

# ***The Write Possibilities:***

*teaching first graders to explore the world of writing*

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I believe that to teach writing well, we have to understand the process a writer endures. In The Art of Teaching Writing, Lucy Calkins encourages writing teachers to spend more time focused on the process children go through as authors and less time worried about the product. Teach the writer, not the writing. In order to identify and understand the needs of my students as writers, I must be cognizant of my own writing behaviors. This year my students have grown into confident, excited writers who envision themselves as real authors. Participating in and supporting them in their journey has been a challenge, yet it's what keeps me on the edge of my learning and pushes me to evolve as a teacher of writing.

I have learned certain supports need to be in place in order for the children to take risks, grow and experience success as writers. In our writer's workshop you will notice that:

- *Children are given time to compose. Allotting consistent amounts of time conveys that writing is valued.*
- *My students have learned to develop a purpose or vision for what they are going to create and resources are made available for them to do so.*
- *Children are supported in their writing journey through teacher models, interactive writing, peer conferences, and exposure to a variety of authors and genres.*
- *Spelling strategies and the appropriate use of conventions explicitly taught.*
- *Children are shown the connection between reading and writing and how it can strengthen their sense of craft. The world of writing is magically opened when students are taught to read like writers. They begin to see every new book as an opportunity to discover a novel writing idea or style.*
- *My students celebrate their writing publicly. Celebrations create vision and a sense of audience for writers.*
- *Conferring happens daily and is necessary in order to coach, research, and teach individual writers. Making decisions about what to teach each child during a short writing conference is difficult, yet may prove to be the single most important teaching tool for pushing each writer to the edge of their learning. Teaching the individual creates unique writers.*
- *Students are immersed in a year full of genre studies and choice. Knowing how to write in various genres builds versatile writers and choice gives young writers ownership over their pieces.*

Writing is a reflection of who we are. . . It is the way we process the world around us. As you travel through the pages of student writing, you will recognize their uniqueness, notice their growth as writers, and see the world through their words.

## Child A, "An author with heart"

Anne Lamott in Bird by Bird wrote, "And the truth of your experience can *only* come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes. You cannot write out of someone else's big dark place; you can only write out of your own." When I reread Anne's words, I can't help but think of the way in which child A developed his own voice as a writer. Although child A began first grade borrowing or "dressed up in" the writing styles of Dr. Seuss and other popular authors, he discovered that true writing comes from what you know well. . .from the heart. Crafting his innermost thoughts and feelings on paper became *his* way of communicating and expressing emotion.

During the first week of school, Child A wrote Apple where he attempted to create a book similar to Dr. Seuss' Ten Apples Up On Top. Initially, when he shared this piece with me, he had written "by Dr. Seuss" on the cover. Although Child A knew he wrote the piece, he didn't see himself as the author because he created a book that was based on an idea that already existed. Through conferring, Child A recognized that the message was his even if the idea came from someone else. We also discussed his admiration for Dr. Seuss and Child A decided to take on a pen name that would connect him to his mentor. Thereafter, Child A would sign his first or last name preceded by the title "Dr." on all his pieces. I recognized Child A's desire to be an "original" and find his own voice.

Child A began experimenting with his own voice when we explored personal narrative. We read The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst and discussed how she may have written the book to express her thoughts and feelings related to loss and death. I wanted the children to understand that authors sometimes write about life experiences that carry strong emotion. My First Grandma Died, is Child A's first attempt at writing with feeling. With this new understanding of where authors get their ideas, Child A realizes that he can compose messages from the heart.

Shortly after winter vacation, we looked at how authors use descriptive language to help their readers paint vivid mental images. In Hailstones and Halibut Bones Mary O'Neill paints a world of emotion through her vivid descriptions of color. Taking on O'Neill's poetic style, Child A drafted a beautiful, yet anxious piece entitled Panic. I thought this piece was incredibly deep and somewhat abstract for a child who was barely six years old. Panic creates strong mind pictures for the reader. Child A took a huge risk with this piece and revealed even more heart and voice to

his readers. The children and I have created a classroom community where Child A feels safe enough to open up and expose his “sensitive side.” For our writing celebration with another class, Child A chose to publish Panic. Minutes before the celebration, Child A came to me and abruptly handed over his piece entitled I’m Scared. Child A felt vulnerable, no longer “wrapped in someone else’s voice.”

We spent most of April delving into the world of nonfiction writing, which posed a challenge for Child A who is a “from the heart” writer. I was not surprised when Child A chose to write a nonfiction book based on the life and times of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Child A felt emotionally connected to Dr. King and admired his courage, loving heart, and peaceful disposition. Child A modeled his piece I am Martin Luther King after a literary nonfiction series we examined during writer’s workshop. He took on the text structure of that series and wrote the book as though he were Martin Luther King Jr. telling the audience about the important events in his life. During the editing stage, I conferred with Child A as to what he needed to “fix up” to make his piece ready for an audience. Comparable to what Child A knew at the beginning of the year, his knowledge of correct spelling, use of capital letters, and punctuation had grown. Child A was crafting with his heart and learning to edit with his head.

#### Child B, “A mentored writer”

I remember when Child B stepped into the classroom on the first day of school and wrote The Sequoias. This piece was my first peek into the world of Child B. I noticed she knew a lot about the conventions and mechanics of writing. Child B could spell, write complete sentences, and use punctuation and capital letters appropriately. She understood that life experiences could be remembered and recorded. She was a bright-eyed, confident, and determined student who was eager to please and hungry for knowledge.

Child B is a linear thinker. Her ideas come to her in list form, therefore her pieces often resemble lists. In early October, I read I Love You, Blue Kangaroo, I Lost My Bear, and Earrings with the intention of showing my students stories written about children and what they love. Child B subsequently wrote What I Love, a detailed list of everything she could possibly think of that was close to her heart. Literature had influenced her as a writer. Child B needed a crafty mentor. She needed creative models to show her the way out of the monotony of list-like writing and into the world of crafty composition.

Tony Stead, author of Is That a Fact?, conveys that children need to be introduced to many writing genres and styles that show young writers the “wide world of possibilities.” Once Child B learned to read like a writer, she saw each text she encountered as a writing possibility. In January, Child B experimented with nonfiction text in a piece entitled Trees and What Trees Need. I urged her to check out several nonfiction books in the classroom to get ideas for her own book. She took on the challenge and began traveling back and forth between her desk and the classroom library. She was examining the structures and features of nonfiction texts, then applying them in her writing.

In April, Child B took a risk and wrote another nonfiction piece in a different style. Her piece Who Am I? was modeled after a literary nonfiction series we analyzed during writer’s workshop. She crafted her piece with the intention of engaging her readers through a clever summary, thought-provoking questions, and a surprise quiz at the end. She wanted her audience to be entertained while learning new information about Puffins. Child B was able to extend her use of mentor texts into the realm of poetry with her acrostic poems “Midnight” and “Stars.” Clearly, mentor literature has awakened Child B’s potential as a writer and has undoubtedly whisked her away from the limiting lists.

#### Child C, “A writer with purpose”

When I think back to September, I visualize child C moving sluggishly to his desk, shoulders slouched, and head bowed. He would proclaim, “I don’t know what to write about.” As earnest children reached for their pencils, Child C appeared troubled by the whole idea of writing. Although we took the time to explore what great writers do and where writing ideas come from, Child C did not see himself as a writer. . .yet.

Influenced by a few weeks of writer’s workshop, Child C began to draw pictures related to nature and use the dictionary to correctly spell the words that matched his drawings. Waterfall is a perfect example of Child C’s earliest labeled picture. He was uncomfortable experimenting with inventive spelling and hesitant about adding more words to his pieces. Through conferring and small group interactive writing, Child C learned how to formulate a coherent thought, orally rehearse that thought or sentence, and finally record the sentence on paper. Through several mini lessons, I taught the children to apply various spelling strategies when they didn’t know a word. We learned to “stretch words out,” refer to the word wall, generalize patterns, look in books, and ask friends. Child C was acquiring the tools necessary to begin his life as a writer. He

had begun to figure out how to put words on paper, but had not yet developed a sense of purpose as a writer.

In January, Child C's sense of purpose was ignited. While we analyzed the writing of Margaret Wise Brown in The Important Book, Child C began to understand that this "author" was a real person. In his opinion, one of her reasons for writing the book was to describe the beauty and importance of everything around us. Child C, who also values nature, connected to Brown's reasons for writing The Important Book. This connection helped Child C identify purpose and audience.

In March we studied nonfiction during reader's workshop. Reading a plethora of nonfiction material motivated and inspired Child C to start his own nonfiction piece during writer's workshop. Child C is all about nonfiction! He can't wait to tell others about real facts he's learned from informational texts. I could not get him to put his pencil down when he started writing his nonfiction book entitled Dinosaurs. He wrote Dinosaurs with a purpose: to teach others what he knows about dinosaurs. During revision, I conferred with Child C and we discussed adding traditional nonfiction features such as a glossary and an index. He even took a risk and composed a section on the back cover that was meant to persuade his audience to read his book. Child C wrote with intention. He knew what, how, and why he was writing this piece. He's a writer. Presently, I can't get Child C to stop asking, "How much longer until writer's workshop. . .I want to write!"