

WORKSHOP HELP DESK

A QUICK GUIDE TO
**Teaching Second-Grade
Writers with Units of Study**

LUCY CALKINS

Workshop Help Desk Series

Edited by Lucy Calkins

with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project



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*For Julia Mooney,
with thanks for her brilliance
and dedication.*





C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION	ix
September Narrative Writing—Revisiting and Re-energizing Small Moments	1
October Raising the Level of Narrative Writing with Authors as Mentors	19
November Writing and Revising Realistic Fiction ..	36
December The World of Wonder: Fairy Tale Adaptations and Original Fantasy Stories	46
January Writing to Grow Ideas (Including Ideas About Books)	56
February– June A Plan for the Rest of the Year	65
WORKS CITED	75



S E P T E M B E R

Narrative Writing— Revisiting and Re-energizing Small Moments

We suggest beginning the year by launching a unit of study on personal narrative writing—a unit I refer to as Small Moments. By definition, personal narratives are stories about one’s life written chronologically. They contain characters; the main character is the author of the piece; and they take place in a setting. There is a plot with a couple of events occurring in the period of time in the story, and there tends to be a problem that is solved, a tension that is resolved, or a change that occurs (see “Small Moments” in *Units of Study for Primary Writing* [Calkins et al. 2003]).

There are several reasons to begin the year with narrative writing. When a child reads a story, the child uses words to create a virtual experience. Writing stories is the reciprocal process to reading stories; in both instances, children rely on

words to create and operate within the alternate world of another time and place. Human beings come to know each other through the sharing of stories, and beginning the year with a personal narrative unit provides opportunities to build community. Then, too, narrative writing is an essential component of most other kinds of writing—even persuasive letter writing includes writing anecdotes (which are really Small Moment stories). More than this, your children will be reading lots of narrative texts; the more they understand how those texts are made, the more they can construct meaning as they read and write.

Assessing Writers at the Start of the Year

Although you may be eager to get writing workshop under way, it's important to take time to assess your writers and collect baseline data right away. We suggest devoting one day's writing workshop to assessment. You might say, "Before we get started, I would love to see what you can do as writers of true stories. Today, I'm going to give you a booklet that you'll use to draw and then write a story on one particular thing that you did. Make this an example of the best true-story writing you can do. I'm not going to be helping you today—instead I'll be working away on my own story!"

Teachers often provide forty minutes of actual writing time and refrain from giving any reminders or assistance. We recommend using writing booklets that contain plenty of pages (five, perhaps) and plenty of lines on each page (more than five). Tell children they can add more pages if necessary. If you

sit down and actually write on that day, it is important to do so without huge fanfare so that your children don't use your writing as a model. You want to see what they can do all on their own. Resist the temptation to nudge kids to revise a piece of writing or to scaffold children to do work that is far beyond what they will be able to soon do on their own.

Once the writing time is over, make sure that each booklet contains the child's name and the date, and then look at these pieces alongside a narrative continuum that shows the developmental stages of writing and names the qualities of writing that define each stage. You needn't match every single trait; just look between the piece that the child has written and the sample pieces of writing for each level and do the best you can to locate the child's on-demand writing within the scale. You'll be able to look ahead on the continuum to see the work you'll encourage him to do over the next few months and to see specific techniques that you can complement and teach.

After two months of work in narrative writing, you'll redo this assessment, saying exactly the same things and providing the same conditions, and then watching to see how much your children have grown in that time. You may use both September and the late-October writing at your parent-teacher conferences to discuss children's growth.

Getting Started on Writing Small Moment Narratives

After the one-day assessment, you'll be ready to begin the Small Moments unit. If your students are new to this curriculum, it will be easy to inspire them by saying, "Writers, this

year you are going to write the important moments from your life. We are going to call these pieces *Small Moment stories*.” If you demonstrate with your own writing and share a couple of stories written by children—making sure the children’s work represents a range of developmental levels—your youngsters will be ready to start writing.

If your students wrote Small Moment stories the year before, your challenge this year is to generate excitement about once again writing Small Moment stories, and so you’ll want to convey that there will be new layers of difficulty in this year’s work. You’ll need to decide on how to accomplish this goal.

For example, at the end of the school year, perhaps the first-grade teachers told children to save artifacts of their first-grade writing lives in a time capsule. If first graders saved one of their best Small Moment stories from first grade, then when these youngsters cross the threshold into second grade, they can retrieve the saved treasures and recall their old writing lives. The first writing project for those children could then be to reread and rethink those earlier stories, making them even better. This, of course, would provide a physical, hands-on way for children and for their new teachers, too, to recall what children have already learned to do, building on that foundation at the start of second grade.

You need not start the year that way. You could come up with other ways to create a drumroll around the idea that children will be writing Small Moment stories. As you read the description of this month, you can select any goal to spotlight so that you can say, “Like last year, you’ll write Small Moment stories. You already learned that writers do *x*, *y*, and *z*. This year, you’ll again have the chance to do all of that, but this

year, you are in *second grade*, so you're *also* going to . . ." For example, you could emphasize that this year, the moments they select to write about will be both small *and big* ones. Learning to imbue a story with significance is gigantic work and this will certainly be one aspect of narrative craft that you teach this year. Another option is to tell children at the start of the year that this year, they'll not only be writing Small Moment stories but storytelling them as well, and writing with the voices of storytellers. One way or another, you'll rally kids to not only recall all that they have already learned but also work with zeal toward ambitious new goals.

As I mentioned earlier, there are a few things that are especially essential for this year, one of which is stamina. The secret to stamina lies in the paper that you give to your children. Start the year by providing kids with booklets, not single pages, on which to write—and those booklets can each contain five pages, with each page containing only a very small box for the picture and plenty of lines for the writing. It is impossible to overemphasize the power that the paper itself has for conveying expectations. As children become more skilled as writers, steer them toward paper with more lines, encouraging them to write more, and from the start, be sure you differentiate by giving paper with more lines to children who are ready for it.

Generating Story Ideas

Early in the unit, remind children that they can come up with ideas for true stories easily by simply thinking of things that

they have done. They can think about what they did over the summer, the weekend, the previous day. They can think about what happened that morning at home, on the way to school, on the playground, while coming in to school. One thing we've learned is that children's writing will be much more powerful if they decide to write about experiences that matter to them, moments that are both small and big, rather than try to write to a specific sort of prompt.

One way to guide children toward writing about moments that are personally significant is to encourage them to write about something that happened that gave them a strong feeling—something that was really funny or really scary or really sad or really joyful. You could also teach children that sometimes writers think about things that have happened to us that we want to tell others about. You might suggest that writers sometimes think about particular small moments when the writer was the hero—a particular time when the writer helped someone, or taught someone, or accomplished something, or learned something. You could add, "Lots of times others probably didn't notice these tiny moments of heroism, but you know the moment was a special one." It's important that you and the students understand that these are suggestions but the choice of which strategy to use is up to each child. Soon children will be drawing from a list of several optional strategies for coming up with true stories and for making sure their Small Moments are both small *and* big.

A word of caution: We recommend spending no more than a few days teaching several strategies to generate story ideas. We don't want students to think the purpose of a mini-lesson is for the teacher to lay out a new strategy for generat-

ing ideas that they will then use that day. In other words, we don't want the class to become dependent on us to jump-start their writing every day. Instead, we want them to become accustomed to writing every day and knowing that life itself gives them story ideas. All this is to say that after just two or three days of demonstrating strategies for generating writing ideas, you should shift your teaching toward helping children write those story ideas.

Teaching a Crucial Characteristic of Effective Narrative Writing

The single most important skill to teach writers of stories is a skill that is sometimes referred to as *show, don't tell*. Often people misunderstand this term, thinking that it means simply that a writer should show a character is feeling something (e.g., "He clenched his fists and stomped away.") rather than say it (e.g., "He was mad."). Actually, the advice to show rather than to tell is much more profound than that. In order to storytell well, a writer needs to do what a reader does when reading a story. The writer needs to put herself in the shoes of the main character and re-create, in her mind, the evolving drama of that time and place.

So if I am going to write about taking my son to college and helping him fix up his room, I can't stand outside that event and talk about it, or I will be summarizing, not storytelling. I'll be summarizing if I say, "I remember when John and I took Evan to college. It was really hard. I wanted to set up his room perfectly." Instead, I need to begin by asking

myself, “What will be the starting point of the story?” If the starting point is the moment when we stopped the car outside Evan’s dorm room, I need to go back in my mind to just before that moment and start reliving it so I can write it in a storytelling manner. I might write, “‘There’s a space right by the door,’ I said, pointing. John pulled the car to a stop alongside Evan’s dorm. I opened the door and got out, turning back to collect an armload of suitcases. . . .”

It is a challenge to help seven-year-olds ask themselves, “When in the sequence of events will my story start?” and for them to reimagine (or relive) the experience, capturing it bit by bit onto the page. There are a number of potential hard parts. One, certainly, is for the writer to realize that a story about catching a fish need not begin with waking up or with catching the fish. Instead, it can begin with threading the worm onto the hook, or with casting, or with arriving at the stream. There are options, and generally the best place to start is just a bit before the heart of the story.

Another challenge is for the writer to relive or re-create the event. When a child says, “I can’t remember what I did!” it is important to respond, “Imagine what you *probably* did and said.” Of course, children can imagine in sweeping steps (“I caught a fish.”) or in great detail (“I settled down on a log that I’d made into a chair and tried to hold the fishing rod very still.”). What can we say or do to help children write more like the latter than the former? That’s a mystery for all teachers of writing, but chances are that one important step is to listen to children in ways that help them know the details of their lives matter. So when they are sharing a story from their lives, we can listen closely and ask things such as, “So what was that

like?" "What were you thinking right then?" "Help me picture that," or "Can you say more about that?"

Rehearsing for Writing

You'll want to teach your children that writers take time to rehearse their writing. In other words, they do not simply pick up a pen and start writing their narratives, because when they do that, their narratives read more like summaries. Instead, writers take time to rehearse. We suggest taking a firm stance about the importance of rehearsal and teaching strategies for rehearsing that will lead your students away from summaries and toward stories.

In first grade, perhaps your students learned to touch each page in a story booklet, saying aloud the exact words that they planned to eventually write on that page. This method for rehearsal is enormously powerful and useful. Another strategy for rehearsal is to teach your second graders to storytell multiple times before drafting a story. Teach them to think, "How do I want listeners to feel?" and then tell their story in a way so that readers really feel that. Say, "Think, 'What is the good part of this story?'" and this time, tell it so that you really build up the good part."

Once children have said aloud the exact words they might write for one page, the next, and the next, then they can begin writing. However, children sometimes tend to run the whole story together, writing not only about starting sledding but about sledding itself all on one page. When this happens, it helps to teach writers they can jot a subtitle or sketch an icon

or quick picture onto each page to act as a placeholder to pace the story.

Remember that all your lessons about rehearsing for narrative writing do not need to be taught early in this unit. Children will be cycling through the process of writing many stories. At the very start of the unit, they will all start stories in sync with each other, but soon you will find that one child has finished her first story and is starting on her second while lots of other children are midway through their first stories. This means that during the second, third, and fourth weeks of this unit, you'll still be able to teach children strategies for rehearsing for writing. Always, your teaching will remind children of the repertoire of strategies they already have access to and will help them know yet another strategy or another way to use the strategies.

Supporting Your Children as They Cycle Through the Writing Process

Within this one unit, you can expect that second graders will write approximately six or seven five-page-long stories with perhaps approximately five or six sentences on a page. Those are rough estimates and certainly many children can do more than this, especially when we hold high, yet realistic, expectations that second graders can write more than a page a day and much more than one book a month. Many teachers have found that it's quite reasonable to expect that a child will rehearse for and write a story in approximately two or three days, revising it a bit while writing the draft, especially if the

teacher reaches the child in time to support this, and revising it more extensively on the next day. Expect that at this time of the year, those revisions will be written right onto the original draft and will probably not yield a whole new draft. Then the child will get started on another story.

Typically if the whole class begins writing a story on day one, a third of the students will probably have gone as far as they can go without teacher input by early in day three, another third will have received support from the teacher and will be revising so as to continue working till the start of day four, and some children won't be ready to start their next piece until the start of day five. This means that the class will not progress through the writing process in sync with each other (although by day five of your first week, you might announce a deadline to push along kids who need a nudge).

As children move through rehearsal, drafting, and revision, your teaching, too, should cycle between these processes. You can't devote the first third of the month to rehearsal work as if children are writing just one piece and will rehearse it for ten days before progressing to drafting. Instead, your teaching will shift from strategies that pertain to rehearsal, to those that pertain to drafting, to those that pertain to revision along with the bulk of your class, which means that you'll devote just a day or sometimes two to each of these before moving to the next process. Imagine, then, that you'll teach rehearsal strategies on something like days one, two, five, nine, and thirteen of the unit and drafting strategies on days three, six, ten, and fourteen of the unit.

This also means that if you teach a concept halfway through this first unit—perhaps teaching children that when

characters talk, it helps if they usually use direct address, complete with quotations—then a child could conceivably use the new strategy across the stories in her writing folder. For example, on the day of your lesson on writing with direct address, you may ask children to reread all the stories they have written thus far in the year (perhaps with a partner), looking for instances in which the text summarizes rather than uses direct address. If one child spots a page that says, “My mom told me she was going to go,” the child might revise this so the page now reads, “My mom said, ‘I’m going.’”

Once a child has written several stories, he can use classroom charts as a scaffold and can go back on his own initiative to revise for any of the concepts you have taught thus far in the unit. Support this sort of independence and initiative because independence is an important goal in a writing workshop.

Each day during the writing workshop, writers will work on their writing, and in order to do so, they will draw on their full, composite repertoire of strategies. That is, your children should know how to come up with story ideas, get started, write, finish, reread, revise, and get started on another story all without needing teacher involvement. This will allow them to cycle through the writing process with independence, leaving you free enough to teach writing rather than manage their writing process during conferences.

While your children cycle through the process, writing up a storm, notice their command of the conventions of written language. Some children will come into your class writing their drafts without a lot of concern for spelling, not pausing for even a second to spell even the words they almost know by

heart, and others will obsess over every word and want your seal of approval for every decision. Differentiate your instruction, helping the fast-and-free writers take that extra second to remember to write in lowercase letters (unless uppercase letters are required) and spell words they almost know by heart as correctly as they can while still writing quickly. That is, you are definitely not expecting perfect spelling, but you are expecting children to write an increasing number of words correctly with ease and automaticity. You'll also want your fast-and-free writers to become increasingly accustomed to inserting end punctuation into their texts as they write. Meanwhile, help the children who see writing as little more than an exercise on spelling and penmanship focus much more on writing quickly, fluently, and with a focus on content.

One way to support children in cycling through the writing process at their own speeds is by setting up partnerships. By the third day of school, each writer can sit beside a partner in the meeting area and also meet with that person during many mid-workshop interruptions and share sessions. You do not need to know your children well before you link them into these short-term partnerships. You also need to be willing for children to write as best they can, revise as best they can, edit as best they can, and then move to another piece—all without necessarily getting a green light from you. Remember that their drafts will all accumulate in a folder, and toward the end of the unit, you will ask children to select their best to revise and edit more extensively, so at that point you can catch up to kids who never did all the refinements you'd love for them to do!

In order for your children to progress through the writing process with some independence, channel some of your

teaching time toward the goal of establishing a productive community within the classroom. It will be much easier to induct children into the norms of a writing workshop if they were part of a similar workshop the year before, but either way, remember that you need to explicitly teach children your expectations for how they'll act during writing. Remind children how to convene in and disperse from the meeting area. Act this out yourself, physically showing kids how to push in chairs, come swiftly to the meeting area, sit cross-legged on top of their writing folder in their assigned rug spot, and reread the charts that hang near the meeting area. Similarly, explicitly teach children what you want them to do when you pause in the midst of a minilesson to say, "Turn and talk," or "Stop and jot." Whether children have been working in this manner for a year or two now, or are brand new to this way of workshop, you can expect them to learn to turn on a dime to talk with a partner, and you can also expect them to attend to your signal that time for talking or jotting is over.

Important Content You Can Teach Throughout the Writing Process

Once your children are all cycling through the writing process and drawing on their cumulative repertoire of strategies and their growing knowledge of good writing, you'll be free to teach in ways that lift the level of their writing. Draw upon knowledge of content that is apt to especially pay off for second-grade writers.

First of all, one of the most important things you can do to lift the level of children's stories is to help them write stories that are long and fully developed, yet also focused. For many children, those two goals are contradictions. They are all set to write long stories with lots of words, thereby impressing you and others with their new powers of spelling and handwriting, but the drawback is often that their long stories are unfocused. The stories wind up telling one thing after another after another after another. If you are going to teach children to write stories that are both long *and* focused, it is really important that *you* grasp how to do this. Sometimes kids get confused because, in fact, teachers are confused. For starters, think about focus this way: for second graders, writing personal narratives that are focused generally means the stories will chronicle events that lasted around twenty minutes.

Also teach children that after they finish writing a story, they can reread it and think about ways they can fix it up. "The Craft of Revision," from *Units of Study for Primary Writing* (Calkins et al. 2003), provides additional ideas for minilessons to teach during this portion of your unit. The most important lesson on revision might be this: writers need to become *readers*, and we need to read our writing as if we have never read it before, asking especially, "Does this make sense? Is this clear?" Writers revise to make sure our writing is clear and sensible.

You'll also want to encourage children to think of their drafts as physically malleable. A good place to begin is to have children try out different ways to start or end a story, attaching flaps onto their paper, with each flap containing another

draft of a lead or an ending. Children can also revise to make characters talk—including the exact words each character said. They can reread to identify and then embellish especially important parts of the story, adding onto these sections of the story. Of course, many children may have learned these strategies last year, but chances are they will have forgotten to do all these things. Don't take four months to remind them of what they have already learned!

Then, too, throughout this month, you can continue to coach children to make even their first drafts a bit more conventionally correct. Remind your students that writers think of a sentence of thought, write that thought down in a rush, then add the period. Then the writer thinks of the next thought, and begins to write it using a capital letter for the first word, and again writes in a rush, ending that sentence with another period. That is, punctuation is not an afterthought to be inserted during editing!

The Finishing Touch: Selecting the Best Piece to Revise for an Audience

At the end of the unit, children will choose their best work and revise this more deeply and extensively, with help from you. One of the best, most exciting ways for children to revise narratives is by using drama to see what they have said and what they might say next. A writer and his partner could read a bit of the writer's text aloud, then act out that bit and then read the next bit and act it out. The actors will quickly realize things that have been left out. "No, you need to do

this!” they’ll say, and then the obvious comment, “You should say that in the story!” Imagining their narratives as the basis for little plays can help children understand the fundamental concept behind narrative writing.

There are other ways to revise as well. Children could rewrite the most important page in their story, taking smaller steps through the progression of events and thoughts on that one page. This revision process can last for a few days, and it can, if you’d like, involve taping flaps of paper onto the bottom or the sides of a draft, using staple removers to open books up so that one page can be removed and a new one substituted, and so forth.

After children revise their selected work, they will need to edit it. You will presumably already have a word wall featuring a dozen high-frequency words, and if you haven’t done so already, teach your children that writers reread, checking to be sure they use word wall words correctly. From now on, after a child writes a draft of any story (even if the writer is not on the verge of publishing it), the writer needs to reread the text, checking that he spelled the word wall words correctly.

After your second graders fix some spellings and add some punctuation to their stories, the pieces will probably still be far from correct. You may want to call children into small groups to teach them one more thing—some might benefit from learning about commas, others from learning the spelling of a common word ending. I do not recommend that you then go through the very time-consuming, elaborate process of correcting every error in the child’s draft and insisting the child copy that draft over so that it is perfectly conventional. Doing this requires days and days on end, and the

work is frankly not very rigorous for kids—they end up just copying your corrections. Meanwhile, the resulting text does not represent what they can do anyhow. These are little kids at the start of the year, and their work will not be perfect. If you intervene to prop the work up so that it matches your high standards, then the work will not represent what your children can do, and later you and others will not be able to look at the progression of published pieces to see ways in which children have grown. Of course, if you or someone else types up the pieces, that person will correct the spellings. But chances are good that if this happens, it will take a number of days before those pieces are all typed. Don't wait for those perfect pieces to be returned to kids before you celebrate the kids' best work and move on to the next unit.

I recommend the simplest possible publishing party so that you get onto the next unit by the start of your second month of school. Perhaps just put writers into small circles and give each child a turn to read aloud, with the listeners chiming in after each author reads. Then gather the kids alongside the bulletin board as each writer leaves his work in the appropriate square, perhaps saying as he does, "I'm proud of the way I . . ."



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