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ABSTRACT

Intended for classroom teachers who are interested in but apprehensive about starting a writing program, this journal article addresses some of the most common questions asked at workshops. The specific questions answered in the article are as follows: (1) How do I start? (2) What materials are needed? (3) How do I find time for student writing? (4) Can children write without assigned writing topics? (5) What do I do when a child cannot spell a word? (6) What is sharing time? (7) Does everything have to be rewritten? (8) How can I find time to teach the skills in language arts? (9) How do I publish writing? (10) How do the parents react? (11) How do I grade the papers? and (12) Now that I know how to start, am I brave enough to begin? (NKA)

Twelve Frequently Asked Questions about Writing Programs

Roxanne Lee Henkin

TWELVE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT WRITING PROGRAMS

Roxanne Lee Henkin

At writing workshops that I've conducted, teachers repeatedly ask many of the same questions. Those questions reflect their concern about initiating and sustaining writing programs in the classroom. Most teachers want students to write more, but are unsure of how to begin, what to do, and/or how to operate a writing program. This article will address these major concerns.

1. How do I start?

Starting a writing program depends upon teacher motivation and teacher modeling. Teachers of writing write with the class, are enthusiastic about writing, and enjoy student writing. To begin a writing program, teachers need to be positive, and concentrate on the student's message rather than the mechanics. They should use every opportunity to show how much they value writing. The work that is done at home and shown in school should be praised. Statements like, "You're a real writer, working at home to revise your piece," encourage other children also. A daily writing time should be established so that students can count on a writing routine.

Writing is scary at any age. Beginning writers will need actual instruction before writing a story. On the first day, I ask for a volunteer from my class to tell a story. After the student has orally told the story, he or she writes it on the chalkboard with my help. Then I ask the other students in the class to write their own stories. I make myself available for help. I'm happy to discuss ideas and story plot with the students, or to answer any questions that they have. I encourage the children to spell unknown words themselves. With older children, this modeling and encouragement time is still necessary.

2. What materials are needed?

Paper, pencils and pens are the main materials needed for a writing program. Lots of paper should be available, enough for children to write and rewrite as needed. Books for children to write in, either teacher made or commercial, encourage some students to write. A variety of hard covers, such as teacher-made covers from cardboard and commercial covers for reports, provide nice alternatives when "publishing" books. Markers, crayons, and paints may be needed for illustrations. Folders are needed for each student's permanent writing file. In addition, I send home stories in a separate writing folder. When parents see this folder, they know that the enclosed stories should be read and returned. Extra paper should be available for students to write lists, reminders, and notes to themselves. Stationery and postcards should be provided for letters and pen-pal writing. Notebooks or spiral notebooks might be used for diaries and journals. Mini-computers and word processing systems are another alternative. I have beginning first-grade students writing their stories on the "Bank Street Writer" word processing program. Essay tests, science logbooks, and index cards for speeches are just a few of the materials that are used in a classroom where students write.

3. How do I find time for student writing?

This is the question most often asked by teachers. Variations of the question include, How can I fit writing into an already crowded curriculum? and, If I'm

devoting this much time to writing, what am I leaving out?

There is time for writing during the school day. Teachers can find time for student writing by making it a priority. Unlike other subjects, writing fits naturally across the curriculum. Writing as a thinking process enables children to learn concepts and ideas that they may not master in any other way. Once children are used to writing independently, they can write with very little supervision. Instead of ditto papers for seatwork, the children may write on their own during this time. I found that my second graders could work through the morning without any ill effects. The children still had lunch recess and a break in the afternoon. By eliminating morning recess, precious minutes were added to the school day for writing and other language arts activities.

4. Can children write without assigned writing topics?

Yes. It is not necessary for teachers to assign writing topics; children are able to think of their own writing topics. Often this can result in better student writing. Teachers show that they believe in their students and their ability to write about important matters. Teacher interest, teacher questions, and teacher enthusiasm set the stage for meaningful student writing.

The pre-writing process is important and one that can't be rushed. When children know that they are expected to write daily, they think about possible writing topics throughout the day, not just when they are at school. This is known as off-stage rehearsal. The many experiences a child has both at home and in school serve as a reservoir of writing ideas for future use (Graves, 1982). When writing is taught in a whole-language environment that also includes speaking, listening, and reading, children learn that words are meaningful, and that communication in any form must make sense. The Language-Experience Approach and reading good literature to children are two positive, concrete ways that teachers can foster the whole language environment in their classrooms. Also, children should write across the curriculum. They should be encouraged to write for different purposes and different audiences. Children should be encouraged to write journals, stories, nonfiction, and research-based papers. With such a rich background, children do not need to be told what to write. Hours a teacher wastes trying to think of writing topics can be better devoted to the sharing and editing processes.

5. What do I do when a child can't spell a word?

From kindergarten through grade six, this question is universally asked. Other related questions include: The writing program sounds great for children in the upper elementary grades who have the skills to write, but what about beginning writers? How can first-graders write when they are too dependent on the teacher? How can they write if they can't read? How can they write if they can't sit still or if they can't print?

We never discover what children can do if we don't allow them to show us. Young children can write. Two-, three- and four-year-olds can and should write (Deford, 1983). When children are given the opportunities to read and write in a developmental kindergarten, those children who are ready will begin to write.

To decipher young children's writing, it is necessary to understand what "invented spelling" is. Charles Read (1975) studied young students' invented spellings. His work has been called the Rosetta Stone for children's spelling (Gill, 1982). Read discovered that young children spell words similarly and in a way that makes sense, although adults may have a difficult time understanding the spellings. Young children spell very closely to the way sounds are actually made. Many of their transformations resemble the symbols used by the International Phonetic Alphabet. For example, "d_g" is the symbol used in the International Phonetic Alphabet to rep-

resent the "j" sound. It is not uncommon for young children to write "d" for "j". This early strategy is replaced by a more sophisticated one as children gain experience working with words.

An analysis of the way in which children change their spelling strategies led to the discovery of the developmental spelling stages. Many articles by researchers are available that explain these stages in depth (Gentry, 1978, 1982; Henderson and Beers, 1980; Zutell, 1978). A partial description of the stages follows:

Precommunicative Stage:

Example: "1" for "ready." Marks are made on paper, but there is no relationship to the accepted meaning of the symbols.

Semiphonetic Stage:

Example: "r" for "ready." This stage is characteristic of the letter-name strategy in which children perceive the letters as the sounds rather than as symbols for the sounds. During this stage, words are partially spelled.

Phonetic Stage:

Example: "rade" for "ready." The letter-name strategy is used. The entire word is represented. Short vowels begin to be spelled correctly.

Transitional Stage:

Example: "redy" for "ready". The child understands that letters are symbols for words. All the sounds in a word are now represented. All words have vowels. The child's growing knowledge of language is illustrated by the use of orthographic markers and morphophonemic elements. Overgeneralization of the rules occurs at this point.

Correct Spelling:

Example: "ready" for "ready". Most words are spelled correctly. This is somewhat flexible and based on a core list of words so that a third-grade correct speller would not be as advanced as a sixth-grade correct speller. The child's spelling accuracy is continually improving.

If children are given the opportunity to write, most of them will move through the developmental spelling stages at their own natural progression. Children who must spell every word correctly do not have enough opportunity to explore or work with words, or to understand and to draw their own hypotheses and conclusions. Children are constantly revising the way they spell words. Teachers should accept invented spelling in children's writing. Editing skills should be taught and spelling corrected during the editing stage. Spelling instruction might include list words from the children's writing, books for commonly used words, opportunities to categorize and classify words, and a whole language environment where children are surrounded by print, books, and rich language. Teachers might assess their students' spelling errors, placing them into their developmental spelling stage. Continued instruction and assessment should take place throughout the year.

6. *What is sharing time?*

Teachers can use sharing time for several purposes. It is an opportunity for the student to share his or her work with an audience. It is a time when the class can help the student revise his or her work. Sharing time also can be an informal instruction period for the children and a flexible and dynamic teaching tool for the writing teacher. Sharing time can be either whole-group or small-group. Once children have gone though the process of whole group sharing, small group sharing becomes attainable. In conferences, the teacher meets individually with the student. Many of the same questions that are asked in whole-group sharing are asked during conferencing and during the first small-group sharing periods.

The teacher attempts to elicit higher-level thinking from all the students and, during the sharing periods, models the kinds of questions to ask. Soon the

students begin asking the questions. Key questions include: Why? Why did you write this? What happens next? How are you going to end this story? The teacher creates a positive, accepting environment where children feel safe to share their work. The students ask each other questions about the story to help the author improve it. The author is free to reject or accept advice and to revise the story or let it stand as it is. He or she begins to write for the audience, revising the piece with the audience in mind. The teacher encourages the student authors at each step in the pre-writing, writing, revising, editing, and publishing process. As students strive to improve their writing, the teacher offers positive reinforcement. Whole group reflection on a story is valuable to the author and the group as a whole. Informal instruction might occur as children brainstorm ways to solve a particular problem in a story. The teacher encourages the children to take risks with what they write and with how they write it. Students learn to take pride in their writing. Sharing time helps to sustain interest in writing over a long period of time.

7. Does everything have to be rewritten?

No. Children need the opportunity to write many articles on a variety of topics and in different modes. The teacher should spend his or her time helping the child to improve the quality of the story. First, the student must decide if he or she wants to do anything to the story. The student might be satisfied with the story as it stands or unhappy with the story, no longer wanting to spend time on it. If the student wants to try to improve the story, then the revision process begins.

Children need to learn that stories have beginnings, middles, and endings. Writing satisfactory endings seems to be especially difficult for beginning writers. Informal instruction during sharing time could be spent on brainstorming appropriate endings to a student's story or to an adult's published story. There are several suggestions that the teacher can offer in the discussion of a good ending: a satisfactory conclusion, a resolution of the conflict, the tying together of the details, and a good stopping place (rather than a run-on ending). Such activities could be part of the student reading group time. Besides endings, children often need to add details to their work. Children can be helped to eliminate unimportant facts that are needed for non-fiction pieces. Discussion can center around the ways the story can be improved. During the revising process, the children experience the frustration, resentment, and lack of confidence that many adult writers feel. The children's lack of experience makes the revising process even more difficult. Children learn that it may take a number of attempts to make their story say what they want it to say. Through revision, children learn that writing is hard work, but that it is worth the effort.

8. How can I find time to teach the skills in language arts?

Teachers wonder how they will find time to teach their formal language-arts program. This is a valid question. One option is to teach the language arts skills to the students through their own writing. This process is called "editing." When a child's writing, for example, shows that he or she is writing dialogue without using the proper punctuation, then quotation marks could be taught. Beginning students' writing lacks many structures. The student should learn only one or two skills at a time. The instructor should teach the skill until the children show evidence of mastery by using it in their writing. Fewer skills may be covered, but the ones taught will truly be used by the students.

Skills can be taught to large groups, small groups, and individuals. Student work can be reproduced on an overhead transparency and used with the group to teach the skill, although permission from the student should be obtained first. Make sure that the presentation is a positive experience for the child.

Often several children may need skill instruction at the same time. One child may be ahead of the others and need individual instruction. I've often found that when I teach a new skill to one child, the others are listening carefully. Within a few days, many children are incorporating the new skill into their writing. Language arts skills become meaningful to children when they have a need for them. Most children become aware of the conventions of writing quickly and want their stories to look correct so that others can read them.

9. How do I publish writing?

Formal publishing can take many forms. It is important to have a valid purpose for publishing. Material should be published when it will be submitted to contests, magazines and other competitions. Books should be published if they are going to become part of the classroom library or the learning center. The complete editing and publishing process takes a long time. Aides or volunteer mothers might assist the teacher at this stage. Books can be published with a variety of covers. Some teachers sew together the pages of the text and bind the book. Another alternative would be to buy inexpensive report covers and use them for the final product. Published books should represent the students' best writing efforts.

10. How do the parents react?

Teachers often ask how parents will react to papers that come home with invented spellings. In the upper grades, teachers ask how they can convince parents not to interfere and edit their children's work. Parent education is the key to a successful writing program. There are several things that a teacher can do to educate the parents. Every opportunity to teach parents about the writing process should be used. The research can be explained and articles can be shared. Other opportunities include "Back to School Nights," American Education Week, conferences, and any other time when parents and teachers come together. New articles can be sent home as they become available. Workshops may feature guest speakers to talk to the parents. Parents may be used as volunteers for the writing program. They could make books and sew the covers on published manuscripts. Mothers could assist in the editing process. Parents could type manuscripts and help children write articles on word processors. Parents may be invited to spend a morning writing and sharing with the class. They might talk with the children about their own writing process. Parents enjoy observing their children write and assessing writing growth when they know what to look for. Parents who are involved in the writing program can speak to other groups of parents and share their enthusiasm. Parents can be powerful allies if they understand the writing process.

11. How do I grade the papers?

This is a difficult question that each teacher must decide on his or her own. There are several alternatives to grading papers. In the lower grades, writing can be analyzed for the developmental spelling levels and the developmental writing levels. A spelling features test can be given to children to determine their developmental spelling stage (Gillet and Temple, 1982). At each reporting period the test can be regiven and analyzed for spelling growth. This information can then be shared with the parents. Developmental writing levels have been identified and are available for teacher use (Clay, 1975; McCaig, 1981). Teachers can determine the writing level of each student, record and share this information with parents, and then chart progress during the year. Graves (1983) offers many ideas for evaluation; they include skill lists for each child and checklists for sharing time and conferences. Each of these methods can provide useful information.

Evaluation is a tool that should be used to assess writing growth. In the older grades, teachers may not want to do a holistic evaluation of the writing of

the class (Myers, 1980). In traditional evaluation, one part of the writing is evaluated, while in holistic evaluation the writing as a whole is examined. Teachers using holistic evaluation read the article and assign a score of either one, two, three, or four. A four represents a fine article, while one is the lowest score. Holistic evaluation helps the student, the teacher, and the parent to understand how the child's writing stands in relationship to the group. Upper-grade teachers often feel it necessary to give a grade on completed work. One sixth-grade teacher gives two grades, one for effort and improvement, and the other for achievement. She then averages all the grades together. No matter what form of evaluation is used, it is meant to be helpful.

12. Now that I know how to start, am I brave enough to begin?

Ultimately, the decision to begin rests with the teacher. This kind of writing program requires commitment, enthusiasm and belief on the part of the teacher. Real enthusiasm and commitment mean that even after problems develop, the teacher continues with the writing program. He or she must believe that each child has something valuable to say and that with practice will be able to write it. What if it doesn't work? It will work if the teacher keeps trying. Writing classes and workshops can be beneficial. Support groups can be helpful, especially when other teachers are struggling with the same problem. Teacher research and teacher writing can be an additional benefit of a support group. The reward comes when a child says, "I can't wait to write today," or when a student writes a good story.

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IRA MICROMONOGRAPH GIVES IDEAS ON PREPARING YOUNG CHILDREN FOR READING

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Grinnell recommends that parents talk with children from infancy since "the knowledge of spoken language that children develop forms the basis for their knowledge of written language." She also recommends some specific activities for stimulating conversation as the child grows older.

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