

# *Hidden Gems*



**Naming and Teaching from the Brilliance  
in Every Student's Writing**

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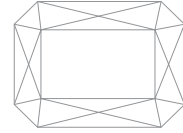
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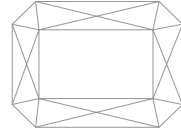
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SAMPLE PAGES

## *Hidden Gems*



SAMPLE PAGES



# What If We Just Relaxed and Stopped Caring What the Neighbors Think?

If you're going to teach him how to write, first you have to love him.

If you can convince him of that, there's nothing you can't teach him.

—AVI

I grew up in a modest neighborhood in what was, in the early 1960s, the very northeast edge of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our house represented one of the four building model options available in this section. I made a game of walking the streets forming the grid of this planned subdivision to find all the houses that matched ours exactly, window-for-window; and the builders couldn't trick me by reversing the plan, by making the garage on the left side of the kitchen, for instance, instead of the right. Blessedly, my own house escaped total, rigid conformity by its lucky placement on a slightly larger corner lot, atop a gentle elevation, and by having a cool driveway crossing the entire front yard, with egress on two different streets. Neighborhood kids loved to roller-skate, skateboard, and ride their bikes on this little concrete slope, and teenagers loved to drive across it, saving themselves the trouble of turning the corner the normal way.

But there were clusters of houses in the south and northwest valleys, and in little, centuries-old villages on the outskirts of Albuquerque that fascinated me with their diverse appearances. The roads were dirt. Many houses sat on at least an acre of land and were working farms, raising horses, goats, and chickens, as well as corn, beans, and chile peppers. The *casas* (houses) were built of mud and straw *adobe* bricks, with flat roofs, and they sat lower to the ground than houses in my

subdivision. They looked as if they had grown straight up from the dirt, in colors ranging from tan to terra cotta.

To many visiting these regions for the first time, the preponderance of brown mud houses with dirt yards—of houses built without pitched roofs, sidewalks, well-kept lawns and shrubs pruned into geometric shapes—might have appeared disheveled and haphazard, compared with the squared-off neighborhoods in the expanding city. These houses seemed to sprawl and spread on a whim, each with a unique shape and personality, and it proved impossible to judge, unlike in the carefully prescribed suburbs of the city, who might have tremendous amounts of money, and who might not.

I thought these old village sites were beautiful. I loved that each handmade house was different and each seemed to be situated on the land according to sunrises and sunsets, or to sources of some private inspiration, their faces turned east toward the stately mountains or west toward the cozy, intimate Rio Grande River Valley. The front door might be found on any side of the house. Mostly, I admired how the human-made (both women and men contributed to house building) structures blended into and reflected the natural New Mexican landscape of desert and mountains. At sunset, the eye could sweep across homes and farms as if they were simply great swaths of earth dotted with wildflowers, toward the magenta Sandia Mountains.

When I was in college at the University of New Mexico, I chose to live in the Northwest Valley area of Albuquerque, in a tiny adobe *casita* (which was actually a converted garage) behind a not much larger main house. I inherited a little garden with peach trees, hollyhocks, roses, and chile peppers growing in abundance and without elaborate plan or boundaries, and certainly without a moment of attention from my young-adult self. I could see the Sandia Mountains from my windows; I could park my old, dented Toyota Corolla in front of the house without shame; I could let my puppy race around the land surrounding the house, tumbling about with dozens of other dogs, without worrying about the neighbors' wrath; I could meet my fellow valley dwellers, who were professors, artists, musicians, mixed in with families who had lived in this same spot for hundreds of years, and still spoke Spanish and made fresh tortillas and beans daily. I could practice speaking Spanish and not worry about making a bad grade for my mistakes. This community folded me in, without judgment or derision. My mother's worried refrain: "What will the neighbors think?" did not apply in this place because my neighbors were at least as unconventional as I was. I felt at home for the first time in my life.

## Accepting Diversity in Young Persons' Ways with Words

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So what, you should be asking by now, does this have to do with looking at the writing of eight- to fifteen-year-olds?

I think that the New Mexican landscape I grew up in, with its mixed languages and communities, helped shape my identity and my worldview. I am happiest with policies and practices that include everyone and miserable with too many constrictions, rules and prejudices, or any kind of practices that might belittle someone who does not conform to elitist conventions about what is considered valuable or correct.

As a writer and a reader, I am happiest with surprising, fresh ways of using language and shaping texts. I am uncomfortable when language is forced to fit into formulas determined by notions of correctness and acceptability in school settings and does not reflect how people writing outside of schools use language and genre to convince and move readers, to open eyes, to discover through the act of writing, or to express beauty and deep emotion.

This does not mean that I think spelling “doesn’t count,” or that I don’t respect grammar, the architecture of language. It does not mean that I think writing should look like the ramblings of a mad diarist and never find the grace and power of genre or sentence boundaries. On the contrary, I am grammar’s biggest fan. I admire sonnets and classic text forms. I love well-researched nonfiction, and I certainly love clear instructions for how to use my cell phone or put together a desk from IKEA. But I also value writing that breaks the conventions of what is “good” and “bad” to do in writing; I value young people’s “ways with words” (Heath 1983) that are pertinent to their languages and communities, and I despise grading, testing, or instruction that forces young writers to produce texts similar to prefabricated homes with shrubs pruned into uniform balls, when what kids are writing comes from their precisely unconventional minds and hearts naming the world in new and unusual ways.

Certainly, as teachers, we want to help our students grow as writers. We want to help them recognize and become fluent with a variety of text forms, codes of convention, or as Lisa Delpit (1995) calls it, the “Edited English” that our culture has created and agreed upon in order to communicate with one another. We truly want the best for our student writers, and we do not want them to be judged for any perceived lack of intelligence about “correctness” in writing. With the barrage of benchmarks and standardized tests resulting from federal legislation called No Child Left Behind, we

feel even greater pressure to help children perform well on writing tasks. We even worry over their college admission essays that allow them to gain entrance to schools of their choice. We are given many hoops to jump through these days, and although the hoops are predictable and rather low to the ground, we still labor over how to help students score as many points as possible before we turn them over to the next level of performance standards.

Teachers rightly wonder how to help kids approach any new writing task with ease and fluency, with clear thinking and organizing tools, and with a writing style that will help their pieces stand out from the other prefab essays. (Remember the cool driveway on my otherwise unimaginative house model number four in Albuquerque?)

We have come to believe that strong lessons demonstrating aspects of the writing process, style, and genre features, and writing conferences focused on individuals' writing issues will help kids improve dramatically because we've seen the evidence in

their work. Yet teachers often tell me that they stumble over things to say in minilessons and conferences, particularly how to notice and name positive aspects in every student's writing, and how to teach beyond language conventions or organization of school genres such as the infamous five-paragraph essay. Because

What we need is a full array of lenses for reading student writing.

of our own highly standardized writing backgrounds in middle school, high school, and even college, we all share lenses for looking at student writing that include spelling, grammar, punctuation, and organization rules. Some of us were evaluated with rubrics in school and accept them as a more just and much clearer process for sorting pieces of writing into "proficient" or "low-performing." However, the world of writing is vastly richer than a list of spelling words or grammar rules or even the boxes provided on rubrics, and what we need is a full array of lenses for reading student writing. We can notice when students play with time and order of events in an unusual way, or when they manage to empathize with a person of the opposite gender or from another period in history so that they can create that person's inner life in a believable way. We can recognize that our students' writing reflects diverse and evolving cultures, with influences from multiple languages and visual and digital literacies.

We can also celebrate student writing by appreciating how often its odd syntax mirrors modern texts, especially the literature of some of the twentieth century's most famous writers in the English language, such as Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, and

James Joyce. The first time I experienced this phenomenon was when I was consulting about writing in a middle school in the South Bronx. A teacher who attended my workshop at her school came up to me during a break and said, “I have a young man in my eighth-grade class, and I don’t know what to do with his writing. It’s bizarre! Please, could you take a look at it and tell me what I could do with him?” This poor teacher looked genuinely overwhelmed by Tyrell’s particular issues. She knew there was something wonderful about it, but it did not meet any of the standard criteria of conventional, school-sanctioned writing. I took Tyrell’s notebook to read during my lunch break. I cannot recall what labels or classifications he had received, but my memory is that he had been held back a year. His writing astonished me, and I asked if I could meet him and perhaps work with him during my lunch breaks whenever I worked at this school.

I had never seen writing like this from a young person. In the pages of a spiral notebook, in flowing handwriting, spilled page after page of the most complicated, inventive, confused, and often frightfully beautiful prose I had ever seen. In all honesty, if I had not been Lucy Calkins’ student and had not read her brilliant first book, *Lessons from a Child*, I may not have known where to begin, beyond circling obvious spelling and punctuation errors. But I remembered how carefully and respectfully she had made a case study of one young girl’s writing process; how she had taken on the role of researcher, looking for a “window onto a child’s thinking” instead of feeling “exasperated by error” (1983, 56). I wanted to become a researcher, and look upon Tyrell as a fascinating case study, and know that, as Calkins writes, “When we regard our students as unique and fascinating, when they become case-study subjects even while they are students, then the children become our teachers, showing us how they learn” (8). So in order to notice and name the beauty and brilliance in Tyrell’s work, I had to reach into my knowledge of what contemporary writers do with language and text forms and compare that with what I saw in this young man’s writing.

Tyrell made up all kinds of fancy words, such as *accentment* and *ordinarial*. They seemed overreaching in some way, perhaps toward a “Standard English”; as June Jordan says, his words were “stilted, and frequently polysyllabic, simply for the sake of having more syllables” (2002, 161). On several pages, he wrote only two sentences that still impress me with their slanted beauty: “Daybreak is on its curve. The birds glisten and the branches wobble.” As a poet, I would have to revise ten times to get lines so original and mellifluous. First of all, *daybreak*: what fifteen-year-old boy says

“daybreak”? *On its curve*: as if the light bends and echoes the shape of the world. *Birds glisten*: Tyrell flips our expectations for what birds do (chirp, sing, caw?) and draws our attention to a visual aspect, as if morning dew shone on their feathers. *Branches wobble*: again, an idea that surprises. We might think of leaves rustling in the wind or branches swaying in the wind. Here, we don’t know if there’s wind or not, and I’ve never heard of a branch “wobbling” before.

What happens after these opening sentences changes on every page; sometimes a full page of what seems to be fictional prose follows, sometimes just a paragraph. If I were to guess at his writing process, I would say it’s as if he knows that opening sentence, “Daybreak is on its curve” is a keeper, but he has to keep jump-starting the story because he’s never satisfied. In various versions, we are inside a cathedral at a “wedding of somewhat incandescent value.” There is variously a priest or a Father, whose life is either “a burning ship in no mercy” or “a knot you couldn’t quite untangle.” The overall tone of every page, though there are some funny and odd details, is dark and depressed; not much happens, but a lot of dense, intriguing description about subjects that seemed way too mature for a fifteen-year-old boy, if you ask me.

Finally, when I was able to meet with Tyrell, this is what I said: “You are an exquisite writer! You remind me of my favorite writers, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Joyce, Jeanette Winterson, and Samuel Beckett, all at once!” And then I asked him what I was dying to know: “What do you read?”

“The Bible,” Tyrell said.

Of course! The church setting, the dense, old-fashioned prose, and even the kind of dark overtones reminded me of my own experiences with liturgy as a child. I was able to meet with Tyrell only two times. I brought my copy of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* with me and showed him the first page that begins:

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came down from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

—*Introibo ad altare Dei.*

We shouldn’t compare kids writing only to famous (or dead) writers, though. We can show kids that their writing is similar to contemporary short fiction, graphic

novels, digital interactive texts, and other texts that defy all genre rules. When I conferred with Tyrell, there was no Internet, so besides *Ulysses*, I also showed him some pages from an unusual and gorgeous memoir that I was reading at the time. *Under the Eye of the Clock*, narrated in third person by Irish poet, Christopher Nolan, is about growing up with severe cerebral palsy; its radically musical prose won awards and had critics comparing him with James Joyce and Dylan Thomas.

Christened for his cross-bearing, he chalk-white weathered the avenues of his babyhood. But nobody wounded like him could deserve a chance at life. Better dead said the crones, better dead said history, better jump in at the deep end decided her strong soul as she heard his crestfallen cry. His mother it was who treated him as normal, tumbled to his intelligence, tumbled to his eye-signalled talk, tumbled to the hollyberries, green yet, but holding promise of burning in red given time, given home. (1987, 50)

Joyce, Nolan, Brooks, and Virginia Woolf, these are the writers I suggested Tyrell try reading—why not, his writing sounded just like theirs—along with his Bible, in hopes that he could find himself among the greats. Every time I look at the copy I kept, these many years later, I think Tyrell's writing is still the most lyrical and inventive I have ever seen from a young person.

## What If We Build a Writing Curriculum from Strength?

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My hope is that as teachers we respond to all students' writing with astonished, appreciative, awestruck eyes. But we can't create this kind of writing response if we don't first "fall in love" with our students' quirky, unconventional, and culture-infused texts. Writing teacher-extraordinaire, Brenda Ueland, wrote back in 1938 that "The only good teachers . . . are those who love you, who think you are interesting or very important, or wonderfully funny; whose attitude is: 'Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you'" (1987, 8). So what if we were to gather our courage and read student writing wanting to know more? With the belief that our student writers are interesting and "wonderfully funny"? With eyes to see the beauty and

brilliance in our students' writing rather than the lack of topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph?

What if we were to suspend the mandates, real or simply perceived, from our administrations, districts, state, and federal governments, to read deeply, and reread, and attempt to understand what our students are writing?

What if we were able to read and respond to work by children who write so gorgeously and ingeniously that we are at a loss of what to suggest they try to do to improve? And what if we were able to champion even the most spindly pieces of writing by digging in and envisioning what is there, assigning the same generous amounts of time and respect we give to the most difficult of published literature?

Since writing reflects thoughts and feelings, and bares the self more than any other activity that children will undertake in school, it also tends to reflect the differences between children. What if we help create spaces for each and every child behind the writing—kids who have difficulty in school, kids who are quirky and outrageous, kids who don't fit in the boxes that standards, rubrics, and tests have forced us to draw—to shine?

### ***What This Book Will Do***

This book will teach you how to notice, perhaps even love, the hidden beauty in student writing that will help you feel excited by what your students know and can do.

In this book, I suggest ways to build a writing curriculum from strength, rather than from what is missing or what mistakes immediately leap from our students' drafts. Like most adults, when I read kids' writing, I too am almost swallowed up in a sea of punctuation errors, twisted syntax, shifting tenses, and underdeveloped ideas. I have to take a step back and ask myself where this radar for error came from so that I can question and critique it. Then I have to fill my store of alternatives for reading kids' writing. Because when I'm able to read past all those surface problems, what I find in young people's writing is passionate, surprising, and endearing enough to convince me that I have the best job on the earth.

Part 1 of the book invites readers to think along with me about how we have made our knowledge of what we see and say about student writing—our lenses for reading their work. Once we know what our lenses are and where they came from, we can decide which ones are useful for our students, and which might need tweaking

or even discarding. We can also think about adding to the possibilities for response through our own reading and writing, and by inventing fun new ways to talk about the qualities of good writing. With dozens of options for naming what we see, we explore how to respond to student writing, whether in writing conferences, share sessions, in the margins of drafts, in family/student conferences, in blogs or tweets.

In particular, I slow down the writing conference, the one-to-one instructional conversation between teacher and student during a writing workshop. Calkins (1994) described the parts of a writing conference as Research, Decide, and Teach. I want to add a second step—Name—where we listen and look for something a student is doing that we can build from and reinforce, to offer a “lasting compliment,” as Calkins, Hartman, and White call it (2005, 64). We name something specific, something that writers honestly do or at least try to do, that we can see or hear in a student’s piece already. I believe this *naming* portion of the writing conference is not a throwaway moment, not empty praise, or a pat on the head for being a good girl or boy, but in fact the key to *teaching* students something they may not have consciously realized they are doing so that they can build on it and do it again. I find that kids learn more from this naming of their capabilities and that the information goes deeper and stays longer than even my most enlightened minilesson or teaching point in a conference does. When writing feels hard, and believe me, it does for everyone, what pulls you through, what helps you solve all the little knots and puzzle places, and makes you “sit and stay” (as Katie Wood Ray calls the reality of a writer’s work) is not knowing what “nominative absolute” means but knowing what your particular writing passions, talents, and quirks are. You don’t get true, fire-in-the-belly energy for writing because you fear getting a bad grade but because you have something to say and your own way of saying it.

In this book, I hope to expand a thinking and feeling for diversity in writing, so that we can find and name the particular voice that students send out to the world every time they put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, rather than narrow the possibilities for writing that most evaluation and grading does. I hope to move toward a culturally accepting practice, a liberal kind of growth, rather than the anemic categories that most school-sanctioned assessment practices would allow.

In Part 2 of the book, I read pieces of student writing through the lens of someone who writes as often as possible and reads a variety of texts. Novelist Toni Morrison (2006, 174) says that there is a difference between reading as a skill and reading as

an *art*. To read like an artist, she says, involves “digging for the hidden, questioning or relishing the choices the author made, . . . eager to envision what is there.” I like to apply this idea to reading student writing. I like to try to imagine that in the scrawniest, most illegible piece of writing, I will be able to find what that student was meaning to say, though it may be hidden from me at first.

Chapters 6 and 7 invite readers to honor student writing the way we would honor a novel by Toni Morrison, Jonathan Safran Foer, or Barbara Kingsolver. Travel with me as I dig into and envision pieces written by young, unseasoned writers, the way we would inquire our way into a poem by Nikki Giovanni, Julia Alvarez, Jimmy Santiago Baca, or Naomi Shihab Nye, and try to read it like an artist, as Toni Morrison says. Perhaps this way of reading can renew our *faith*, as Donald Murray names it, that all of our students “have something to say and a language in which to say it” (1982, 160). “I hear voices from my students they have never heard from themselves. I find they are authorities on subjects they think ordinary. Sometimes I lose that faith,” Murray writes, “but if I regain it and do not interfere, my students do write and I begin to hear things that need saying said well” (160). After I name several positive aspects of each piece of writing, I offer two or three directions for what I might teach the writer how to do next in writing if he or she were my student.

In Chapter 8, I present practical ideas for reading student work with colleagues in order to help each other expand the horizons for what to see and say about students’ writing. I offer specific guidelines and protocols for how to read the writing, along with grids or templates for storing what everyone finds so that you can take the comments immediately back to your students. In the final chapters, I explore options to writing response through positive assessment and through the ultimate in response: writing celebrations.

### ***What This Book Will Teach***

This book will teach you new ways to name what you see in student writing so that it motivates kids to want to write more and revise for readers.

Some student writing, especially in middle and high school, gets labeled “below grade level” or scored with a 1 on a four-point scale because its syntax differs from conventional English or it struggles with a shape or logical order that helps readers uncover the meaning. Also, much student writing concerns topics we may dislike

or prefer not to read about, like replays of cartoons and video games, blow-by-blow descriptions of soccer games, and graphic stories of desperate home lives that are beyond our imaginations. So when we confer with these writers or remark with our pens in the margins of their papers, we might have to work to find specific, positive things to say. But find them, we must. “In so many ways we are creations of language, the things that people have said to us, the things they tell us we are,” says poet Linda Hogan (2001, 121), whose memoir, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, explores pain and healing inside her personal and Native American tribal history. I agree with Hogan that the language we use with our students has the power to create who they become as writers. I know that telling a young person that her writing voice slides around your shoulders and warms you is language that might create her as a writer and a person eager to learn more. Continually naming the same child as “low-performing” on state writing tests is language that might construct her as a failure for the rest of her life.

Sometimes I notice when I speak appreciatively of student writing, people have a look on their face that seems to say, “Where is she coming up with this stuff?” I think I learned ways of talking about student writing from reading and taking writing classes in which I learned from others how to talk about writing. I learned it, too, because I often have to work to see the value in my own writing. While these experiences help me know how to make visible what often seems, at first glance, invisible, I know that all teachers can learn to read like writers, to have more informed lenses, and to expand their vocabulary for talking about writing. This book will help provide that new language.

My purpose in this book is to demonstrate that student writers often perform remarkable feats in the craft of writing, from the macro level of content and organization, to the micro level of sentences, images, and word choice, precisely *because* they are young, unpracticed writers. They haven’t yet conformed to notions of conventional syntax or fixed and formulaic genre structures, so their writing sounds fresh and original, ahead of its time, avant-garde you could even say. Pablo Picasso apparently said that every child is an artist. He also claimed that it took him four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child. As a writer of poetry and nonfiction, I understand that desire for the unbridled imagination of a child. I also admire, almost envy, the inventive ways that children use language. I believe that if we acquire content knowledge about how to read and talk about writing, we

can begin to appreciate the gifts of childlike expression. Using the discourse of artists rather than the more abstract and often damaging evaluations fostered by tests, letter grades, and hyperattention to surface conventions, we will be able to notice and name the specific technique each student is using. Students with writing difficulties feel better about writing and want to keep doing it when they have a sense of what they do particularly well. Strong writers more readily take risks with their writing by trying new styles, new genres, and new sophisticated techniques when they have some names for their attempts and accomplishments. All of our students will have a place in this community of writers we build in our classrooms—a community that will rise from the earth and face all its sources of inspiration.



## What Can We See in Student Writing When We Read It with Colleagues?

I have a mental picture, perhaps you recognize a similar image, of the lonely English teacher at home in front of the television, or on the bus or subway to and from work, poring over endless, fabulously dull or pompous essays, hunting for errors and marking in margins the same words over and over: *vague*, *elaborate*, *wordy*, or my favorite, *AWK*. Once in awhile, a fresh and cleverly written essay pops out of the stack and this teacher sits back to read it, a little smile or even a giggle passes his or her lips, and after reading it, he or she makes a nice big A in the upper-right corner, with one of these words: *Coherent!* *Cohesive!* *Cogent!* *Well-written!*

What a stereotypical and uncomplicated view of the person responsible to teach hordes of young persons to write in an organized, grammatical, and meaningful way. But I know the portrait is not too far removed from reality because at different points of my adulthood, I have been that lonely English teacher; until I met and worked with Lucy Calkins and a group of brilliant writers and educators at Teachers College Reading and Writing Project in New York City, and until I read great books about assessment and response to writing such as Mina Shaughnessy's *Error and Expectations*, and Jane Hansen's *When Writers Read*, I did not realize I had options for how to respond to writing. I hated to witness myself reading and marking papers like that, but what alternative did I have? It was not how the poets, essayists, and novelists in my college writing courses talked and wrote about each other's writing, but it was how my own high school and college essays were graded, so I was simply playing teacher, exactly as I had when I was seven years old, making the kids on my block do homework in my little classroom in our den. My favorite part of this play teaching was checking the spelling quizzes I gave and marking incorrect answers

with a big red X. (It's a wonder I had any friends at all in my neighborhood—what a bossy-head I was!)

The problem with my way of marking papers as a salary earning, adult teacher was that the kids who got the “well-written” on their paper felt great. Perhaps they could bank this A away with all the other kudos they've received throughout their years in school. They may not have completely understood what they did to deserve this reward, but so what? It felt great to get one. The kids whose papers radiated red ink, who read my margin comments and looked furtively back and forth from those comments to their writing, completely flummoxed by most of the marginalia, felt defeated and possibly angry—frustrated, at the least.

While we have learned some fine alternatives, such as portfolio collections, self-assessment surveys, and to some extent, rubrics, to the red ink “AWK” in the margin, most of us have a long way to go toward creating assessments that *teach* writing rather than sort, humiliate, and confuse. The kids who have difficulties with conventional language syntax and text structures try so hard to follow directions, to make their writing look and sound like the number 4, exemplary essay on the state writing test, and they often think they have done a pretty good job. But once again, they have missed the cues and failed to conform, and this becomes one more notch in their belts of failure. They will avoid writing in school and as adults because they will always have those red-penned comments and those numerical scores in their heads as they try to compose their thoughts and feelings on paper.

## Alternatives for Reading Student Writing

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What we need are alternative tools and structures for noticing and naming what our students are doing as writers that take into account writers' strengths and individual gifts and build teaching on those, instead of on deficits. If possible, we should practice that noticing and naming activity with colleagues. Four eyes are better than two, and eight, twelve, twenty eyes can begin to paint a magnificently rich portrait of a young person as a writer, when those eyes are focused on the beauty and brilliance in sample student pieces.

What follows are some suggestions for enacting this powerful work of reading student writing with grade-level colleagues or as a whole-school, whole-faculty

pursuit. At the end of the book, I include several blank templates that might prove useful as a way to train the eyes where to look and what to look for. I also suggest places to go for more in-depth information about looking at all kinds of student work, as there are whole books, websites, and education groups devoted to this important cause. Finally, I offer suggestions for structures inside the classroom for students to learn how to look at and talk about each other's work in meaningful and productive ways in writing partnerships and writing groups.

But first, here are some ground rules to keep in mind for how to read student writing, no matter what the occasion and no matter if you are alone or with colleagues:

1. Take time outside of writing workshop to read your students' writing. I used to take ten notebooks or writing folders home every Friday and my Saturday morning ritual involved downing a pot of coffee and delighting in my kids' words. Other teachers grab fifteen minutes during planning periods, at lunch or after school, to spend extra time with one student's writing.
2. Reread student writing exactly as you would a difficult poem or prose text, expecting that meaning exists there, even if you can't grasp it immediately.
3. Respond first as a human being. As these teachers from my summer institute section blessedly reminded our group: Ed Shumley said, "It's just a communication between people. If you think of it like that, you're more apt to respond in a human way." You could say, as Claudia Vecchio did, "Your writing makes me want to respond like a reader—to just put my teacher self aside." Or as Melissa did: "That scar has its own story and you told it." Or as Emily Sobczuk said, "Your writing makes me want to run off and write about my own memories." Or as Cheryl Tyler said, "These words are gentle, just like you."
4. Read with sticky notes on hand, or if using a copy of the original, mark in the margins, underline, circle, and star arresting places. Write encouraging words. These will carry long-lasting weight and will motivate your kids to write more and care about their writing.
5. As often as possible, read and discuss student writing with colleagues. Many eyes make reading easier and more fun.

6. Be ready to be surprised. Be open to laugh, or cry, or feel your heart move, as one human being who has been trusted with the heart and soul of another human being.

### Opportunities for Reading Student Writing

- Alone, with only your mind and a pen and sticky notes
- With an individual student beside you to explain her thinking about her process and her intentions (for much more about conferring into student intentions, see Carl Anderson's *How's It Going?* [2000] and *Assessing Writers* [2005])
- With a small group of students, again, ready and willing to explain their thinking and intentions
- With a partner teacher
- With grade-level teachers, across-grade level or discipline area faculty members and administrators, university researchers, writers

## Structures for Reading Student Writing with Colleagues

### Partner Teacher

As a great partner or friend can make any life situation more tolerable and easier to handle, a teaching partner, or school friend, can add energy, knowledge, and humor to the art of reading and assessing student writing. We all need at least one like-minded colleague in our school buildings or else we can grow lonely and disparaged about the work of teaching. We begin mumbling to ourselves and wondering, "Am I crazy . . . or is this truly happening?" and a teaching buddy can assure us that yes, it (whatever *it* is) is indeed happening!

Many teachers I know come to crave time to be with their teaching partners to look at kids' work and talk about the teaching of writing. Sometimes teachers share suggestions of how to help struggling writers, but just as often, they ask how to teach the "superstar" writers in the class—you know, the ones for whom clever language and ideas come as easily as breathing. How can we help those writers stretch as well?

### Grade-Level, Across-Grade-Level, and Across-Discipline-Area Groups

In many elementary and middle schools I work with, structures are in place for grade-level articulation groups or professional learning communities to meet at least once a month, if not weekly. These groups are quite busy with agenda items concerning all the discipline areas, with data entry for benchmark testing, with requests from administrations and plans for schoolwide celebrations and performances. But still, groups of teachers realize that scheduling time to look at student writing across the year can yield tremendous bounty—from ideas for genre minilessons to specific teaching content for writing conferences. What if these groups made a routine to read and talk about a few pieces of student writing every time they meet?

I want to make a plug here for creating vertical, across-grade-level, even across-discipline-area groups for looking at student work. Music, art, gym, and content-area teachers can offer valuable insights about the learning habits and strengths of our students that make us wonder sometimes if we are talking about the same child. Teachers of language arts and English classes have been amazed at what student writing looks like at different age levels. For one thing, upper-grade teachers are often impressed with the voice, intelligence, and emotional honesty in young kids' work. Primary teachers can see where their students are going—how thinking on the page deepens and fits into ever more complicated structures. They can learn what upper-grade teachers pay attention to, and what they might do to help lay the groundwork for that. Interestingly, teachers of different grade levels can come to discover that they all teach things like commas, paragraphing, and the spelling of *there*, *their*, and *they're* every single year and still, in twelfth grade, kids struggle with those concepts. We can no longer blame any particular grade level but must come to the conclusion that mastery of some complex language and text features may not come in a given grade or at a certain age, or may come much later in the literacy learning journey.

One last obvious benefit of across-grade collaboration is that when individual kids need specific help with basic skills or with more sophisticated strategies that we feel unprepared to explain, the teachers of older or younger kids might have excellent ideas that can help.

## Study Groups

I've been privileged to be a member and also a facilitator of dozens of teacher and administrator study groups. Most of these met in a lovely school library. Other groups met outside of members' schools, in university classrooms, in public libraries, and in members' houses. I know of a group of teachers in Austin, Texas, that meets to talk about curriculum and planning in a coffeeshop every Saturday morning. Often, these groups receive support from school and district administrations, special grants, or local writing projects and networks. In some cases, teachers were paid small stipends to attend, but again, as with the formal and informal partnerships that teachers form inside schools, these study groups felt to their members like lifelines in the rushing current of daily teaching, and they attended without monetary compensation because they wanted to.

I've participated in and led study groups that include members from outside schools. Occasionally, a guest writer might join a meeting and offer insights from his or her professional experience. Some districts take advantage of their proximity to colleges and universities to partner with education professors and their students in study groups or in classes that meet inside schools and use classrooms as learning sites. If your school does not participate in university partnerships, and this idea interests you, please, contact the literacy department at your local college and ask if you could get involved in some kind of study or relationship. Most literacy and language professors I know are eagerly searching for willing teachers and classrooms in which to do research.

Study groups can form around any topic imaginable, some even become book clubs and writing groups for teachers' personal work. I'm focusing this section specifically on groups that organize around reading student writing to offer another option for collaborative work for the ultimate benefit of all students. What follows is an example of what one study group I've participated in looks like.

In Austin, Texas, where I live, some teachers from different schools gather once a month after school to read student writing and to talk about what they see and how to help their students. These teachers are not paid for their time, unfortunately, and they all have to drive some distance to reach the meeting place, but the benefits

of their collaboration give them the will and energy to continue meeting. They are all teachers of students who are English language learners (ELLs) in third to eighth grade. These teachers put a piece of student writing on an overhead projector or beneath a document camera so that everyone's eyes can be on the text at once. Then they read it, notice what the student is doing well, and what they might teach next for that individual student.

Some of the teachers are fluent Spanish speakers and others are not. They help each other notice the ways in which their students, mostly Spanish speakers, compose sentences that reflect Spanish grammar and syntax. This is profound work. To look at a sentence written by a young person who is learning a new language, in some cases, the third or fourth language, and to be able to name how that sentence conforms perfectly to Spanish syntax, even though it sounds odd according to English syntax, recognizes and appreciates what that student knows. I remember that the first time someone pointed this out, we all responded with a gasp; our eyes were opened and a new way of reading student writing became possible. A fifth grader named Benito had written this first sentence of his personal narrative about going to Zilker Park in Austin: "At Zilker Park there is a ocean but little water."

As a group, we puzzled over this sentence for several minutes. For one thing, there certainly is not an ocean anywhere in or around Austin, Texas, so that threw us off. Finally, someone noticed that Benito had scribbled in the word *whit* [with], so that the sentence could read: "At Zilker Park there is a ocean with little water." One of the bilingual teachers suddenly blurted out, "Oh! He might mean *lake* or *pond* but not have that word yet. So he's trying to describe a body of water that maybe looks almost as big as an ocean to him, but it has less water!" We all learned that day about how language learners will often use circumlocutions, describe in a roundabout way, when they cannot reach for the word that they want. Benito's teacher, Kristel Nichols, was sensitive enough not to instantly mark this as incorrect, but rather to ask him to say more about the place. We often become overly concerned with the idea that there is exactly one word or phrase to say things. While "an ocean with less water" might be a technically or scientifically incorrect name for a lake or pond (and by the way, the body of water in Zilker Park that Benito refers to is called "Barton Springs," and it looks like and functions as an enormous swimming pool, so it is variously called springs, pool, pond, and lake), his circumlocution works perfectly well in a personal narrative, and in fact is quite a lovely, poetic way to describe this place.

## *Formalized Protocol for Looking at Student Work*

Several ongoing programs and centers provide information, professional development, and paper and online materials for looking at student work. While most of these resources are geared to looking across discipline-area products and processes, most can easily be tweaked to fit writing specifically. What I like about the values and procedures of these different initiatives is that most suggest gathering entire school faculties and communities around a student(s) portfolio of work from every discipline. The purpose is not to evaluate or grade, but to learn who this young person is; what gifts and strengths he or she possesses; what we can do as a *faculty* or *school community* to help him or her fit in and excel.

In the next few pages, I discuss briefly the sources I know of and think are extraordinary for providing guidance and tools for looking at student work in order to benefit all students.

### **“The Descriptive Review,” Patricia F. Carini, author and educator**

I have read about Pat Carini’s work and watched some demonstrations of the process she devised for systematically looking at students’ learning and work. Carini may be one of the biggest influences on the growth and development of the idea of focusing on how students go about learning and making something instead of instantly evaluating and passing judgment on what he or she did. Carini designed something called the “Descriptive Review of the Child,” which leans on the knowledge and experience that everyone in the home, school, and community have about a child, so that each child emerges as a complex being with multiple strengths and attitudes. She calls on teachers and families to truly look at and listen to their children, to recognize their moods and gestures, their full selves. Carini’s words and ideas are profoundly elegant, beautiful, and important for parents and guardians, and all the adults responsible for the lives of children.

For a presentation of Carini’s philosophy and descriptive processes, I suggest reading *From Another Angle: Children’s Strengths and School Standards: The Prospect Center’s Descriptive Review of the Child*, edited by Margaret Himley, with Patricia Carini (2000). The book includes the extremely detailed stories of the descriptive reviews of three students in primary, fourth grade and high school, with samples of their work and comments from their presenting teachers.

## National School Reform Faculty

National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) is a professional development initiative that includes concepts of Facilitative Leadership and Critical Friends Groups (CFG). Critical Friendships are a specific type of learning committee that uses formal protocols to help educators collaborate on improving practice. Located at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana, NSRF offers many resources at its physical location and online ([nsrfharmony.org](http://nsrfharmony.org)) for schools wishing to form CFGs to help improve teaching practices for the benefit of students. While NSRF provides several formal work review protocols, I also know schools that have modified the NSRF forms to fit their own sites and circumstances. Elaine Bakke, a literacy coach in Livingston, New Jersey, shared with me that they began the school year using the protocol called “ATLAS: Learning from Student Work,” available on the NSRF website.

Here is an example of a semiformal process for looking at student writing that I borrowed and modified a bit from one of the protocol resources on the NSRF website:

1. A teacher copies and distributes a collection (preferably) of student work that she wishes to submit to group feedback. Her initial question might be, what do you notice?
2. The teacher removes herself from the conversation, taking notes on what her colleagues say but not commenting until the very end of the process.
3. First round: Teachers respond, pointing out as many positive features as possible.
4. Second round: Teachers suggest teaching points to help the student grow as a writer.
5. Third round: The student’s teacher finally responds, filling in background information on the student, asking questions, and deciding to follow through with suggestions.

A variation on this approach might be that the initiating teacher fills in background information about the student first (he or she is an ELL, has repeated a grade, is new to the school), if that needs to be taken into account before teachers begin to comment on the writing.

## Looking at Student Work Website

Looking at Student Work (LASW, [www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org)) is a fantastic website for links to books, articles, videos, and protocols devoted to the careful and close examination of

student work in a variety of contexts and for numerous purposes. According to the Welcome page, LASW is “an association of individuals and educational organizations that focus on looking at student work to strengthen connections between instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of school life to students’ learning.” The collaborative formed out of a meeting in 1998 hosted by the Chicago Learning Collaborative and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (which was the parent organization of NSRF).

## Strategies for Reading Student Writing

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Remember that my impassioned plea in this book is that as teachers of writing, we should give the same amount of time, respect, and attitude of inquiry into the mystery in our students’ writing that we would give to a published novel, poem, or feature article. Yes, we notice misspelled words, and absolutely, we trip over sentences that don’t flow in conventional, logical patterns. But we have decided to take a different stance: to notice the surprises, the brilliance, and the unique tone and signature style of even the most plain or scrawny or meandering piece of student writing.

Whether you are working alone to read your students’ writing over a cup of coffee on Saturday morning, or you are lucky to have found a partner teacher or group of colleagues to read it with you, it will help to have a strategy that works best for you to help read for strength first and areas to teach second.

### *Using the General Reading Protocol Alongside Student Writing*

For a basic and simple approach to reading student writing, many teachers have gainfully applied my general reading protocol (Appendix A) for published texts (as discussed in Chapter 3) to their students’ writing. I like this approach because it lays the exact same process on top of both published and student texts, thereby giving us practice and experience in treating them as equals. What I wish to add to the protocol in the context of reading student writing is a suggestion to elect a facilitator of the group who can keep time and conversation flowing. I recommend the facilitator set a timer or watch the clock and allow five to ten minutes for positive comments (for the first three items on the protocol) about student work. From experience, I know

this is not so easy to do! I recognize that teachers have zero time in their schedules and they long for help to know what to teach, especially to kids who have difficulties with writing. You will need to trust me here until you witness it for yourselves: time spent looking at student work with positive eyes yields enough teaching content for weeks. Remember that a precise naming of what an individual student is doing well is valuable teaching, and we should continually lay that foundation; otherwise, it will not matter if we have 100 clever teaching points and suggestions in our magnificent minilessons, students who have difficulties will not hear or use them because they do not address individual writers.

As described in Chapter 3, you can place the general reading protocol (Appendix A) beside student writing and practice the same sequence, first finding places you admire or places that remind you of your own feelings and life experiences. You may need to reread all or parts of student writing (alone or with colleagues). If you have a copy of the original, you can underline, write questions in the margins, and prepare to talk with your reading partner or grade-level or faculty group. Share out parts that make you laugh out loud or that pull up grief, or that make you reconsider a long-held notion. Then tell your students about the compliments and positive responses of other adults.

### ***Templates for Looking at Student Writing***

Aside from a protocol for helping to keep our focus *positive* first, it can help to have a template that keeps track of all the things we're noticing and thinking as we read student writing. Some teachers have worried that it is too difficult *not* to see grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors, so I've included a box to park those concerns while we continue looking at what students do well in their writing. Many groups of teachers have gamely practiced using some variation of the template in Figures 8–1 (reproducible version in Appendix C for writing from the whole class and Appendix D for individual student writers). Teachers have given me excellent feedback on how they could imagine using the template, and have alerted me to its strengths and gaps, as well as places to revise, and the version printed here reflects all their helpful comments.

| Research and Name                                  |                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Going Well                                         | Questions for Class                     |
| Decide                                             |                                         |
| Writing Areas to Grow                              | Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation Concerns |
| Teach                                              |                                         |
| Next Minilesson<br><i>What:</i><br><br><i>How:</i> | In Future                               |

**Figure 8–1** Looking at Whole-Class Writing

### Examples of What Might Go into Template Boxes

What follows is a brief description of what I mean by the labels inside each box of the template and a few examples of things that teachers in my workshop presentations have noticed and named as we looked at student writing together. Taken as a whole, the boxes provide information for the big moves of a writing conference: *Research* what the class/student knows and does well; *name* one or two of those things before you do anything else; *decide* what you feel is most important to address with the class/student from the boxes in the middle containing items of concern, *teach* one of them now, and save others for future conferences.

1. *Going Well*: This box contains only positive comments. I encourage teachers to push past surface features like paragraphs and subject/verb agreement, and labels from writing rubrics, like *sequenced*, *organized*, and *detailed* to more descriptive language such as found in Chapters 4 and 5.

Some examples: purposeful repetition; ending is surprising and sad; music in the combined languages of Spanish and English; sounds like a young adult novel; can see the relationship between the father and son; uses anecdotes that teenagers will relate to as support for the facts; intones truth with a voice like the principal/president/Bible; sounds like prose poetry with rap undertones.

2. *Questions for Author*: This box is a place to capture any questions about process or content that might arise as you read a student's text.

Some examples: What inspired you to write this? How do you envision this piece continuing? How do you imagine this ending connecting to the title and beginning? What kinds of revision have you done? How old is your main character? Who are you arguing with in this essay? What point are you trying to make?

3. *Writing Areas to Grow*: This box might contain both big concepts about writing, as well as items that pertain to a specific text.

Some examples: reread to revise; increase stamina; figure out what you really want to say; describe what that character is thinking and how his body might feel as he hits the winning home run; practice breaking the lines of this poem several ways for different meanings and rhythms; brainstorm some possible ways to support your big idea or thesis.

4. *Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation Concerns*: I think this box is self-explanatory, and it will contain whatever surface features shout from the page. One group of high school teachers decided to revise *concerns* to *urgencies*. Have at it!
5. *Next Conference*: After you have listed several items in the writing areas to grow and grammar concerns boxes, you can look over them and decide which *one* (perhaps another item if it's easy to tuck in as you talk) to broach in your next conference with the class/student. Do not try to teach everything you listed in those boxes. You'll have this sheet on file, perhaps in a conferring binder, ready to look at again, should you need to remind yourself what else you meant to teach that class/student. Notice I've included a place for you to decide not only *what* to teach, but *how*: explain, demonstrate, look at mentor texts together, send student to another member of the class to see what advice he or she could give.

Some examples: What—fiction is about growth and change in main character; how—talk about the character changing in class read-aloud book or in student's

independent reading book. What—feature articles take on an enthusiastic teaching voice; how—practice out loud with me—tell me two fascinating ideas about electric guitars.

6. *In Future*: Again, this label is self-explanatory, and it can house whatever items from previous boxes that seem worth teaching next or in the near future. It helps if the issues for future teaching are broad, since you may not get to this student for awhile, and she may have moved on to a new genre or part of the writing process completely.

I suggest that we plan once a month to stack all our students' writing and skim through it using the template called Looking at Whole-Class Writing (Figure 8–1 and Appendix C). The stack might consist, at the beginning of the year, of just our students' writer's notebooks. Later, the stack might include drafts of a genre study—short fiction, for instance. Though we can also use the templates to look at final products of a writing unit, be advised that I do *not* mean for these templates to be evaluative. They are not rubrics that direct us to look for specific, particular text features, but rather lead us to notice and name things in our students' writing that might fall outside any rigid genre guidelines or list of conventions. We use the protocols and templates in this book to be *surprised* by brilliance. They can help train our eyes until seeing hidden gems becomes second nature, until we *expect* to see it, and therefore, we do. To help that happen, I suggest also trying the template variations in Figure 8–2 and Appendix E, which can function as a deliberately organized process toward becoming a different reader of student work.

Looking first at the whole-class stack of writing allows us to scan and skim across kids' writing to get the gist or take the temperature of how the majority of students are doing. Afterward, we can focus on individual students using the template Looking at Individual Student Writing (Appendix D).

### ***A Detailed Protocol for Looking at Student Writing***

Earlier, I described using a general reading protocol (Appendix A) for looking at student writing. Here, I offer a more detailed protocol (outlined here and included as a reproducible version in Appendix G). This detailed protocol provides an opportunity

|                                                                                                                                           |             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Student Name: _____                                                                                                                       | Date: _____ |
| Unit of Study: _____                                                                                                                      |             |
| Initial Thoughts (A parking lot for things that immediately occur to you)                                                                 |             |
| Lens: _____ (e.g., voice, structure, specific genre features. Remember to change your stance toward the positive.)                        |             |
| New Language to Name What I See (from ideas in Chapters 4 and 5)                                                                          |             |
| New Directions to Take (What to teach the class as <i>writers</i> rather than surface features of the writing.)<br>1.<br><br>2.<br><br>3. |             |

Figure 8–2 Looking at Whole-Class Writing (Variation)

to read some humorous, surprising, and beautiful bits of writing out loud to the group, an activity that has amazed groups of teachers around the country when they gave themselves over to finding hidden gems in their students' writing. Again, this activity works best if someone will facilitate and keep a careful watch on the clock. The activity can take anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour, depending on how many minutes you give to each item. I suggest *not* to shorten the minutes of the first step spent looking for what students are doing well; this is the hardest part for many of us and it takes time to relax, to read and reread, and to let the kids' delightful voices wash over us. This protocol makes use of the templates in Appendices C and D.

### Whole-Class Writing

1. Skim across a batch of student writing from your whole class. It might be everyone's writer's notebooks or writing folders, complete with drafts, or everyone's final pieces, or benchmark assessment pieces.
2. For ten full minutes, look for responses to put *only* into the box labeled "Going Well" found in the template in Figure 8–1 and Appendix C. (For some teachers with generous spirits and/or knowledge of what to call the things they admired, the "Going Well" box was too small!)
3. For five minutes, group members read out loud a line or a sentence or two that they admire from the writing pieces. Do not preface the sentences with explanations or discuss it afterward. There will be time for that in the next steps of the protocol. This part should sound like a choral performance of powerful language, so belt these lines out with full, appreciative voices.
4. For five minutes, share out and discuss items teachers find as they look through the lens of what is going well for their student writers. Make this language public on charts or document camera projections because this helps "grow" what is possible to say for the whole group.
5. For another ten minutes, teachers can work alone or with a partner to fill in the other boxes on the template.
6. For the next ten minutes, teachers can again share out and discuss with the whole group things they are finding to put in the other boxes of the template.

# Individual Student Writing

For a longer meeting or to focus directly on one particular student you can repeat the process I just outlined, using the template in Figure 8–3 and Appendix D (Looking at Individual Student Writing). If you are doing this work at a faculty meeting or in a situation where time is quite limited, I suggest you choose just one student. I usually invite teachers to find a student who is a mystery to them, a source of frustration or discouragement because now they will have help from fellow teachers to find beauty in the writing and come up with ways to name it. The frustration need not be that a student has difficulties making paragraphs or enjoys sprinkling in commas every third word, or uses text-messaging abbreviations, but because the student can write circles around all of us and we are at a loss for how to push him or her.

A benefit to looking at student writing with colleagues is that we can help each other develop new language for naming what our students do well, and take the filled-in templates directly back to share with our kids or to use in conferences with individual writers.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Genre or Unit of Study: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

| Research and Name                |                                         |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Going Well                       | Questions for Author                    |
| Decide                           |                                         |
| Writing Areas to Grow            | Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation Concerns |
| Teach                            |                                         |
| Next Conference<br>What:<br>How: | In Future                               |

Figure 8–3 Looking at Individual Student Writing

# Structures for Kids Reading and Talking About Each Other's Writing

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## *Writing Partners*

I am the luckiest writer I know because I live in the same house with my writing partner/friend/buddy/husband! Randy and I have written speeches and workshop presentations together, and we co-authored our book, *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action* (2001). We have a way of working together forged from years of experience that began when we were both doctoral students at Teachers College, Columbia University. When other couples ask us how we can possibly do this, we smile knowingly and answer that at times it wasn't easy, but what we accomplished overall has been rich and meaningful for both of us.

Because we have composed, revised, and published texts together, we have a vivid sense of each other as writers. We know each other's particular strengths and we know areas that always need tweaking. We send each other to book and article resources; we share student writing and stories of classrooms. We respect each other's writing talents and knowledge so much that we are often each other's first reader of any book and article drafts that we send out. We trust each other and follow each other's advice much (though not all) of the time. We know that we can always count on each other to gush over the good spots (I always write "Yummy!" in the margins of Randy's work), and suggest alternative words, phrases, and structures for the places that need work.

Over my history as a writer, I have also had special poetry friends, memoir and fiction readers. Again, in the years I was writing those kinds of texts, I could not imagine doing so without my friends by my side, inspiring me to write better, seeing strengths I didn't know I had, and then offering sound, constructive advice for areas I needed help with. Since I have leaned on my fellow writers so heavily over all the decades I've been a writer, I know how crucial these relationships can be. I want to offer this same inspiring and practical relationship to my students, so that they might feel the power of a writing friend. We want our students to do well, so we have to demonstrate and teach what being a good writing partner means, and then we have to give them time to practice and time to grow into the role of the writing

partner. Here are some things to think about and try when introducing and maintaining writing partnerships:

- Invite an actual writing friend to come to your class to talk about how the two of you provide writing help for each other.
- Show a piece of your own writing that received helpful comments written in the margins or in a letter or email, or jot down verbal comments that someone made about your piece. Talk about what you learned, and what you revised as a result of someone's comments.
- In a minilesson, demonstrate with a student volunteer what a "bad" partner looks and sounds like. I have acted out, in a real drama queen way, looking around the room while my partner reads her piece; getting distracted by what someone in the room is doing or saying; and responding with a shrug, a grunt, or an unhelpful, "It's good."
- Introduce the simplified reading protocol in Appendix H for kids to use with their writing partners. Provide time for kids to practice using it.
- Demonstrate how to be a strong, helpful partner across more than one minilesson and come at the idea from different angles. For instance, we can model with our student volunteer how to look at our partner and listen closely; how to notice something we love first, and ask questions like: "What part would you like me to look at/listen to?" "Where are you having difficulties?"

As partnerships are maintained over a length of time, the exploratory, beginner-type questions drop away. The writing partners come to know each other's work. They become braver about admitting difficulties to their friends, such as "I suck at dialogue." They learn how to offer guidance, such as "Did you ever find another anecdote for your feature article?"

### **Writing Groups**

The only thing better than a wonderful writing partner is a whole *group* of writing friends. Most writers I know have belonged to a writing group at one time or another. Groups range from extremely formal types, with applications for membership and strict rules for conducting business, to very casual get-togethers to offer cheerleading

and companionship, gourmet food, and often, wine! Finding the right group can be, in the outside world, a matter of trial and error. Beginning in college, I have belonged to several writing groups. Typically, we were all serious writers, wanting and needing critical eyes on our work because we all wanted to be published. There were plenty of big egos in every group, and there was often an undercurrent of competition. Our comments could sometimes seem rather cruel, and at least once, I cried over someone's insensitivity. We acted that way because we had not been taught differently! At this stage in my life, I long for more openhearted support in a writing group. I still need critical and educated eyes on my writing, but I want it to come with a good dollop of warmth, kindness, and especially, humor. As traveling for work keeps me away from home a lot, I've tried an online writing group, but nothing substitutes for the gasps, laughter, tears, and cheers of a live audience for writing.

Lucky kids in our classrooms. They don't have to go searching the classifieds or the Internet for local writing groups. They don't have to drive any distances to get to the meeting, and they don't have to worry about time or travel schedules. All our students have to do is practice and learn how to be strong, supportive group members.

I teach students how to be in writing groups by following the same ideas I listed for teaching about partnerships. Once the groups are in motion and I find some predictable social and organizational obstacles as I confer with them, I lean more heavily on the kids to watch and learn from each other. I ask for a volunteer group to carry on a conversation in front of the other students (sometimes called a "fishbowl" conversation), where the classroom audience forms a circle around the demonstration group and observes everything from how the group begins, how they take turns, ask each other clarifying questions, offer positive, collegial advice and suggestions, and so on.

Teachers often wonder how kids will know what to say about each other's writing, beyond "I like the part," or "where did you get the idea to write this?" I suggest that you wait to form writing groups until after kids have been with you for a few months and have developed some language about writing from your minilessons and conferences. Writing group members might also use Appendix H for their response group work and practice responding first to what they admire and what moves them and then naming it with language that resonates for them.

After my Teachers College summer institute participants took our field trip to find great language on the backs of books at the Columbia University bookstore (see Chapter 5), Roxanna Lopez thought her kids could also go on a field trip, or a

“language treasure hunt” to the school library. Danielle Howard imagined making a bulletin board full of elevated phrases from book blurbs to immerse her students in the language of specific compliments to give their partners and groups that build up confidence while also pointing out qualities their friends might not have been aware of in their own writing.

Finally, I teach kids directly, all year long, to keep running lists of questions to bring to a writing conference with me, to a partnership, or to a peer group, and to come prepared with writing puzzles they need help solving or small sections they would like to read out loud to an audience to get feedback.

## How Administrators, Literacy Coaches, and Instructional Leaders Can Help Support This Work

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Devoted and passionate teachers will always find the time, place, and resources to do the work they believe will help their students whether or not they are provided these things. However, such teachers end up feeling frustrated and exhausted when they have to proceed without administrator support, and research shows that these talented and dedicated teachers leave the classroom in droves. Administrators can stem the bleeding tide of great teachers by providing physical and emotional support for their important work that will reap benefits beyond any one-day professional development or any binder full of assessment materials. Here are some ideas for carving time and space for teachers to gather together to look at student writing. In every situation, of course, the work will improve dramatically if instructional leaders, coaches, principals, and department chairs are present and working alongside classroom teachers. In school buildings where administrators carve out time to visit classrooms to talk with students about their literacy learning, not as supervisors making judgments, but as adults who also read and write, kids make remarkable progress in their literacy learning and their general motivation and well-being in school. Here are several suggestions for supporting faculty members working collaboratively to help improve teaching practice and student learning:

- Provide time for teachers to have grade-level meetings and study groups around reading student writing. Study groups should be interest- and topic-driven. They

might meet only once a month (dates and times should be prearranged and remain unchanged) and last no longer than two hours. A facilitator can gather consensus about what to study, what research and data collection to perform in classrooms, and what and how much to read (an article, a single chapter in a professional book) before the next scheduled meeting.

- Set up a several weeks-long course with noticing and naming what their students know as writers as the central topic. Jen Jeffries, an inventive literacy coach at PS 172, Brooklyn, New York, invited teachers to each bring the work of one student to the meeting, and get help naming the writing strengths of that student from all the positive eyes around the table. Then teachers practiced saying those positive things to the student over the following weeks, and brought the stories and new sample writing to the next meeting to relate how it went and to look for signs of growth in the new writing pieces.
- Support teachers and coaches attending professional workshops and conferences. Every professional person spends some amount of her work life continuing to learn about her craft and profession. Brain surgeons attend technology classes; pilots renew their licenses. Teachers and coaches must also pursue continuing education in current issues, research, and methodologies for teaching in the twenty-first century. Administrators are often the sole means of support for teachers wishing to increase their knowledge.
- Attend and participate in all professional development that you might provide for teachers and coaches. This sends a message of what is valued to all in the building, and it also allows you to understand what to expect to see and hear in writing classrooms.
- Turn the focus of this book from student writing to looking with new lenses at the beauty and brilliance in teachers' work. Look at growth, risk taking, collaborating, leadership, and most important, a willingness to continue learning. Look for an individual's particular gifts: management, organization of time and even of paperwork (trust me, that is a talent), calm tone, student/teacher trust, powerful math, science, social studies/history teaching, contributions to the profession through writing articles or blogs, and presenting at workshops and conferences.

If we want to change the conversation in schools about how we can read student writing in ways that celebrate their strengths and motivate them to revise and keep

writing, we will need to do that work with our colleagues. It will not help if one lone teacher in one grade level operates from a curriculum of strength and names powerful writing identities for her students, and then when those students proceed to the next grade level, someone responds to their work only by circling errors in red pen. This work of shifting how we read and respond to student writing should permeate entire school buildings, entire school systems, and that will only happen if we do it together.



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