Winning Ways of Coaching Writing: A Practical Guide for Teaching Writing, Grades 6–12
by Mary L. Warner
Reviewed by Jim Addison

Winning Ways of Coaching Writing provides a balance between traditional concerns of writing teachers—how to teach grammar, for example—and more current and pressing problems, like how to teach English as a second language (ESL) students and how to address the all-too-real issue of state-mandated writing tests. More practical and hands-on than many texts written for teachers of writing, this book fills a real need for a user-friendly, pragmatic text whose chapters include lesson plans, replicable activities, rubrics, and numerous examples.

Choosing “coaching” as its dominant metaphor, Winning Ways of Coaching Writing replicates the underlying philosophy of the National Writing Project—that is, “teachers teaching teachers.” Given Warner’s experience with the Dakota Writing Project (Warner is a 1995 fellow of their summer institute), this is a natural consequence. Warner defines coaching, in part, by clarifying what it isn’t: coaching isn’t judging, and it isn’t prescribing or healing. It’s a way of proceeding, much like it is in the athletic arena, where the coach redirects, encourages, and guides. The book, directed at an audience of middle and high school teachers, both inservice and preservice, aims to “meet a need for teachers of writing to talk with new teachers of writing or to other colleagues out in the field who are struggling with real writing issues” (viii). In this way, older, more experienced teachers “talk” with preservice or less-experienced inservice teachers, telling their stories, giving their first-person accounts, relating their teaching histories. And the result is a comfortable dialogue between colleagues, a one-on-one with a fellow teacher who has struggled with the same issues and problems that you currently struggle with.

Notable features of Winning Ways of Coaching Writing include: (1) the consistently developed metaphor of the teacher as coach, the teacher as continually guiding or shaping the writer’s activity, giving it clarity and focus; (2) the samples of student writing sprinkled throughout many of the chapters; (3) the brief case studies and classroom scenarios found in a number of places; (4) the first-person accounts of the writing, teaching, and cognitive processes of both teachers and learners; (5) useful, practical annotated resources for teaching with technology and Internet resources for the teaching of writing; and (6) the “collegial journal” concept developed in chapter 12, which seeks to facilitate communication between student teachers and mentors and between teachers within and across disciplines.

Organized around the way issues and topics arise for classroom and preservice teachers, the text addresses, through its various contributors, what Leila Christenbury, in her foreword, calls “a wide variety of strategies and approaches, including the use of interdisciplinary writing, writing to learn, and multigenre writing, and can involve journals, creative dramatics, and the reading and example of literature” (xviii).
Chapter 1, “The Philosopher’s Stone: Writing and the Humanities,” by Stephen Tchudi, alchemically blends a philosophical, theoretical view of writing with its practical application. Through the touchstone of writing, base learning is turned to gold.

Chapter 2, “Thesis, Thinking, and Tying Together,” by Mary Warner, outlines and clarifies basic components of writing that beginning writers need to know. An intriguing idea gleaned from Warner’s work with the Dakota Writing Project is the “write-around” and its high-tech equivalent “computer-hopping,” both of which aid in topic selection and clarification.

In chapter 3, “Audience and Voice,” Kathryn Klintworth, a teacher with twenty-five years of experience in elementary, junior high, high school, and college teaching, maps out strategies that encourage students to find their own, unique voices and to share their writing with real, identifiable audiences.

Mark Honegger, a linguist and ESL instructor, examines two approaches to teaching grammar in chapter 4 and looks at the practicalities of ESL instruction in chapter 6, “ESL and Dialects in the Writing Classroom.” A particular strength of this chapter is its emphasis on how to integrate a few dialectal or ESL students into the larger, non-ESL writing class.


Chapter 7, “Attention Deficiency in the Writing Classroom,” addresses a pressing contemporary classroom issue: how to successfully “coach” writers with ADD and ADHD (attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). Ellen Shannon, the chapter’s author, is herself a person with attention deficiency, so what she says carries weight. The list of references and resources at the end of the chapter is especially valuable.

Still another contemporary issue is addressed in chapter 8, “Working and Writing with Nontraditional Ninth Graders.” Here, Dan Madigan and Deborah Alvarez, both of whom taught secondary English for over fourteen years, lay out workable strategies for reaching the hard-to-reach students—the ones who don’t fit the mold, students who aren’t going to college and who are uncertain of their direction.

In chapter 9, “The Reading and Writing Transaction,” Carla Verderame, a supervisor (like Mary Warner) of student teachers and placements, uses three quite distinct “texts”—Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery,” Muriel Sparks’ novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, and the film The Dead Poets Society—to explore literary interpretation and explication. One strategy, reading logs, is particularly useful in getting students ready to write about literature.

With chapter 10, Mary Warner focuses on another, sometimes frustrating, issue facing new teachers of writing in the middle grades and in high school—state-mandated writing tests. She provides two teacher narratives—both by high school teachers in North Carolina—that illuminate the problem of having to “teach to the test” while mapping some strategies that facilitate real learning and writing competency, not simply formulaic response.

With chapter 11, “The Grading Game and the Teaching of Writing,” Stephen Tchudi posits “assessment” as a viable alternative to “grading”—something many English teachers dislike as much, perhaps, as state-mandated writing tests. In his discussion of the troublesome issue of evaluating writing, he provides a range of options for the novice or experienced instructor.

The final two chapters of the book are in many ways the most memorable. Chapter 12, “When Coaching Is Teacher to Teacher: The Collegial Journal,” by Teresa Berndt and Donna Fisher (practicing middle grades and high school teachers), addresses teachers of writing as teachers. Together, the two teachers describe their own powerful discovery of the collegial journal and how it can be used to rekindle and reinvigorate writing teachers who have perhaps neglected themselves in directing all their energies toward their students.

And in the book’s final chapter, Stewart Bellman, a retired teacher with thirty-two years of experience, shares his accumulated wisdom about successful ways of coaching writing. Using practical strategies, Bellman emphasizes the teacher writing along with his or her students, and he describes the many benefits that such an open sharing and willingness to be vulnerable provide for the writing classroom. It’s a strategy that’s perfectly in line with the goals of the National Writing Project and encapsulates the NWP philosophy of “teachers teaching teachers” and of teachers sharing with other teachers to empower themselves and one another.

Jim Addison is director of the Mountain Area Writing Project at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he is a professor of English.