

A Writer's Workshop: Working in the Middle from Jennifer Alex, NNWP Consultant

Structure of a Workshop:

For the last four years, writing and reading workshops have been the foundation of my classroom practice. Much like with Corbett's experience, I found that the writing in my classes was authentic and wonderful. Part of my mission as a middle school teacher has been to help students see themselves as writers and to have them enjoy the process of writing. Writing workshop helped me not only meet the standards that I am required to teach, but it helped me meet what I felt were the larger goals in my classroom.

My journey to writing workshop came out of a frustrating first year of teaching. I was teaching from the book, dragging students through writing, reading, vocabulary, and spelling assignments. I could see and feel the frustrations my students were experiencing, and I knew the frustration I was experiencing. There had to be a better way. I went back to my copy of *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell and at mid-year, tried to implement her form of writing workshop. The specific structures of her workshop were not successful in my classroom, but both the students and I were happier when they were allowed to choose what they wanted to write.

Over that summer, I made revisions to my writing workshop, some taken from Linda Rief's *Seeking Diversity*, which are the ones I'm still using. Those revisions involved contract grading, with students deciding how many pieces of writing they would complete in a quarter and how many revisions they would make.

My Writer's Workshop's overarching goal:

The first quarter of the year is spent teaching students the structure of our class and learning how to work in a writing workshop. During that quarter, students are expected to finish two pieces of writing. After the first quarter, students are expected to complete at least three pieces of writing and one revision during a quarter. Those revised pieces are to become part of the student's portfolio, put together and presented at the end of the school year.

Each week students are expected to create three-five pages of writing for their writer's notebook. The pages do not have to be about the same topic. I really just want students to work on getting words on the page, and the weekly writing requirement, something that is recorded as done or not, is incorporated to help students in that regard.

With each quarter, my students focus their writing on a particular trait. The first quarter's focus is ideas and organization. Time is spent working with that particular trait, making sure that students understand what the trait is, what it looks like in their writing, how to revise for it, etc. Of course, within those focuses on individual traits such as ideas and organization, the other traits come in to play. For example, students are always expected to edit for proper conventions, and the revision process targets voice.

Writing workshop in my class was scheduled in the following way: my school was on a block schedule, so for two or three times a week, I saw my students for 75 minutes each time. For the first 20-30 minutes of class, students were either reading or writing quietly. At the beginning of the year, I always start with journal topics for students. After students became comfortable with the structure of the class, I gave topics or prompts less frequently. Students also had a list of hundreds of possible topics that they could write about if “stuck” and couldn’t think of anything to write about on a typical day.

After our reading and writing time, I usually presented a mini-lesson to students, either related to writing or to strategies for their reading. Once the mini-lesson was presented, students were asked to apply it to their reading or writing. Once I was comfortable with students’ understanding of the mini-lesson, they then moved into working on their writing. During that time, they were free to conference with their peers, to conference with me, or to simply write. At the end of the period, students were asked to fill out their Writing Workshop Log.

Our first assignment was a very structured personal narrative, designed to help students become familiar with all steps of the writing process and how they were expected to move through those steps while in my class. During that period of time, we did structured pre-writing activities, structured drafting activities, and structured revising activities.

A key piece to this first part of the year was always the practicing of peer response groups. In order to help students better understand the type of support they were to be giving their fellow students, my colleagues and I demonstrated successful and unsuccessful peer response conferences. This was a very time-intensive part of our workshop, taking at least a week to practice and discuss the characteristics of a good conference. Students then practiced in their own groups, offering critiques of each other. This was always time well-spent as once students understand what was expected of them during a peer response conference, they were able to offer their peers insightful comments and suggestions.

Once we finished the peer response process, we moved on to editing a second draft that incorporated suggestions from peer response. For each paper we worked on, students had an editing checklist which incorporated things we had worked on in mini-lessons. At the beginning of the year, the checklist was fairly short, but as the year progressed, we continued to add things that students should have incorporated into their writing. Once the editing process was finished, students moved on to a final draft of their writing, one that would be submitted to me.

Some students struggled with the idea of having to write, and to write so much, but once they adapted to the expectations, most were able to experience success. Special education students and English language learners were almost always successful because one of the beautiful things about a writing workshop is that students are able to work at their abilities.

My first year of writing workshop was a heady experience. When given the ability to decide what they would write about, students frequently surprised me with their contributions, and through their writing, I got to know them better than I ever thought I would.

Every thing wasn't all rosy, though. Figuring out how to handle 200 papers, three or more times a quarter was a daunting task, and that first year, I wasn't very good at it. (I'm still not very good at it) I found that in order to more effectively deal with the sheer volume of paper, I needed to make excellent use of my time conferencing with students, and I need to place increasingly more responsibility on the shoulders of students with regard to assessment based on the traits and rubrics.

Peer response groups, and getting them right, were also incredibly important, which was not something my students and I did very successfully the first couple of years. The idea to model and model and model for students came from attendance at a session during an NCTE workshop in Milwaukee. My response sheets were always very basic to begin with and then focused on the trait we happened to be working on. Students were free, though, to move back to a different trait if they felt their piece could benefit from work in that area.

As part of the revision process, students were required to highlight in their final drafts the changes they had made from their first drafts. Final drafts often come to me in a rainbow of colors. Attached to those final drafts was a short explanation of the changes and how the student felt the change strengthened their writing.

On the following pages, you'll find hand-outs given to students and resources used in my classes that helped my writing workshop function more smoothly.

Establishing the Writing Workshop:

I believe that one of the key pieces of a successful writing workshop is the community in the classroom. As such, I spend a good deal of time in the first month or so of school doing activities that help build the community, getting students interacting with each other and working together. Community building activities can be found at the following sites:

http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson131.shtml

<http://www.proteacher.com/030005.shtml>

<http://www.suelebeau.com/firstday.htm>

<http://www.cbv.ns.ca/sstudies/activities/1rstday/1rst.html>

<http://www.piercedwonderings.com/Teaching%20Tips/Start%20Fresh.htm>

As we complete community building activities, we begin working on Writing Workshop procedures. One of the things that we do as a class is brainstorm possible writing territories or genres. All of the classes' suggestions are compiled and then posted in the classroom. We repeat the same process for possible writing topics, except instead of posting the possible topics in the classroom, they are compiled and given to students to keep in their writing notebooks. Students are also given handouts with possible writing prompts for when they get "stuck". Possible writing prompts can be found at the following sites:

<http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/prompts.html>

<http://www.writersdigest.com/writingprompts.asp>

<http://www.creativewritingprompts.com/>

<http://ccweb.norshore.wednet.edu/writingcorner/promptlist.html>

<http://wizard.hprtec.org/builder/worksheet.php3?ID=1309>

In establishing writing workshop procedures in my classroom, I give students a "Progress and Plan" sheet that they are required to fill out at the end of each writing session. I found that Nancie Atwell's Status of the Class did not work for me, but having students fill out their Progress and Plan sheet and moving around the room to verify what students are working on was much less disruptive to my classroom environment. The following is the Progress and Plan Sheet:

My Writing Progress and Plans

Today's Date:	What I worked on today:
What I'm working on:	
Where I was when I started:	What I need to work on next time:

Today's Date:	What I worked on today:
What I'm working on:	
Where I was when I started:	What I need to work on next time:

Peer Response and Revision

Responding to peers and giving quality feedback is something that students struggle with. Often they feel that once they've written a piece, they're done with it. When it comes to giving another student suggestions about his or her writing, they are uncomfortable and often fall back on standard praise responses of "it was good" or "I liked it" or "You did a good job." As the first writing assignment is highly structured, the first response groups are highly structured as well. As students become more proficient with their responses to their peers, they have the option of using less structured response forms.

I have found that perhaps most important in the teaching of peer response is to model for students what successful, and unsuccessful response conferences look like. In order to do this, I distribute to students a sample paper and previously completed peer response sheets. We discuss answers to the peer response questions, in relation to the sample paper.

The next step in the model of peer response conferences is to actually allow students to watch several, both good and bad. Because I have written the assignment with the students, I have a paper to respond for them. My colleagues respond to my piece, and then the students critique our response group. We discuss what made a for a good response group and what would have made the poor responses better.

I believe that writers should come to a peer response conference with a concern or issue they'd like their partners to pay particular attention to. It signals to the group members that the writer is invested in their response, and it gives them some thing to focus on. Middle school students are often over-whelmed when asked to respond to their peers because they don't know what to respond to exactly. Having something to specifically look for often allows them to respond more effectively. Students are trained to not allow a conference to begin if the author is not fully prepared.

Students then move into peer response groups of their own, using a first very structured response tool. Once they've finished the first round of response, we discuss what went well for them and what did not go so well and ways to correct those problems. From these practice sessions, we create a list of response behaviors that is posted in the classroom.

Often during the first two quarters of the year, we revisit how to have a successful peer response conference. This takes time, and I'll admit to experiencing a certain amount of angst with regard to the time the process takes. It is always well spent, though, as the reinforcement and extended practice allow students to become more autonomous during the writing workshop.

The response conference is only the first step, though. Once the student has input from his or her peers, they then need to incorporate into their writing some of the suggestions they have been given. In order to help facilitate this process, I ask students to highlight the changes they make between their drafts and to write a brief reflection about the nature of the changes they have made. This helps make the revision process more concrete for them. The highlighting allows them to readily see the changes between drafts and to begin to realize that they in fact do make changes to their writing.

The following are 3 peer response sheets that I use in my classroom:

Peer Response Sheet
(Adapted from materials by Ted Nellen)

1. The author wants me to pay specific attention to:

2. List some of your reactions to reading this piece for the first time:

3. What is the main point of this piece? What does the author want you to know?

4. Does the writing keep you interested? (Circle one) YES NO SORT OF
Reasons for your answer?

5. List three details or examples that interest you:

6. Can you follow the time or order of the events or situations easily? (Give examples)

7. What should the writer definitely keep in his or her finished draft?

8. What, if anything, should the writer throw out or revise?

9. Quote or note your favorite sentence, point, or idea:

10. Are there any places where you're confused? (Give examples)

11. Any further comments or suggestions?

This write-up was featured in the The Northern Nevada Writing Project's *Secondary Writing Guide*

Peer Response Sheet:
(Adapted from *Writing Workshop Survival Kit*)

The author would like help with:

What things do I like about this piece? (Give examples)

What do I want to know more about? (Give examples)

What can be eliminated without losing the author's intention? (Words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs?)

My suggestions for the author (Give specific examples):

This write-up was featured in the The Northern Nevada Writing Project's *Secondary Writing Guide*

Peer Response Sheet:

The author would like help with the following:

This piece is about:

What I liked the most (give specific examples):

Questions I have (cite specific concerns):

Something you might want to try (give the author a suggestion for improvement):

Additional comments I have (give specific examples):

Editing and Mechanics

During the first weeks of the writing workshop, mini-lessons revolve around reviewing skills that students already know but need to be reminded of. These are truly “mini” mini-lessons. As we review or learn and practice skills, those skills get added to an editing checklist that students are expected to use before beginning their final drafts.

Things that are typically on the editing checklist at the beginning of the year:

- Capitalization of proper nouns
- Complete sentences
- Proper punctuation at the end sentences
- Properly punctuated compound sentences
- Paragraphs
- Properly punctuated dialogue

As the year progresses, more complex items get added to the list, including particular complex sentence patterns that I want students to incorporate into their writing. Additions are always only made after we've had a chance to practice the particular skill and I'm comfortable that students are proficient with the skill. Students are encouraged to edit their own paper and then to have a classmate edit their paper as well.

Teacher Response and Conferences

I require that students conference with me before they turn in a final draft. I like to be familiar with what they have written before a final draft gets turned in because I find that it cuts down on the amount of time it takes me to respond to final drafts. There is a sign-up sheet where students indicate that they are ready for a conference. During a conference I always ask students what they would like from me, and then I listen to their writing.

Very rarely do I listen to an entire piece. There just isn't time for that. When we've reached a stopping point, I use Linda Rief's three questions:

1. What do you think you did well?
2. What do you have questions about?
3. Based on what you've said, I have the following suggestions for you:
4. Do you have any questions for me?

During conferencing I make use of Cognitive Coaching strategies to help students come to their own conclusions. Their writing is their own, and part of my purpose as a teacher is to help them find their own way with regard to their writing.

Much like Corbett's response to students, on final drafts, I do not fix the errors that should have been caught with their editing checklists. I will mark the line that contains the error but not the error itself. If there's an error that we have yet to cover, I'll mark and correct it, explaining what the error is. I also make trait-based comments on the paper, giving students suggestions for further revision, which is a part of our final portfolio process.

Portfolios and Final Revisions

Because most of my class revolved around writing in some form or another, most of students' grades were based on writing. The final portfolio done in the fourth quarter was worth 50% of the grade. The portfolio consists of pieces that students elect to go back and spend a little more time with. Each quarter students are expected to revise one piece of their writing, and that revision makes it into their portfolio. During the fourth quarter, students are expected to complete two revisions. Each piece that makes it into the portfolio has a reflection piece that asks the student to talk about the learning that occurred the writing of that particular piece.

While we spend an incredible amount of time on writing, we also spend time in reading workshop, which often serves as inspiration for writing. The entire class revolves around student choice, and the power of that freedom is evident in their final works.