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Teaching
WRITING
in Small Groups

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Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020924811
ISBN: 978-0-325-13234-1

Editors: Katie Wood Ray and Zoë Ryder White

Production: Victoria Merecki

Cover and interior designs: Suzanne Heiser

Author photograph and interior photography: Nick Christoff and Michelle Baker

Interior art: © Deemak Daksina / Shutterstock (*bee icon*); © AVIcon / Shutterstock (*owl icon*)

Video editing: Michael Grover and Sherry Day

Typesetting: Gina Poirier Design

Manufacturing: Val Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 BB 26 25 24 23 22 21

January 2021 Printing

*This book is dedicated to
the teachers who showed up
physically, mentally, and
emotionally (whether through
a screen or in person) for
children and families every
day during the pandemic.
With unending gratitude
and awe, I see you.*



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PART II: Types of Small Groups

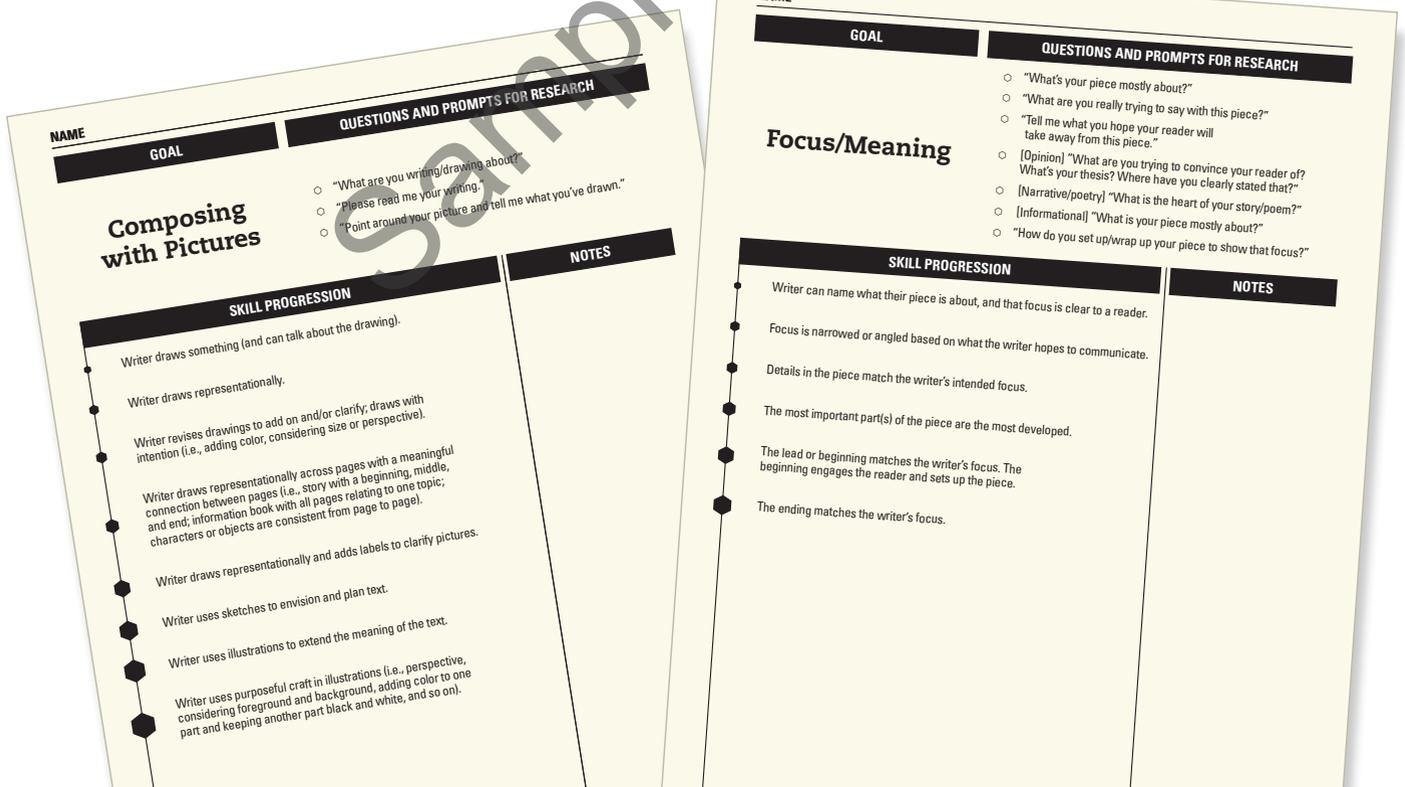
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About the Online Resources for This Book

In the online resources for this book you will find a variety of note-taking forms and videos that will help you get started with implementing—or refining—small-group writing instruction right away.

Skill-progression note-taking forms can help you identify goals for students, track progress, make in-the-moment decisions during small groups, and remind you of questions and prompts you can ask to learn more from your students. You can read more about how to use them in Chapter 2, and you'll see examples of them in use throughout the book.



The videos I selected for this book were captured during a few different moments in time. Some of them were filmed before I had envisioned this book—they are examples of me teaching in first- and fourth-grade classrooms. I've used them in professional development with teachers over the past couple of years, and some of them appear in my Heinemann online course, *Strategies in Action*. About half of the videos were filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic using video-conferencing software. These were filmed with neighbors' children, friends of my daughters, and the children of friends across the country. I'm not their regular teacher, but they graciously agreed to be part of filming these examples.

An important note: *the teaching I describe in this book works whether you're in person in a physical classroom with children or you are working with them in an online "classroom."* Every video example you see that was filmed online could be conducted in person, and vice versa. As we get beyond this pandemic, I hope to get into a classroom or two with a video crew, film some additional examples, and upload the video to the online resources.

The one-on-one conferences and small groups feature students in grades K–8. I included individual conferences because they form a foundation for the types of small-group work described in the book. When you come upon a "Watch and Read" section (within Chapters 4–10) I encourage you to pause your reading and watch the video referenced, regardless of whether the age of students you teach matches the ages of the students in the video. The teaching moves you'll be invited to study are universal, and the video is meant to provide a key example of what's being described in the main text.



Below is a list of the conferences and small groups you'll be invited to view. In addition to these full-length lessons, there are also some short excerpts referenced in Chapter 3.

VIDEO CLIPS			
CHAPTER	GRADE	LESSON TYPE	DESCRIPTION—GENRE AND GOAL(S)
4	1	Coaching conference	All-about books (informational), elaboration
4	4	Strategy lesson	Personal narrative, generating ideas
4	5	Student-led strategy lesson	Essay, elaboration
5	3	Guided writing	Persuasive letter, organization and structure
6	1	Shared writing	Poetry, elaboration
7	K	Interactive writing	Thank-you note, conventions
8	4	Inquiry conference	Narrative, conventions
8	7	Inquiry group	Narrative; elaboration, conventions, structure
9	4	Goal-setting conference	Narrative, elaboration
9	6	Reflection group	Poetry
10	1	Partnership conference	Narrative, giving feedback
10	4	Partnership conference	Narrative, oral storytelling/rehearsing



How to Access Online Resources

To access online resources for *Teaching Writing in Small Groups*:

1. Go to **<http://hein.pub/WritingSmallGroups-login>**.
2. Log in with your username and password. If you do not already have an account with Heinemann, you will need to create an account.
3. On the Welcome page, choose “Click here to register an Online Resource.”
4. Register your product by entering the code: **XXXXXXXX** (be sure to read and check the acknowledgment box under the keycode).
5. Once you have registered your product, it will appear alphabetically in your account list of My Online Resources.

Note: When returning to Heinemann.com to access your previously registered products, simply log into your Heinemann account and click on “View my registered Online Resources.”

PART I

Writing
Small-Group
Fundamentals



Sample Pages



Sample pages



THE CASE FOR Small-Group Instruction in Writing

When and how do students write in school? What are the purposes for writing, and what procedures and processes do students follow when they write? Where does small-group instruction fit?

Consider Mr. Rivera's, Mr. De La Fuente's, and Ms. Walker's classrooms. As you read, notice how small-group instruction benefits students and teachers in every case, no matter the approach to writing instruction or grade level.

FROM CONFERRING TO SMALL GROUPS

Mr. Rivera describes himself as a "writing workshop teacher." He organizes his writing into monthlong units of study, each focused on a different genre. Every day, he teaches a very short whole-class lesson focused on one strategy, and then sends children off to write on topics they've self-selected. While children write, he makes his way around the classroom to confer with students one-on-one, something he's learned from studying Calkins, Graves, Murray, Atwell, and Anderson. He spends about five to seven minutes with each student checking to see

Continued on next page

FROM CONFERRING TO SMALL GROUPS

CONT.

Mr. Rivera *Continued from previous page*

how they are getting on with the class lessons and with strategies he's taught them in prior conferences, giving them targeted feedback on their writing, and offering them a strategy that will help them most today. He takes notes on each conference and follows up with students on past teaching. Some days children meet with writing partners, and most days the workshop ends with a gathering that he calls a "share" where students learn from each other.

Mr. Rivera loves the way he knows each of his writers. He feels confident that he's giving them support they need and he and his students enjoy the time they spend in conferences. What nags at him is how infrequently he's able to meet with students. In a class of twenty-eight fifth graders, with conferences averaging 5–7 minutes each plus a little time to travel from student to student and take some notes in between, it takes him seven class periods, or about a week and a half, to get back around to each student a second time. In that time, kids have often moved through multiple steps of the writing process, and many opportunities for individualized feedback have passed him by. Incorporating small groups, and balancing small groups with individual conferring, will help him to maintain the valuable individualized instruction he's able to accomplish with conferring, but double the number of children he's able to see each week. He might start with one type of small group that feels like a conference—a strategy lesson—and pull a few children together at a time.

FROM THE WHOLE CLASS WITH THE SAME GOALS TO BALANCING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Mr. De La Fuente is trying to prepare his eighth graders for the sorts of academic writing they'll need to engage with next year in high school, specifically literary analysis and essay writing. He's painstakingly crafted a detailed rubric detailing what each student's piece needs to have, and he has offered a list of three thesis statements to choose from that align to the novel the students have just studied as a class. Each day, he gives a short lecture on one criteria from the rubric, and students work on a portion of their piece at their seats. While they work, he responds to raised hands, answering questions and giving help as students ask for it.

After a week, he asks all students to leave their drafts on his desk at the end of the class period. During lunch, as he looks through the drafts, he sees their needs run the gamut, although every student heard the same lecture each day. There seem to be a few that could use work on their introduction paragraphs. Several students still need to properly cite sources. Some are going on for way more sentences than necessary in each body paragraph, and it's cluttering the writing. Some seem to be including

details from the text that aren't relevant, and it's muddying the focus of their piece.

He knows he's *taught* it all, but clearly they haven't all learned at the same pace. He offered to answer any questions that came up, but he realizes that it's likely that some didn't know enough about what issues they had in their writing to ask for help.

Incorporating small groups as students revise will allow him to target each area he's noticing students need support with, and go from having whole-class goals to finding individual goals for each student.

FROM WHOLE-CLASS SHARED PRACTICE TO SMALL-GROUP GUIDED PRACTICE

Ms. Walker believes in the power of writing instruction to help her first graders write better—and read better. She makes time every day for a whole-class lesson where her students help her compose a text. Some days they work on a new text; other days they return to previously written texts and make revisions and edits.

When teaching a writing lesson, she gathers her twenty-five first graders onto their classroom rug and directs their attention to the easel with chart paper. Sometimes she does all the writing, calling on children to give suggestions, or inviting them to turn and talk before sharing what a friend has said. Other times, she invites children up to write a letter or whole word on the chart. She feels that these shared and interactive writing lessons are very helpful in providing children with language models and examples of the genre they are practicing writing, and the students seem to enjoy them. But every day, she feels that although a portion of the children are completely with her, there are some who are bored (they know all the things she's pointing out and could just write it on their own) and others are confused (the lesson is moving too fast, or the sorts of strategies they are practicing aren't within their current grasp). When she sends children off to do some of their own writing, she sees her lessons stick for a portion of the class, but she knows many children need something else.

Incorporating small groups during the time when children are doing their own writing, and balancing these small groups with some of the whole-class lessons she has children engage in, will allow her to more carefully fine-tune and target what students need. They will get more support and specialized feedback on their specific pieces of writing and their strategies and processes. She can even use some of the same methods—shared writing and interactive writing—in small groups, and also try out some new methods for different purposes.

Small-Group Writing Instruction Allows Teachers and Students To . . .

Value Each Child’s Language and Literacy Practices

Most classrooms today are filled with children who have a rich diversity of language and literacy practices. When instruction is always whole class, it’s easy for that richness to become less visible as all children try to conform to a single standard. Working with children in small groups gives you the opportunity to tailor instruction to each child as a unique and competent learner, valuing and affirming the language and literacy practices of each (España and Herrera 2020; Ladson-Billings 2009; Souto-Manning and Martell 2016).

Develop Relationships

Positive relationships between teacher and students are a precursor for learning to happen (Howard, Milner-McCall, and Howard 2020; Hammond 2015; Minor 2018). When you work to build relationships, your small groups will be more beneficial for you and your students. Also, working with children in small groups (and one-on-one) can *help to strengthen* relationships.

Simply putting children into small groups does not automatically mean that a positive relationship will result, but working with children in groups in ways described in this book—ways that allow for two-way feedback with lots of listening on the part of the teacher, that offer support for strategies that are meaningful and appropriate, that invite true collaboration, and that show true caring from the teacher who communicates with body language and words “You’ve got this!”—can help move toward the goal.

Teach and Learn with Efficiency

There are only so many minutes in a day, and only so many minutes each week you can devote to writing instruction and writing practice for your students. Ideally, you’re able to find four or five class periods of forty-five to sixty minutes each week where children participate in some whole-class instruction followed by independent writing time with conferring and small-group instruction. Let’s say we have thirty minutes five times a week, or 150 minutes weekly, for conferring and small-group time. If you were to do only one-to-one conferring, assuming an average of five minutes per conference, that means you could do *thirty*

conferences. (My class sizes in New York City when I was an elementary teacher were a little over thirty students, so I wouldn't get to every student even once a week with only individual conferences.)

If instead you shifted to small-group instruction only, and you are able to see three children in a seven- to ten-minute small group (for the purposes of estimating, let's just say ten minutes per group), then you'd be able to do fifteen small groups times three children in a group—that's forty-five children a week (or twenty-two children twice a week) who receive targeted instruction and feedback.

In all likelihood, you'll use a *balance* of methods—sometimes groups, sometimes conferences. Sometimes your groups will be two children, sometimes four. But the point is this: using small-group instruction alongside conferring makes it possible for you to meet with *every student once or twice a week* to give individualized support about their writing during writing time.

Increase Engagement

When moving from mostly whole-class instruction to more small-group instruction, you'll notice an uptick in engagement and attentional focus on the part of the learners. Their physical proximity to you, and the amount of one-to-one interactions that are possible as you ask them questions, nudge their thinking, or prompt them as they try, increases dramatically. You'll read more about feedback in Chapter 3, but for now consider this tidbit from neuroscientist James Zull as cited in Hammond (2015): receiving feedback triggers the brain to release *dopamine*, which motivates a student to work harder and persevere. When students apply feedback, it stimulates the growth of neurons and dendrites and grows more gray matter. Moving from all whole-class to small-group instruction increases the number of times you are able to offer children specific, helpful, actionable feedback and will literally grow and change their brain and help them to be more engaged in their own learning (Hammond 2015). For those of you reading who already have lots of individualized instruction in the form of conferences, doing more small groups will help you see more children in a class period, increasing the number of moments across a week when children are engaged in the feedback cycle with you.

Improve Independence

It can be easy for children to get lost if lessons are only whole class—with a wide range of learners, the teaching in a whole-class setting can only be “just right” for a portion at any given time. This is true in any subject area! When you incorporate small-group instruction as a regular part of your schedule, you’re able to offer strategies in the context of student goals—what they *want* to and *need* to be working on. That alone makes the instruction meaningful and engaging. But in small groups you also can provide feedback in the moment, support students with practice, and make sure they “get it” (or at least get *closer* to “it”) before they continue independently with their work. They will take on new learning more quickly and better be able to continue independently.

Develop Social Support Among Students

Both within and during the small groups you lead, and then during classroom time as children continue to write independently, students can look to peers as other learners who are working on the same goals, skills, and strategies. Within groups, they might overhear you giving feedback to a friend, which they can then apply to their work. They might hear a child share an example of a place in their writing where they successfully applied a strategy, which becomes another model for them as they work on their own writing. This is built-in support for learners. In addition, as children begin to get the hang of strategies and accomplish goals, they can be class experts on topics and can be leaders of their own small groups (see more about student-led small groups in Chapters 4 and 8).

Give and Receive Feedback

Grouping children allows us to *give* more feedback, but just as importantly it allows us to *get* feedback. The feedback we receive from students about our teaching is crucial to be able to revise, adapt, pivot, and change to positively impact learning outcomes (Hattie 2008). When we group kids, it can blur the line between teacher and student in the best of ways—you become a researcher as you learn about your students and they learn from you, and you cocreate knowledge alongside your students (Morrell 2012; Freire 1998). You can read more about what to watch for, and how to ask for feedback from your students, in Chapter 3.

So What Is the Rest of the Class Doing?

By now I hope you're convinced that small-group work can enhance any classroom, whether the intention is to move from strictly whole-class instruction to groups or to balance groups with one-to-one conferring, whether you teach kindergarten or seventh grade. When looking at your packed schedule, you might wonder "How do I fit this in?" and "What is the rest of the class doing?"

The short answer is: the rest of the class is writing, and you fit your groups in during a time when they write. As Stephen King writes, "You cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot. It's not just a question of how-to, you see; it's a question of how much to. Reading will help you answer how much, and only reams of writing will help you with the how. You can learn only by doing" (2000, 173).

This writing time might be its own class period or a portion of an English language arts block or could even happen during content areas (science, social studies) when children are independently writing about a topic under study. Children need to be engaged independently in their work or working with a partner or small group in collaboration without the need for teacher involvement for you to be freed up to work with them in groups; importantly, they also need independent work time when you're not meeting with them to have plenty of time to practice and apply what you've taught during the group and other lessons.

How much time? It depends on your schedule, but remember that for you to meet with children regularly, they need regular blocks of time to write. In my elementary classroom, I taught writing four days a week and usually blocked out about an hour: forty-five minutes of which was used for conferring and small-group instruction with some time spent in whole-class instruction (minilessons or studying a mentor text). As a consultant, I work with middle school teachers who have under an hour for English language arts, which must include both reading *and* writing, so they either choose to split their class time each day, teach reading or writing every other day, or focus on each for a mini-unit: reading for a week (or longer), then switching to writing for a week (or longer).

When you look at your overall schedule, my advice is to go for balance. Balance of reading and writing. Balance of a (small amount) of whole-class instruction followed by a large chunk of time when kids can write and you can confer and work with small groups.

TAKE IT TO YOUR CLASSROOM

- ✓ Reflect on how you currently balance whole-class lessons with small-group or one-on-one instruction.
- ✓ Consider your students' level of engagement and the amount of and frequency of individual feedback. How might your students and you benefit from small-group instruction?
- ✓ To make time and space for small-group instruction in your classroom, reflect on what you might need to adjust or change in your daily or weekly schedule.

Sample pages



“Working with children in small groups gives you the opportunity to tailor instruction to each child as a unique and competent learner, valuing and affirming the language and literacy practices of each.”

