

## CHAPTER 1

# Time to Rethink the Teaching of Writing

Writing has finally taken a place at the big family table with reading and math. It's long overdue. There is a loud clamor from educators for help with improving student writing at every age and in every subject. With this elevation of standing comes pressure to succeed, and succeed we must because, quite frankly, we're not doing a credible job of teaching writing in U.S. schools. In October 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics published its results of the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for writing in grades 8 and 12. The results were dismal. Only 27% of the nation's eighth graders perform at or above the proficient level. Only 27%. And of that group, only 3% were advanced. That means 73% of eighth graders couldn't write at the proficient level. And the results for grade 12 were worse because the numbers were the same, 27% proficient and 3% advanced, meaning that in four years there were no measurable gains. This is abysmal, and I'm sure you're shaking your head right along with me at these numbers.

The U.S. Department of Education (2012) also published these results: Student writing was 8 points down on the SAT since the inception of the direct writing assessment from an average score of 497 in 2006 to 489 in 2011. These numbers are in line with the findings from Graham and Perin (2007) that 70% of students in grades 4–12 are considered low-achieving writers. Graham and Perin argue the following for the 21st century:

Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. (p. 3)

But from all available information, we seem to have a long way to go to make writing well a reality for today's students.

The news about reading and literacy in general isn't any better. According to a study conducted in late April 2013 by the National Institute of Literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), 14% of the population (32 million adults) in the United States can't read, 21% of adults read below the fifth-grade level, and 19% of high school graduates can't read. Unfortunately, even though reading and literacy have been on the educational radar for years, this literacy rate isn't any better than it was 10 years ago when the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) reported that 14% of adults in the United States in 2003 demonstrated a below-basic literacy level, and 29% percent exhibited a basic reading level.

There are many reasons the United States isn't making progress toward critical literacy goals, including the quality of education and the poverty rate in this country, which undermine the conditions needed for students to learn. Measures of socioeconomic status—a combination of education, income, and occupation—spotlight the literacy gap between the haves and the have-nots. Muijs (2010), in his work on socioeconomic status and its impact on education, points out that reaching more students to make gains in literacy rates will be a challenge because it requires skilled and highly qualified teachers. He notes that our most successful teachers are rarely found in the schools and classrooms of children from the least privileged communities, thus assuring the literacy gap for generations to come.

Stephen Krashen's (2011a, 2011b) research and understanding about the effects of poverty also shed light on literacy rates. Drawing from his own work and the work of other key educational researchers on poverty and its effect on learning, he concludes that 20% of U.S. children come from high-poverty families, the highest level of any industrialized country, and have very little access to books at home, at school, and in their communities. Krashen notes that when children have access to reading material, they read. And what is of particular interest to note is that reading has been shown to improve "all aspects of [children's] literacy, including vocabulary, grammar, spelling, reading and writing ability" (2011, para. 8).

As we've known for many years, the crisis in public education can be remedied by these two factors: students' access to great texts, and great teaching. We must close the education gap by leveling the playing field

for all students. This does not mean more tests, by the way. Our rallying cry should be, “Texts not tests.” Every student deserves a highly qualified writing and reading teacher and a wealth of reading and writing resources—no matter where they live: urban or rural; the North, South, East, or West.

Many schools I visit have been thinking about and implementing new educational systems and ways of thinking about teaching and learning for a number of years. They’ve been grappling with issues of poverty and how it affects the students in their schools, right along with delivering

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professional development to create teachers who are highly skilled and able to deliver the goods for students in all socioeconomic groups.

Recently, I was in Illinois working with a very forward-thinking and dedicated group of teachers. After a discussion about how writing instruction was going in their schools, one teacher raised her

hand and asked me probably the most important and insightful question that anyone has ever asked in my 25 years of conducting professional development across the country and around the world. Her eyes locked with mine as she probed, “*Why* aren’t we doing better? So many of us are teaching writing the best way we know how. Why isn’t it paying off?”

Bingo. This is the jackpot question, the mother of all issues in the writing instruction world. Why aren’t students writing better? I took a deep breath and thought for a moment. Such a smart question deserved an equally smart answer, so I turned it back to the group to discuss for a few minutes, and then we shared our conclusions. Interestingly, each group of teachers came up with the same point: consistency. There is little or no continuity in the teaching of writing. Most schools don’t have a scope and sequence or a set of materials and strategies that outlines a core writing curriculum for each grade and across grades. So, although students may have an exemplary writing experience and make great gains one year, they start all over the next year because the new teacher doesn’t know what was taught the previous year or has a different set of objectives in mind. Think of the impact on student writing performance when this happens year after year after year.

Several of the teachers in Illinois said they had participated in curriculum-mapping activities to track writing lessons and develop a scope and sequence of writing skills taught each year. They were shocked to discover that many of the same lessons taught in fourth grade, for instance, were also taught in eighth grade. There was no evidence of scaling up with skills instruction over time. A lesson on sentence beginnings in second grade, for instance, looked exactly like a lesson in fifth grade on that same topic. “No wonder students aren’t improving,” one teacher noted. “We’re not challenging them or deepening their learning by approaching our teaching systematically and with increasing complexity over time. If anything, we’re leading them to slow writing deaths.”

There are actions that we can take to make sure students are in classrooms where writing contributes to overall academic success. We can develop curriculum that is based on essential writing skills and make sure it deepens over time, becoming more complex and more integrated every week, month, and year. We can examine current teaching practices for effectiveness and discard old ways of doing things that simply don’t work. We can reinforce for students that writing well is a goal worth shooting for every single day.

To accomplish this, we should teach children that writing is thinking and, as such, that it’s never easy, always messy, yet ultimately satisfying to get right. It’s satisfying because the writing they do matters to them. Students should always know and embrace the relevance of what they compose from the onset. This is how we get buy-in for writing. Whether a sentence, a paragraph, or a page, the child engaged in the tough but transformational work of writing is egged on by the motivation to reach his or her audience in some purposeful way. That purpose could be as concrete as a movie or book review or as atmospheric as how the teacher makes it clear that writing is thinking, but it’s in the air of the classroom, and the students breathe it: Writing isn’t just for poets; it’s for life.

Here’s the bottom line: It’s a happy, new day for writing instruction. There’s a renewed interest and emphasis on how to improve the literacy lives of children everywhere. I welcome everyone’s ideas about how to create continuity in writing instruction so students move forward in

a purposeful and meaningful way. It's a big table, and there is plenty of room for multiple perspectives on how to get the job done, but it needs to happen now. Too many children are counting on us to get it right—now.

## **Start Here: Stop Doing Dumb Things**

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We do a lot of sensible things in teaching, but we also do a lot of dumb things. As workshops and professional development sessions point out and from our own understandings as writing teachers, we're aware of the things that work and don't work. Yet, we keep doing many of the wrong things anyway because we don't know what else to do or just don't want to change. I call these zombie practices: We think we kill them, but they just keep coming back to life.

I propose we stop doing anything that is not a proven, documented, successful practice and focus on how to help every teacher feel comfortable with and capable of implementing the most dynamic writing practices as we learn to make wise instructional decisions for and with student writers.

So, how do you spot dumb things? For starters, when students groan, don't want to write, and have to be dragged through the writing process and into conferences, something's not right. Maybe it's the topic, maybe it's their history with writing, or maybe it sounds flat-out scary to think of putting words on a page for any number of reasons. Whatever is making your writing students sick, diagnose it and provide an antidote quickly, before the patient dies. Table 1 is a starter list of things that don't work and some alternatives that you can try instead.

Abandoning time-honored practices is not a simple thing. If you were taught (as I was) to diagram sentences over and over; write five-paragraph essays; learn grammar, spelling, and vocabulary from lists; and other traditional practices, it's likely that you're teaching using those same methods. I did. When I began teaching, I replicated how I was taught, and it didn't work. My students hated to write, and I hated to spend time teaching it. It wasn't until I went to the Montana Writing Project and learned how to write myself that I began to change my teaching. If we're honest about our collective practices, we can find many to jettison

**Table 1. Dumb Things Versus Sensible Things in Writing Instruction**

Dumb Things	Sensible Things
Using worksheets	Practicing new skills in writing created by the student
Giving Friday spelling tests	Developing control over spelling words by using multiple methods, such as high-frequency words, word families, phonetics, sight words, spell-check, and other resources
Assigning vocabulary lists	Exploring word meanings and developing a fascination for language
Prescribing formats, such as topic sentence plus three supporting details, and five-paragraph essays	Allowing the ideas to determine the organization, based on the purpose for the writing
Teaching skills in isolation	Teaching in the context of reading, skill by skill, always moving toward deepening understanding of text
Assigning topics every time students write	Providing choice in format, genre, and mode
Grading based on compliance and following directions	Evaluating based on performance, noting growth, and celebrating effort
Covering everything every year	Using a spiraling scope and sequence of writing skills that builds one year upon the next
Writing in absolute quiet	Creating a happy, working classroom in which students freely share, ask questions, and discuss
Dwelling on test preparation	Teaching the test format as a genre of reading and writing
Marking papers for every possible thing that could be improved or corrected	Offering small, focused suggestions for revision and editing
Teaching writing as an isolated subject that consists mostly of grammar and other conventional practices	Teaching reading and writing together as mutually supportive language processes, one leading to the next

in favor of better methods—ones that aren't harder and more time-consuming but instead teach writing in a way that makes it easier for you and a lot more successful for students, which in turn makes teaching writing successful and, dare I say, fun.

I'm a firm believer in beginning with what we know works. To do that, it's important that we agree to put every writing practice that's present in our schools today on that table and examine it for effectiveness. And by effective, I mean we *know* that students become better writers by learning this technique, using these materials, or applying this knowledge. Take the five-paragraph essay, for example, and put it squarely down on the table. This is a zombie practice for sure! I challenge you to find empirical evidence that this technique works to create good essays. In fact, there's evidence that this formulaic way of writing actually detracts from students' abilities over time. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007),

advocates of the five-paragraph essay argue that such formulas can provide useful guidance for beginning writers, offering them a crutch upon which to rely until they are ready to try other styles and formats. However, there exists no evidence to support this theory, and most experts in writing instruction now argue that this approach does more harm than good, giving students the false impression that good writing involves nothing more than following a set of rules. Rather, the expert consensus holds that the best writing instruction teaches students to become comfortable with a wide variety of styles and formats, so they can communicate effectively with many different kinds of readers in many different contexts, adapting their writing to the particular situation and audience at hand.

Moreover, experts caution that the more formulaic and constrained the assignments, the more students learn to think of writing as a rote, unengaging activity. (pp. 4–5)

We need to kill this kind of mechanized, “paint by number,” zombie-style organizational strategy from our teaching world and replace it with practices that actually work. That's what this whole book is about: finding more effective ways to teach students to write by using mentor texts. Instead of telling students how many paragraphs to write or how many sentences to include in each of those paragraphs, have them look at published pieces of fiction and nonfiction and draw conclusions about how writing is structured and how long paragraphs tend to be. Ask

students to note if the paragraphs are longer in informational writing or narrative, or see if they can discover the role that punctuation plays in the readability of the sentences in the paragraph. Inspire students' curiosity by looking at examples. Ask students what they find and what that might mean to them as readers and as writers. This is how you develop an energized, enthusiastic group of writers who are ready to take on the writing world. This is how students' writing will improve.

## **The Elephant in the Room: The Common Core State Standards**

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It shouldn't surprise anyone that because students' reading and writing are not at high enough performance levels to satisfy teachers, students, parents, the community, and the legislature, a national effort to find a remedy has been underway for several years. The Common Core State Standards formally entered the educational arena in 2010 and are leading the way toward an integrated approach to teaching reading and writing. Some of the standards address reading and others address writing, but teachers in every subject area are encouraged to weave them together and maximize time and resources to get better results: better readers and writers—and best of all, better thinkers.

Take a look at the Reading and Writing Anchor Standards side by side in Table 2 to see the world of possibilities for developing curriculum and planning projects to encourage students to read *and* write. As students examine texts for the writing traits and their key qualities (e.g., “Creating the Lead” in the organization trait), they do close reading of multiple texts to see how writers began similar pieces. They compare and contrast the styles of fiction leads to nonfiction leads. They develop a resource list of possible types of leads: flashback, fascinating fact, shocking statistic, dialogue, provocative phrase, and so forth. They sort them into leads that work better for fiction and those they might use for nonfiction writing. But they don't draw hard and fast lines. Writing isn't like that; the minute you reduce it to a list or a rule, you've missed the point.

After thinking, reading, and discussing the leads of multiple mentor texts, students are encouraged to revise the lead in a piece of their own. Different students will apply what they've figured out in different ways.

**Table 2. Reading and Writing Anchor Standards in the Common Core<sup>a</sup>**

Reading Anchor Standards	Writing Anchor Standards
<i>Key ideas and details:</i> “Read closely to determine what the text says” (p. 10), analyze for the central ideas and key interactions with the text, summarize, and make logical inferences.	<i>Text types and purposes:</i> Write narrative, informational/explanatory, and opinion/argument in print and electronic formats.
<i>Craft and structure:</i> Interpret words and phrases for meaning, understand how passages relate, and determine how purpose and point of view are exhibited in the text.	<i>Production and distribution of writing:</i> Use the writing process (prewriting, drafting, sharing and feedback, revising, editing, and finishing or publishing) to produce clear and coherent pieces.
<i>Integration of knowledge and ideas:</i> Integrate and evaluate the arguments, claims, and reasoning in two or more texts on the same topic and in diverse media formats.	<i>Research to build and present knowledge:</i> Create projects that require acquisition of information from print and electronic resources, synthesis, and written interpretation of what was learned.
<i>Range of reading and level of text complexity:</i> Read and understand “complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (p. 10).	<i>Range of writing:</i> Write short, midrange, and long-term texts for many different purposes and in a variety of formats.

<sup>a</sup>National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010a). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Authors.

This is exactly what we want them to do—own it. The work on leads wasn’t intended to prescribe how students begin their pieces; it was meant to open the doors of possibilities and allow students to make smart decisions for their own writing.

Reading and writing can work together to meet several of the Common Core’s Anchor Standards. A mentor text-inspired activity such as this one on leads hits multiple performance targets for the Common Core:

- *Reading:* Read closely, analyze, and evaluate the content of complex texts.
- *Writing:* Conduct short research with models, draw from the evidence, revise, and integrate.

Reading and writing have a natural connection that extends into and past the Common Core. After all, the first reader of every text is the actual writer. Weaving these two literacy giants into one tapestry is not only a creative and enjoyable way to teach but also immensely beneficial. Students learn more about reading and writing when we use mentor texts to explore how writing works. I delve into this in greater detail in subsequent chapters. For now, it's enough to note that the Common Core may very well have given us the perfect excuse to officially unify the teaching of reading and writing in the English language arts and in every other content area as well, something great teachers have been doing quietly and under the radar for years. We can build a strong case for why this practice works and refine teaching strategies so every student benefits as soon as possible. Then and only then do I believe we'll see the tide of U.S. literacy begin to turn and head to shore.

## **Don't Forget the Importance of Excellent Teachers!**

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“The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010a, p. 6). This statement in the Common Core document's introduction is worthy of note. Teaching and learning is, without question, the world of the professional educator. We must not abdicate this teaching responsibility to anyone or any organization.

What could be more important for us as a community of teachers and learners than to seek and implement the best possible teaching methodology in reading and writing to impact the greatest number of students? It's our most critical priority in today's schools. The Common Core may set the standards, but teachers are the ones who will roll up their sleeves and make them attainable for their students. No one but the teacher can take materials, regardless of the source, and make them work for their students. Not surprisingly, success comes down to the teacher's ability to conceptualize the performance goals in strategies and materials that connect to all students and move them forward.

An indisputable fact that should drive educational reform is that what really influences how students learn is the effectiveness of the teacher. In their groundbreaking study on the impact of teacher effectiveness on student achievement, Sanders and Rivers (1996) may have been the first to document the differences in performance levels of students who were taught by high- and low-performing teachers. Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) explain this well:

The results of this study well document that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. In addition, the results show wide variation in effectiveness among teachers. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor. *Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms.* (p. 63)

These findings are echoed by Sanders, Wright, and Langevin (2008), 11 years later:

Teachers are the single most important determinant of a student's schooling experience and academic outcomes. Social science studies have demonstrated not only that highly effective teachers are capable of producing nearly three times the student achievement gains of low-performing teachers, but also that a series of five above-average teachers can overcome the deficit typically reported between economically disadvantaged and higher income students. (p. 3)

Give a good teacher an empty cardboard box, and he or she will find a way to build a writing (or reading, math, science, or the arts) curriculum around it.

Thankfully, we have more resources to use than this empty box, but the bottom line is the same. No matter what you have at your fingertips, it's how you use those resources that make a difference. That means fully understanding writing instruction practices and developing new skills in areas where we don't know as much as we should about how to help students at different stages of their writing. The goal should be to become that astonishingly good teacher who makes the difference. And to get there, we have to be willing to talk and have honest conversations (which

are sometimes painful) about what we are doing and not doing at every opportunity. It isn't possible to improve student writing without them. Ineffective teaching strategies have to go, and proven, effective methods must take their place.

However, take heart that we're not doing everything wrong. In fact, a lot of what we know about high-quality writing instruction is already present in schools. I see it firsthand in my work with teachers across the country. One thing the excellent teachers have in common is that they pump up good writing practices much like an action-packed Zumba class at the end of the day. They share what they're doing and encourage others to join in. Success is contagious. The best writing teachers kill the zombies—and they stay dead.

## The 4Ws of Writing

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I've identified four key research-based, dynamic writing practices, or the 4Ws: writing process, writing traits, writing workshop, and writing modes. These practices are the gold standard in teaching writing. When used independently, some gain is achieved. But when combined, the potential gains are limitless. Students in classrooms that embrace all four of the Ws will meet and exceed any of the Common Core Standards or state standards. They will have rich writing lives.

I refer to the 4Ws as *dynamic*, not simply as best practices, because the word implies that there is action, movement, and progress. In becoming strong writers, we're in a constant state of learning, which leads to the application of new knowledge and skills. We're on a journey here, not simply seeking a destination. And as learners ourselves, we continue to refine our instructional practices as we understand more about how children write. Remember Proust's statement: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

We know what a dynamic writing classroom looks like thanks to the work of many educational researchers and world-class writing teachers. It's when we see through new eyes how to embrace what works for teaching and learning about writing that we understand that we don't have to completely reinvent the teaching of writing. Rather, we

need to take the dynamic practices that we already know, seek deeper understandings of the strengths of each, and apply them with fidelity for every student at every age.

To do that, we need to set the literacy table with four place settings:

1. *Writing process*: How writing is generated
2. *Writing traits*: The nuts and bolts of how writing works
3. *Writing workshop*: The organizational routines of the writing classroom
4. *Writing modes*: The purposes for writing

If you put these four elements together, writing will flourish in any classroom. Seeded by the groundbreaking work in the 1980s by Graves (1983) and Murray (1985) in their respective books *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* and *A Writer Teaches Writing*, and Calkins's (1986) *The Art of Teaching Writing*, along with the work of many other brilliant thinkers and writers in the decades since, there couldn't be a better time to revisit these foundational understandings to move us all forward to a new era in writing instruction.

## **Writing Process**

In the 1960s and 1970s, visionary researchers such as Janet Emig and Sondra Perl concluded that writing is not a straightforward, linear process but a search for meaning (Perl, 1994; see, e.g., Faigley, 1994). This simple but profound idea changed the writing instruction world into one whose basic tenant is that writing is a process. The steps were codified a decade later by Graves, Murray, and Calkins:

- *Prewriting*: Coming up with a topic and gathering resources
- *Drafting*: Committing initial, rough ideas to paper or digital form
- *Feedback*: Getting feedback on the draft from the reader or listener
- *Revision*: Reflecting on the feedback and implementing changes for clarity, interest, and authenticity
- *Editing*: Cleaning up the writing for the conventions: spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar and usage, and paragraphing

- *Finishing/publishing*: Wrapping up the task that sometimes means creating a final copy to go public

These steps are recursive, meaning it's the writer's job to apply the step of the process that is needed to move the piece forward. The writer benefits from the teacher's perspective, however, on what the next step might be. It may mean a shift of direction when a reader would be lost by what is written so far. It may mean stopping and gathering more information to add to the text. It may mean learning about and applying conventions at deeper and more thoughtful levels than previously tried. It certainly means reading and rereading to choose the best words and phrases that make the topic clear. All the steps of the writing process are available to writers every time they write. Writing is thinking aloud on paper, after all, so it shouldn't be conceived in a linear fashion. Instead, as the early writing process researchers Emig and Perl wisely point out, the process should be a search for meaning, and the writer refines thinking through revision and editing.

For more about the writing process, I recommend the seminal literature in its original form: Graves (1983), Murray (1985), and Calkins (1986).

## **Writing Traits**

The traits are the vocabulary used to describe what good prose looks like in its different forms. It's used for formative assessment—assessment that helps teachers understand what students know and what they need help to learn. The traits are simple, logical, easy to understand, and deeply rooted in writing research, writing pedagogy, and the combined wisdom of thousands of teachers. The traits have been in the writing teacher's tool kit since first conceived in 1985, almost 30 years ago now. At the writing trait's core are fundamental principles: conducting high-quality assessment that leads to focused instruction, establishing clear goals for teaching and learning the craft of writing, using a shared vocabulary to talk about writing, and weaving together revision and editing seamlessly and strategically.

## The Writing Traits

**Ideas:** The piece’s content—its central message and details that support that message

**Organization:** The internal structure of the piece—the thread of logic and the pattern of meaning

**Voice:** The tone and tenor of the piece—the personal stamp of the writer, which is achieved through a strong understanding of purpose and audience

**Word choice:** The vocabulary the writer uses to convey meaning and enlighten the reader

**Sentence fluency:** The way words and phrases flow through the piece (It is the auditory trait because we “read” for it with the ear as much as the eye.)

**Conventions:** The mechanical correctness of the piece (Correct use of conventions (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and grammar and usage) guides the reader through the text and makes it easy to follow.)

**Presentation:** The physical appearance of the piece (A visually appealing text invites the reader in.)

Four key qualities, or the different essential aspects that are measurable and teachable, further define each of these traits. These key qualities are discussed in Chapter 2. I use the four key qualities of each trait as the organizational structure for Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which include mentor texts and lesson ideas as examples of how to read like a writer in each of the modes: narrative, informational/explanatory, and argument (opinion).

For more about writing traits, I recommend my own theory and practice texts: *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide, Grades 3 and Up* (Culham, 2003), *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* (Culham, 2005), and *Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for Middle School* (Culham, 2010).

## **Writing Workshop**

Writing workshop is a structure, a series of routines, for organizing time, resources, and interaction in the classroom that encourages active, student-centered writing activities in which students (on their own or in collaboration with others and the teacher) make decisions about what will be written. The writing workshop emphasizes the social and collaborative nature of writing and is built on the writing process model. When combined with reading instruction, the writing workshop is often referred to as the literacy workshop.

The teacher's role in writing workshops is to confer, nudge, and support students as the need arises. Most writing workshops begin with a whole-group focus lesson (often called a minilesson) that teaches students about an element of the craft of writing that the teacher has noticed needs improvement in students' writing or is part of the core grade-level curriculum. For the majority of writing workshop time, the teacher circulates around the room and meets with students individually and in small groups to help them with their writing tasks as he or she monitors progress.

There is no single writing workshop model that everyone embraces equally, but most teachers agree that providing students with choice, allowing them to work at an individualized pace, tailoring feedback so it is specific and targeted, and collaborating as writers in an environment that encourages risk taking is key to creating a successful writing experience.

For more about the writing workshop, I recommend *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)* by Ray (2001), *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide* by Fletcher and Portalupi (2001), and *What You Know by Heart: How to Develop Curriculum for Your Writing Workshop* by Ray (2002).

## **Writing Modes**

The modes are the different purposes for writing. There are three traditional prose modes: narrative, expository, and persuasive. In the Common Core State Standards, the modes have taken a front row seat in the writing arena. Purpose drives the reasons students write in all subjects and is key to helping students understand "what" they are

writing. The Common Core (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a) revised two of the familiar modes and refined and refocused the definitions:

- *Narrative*: To write “real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences”
- *Informational/explanatory*: “To examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content”
- *Argument (opinion)*: To “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (p. 18)

Note that the Common Core’s authors retermed *expository* to *informational/explanatory*. Either term defines the same type of writing, and I’ve found that this label change has not caused too much confusion. However, the authors chose to zero in on one genre of persuasive writing by selecting academic arguments (opinions), making it clear that one category or genre within the persuasive mode should be the focus of instruction. By doing this, they left out writing letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, blogs, marketing copy, public-service announcements, political cartoons, and more. The Common Core’s emphasis on academic writing is understandable and even welcome, but I hope teachers will include all forms of persuasive writing in the classroom and not limit students to argument (opinion), even though this purpose for writing may be the most difficult to teach and learn well. Also note that although the Common Core focuses on more formal, academic argument writing in the upper grades, it establishes opinion writing as one of three purposes for writing in grades K–5.

For more about writing modes, I recommend *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by Zinsser (2006), *Teaching Argument Writing, Grades 6–12: Supporting Claims With Relevant Evidence and Clear Reasoning* by Hillocks (2011), and *So, What’s the Story? Teaching Narrative to Understand Ourselves, Others, and the World* by Fredricksen, Wilhelm, and Smith (2012). I also highly recommend King’s (2002) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* not only for narrative writing advice but also for all sorts of practical writing tips.

## AUTHOR INSIGHTS: *Lola Schaefer*



I'm not sure which comes first, the reading or the writing. Early on in my career, the reading had the strongest impact. I immersed myself in children's books—both classics and the newer titles. I passionately studied them for pacing, vocabulary, cadence, humor, voice, leads, use of figurative language, and endings. I learned so much from reading like a writer, and I still do. However, now that my writing is a bit more focused (at least I hope it is), I think that I select the children's literature that I want to read with a more defined purpose.

For instance, I write a lot of literary or narrative nonfiction. I try to read as much of that as I can from authors whom I admire, such as Steve Jenkins, Dianna Aston, Joyce Sidman, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Jeanette Winter, April Pulley Sayre, Steve Sheinkin, and Jim Murphy. While reading these books, I study how the authors focus their ideas down to interesting nuggets that will capture readers. I look at the different nonfiction or informational text structures. I love how publishing now offers a wide selection of formats and great art design. The way in which the information is presented has a lot to do with reader participation and a choice to return to the text again and again. I notice how much critical thinking is offered in today's books. Authors, illustrators, and publishers are setting the bar high for kids. We all know they're intelligent and that they're fascinated with information that they can't find in a cursory read of an encyclopedia page or from watching 30 minutes of television.

### **Notes From Ruth**

I'm dazzled by Lola's list of authors representing a range of different types of texts and how she draws from all of them to write her own informational works. The way she describes studying texts for structure and other writing craft is exactly what I hope this book reinforces. Her belief that critical thinking is a pivotal part of learning to write well is a notion that runs through the Common Core State Standards and can't be emphasized enough in the pedagogy of teaching writing.

## Educational Shift

The teaching world is shifting more right now than at any other time in my 43-year educational career. It's exhilarating and completely terrifying at the same time. In Figure 2, this fourth-grade writer says what each of us is thinking these days and needs printed on our coffee mugs.

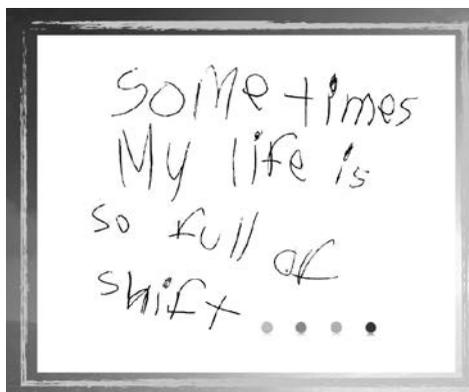
Whether you work in a state that adopted the Common Core or not, the standards are high and the stakes are even higher that students learn to write and write well. Being an excellent teacher of writing is an activity that requires constant assessment and adjustment, based on the students and the tasks

at hand. It is a dynamic practice, no doubt, and it's not easy. Writing is thinking aloud on paper, after all, and there's nothing easy about that. But it is doable. I believe that, or I wouldn't still be spending my life thinking, writing, and learning more about how to lend a hand in this critical literacy work.

Shift: It's hard. It's impossible to know where we'll end up, but one thing is for sure: We'll be further ahead in teaching writing than we are today if we keep working on improving.

When I get discouraged by results such as the 2011 NAEP report (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), I go back to my roots as a classroom teacher—to a time and place where writing process mattered more than the prompt; where curriculum was blended in thematic units, now expanded and called project-based learning, and the flow of how the lessons and activities played out was determined by students' actions and reactions to what they were learning. Reading and writing worked together. Social studies and science were clear springboards for important questions that required research to answer and, in turn, required reading and writing skills.

**Figure 2. A Fourth Grader's View of Shift**



I remember a time when students dived into these activities throughout the school day. I couldn't be happier that we seem to be returning to a time when we not only teach with an eye toward the Standards but also seek the joy of learning, which is infectious and lasts a lifetime. And I couldn't be happier that the rest of this book focuses on something that I've loved working on for every one of the 43 years that I've been an educator: reading and writing using mentor texts. I predict that you'll discover the joy in teaching writing when you read with a writer's eye and become a writing thief just like me.

