

2005 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award Essay

When someone asked Ernest Hemingway what frightened him the most he replied, "A blank sheet of paper." So often we tell our students, use your imagination, be creative, write. We give them a journal or a blank, neatly lined paper and send them on their way. But what about giving them a real guide, a map, to help students truly express themselves and use writing as a tool? How can we allow students to feel comfortable about writing and confident in their writing abilities?

I have always struggled with teaching writing and have improved with each student that I have taught. It is from the students that I learn how to help them be well-equipped travelers on their road as writers. It is vital that we show our students the importance of the journey itself, or the process, rather than just the actual final piece of writing. Through my teaching I carefully model for students just how to approach that blank piece of paper and develop their own voice.

Giving students a voice allows them to feel ownership of a piece of writing. Through teaching writing to my first graders I have come to realize how writing is a glimpse into the author's soul. I used to think about writing as simply teaching grammar and spelling, simply words on a page. I now know that writing shows the author's individuality and uniqueness. I get to know my students so that I may challenge each one to their full potential and stretch their minds a little more. So often I stop and reflect. How do I make someone write about more than just video games or help someone become more descriptive in their writing?

This starts by having writing time built into each day. If you walked into my classroom, you would see us writing, not only during a certain block, or on certain days, but everyday, all the time. We write about our weekends, objects around the room, our

friends, our dreams, hopes, and fears. We write to respond to literature or about a field trip or assembly. Writing becomes a way to express how we feel, to tell or share with others an experience we had. At times I model writing my own piece or we do interactive writing where we write a piece together. Sometimes, other students lead the lesson, sharing how they wrote their piece and why. We look at examples of their work and learn. What is special about this writing? How can we make it even better?

I stress “we,” since it is me writing with the children. I share my writer’s notebook and why I wrote each piece. By using the easel or overhead, students are getting a glimpse of my thought process. In their eyes, I am not just their writing teacher, I am also a writer.

I notice how much student writing improves when they see how I write. Students like to emulate the actions of their teacher. By seeing how much and how often I write, they too start keeping notebooks at home. When someone first brings in a notebook, I make a huge deal. I shout from rooftops how wonderful it is that they too are writing during their free time. I give that child special attention. And of course, before you know it, others too have their own notebooks that they are writing in.

I know that each student is different, and there is not one quick recipe to teach writing. I try to give each one his or her own voice. I want them to get their point across, not mine. This starts with choice. I strongly agree with Calkins, Atwell, and so many others that say students must choose their own topics. We talk about what good writers do and read lots of quality literature by Eve Bunting, Ezra Jack Keats, Eloise Greenfield, Cynthia Rylant, Jane Yolen, and many others. I try to show that writing is everywhere and how writers choose topics they truly care about. My students start to look and think about funny or interesting things that happen and write about that. This is the point when

writing about video games and other favorite toys are long forgotten. There are too many other things to write about now!

I try to allow students to feel less intimidated about writing. How can they have an in? I don't say write about your winter vacation, that's too much. We talk about focusing, or "zooming in" on one part. I show students how to picture that part and think about what they saw, how they felt, and what it was like. I don't want a grocery list of what they did, instead what was that one moment like. We talk about how photographers have to zoom in when taking a picture. In essence, I am asking my students to do the same, to think about just one part. I tell the students I want to be right there and feel what they are feeling, see what they are seeing. You had a huge ice cream sundae? What were the flavors? Did it go all over your face?

I notice that student writing improves when students can picture what they are writing about. Once they have a mental image, they can better write about colors, feelings, and emotions. All of a sudden, writing is so much more descriptive. Children that were only writing a couple of sentences are now writing mini-stories about opening up a gift, making a soccer goal, or hugging their mom.

As the year progresses we talk about more and more ways to improve our spelling and sentences. My students know how to use the word wall, their spelling dictionaries, and how to stretch and sound out words they don't know how to spell. I teach them that not knowing the spelling is not a limitation. We do all kinds of editing, sometimes by ourselves, with a peer, or with me. Peer editing is such a powerful way to teach kids to look back at their writing and "fix up" anything. Teaching first graders to edit can seem like a daunting task, yet with lots of modeling and practice, it becomes a habit.

Together we explore different kinds of writing. We talk about how writing has a purpose and an audience. My students write letters thanking people for coming in to the classroom or after going on a field trip. We write invitations and then create some for our reading buddies to come in and read with us. Also, my students learn about poetry, non-fiction, and writing stories. By exploring, and experimenting with different genres, students learn that good writing is about taking a risk. Our whole class never thought there could be so many different poems about a seashell, a piece of chalk, or a rainy day.

I notice how much student writing improves after we do our unit on poetry. Although we do poetry year round, I make sure to stop and point out the rich language that is used in these short pieces of text. Slowly we take notes on things, with, as Lucy Calkins points out “a poet’s eye.” We look at a pencil and go beyond the fact that it is a writing tool. Does it remind you of an animal? Which one? What is the alligator doing? They learn it’s OK to look at things differently now. We talk about how rich our language is and use similes, metaphors, and idioms. They love acting out their own poems and learn when more description should be included.

I also believe that it is vital to look at reading and writing together since writing is the making of reading. It is a way to respond to literature. Through writing I teach students to make connections between texts, to ask questions while reading, and to write about favorite books and parts. After reading, students need choices about responding. Answering questions after a story is not a way to tell me if they have comprehended it. Do they identify with the characters? Would these characters be their friends or foes? What interesting things did they learn from a book on horses or planets?

As I plan each year, I think about what I want my student to come away with at the end of first grade. What do I want to accomplish? I am still touched by a child who came to visit me the first week of school this September (I had this girl in my first grade class last year). She proudly showed me a notebook filled with writing. After taking it home and reading each page I was so impressed. She had written all summer long! There were poems, funny stories, and interesting facts. This is my ultimate goal, to make students realize the power of writing and transfer it to their daily lives. It is to motivate students to write not because their teacher asked them to, but because they truly want to.