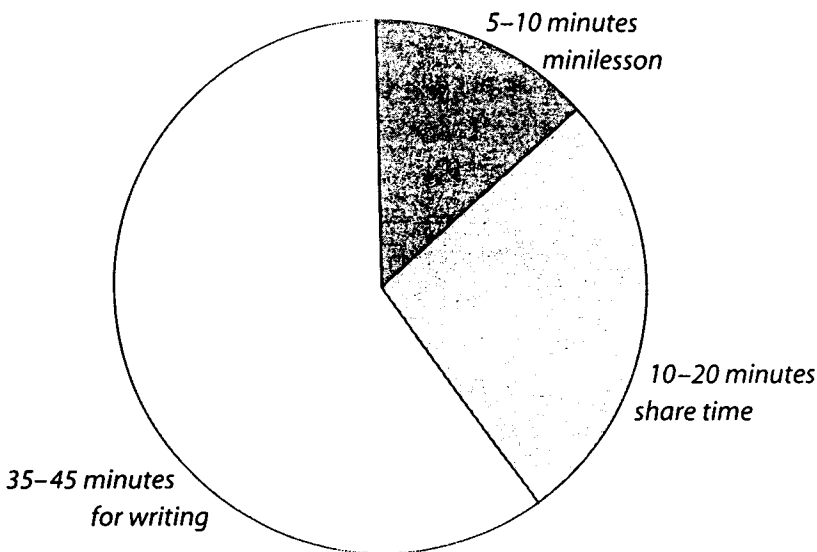
These are big tasks; students will need our careful attention and coaching to do them well. The structure of the workshop helps teachers provide what young writers need. In the same way that a predictable schedule is important for your students, the regularity of the workshop structure also matters. While individual teachers have added their own rituals and routines, three basic components should be present in your workshop: (1) time for whole-group instruction (often referred to as a minilesson), (2) time for writing, and (3) time for structured response (as a whole class or in small groups). A typical hour broken into these three components is illustrated in Figure 2–1. Let's take a closer look at what the hour entails.

Minilessons

Of all the workshop components, the minilesson looks closest to what we associate with traditional teaching. Minilessons are short, focused, and direct. The teacher has something to teach, and she gathers together the students to teach it. The topic of the minilesson varies according to the needs of the class, but it typically falls into one of the following categories:

- Procedural (important information about how the workshop runs—how to get or use materials, where to confer with a friend, etc.)

Figure 2-1 Components of an hour-long writing workshop



- Writer's process (strategies writers use to help them choose, explore, or organize a topic, cut-and-paste techniques for revising a piece, etc.)
- Qualities of good writing (information to deepen students' understandings of literary techniques: use of the scene, influence of point of view, strong language, leads and endings, etc.)
- Editing skills (information to develop their understanding of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical skills)

The correlation with traditional instruction stops there. A mini-lesson is not meant to direct the course of action for the rest of the workshop. This is a time to introduce an important skill (for

example, how strong verbs improve writing), but we shouldn't expect students to spend the next forty minutes practicing it. Rather, teachers use the minilesson to introduce one idea/skill/strategy that seems relevant and timely for a particular group of writers. Teachers might direct students to practice the skill *during* the minilesson, as with the following instruction: "Choose a page in your writer's notebook and circle the verbs. Can you think of a stronger verb that might replace the ones that you are using?"

But when the minilesson ends, students return to their ongoing writing projects, with the focus once again on the goals and intentions they've set out for themselves. It may feel funny to put forth a skill or strategy that your students don't immediately apply in their writing. But you can be sure that such instruction will broaden their visions as writers, and they will bring this broader vision to their work.

Writing Time

Teachers devote most of the workshop time to actual writing. Beware of having your students spend this time completing teacher-assigned writing projects. This may be considered writing, and may have its own value, but it is not what happens in a writing workshop.

In the first chapter we briefly described the look and feel of the workshop. The room hums with the productive sound of writers at work. During this time, students work on the writing projects they have set out for themselves. Kids are rough drafting, planning, rereading, proofreading, or conferring with other students. Most teachers use this time to move around the room and confer with students as they write. This is the crux of the workshop. We devote Chapter 5 to a close look at the writing conference.

Share Time

Response occurs throughout the workshop in the form of teacher-student and student-student conferences. But you'll probably also want to schedule a special time for students to share their writing with the whole class. In these share sessions, you coach students in how to give and receive response to each other's writing. Some teachers designate a special Author's Chair for this purpose.

A third-grade boy sitting in the Author's Chair with his classmates around him is getting ready to share a draft he is working on.

"What kind of help do you need from us?" the teacher asks.

Michael shrugs. The truth is, he's not sure what kind of help he needs. That's okay. The teacher has planted the seed of an important idea with that question. Over time your students come to realize that it is helpful when writers direct the kind of response they need.

"Okay, Michael," the teacher says, "would you like to read your piece aloud?"

Michael nods and starts to read:

I went camping last weekend. We had to hike almost four miles, and by the time we got there I had a blister on my foot as big as a Skittles. First we set up our tents. Then we got a big pile of dry wood for the fire. My dad and the other father took a walk. But when they were gone the wind start blowing. These sparks came shooting out of the fire, and caught onto some dry leaves. Then we had another fire! My friend's big brother, Will, came running up. He was yelling really loud—"Pull that wood back! Move that pile of firewood! Give me that water!" The good thing was he dumped water onto the fire and put it out, but the bad thing was we didn't have much water left to drink.

Writing workshop is a student-centered framework for teaching writing that is based on the idea that students learn to write best when they write frequently, for extended periods of time, on topics of their own choosing. The writing workshop framework meets these needs and streamlines instruction in order to meet the most important objective: giving kids time to write. The workshop setting supports children in taking their writing seriously and viewing themselves as writers. Writing Workshop is a method of writing instruction that developed from the early work of Donald Graves, Donald Murray, and other teacher/researchers who found that coaching students to write for a variety of audiences and purposes was more effective than traditional writing instruction. This approach has been popularized by Lucy Calkins and others involved in the Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University in New York City, New York. (Calkins, L (2006). A Guide to The Writing Workshop, Grades