

Understanding the Essential Characteristics of the Writing Workshop

Imagine this . . .

You're in a fourth-grade classroom. It's a little noisy in the room, but it doesn't seem like a misdirected, off-task kind of noise. Just the hum of noise you get when people are working alongside one another. The students are in different places around the room, and they seem to be involved in some different kinds of things. You can pick the teacher out because she's, well, a lot older than all the rest of them, but you have to look to find her. She's over behind the bookshelf at a table with Mary Ann.

Over in the far corner, two girls are flipping through sports magazines looking for pictures that show women or girls involved in some sports action. When

they find a picture like this, they discuss its merits and its possibilities, and from time to time they cut a picture out and put it aside. Over the next few days these pictures will be used to illustrate an anthology of sports poems that they have co-authored (co-poeted) during the last few weeks.

At a nearby table, two children sit and listen as Dylan gets ready to read to them from a draft of a story about his grandfather's experiences in World War II. "Stop me and tell me whenever anything doesn't make sense," he tells them before he begins to read. They listen intently (well, mostly intently, except for when the guy mowing the lawn passes by the window).

A little further over, Brianna sits reading from a book about hot air balloons, taking notes from time to time in a tiny blue notebook. Next to her, two classmates write in similar notebooks, making lists of strong, descriptive verbs and trying them out in sentences as their teacher demonstrated in the focus lesson that day. They take turns reading them to each other, and this is usually accompanied by some laughter.

Jimmy and Kelvin sit side by side, close but not really interacting, each drafting on long, yellow draft paper. Kelvin is working on a story for a fiction series he's writing about a group of boys who get in many misadventures together. He writes slowly, stopping often to stare off and think. Jimmy writes much faster, working back and forth between his notes on Florida theme parks and the draft of the travel essay he's working on.

Keisha, Donna, and Tremaine huddle close together around a copy of another Gary Paulsen book. They have been reading first chapters of Paulsen's books all week, discussing them, and trying to learn something about leads, about how to start a good story. They all love Paulsen and want to learn to write like he writes.

Mary Ann is having a conference with the teacher, and they are looking through the draft of the picture book she is writing (in both English and Spanish) for her young brother. Together they search for places where she might use today's focus lesson on strong verbs in her revisions.

Out of earshot, Todd and Karen speak in low voices as they discuss whether Todd still likes Anna (Karen's best friend) or not, since he didn't sit with her at lunch yesterday. They'll get back to their writing soon. . . .

Imagine all this.

How much you have to stretch your imagination to imagine this might depend on your experiences with *writing workshop*. This is a snapshot of a

writing workshop, and it may look like nothing you've ever seen, or it may look like what you remember from yesterday in your classroom. The students in this classroom are doing what they do every morning at this time. They are working on various writing projects of interest to them. At times during the year they have studied different genres together and written pieces in these genres, but regardless of the focus of study in the room, the students have maintained their ongoing project-like work. Each student is able to bring his or her particular interests to the workshop and explore those interests through writing.

If you were to look at the products of this student writing, you would see both a real range of developmental writing skills (as you would in any classroom) and the tracks of all the teaching of writing that's been going on in the room. But the products themselves are not nearly as significant as the child standing behind each one of them. While Brianna's piece about hot air balloons might look a lot like a piece stuck in a whole class's set of papers where everyone had to "describe a hot air balloon as it looks in the sky," the fact is, hers is not one in a stack of papers. Her piece is her piece, chosen as a writing project for a number of significant reasons important only to her. And that's what is important to her teacher.

Brianna's teacher has a writing workshop not because she believes it's some "magic potion" that will guarantee her students overnight success as writers, though she believes the workshop will raise the levels of their writing in significant ways through her teaching during the year. No, she doesn't see the workshop as magic, and she understands that her students are fourth graders after all, so she makes a place for them to be just that while they gain the experience they need to become good writers *over time* with her teaching. Her most important goal is that her students write with purpose and intention first—to enrich their lives in significant ways—and that out of this they learn to write well.

WRITING PROCESS OR WRITING WORKSHOP?

In my experiences working with many different teachers and students in many different classrooms, I have found all kinds of writing instruction that goes on under the name "writing workshop" or "writing process." More

than once I have been told, “We do the writing process in my classroom.” What does that mean exactly, and is there a difference between “doing the writing process” and having a writing workshop?

I have seen many classrooms where students “do the writing process,” and the focus is on *pieces of writing* and how to take those pieces of writing through each of the steps of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publication. Sometimes there is some fabulous teaching that supports students’ growth in different parts of this process, and sometimes there is very little teaching around it at all, but either way the focus is very much on the steps of the process and its products. Students move from one piece of writing to the next, faithfully taking each one down the line. Students leave these classrooms with the central impression that writing is a process of getting an idea and then “moving that idea down the line”; learning how to do this is the focus of the instruction.

This down-the-line kind of emphasis can be contrasted to a writing workshop where the focus is very much on *writers* rather than on the process that leads to finished pieces. Now, without a doubt, students in writing workshops utilize all the steps of the writing process—their teachers give them lots of instruction around the process so they can get pieces ready for publication—but it’s not as though they really *do* the writing process. It’s more like they *use* the writing process to get other things *done*. Now, I know that may sound like a subtle difference, but I really believe that the difference in those words—*do* and *use*—represents a huge shift in how we go about teaching writing.

In a writing workshop, one of the main goals teachers have is to help students find good reasons to write. These teachers feel that nothing else matters if students aren’t finding writing projects in which they can become deeply involved. Many of these teachers have worked on personally meaningful writing projects in their own lives and have seen firsthand how the writing process can be used to say big, important things in their lives and to make important things happen. They see the writing process as a tool they can give their students to use when rocking the world, not just as something to learn to do. That knowledge at the forefront of teaching, that knowledge that writing is this amazing, powerful tool you can use to rock the world, *changes everything*.

Students in writing workshops are nurtured in so many important ways that go beyond their just moving through the steps of the writing process.

They are encouraged to reflect often on where they have been as writers and on where they are going. They learn about all kinds of things outside the down-the-line process, things that support them when they do begin to ready a piece for publication: writer's notebooks, genre studies, and craft studies, to name just a few. They are asked to begin working on pieces of writing with some real-world outcome in mind, some purpose for the writing beyond just "getting it finished."

Because the focus is on writers in a writing workshop, the environment of the workshop is often filled with so many more possibilities than is a room where students do the writing process. In writing workshops, teachers invite children to do all the things a writer really does: research, explore, collect, interview, talk, read, stare off into space, co-author, and yes, prewrite, draft, revise, edit, and publish. These teachers have studied writers' lives and habits and know that living a writing life includes a lot more than just always being in one of the stages of the writing process. Writing process classrooms sometimes present children with a very limited view of a what a writer really does when they send the message that writers simply move through these steps, over and over.

Now, my whole argument here has been based on very particular terminology that you may not even use in the same ways I have. It may very well be that when you think about your own teaching and the beliefs behind it, you feel that you have a "writing workshop" philosophy (as I've described it) but that you've been calling it "writing process" or something else. And of course, the labels don't matter as much as what's behind them that drives our teaching. I needed to be clear, however, about what I mean by writing workshop because that's what this book is all about—writing workshops where the focus is on *writers who use writing* to do powerful things in the world in which they live.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP

Having worked alongside so many different teachers in so many different writing workshops, I have seen a rich variety in actual teaching from one writing workshop to the next. As a set of essential methodologies, the workshop

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what it means to be a writer

What you have to do as a writer is to feel, look, and listen. Your stories then become a celebration of those observations. And, most important, a writer needs to fall in love. I'm constantly falling in love—with colors, with flowers, with wings, with bubbles, with mud, with goofy baby smiles. . . . When you're writing under the influence of love, there's a power that will weave your words into magic. . . . (*Bantam Doubleday Dell presents Elvira Woodruff*, n.p.)

Writing under the influence of love. Wow, what a notion for the classroom. When in your lifetime did you write in school because you had fallen in love with something and needed to examine it more closely, to know it more intimately, to become part of it and to make it a part of you? Mem Fox speaks to this same notion in *Radical Reflections* when she says that a writer must “ache with caring” (3). Have you ever “ached with caring” over anything you

were assigned to write? Perhaps you ached, but I'd bet it wasn't with caring. Donald Murray, in *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers*, contends that

Too often we defend writing as a skill, saying writing should be taught so that students can fill out a job application or write a letter asking someone to buy a cemetery lot. Writing is a skill on that level, but it is also a craft and an art; it satisfies an essential need of the human animal. In school and at work, writing is seen as an act of testing, the way ignorance is exposed. But writing is a way of knowing, and the knowing, the understanding, is healing. We can all learn from the needs of writers—the act of writing is constructive, helpful, and for most of us, a necessary process. (1–2)

Recall the opening vignettes Katie provides to give us a glimpse into the lives of writers in a class-



serves as a model that leaves plenty of space for teachers to bring their own particular personalities, experiences, strengths, and knowledge bases to the day-to-day teaching that happens inside the workshop. But as varied as the teachers are who teach in writing workshops every day, they all share a similar focus on the students as writers, and their workshops share some essential characteristics. These things that we see again and again, across many different writing workshops, provide us with the foundation we need in order to learn from each other how to do this teaching well. They give us a place to focus our conversations. Let's look at these briefly now. What are some essential characteristics of writing workshops?

room writing workshop. I don't know if those children ached with caring, but clearly they were engaged in the work of writers. In work that mattered to them. Not work to reveal ignorance, but work to find truth and understanding. In the lives of writers there is always research to be done; exploring to do. That is the work of a writer. "One of the gifts of being a writer is that it gives you an excuse to do things, to go places and explore. Another is that writing motivates you to look closely at life, at life as it lurches by and tramps around," writes Anne Lamott (*Bird by Bird*, xii). Writers are collectors and listeners and talkers and readers. These are habits of mind that help writers to focus, to notice, and to fall in love. It is how they learn *what* to write and *how* to write. Katherine Paterson describes that exploring and collecting and noticing: "The writer of realistic fiction is not a steam-shovel operator but a treasure hunter. In finding the story, a great deal of garbage will have to be sifted through and discarded" (*A Sense of Wonder*, 88). That is the work of a writer. But it is work driven by purpose. And that purpose arises from something the writer has fallen in love with,

something about which the writer aches with caring. In our classrooms, we must trust children to know their hearts and minds. We must teach them to feel and look and listen. We must teach them to explore the world, to "sift through garbage" to find treasures. We must provide them with time: time to investigate, time to read, time to think, time to talk, time to write. We must hope that one day they will "ache with caring."

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Choices about Content

In writing workshops, students decide what they will be writing about—their content—for their many writing projects across the year. By definition, writing is about having something to say, and it is the writer's right to decide what this will be, to decide what he or she wants to say. As teachers we really do not have the right to make this decision for students. We will ask students to do their best to write well in our workshops, so they need to have good reasons of their own to *need* to write well. At the very heart of needing to write well is personal topic selection.

Even when the teaching in the room is very focused on a particular kind of writing (genre) and students are required to do this kind of writing, students still can decide what they will write about in this genre. For example, if we are studying nonfiction in a fourth-grade classroom and learning to write feature articles about nonfiction topics, there is no need for me to force everyone to “choose an animal” or “choose a country” as a topic for their nonfiction pieces. Nonfiction writing isn’t about animals or countries; it’s about voice, structure, and the convincing balance of opinion and research in the writing, and that’s what the teaching needs to be about. Any “nonfiction-y” topic in the world that children care about will do (it may be an animal or a country, but it doesn’t *have* to be). And, as we said above, caring about the topic has a lot to do with how good the writing about it will be.

So while we may have curricular reasons from time to time to require our students to write in a certain genre (as in a genre study of nonfiction), we don’t need to tell them *what* they have to write about. We can still teach the strategies, techniques, conventions, and understandings about writing that we need to teach, no matter what students are writing about. And the “what” of the writing really matters. The only way for students to understand writing as something they can use in their lives (the driving force behind writing workshops) is for them to have unlimited opportunities to find uses for it, to find their own “what-they’ll-write-about.”

Topic selection in writing is also rigorous curriculum; it’s what writers out in the world really have to do. Most of our students don’t know how writers do this, how they select topics again and again to sustain an active writing life. So right alongside our requirement that students select their own topics, we must plan for teaching that shows them how writers go about doing this. I find that this curriculum of topic selection often gets only a perfunctory “covering” in the workshop, if it is addressed as curriculum at all. We seem to want our students just to *choose something*. “You have lots of things to write about,” we tell them. And they do, but there are things to know about how to choose from all they could write about. There is curriculum behind the choosing, in other words. If our students seem to struggle when it comes to selecting meaningful topics for writing, we might think about offering them more curriculum in how writers go about this.

Having said that it is critical that students choose their own topics for writing, we can get one question out of the way right away because I know

someone is asking it right now: “Does this mean we should *never* give our students a writing prompt?” *Never* is a big word and one we should be wary of in any talk about schooling (or about life, for that matter). What the argument here means is that in order to teach writing, there is no need to give students topics; in order for students to learn the purposes for writing, they need to find their own material. Might we have our fourth-grade students practice writing to a prompt from time to time because they will be tested in this way come April? Of course we might. We don’t want the first time they have written to a prompt to be the day they go to take the test. But this is the teaching of *testing*, not the teaching of *writing*, and we need to be very clear about that with our students and very careful to keep this teaching in perspective.

As a final note about students selecting their own topics for writing, it’s important to keep in mind that this decision of what to write about is one that every writer makes as a member of the classroom community. The right to choose personally meaningful topics comes with responsibilities to this larger community, just as the right to speak as part of a literature circle, a group inquiry, or any class discussion comes with this responsibility. So in the same ways we help students negotiate their talk in respectful ways, we may sometimes have to help them negotiate their topic selections for writing. When certain topics or ways of approaching topics (e.g., violence, sexism, racism, etc.) can do damage to the community, we may feel we simply have to ask students to make another choice about what they will write about. I believe that if we must do this, we are not taking away a child’s right to choose, we are taking away his or her ability to hurt another person with this choice.

Time for Writing

To gain the experience they need in writing across a school year, it’s best if students can work on their writing for a sustained block of time (at least thirty-five to forty-five minutes) every day in the writing workshop. Writing is something you do, and doing it well can be fairly challenging. What all writers need is *experience*. It takes lots and lots of time over the course of years for writers to get the experience they need to become good writers. Along the way, writers need time to just write and write—a lot of it won’t be

very good writing, but all of it gives writers experience. With the focus on writers in the writing workshop, teachers realize that it's okay if every piece a student writes is not a masterpiece; it's okay if students write a lot of not-so-good stuff alongside the really good stuff.

When it comes to time, writing workshop teachers go for quantity rather than quality. Let's be very clear here: When it comes to TIME, quantity is what matters. It's not that these teachers don't have high-quality expectations for the work that students do. They do. They would just rather have students spend lots and lots of time writing, knowing that not all of it will be so great, than spending just a little time writing and getting everything perfect. They also know that professional writers say they spend lots of time just "fooling around" with writing before they get to the really good stuff. So they do what it takes to open up spaces of time for their students to get the writing experience they need.

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writing through the bad stuff

I feel a need to try to describe a process I don't understand. It's something like a seed that grows in the dark, and one day you look and there is a full-grown plant with a flower on it—or a grain of sand that keeps rubbing at your vitals until you find you are building a coating around it. I think that's why it takes me a long time to write a book. The physical act of getting it down on a page doesn't take so long, but the growth of a book takes time, and most of it happens out of sight like a kind of dream work. I read, I think; I look, I listen, I hate, I fear, I love, I weep, and somehow all of my life gets wrapped around the grain. I don't get a perfect pearl every time, but then, neither does the oyster. The trick is to know which ones to string and which ones to cast away. (Katherine Paterson, *A Sense of Wonder*, 36–37)

Wow, isn't it a comfort to know that Katherine Paterson doesn't get it perfect every time. Doesn't that just lift a burden right off your shoulders knowing that you don't have to have that expectation of your students? I know that as a student, I would certainly appreciate being relieved of that pressure. In fact, I would probably write more, take more risks, try things out a bit more if I were assured that every piece didn't have to end up perfect.

Katie reminds us that lots of the writing our students do will not be very good writing. She assures us that this will be OK. She's right of course, and I'm not just saying that because we are writing this together. Listen to Christopher Paul Curtis:

I'd tried to write fiction before but it never worked. Writers know when what they've written is bad. In my twenties, I wrote stories and



Teaching

There is a lot to learn about writing, and students need teaching that supports their writing every single day. Writing workshops have lots of rigorous teaching going on. This teaching happens in several forms. There is whole-class teaching in the form of focus lessons, small-group teaching, and individual teaching in the form of one-on-one conferring, as well as the teaching that results when students share from the strategies and techniques they are using to get their writing done. There is hardly a moment during writing workshop when the teacher or a student isn't teaching others in any one of these forms.

Teachers find curriculum to teach in the writing workshop by reading books about writing, by drawing from their own experiences as writers, or by drawing from the experiences of current or former students. They teach about everything that has to do with writing—from how to get ideas for

they were terrible. In my thirties I wrote stories and they were terrible. It wasn't until I was about 40 that I felt like what I was writing was good. (in Diana Winarski, *Teaching K-8*, 44-46)

Anne Lamott adds,

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. . . . A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy. . . . What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. (*Bird by Bird*, 25-26)

Kaye Gibbons says,

I have a file in my computer called "Decent Outtakes" and I throw everything in that. And so far with this novel I've had 175 pages, and I have 65

pages of "Decent Outtakes." . . . Dr. Rubin at Algonquin taught me never to throw anything away. It can be plowed under. When I can't create, I open my "Decent Outtake" section, and I grab a page and figure out how to work it into what I've already done. (in Dannye Romine Powell, *Parting the Curtains*, 180)

So, every writer writes a lot of stuff that is not so good. We have to; that's how we get to the good stuff.

Lamott, Anne. 1995. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

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writing out in the world, to how to craft leads or use telling details, to how to punctuate dialogue. In the best writing workshops I have seen, the teachers have spent a lot of time developing their curriculum knowledge—many of them because they realize how limited their knowledge base was from their own experiences with writing instruction as students in schools. Most of these teachers have completely reeducated themselves about writing (or really, educated themselves for the first time about it) by reading widely from books about writing and by writing themselves. This is one of the most challenging aspects of this teaching: continued development of a knowledge base about writers and writing that helps us meet the teaching demands of writers at so many different places.

Talking

Writers need to talk about their writing, and the thing that seems to make or break many writing workshops is the presence (or absence) of productive talk. Writers just need to be heard; they need listeners who will nod or laugh or cry or wince at what they have written. They need listeners who will say, “This sounds great” or “The other way sounded better.” They need people who will listen and understand when they need to complain about how they’re not getting anywhere. Even though the specific act of writing might be a mostly silent activity, the life of a writer around that activity is often filled with talk, and because writing workshops nurture writing lives, they need to have lots of talk.

Different writers need different kinds and amounts of talk to support their writing lives. Some writers want someone to read most every sentence before they go on to the next one, and some don’t want anyone to see anything they’ve written until it’s almost finished. Some writers will want to talk out an idea before they begin writing about it, and others will need to get it down first and then talk it through. In writing workshops teachers make room for students to get the different kinds and amounts of talk that they need as writers, rather than forcing everyone into a single format for writing talk.

Periods of Focused Study

A year in a writing workshop is made up of periods of focused study around topics of interest and necessity to writers. Much like “units” in social studies or science, the writing workshop needs ongoing units of study at all times.

The teachers in these workshops plan with some kind of whole-class instructional focus in mind. These focused studies can cover a wide range of topics such as: the writer's notebook; various text structures in writing; some aspect of the language system such as punctuation; point of view in writing; the process of publication; the craft of writing; or a particular genre study of writing such as poetry, memoir, or fiction. Some of these studies (such as genre studies) require students to do a certain kind of writing as part of the study, but many of them do not dictate this; they simply support the ongoing work that students have as writers.

During a focused study, the teacher will do lots of very direct teaching, offering content to support the study in a series of focus lessons over several days or weeks. Many focused studies, however, will evolve from inquiry that students are asked to do as part of the writing workshop: looking at texts during a craft study, for example, or immersion in reading examples of a genre during a genre study.

Publication Rituals

Writing workshops operate with the expectation that students will be working toward publication on various writing projects throughout the year. It is only through taking a piece all the way through to publication that students learn both the process of writing and the rewards of seeing that process through to its completion. Most workshops have some publication deadlines that students must work toward—often these are tied to the periods of focused studies—and many also have minimum production requirements that students must meet, not only for finished pieces but also for things like volume in writer's notebooks. These publication rituals and expectations help students maintain the independent part of the writing workshop by helping them understand the outcomes that are expected. In some ways, there is a “publish or perish” mentality that exists in the workshop, and most writing workshop teachers tie at least some grading and evaluation criteria to publication expectations.

High Expectations and Safety

While students have many choices in the writing workshop, choosing not to write is not one of their options. Everyone writes in the writing workshop. We believe that by writing, students will get better at writing, so we require them

to do it. Now, having said this, writing workshop teachers have to make a place in their classrooms where it is okay for everyone to write, where it is safe for everyone to write, no matter what that looks like when a student does it. It needs to be okay for even the most struggling student to do what he or she is capable of doing with writing. It needs to be okay for a student who is not yet proficient in English as a second language to write in his or her first language or to mix the two. We can expect everyone to do his or her best work, and we should have high expectations for that. But evaluation should match, at least in some ways, the students' efforts to do their best work. We must also realize that "best work" may look different for different students.

If struggling students realize that their very best work will never bring them rewards because it just doesn't come close to the writing of the other students, then they will quickly learn that their best work is not valued, that it is not safe for them to try in this place, and they will likely stop even trying to grow as writers. Similarly, if very gifted writers realize they can get by without doing their best work, then they will not grow as much as they could in the writing workshop either. If what we really value is writers' best work, and if we show we value this in every interaction with the children in our writing workshops, then we make the writing workshop both a safe place and a challenging place for *every writer there*.

Structured Management

It may be that this should have gone first because so many teachers say, "I would love to have a writing workshop, but I just need more structure than that." Ralph Peterson (2000) has pointed out that what these teachers need is not more structure; they need more control. A teacher telling everyone what to do every moment of the day is actually a very low-structured classroom—the only structure in place is the teacher giving directions!

The writing workshop is a highly structured place. There have to be all kinds of management structures in place for students to know how it works and how the workshop will be maintained. Students in writing workshops learn how to use the room during the workshop, how to manage the supplies needed for their writing, how time is managed in the workshop between teaching, writing, and sharing, what the publication expectations and structures are, how to figure out what to do next in their writing. For the writing

workshop to be successful, it must be highly structured and must work the same way basically every day so that it could almost run itself independent of directed activity.

And that's it. Across many writing workshops with teachers who have very different styles of teaching, I have found these essential characteristics in place and manifesting themselves in various ways as children write daily. Let's list them for one more look:

Choices about content

Time for writing

Teaching

Talking

Periods of focused study

Publication rituals

High expectations and safety

Structured management

This list helps me think through my teaching of writing in significant ways. I often ask myself, "Am I honoring all these essentials in my day-to-day work with writers?" The answer to that question helps me refocus and redirect my teaching when I need to, and to celebrate the rewards of honoring these essentials when I see what they mean in the writing lives of my students.

Reference

Peterson, Ralph. 2000. Smoky Mountain Language and Learning Institute, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, N.C., June 29.