Working with Beginning Writers

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What inspires kids to write is their teacher’s dedication and attitude toward the process. Students need to see their teachers write. They need to see the struggles, the thought process, the actual writing process that begins in the writer’s mind and ends up on the paper.

Inspiring children to write can be difficult. Before I even begin the year with my new first-graders, I can hear their complaints and see the fear on their faces. “I don’t know how to spell”; “I don’t have anything to write about”; “My story is not good,” they say, their eyes filling with tears.

I want a classroom of writers. I want them to come into the room excited and full of stories that they must tell . . . now! I want them to become process writers and not just product writers. I want them to enjoy the process, to understand the steps, and to want to write.

As I look out over the sea of new faces each year, I realize that it doesn’t matter if it is a first grade class or a middle school class; the faces are the same. All are afraid of rejection by their peers; all are afraid of failure.

Teachers often ask me, “So how do you get your students to write?” I have asked myself the same question. And while I believe that it is important to get the students to write, it is equally important to get them to want to write and to see its value.

Modeling Is the Answer

Many times, I have heard teachers remark that they don’t know enough about writing to teach writing to their students. But what a teacher knows about writing is not the essential element in getting students to write. Rather, what inspires kids to write is their teacher’s dedication and attitude toward the process. Students need to see their teachers write. They need to see the struggles, the thought process, the actual writing process that begins in the writer’s mind and ends up on the paper.

Students need to know that the teacher values writing and that writing has a purpose. The fact that a teacher writes with her students is more important than what or how well she writes. Students appreciate their teacher’s willingness to take the risk of putting writing down on paper. They pick up on the teacher’s attitude and enthusiasm.

If the teacher writes, the students will write. If the teacher writes because she has to cover required material, the students will write with the same attitude.

Modeling in Practice

With my first-graders, I model the very first stages of writing. Beginning with a picture, I tell my story. I add to my story a letter representing words or thoughts. Continuing to write as I talk through my process, I demonstrate pretend writing, random letter writing. I stretch my words aloud, sounding them out slowly, showing my students how to concentrate on writing the sounds that they hear. I stress that I do not have to know all of the words to tell my story. I can always come back and fix things later. For now, I only need to tell my story.

The problem with teaching the writing process to young children is that they can’t write. They can’t spell. They don’t have the language or the knowledge of sound/symbol relationships needed for written expression. Many times, I have thought that
a child was writing down a jumble of random letters only to discover upon having it read to me that the child had a beautiful story. The problem was that I couldn't read it. Now, I make sure I am looking at their papers as they read, my pen in hand, making notes on my paper so that I can decipher theirs later.

With older students, inspiring them to write can be the more difficult task. They've been around longer and understand the vulnerability of exposing themselves to others. Most would rather write a research paper than write about themselves and read their stories aloud in front of peers. Further, although older children have the skills and resources to get their words on paper, they would rather use a one-syllable word that they can spell than look up the spelling of a larger, more expressive word in the dictionary. Worse yet, they tend to write for the teacher—for what the teacher wants—and not for what they, the writers, want. Written in this way, their work often lacks expression, expressive language, or an internal connection with the writer. It is without voice. Older students like these have more to "unlearn."

Modeling writing with this group is done in much the same way as with younger students. Beginning with my chart paper and marker, I show them how to make a topic page. I write down everyday things that have happened to me, jotting down a few words or phrases that remind me of each idea. I talk through my story, telling them just enough to get a laugh or get them interested.

- I tell stories about my family. I tell about the wrestling match that my son lost. I tell it from a mom's point of view. The kids can relate. They understand the feeling of losing.

- I tell about my puppy, Myrtle, that I had in college. My friend and I took Myrtle to visit my sister in the hospital. We carried Myrtle in a large purse. The kids laugh as I tell about nearly getting caught by the nurse.

- I tell about going fishing as a child with my dad. I tell about the tournament that we won. We had three girls and no boys in the family; they can relate to my relationship with my dad as I tried to be the boy he never had.

**Getting the Story Down**

When I have three to five ideas on my chart, I ask the class which story they would like to hear more about. They vote and I write. Using the overhead or chart paper, I begin a very basic story, writing on every other line. I know that skipping lines will make my revision easier, so I place a small X on every other line to remind me where to start the next sentence.
Next, I add details, letting the students watch me create a story right in front of them. They hear me talk and see me write as I struggle with details, spelling, and grammar. I make a point of using words that I can’t spell; I don’t want them to be afraid to use “big” words because of spelling insecurities.

Getting the story down is the most important aspect at this stage of writing. Spelling is something that can be fixed later. I could waste a lot of valuable thinking time looking up a word that I might not even want to use in the final draft. Students like to hear that they don’t have to worry about spelling just yet.

The students always tell me how wonderful my story is after the first draft. They know how hard it is to write, so anything I put down on paper sounds good to them. Besides, I am the teacher, and they wouldn’t want to tell the teacher that her writing is bad. But I am quick to tell them that this is a first draft. It is not complete, but it is a start. I need time to rest from my story. Places where details are needed will be more evident after an opportunity to reflect.

**Teaching Revision Through Surgery**

Despite my insistence that a first draft is just that, it is often a struggle to get beginning writers to move beyond that draft and into revision. They think they have written all that they know about the subject in the first draft. They don’t understand how to add details. To help them, I begin to model the “surgery” procedure on my story. I literally cut my story apart where I want to add details, move the bottom part of the story down, and reattach it with tape, allowing room for more writing.

Next, the students each take a turn. As each student reads aloud to the group, the listeners ask him questions. Listeners have a very important job: they point out the parts they like and they ask questions about the parts they don’t understand. The reader sits with pencil in hand so that as someone asks a question about a particular section, the reader can make an asterisk at that point. At the same time, I also make notes in my notebook to remind me of the points at which listeners raised questions or comments.

Next, I hold individual conferences with each student. I work from my notes as each student reads aloud to me. At a point where details are needed, I stop the student and have her tell me that part of the story. Telling the student that the story needs a little surgery, I take the scissors and cut the paper. Using clear tape, I retape the section of the story on a new sheet of paper. Then I say, “Write down what you just told me.” Next, I tape down the new section of the story. The child begins reading again, stopping at the next point needing details. Using the scissors and tape, I repeat the surgery procedure. Before long, we have a lengthy cut-and-pasted story full of new details. The parts of the story that no longer fit the story are thrown away or saved for another story. This helps the student see where they have strayed from the topic.

At the next group read-around, the student reads the revised story and the listeners again ask questions and make positive comments. If more surgery is needed, the reader will make an asterisk at the point of need and repeat the surgery procedure.

**Revision with the Older Writer**

To model the revision process, I again take out my piece of writing in progress and read it to the class. The story doesn’t seem as funny or as clear as it did the day before. I mark with an asterisk places that are unclear to indicate where I will add details. I want the reader to see my story as I see it in my mind. We talk about audience. What do I want the reader to see or think about as the story is read? I keep adding details until my story is as clear to the reader as it is to me. We talk about how to make the funny parts funny and the surprising parts surprising to the reader.

I continue modeling writing in front of the class with a second reading. During the second reading, I notice several mistakes that I made because I was writing quickly and trying to get my story told. When I come across words that I want to spell check, I circle them so I can check them later. I scratch out words or phrases that don’t work and add in words that I left out the day before. I use editing marks as I read. When I finish, I have such a grand mess of
Asterisks, splotches, and scratches that I have trouble reading my own work. It is time to write the story on a clean piece of paper or on the computer.

I have found that, once they begin in this way, my students don’t mind revising. While most students think that revising means recopying, I show them that revising is a matter of cutting and taping—and that’s fun. This allows the writer to see the story growing and changing without recopying it several times. Using this process, a writer can seem to go from a rough draft straight to a final copy, although he or she has actually revised the piece several times.

**Editing**

Finally, when the story has been told, it is time to move to the next stage of writing—the editing stage. Again, I model using the story that I have written on my chart paper or transferred to the overhead projector. As I read aloud, we pay attention to where my voice naturally stops or pauses, and often I will add a comma or period at those spots. We discuss phrases and sentences and, through example, I show them why I choose a specific punctuation mark.

I circle more words that I want to check for spelling. I introduce a dictionary, and with the younger writers, I also use a pocket chart of words. I use a plastic shoe rack that hangs over the door, labeled with the alphabet. Inside its plastic sleeves are cards made from old magazines, stickers, pictures, and store catalogs. Each card is filed alphabetically. The students sort through the pockets to find words that they need.

If the word is not there, I have them use a “try card,” an idea borrowed from Reggie Routman (1991). In the first column of a sheet of paper that has been divided into three columns, the student writes out the words that he has circled in his story. I help him sound out each word and put a check mark over the words that he has correctly spelled in the first column. The child rewrites the other words in the second column. If he spells one correctly on the second try, I praise him and move on to the next word. If not, I give him the correct spelling in the third column.

Because young students are easily frustrated, the three columns work well. Some words, for example the word *night*, have silent letters that a young child might not know. They might write *nit* in the first column. I tell them about the silent letters, give them the correct spelling, and make a note of the pattern that I need to address during my next language lesson.
Spelling try cards work well with older students, too, but their cards have four columns rather than three. Each student brings her try cards along with her writing to the teacher/student conference for what becomes a quick, individualized grammar lesson. We discuss each word, and the student uses the second and third column to try new spellings. The fourth column is reserved for the correct spelling. Students keep these papers in their writing folders for future spelling reference.

Writers do an initial edit of their own papers, but I tell the students that I will be the final editor. If there are mistakes that were made in the transfer from one draft to another, I help correct them. For example, a student might have reversed letters in a word or left off a period. I look to see if at some point in the writing process, he or she knew how to use the skills that have been taught.

With older writers, I add a peer-editor review of the paper to the process. Before the piece is turned in to me, I provide the writer with a rubric that lists the skills that should be checked. Both the writer and the peer editor sign the rubric, giving the peer a shared responsibility for the piece of writing. If I find mistakes that the student pair should have caught, I call both students for a conference. Both the writer and the peer editor must take their responsibility seriously. Through this process, most errors have been corrected by the time the final copy is written.

**Proofreading**

Proofreading is important. We discuss how an author might feel if mistakes were found in the final copy of his or her story. Especially since other teachers and students will read the writing, the final work must be as perfect as the writer can get it. Students understand this.

The longer students write, the fewer errors their writing should contain. Although student age and ability must be considered, what is acceptable is ultimately a teacher judgment. Is the error one that will change the story? Will rewriting the story be so frustrating to the child that he will not want to write again? Has this student worked hard to do her best? Are the errors developmental and appropriate for that writer? Is it time for the teacher to simply correct the error?

What the teacher considers important must be decided by the teacher. I tend to place the most importance on the revision stage of writing. Editing can be done by someone else, but only the writer can tell the story. Additionally, from my own experience, I have found that after working with a story for too long, I no longer see the errors that are blatant to a new reader.

**Writing Takes Time**

Good writing takes time—a luxury we don’t often have in the school setting.

Whether I have my students for a whole year of school or just a short workshop in the summer, I want to inspire and motivate my students to write. I have to use all of my expertise as a writer and a teacher to help them become confident writers and human beings. It is important that we use some of our teaching time to model, demonstrate, and involve students in the writing process. If we walk beginning writers through the process a few times, they begin to understand that they can write on their own. They begin to revise on their own and understand its value. They become process writers with a product and not just product writers without an understanding of the process.

By the end of the year or the end of the workshop, I see the makings of new writers. The excitement is there, and they bombard me with it: “Look at this!”; “Listen to this new part!”; and “What do you think?” Writing comes at me from all directions. I become the student, being taught by the best: new writers with new ideas, new stories, and new enthusiasm. My desk piles up with stories to be published. What more could a writing teacher wish for?

**References**


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