



GROWING STRONG WRITERS

By Stephanie Franks

Stephanie Franks is the Gifted and Talented Lead Teacher at Foster Elementary School, a Title I public school in Arlington ISD. Her research interests include writing and social and emotional health which, for her, are both matters of the heart! She can be reached at sfranks@aisd.net.

Abstract: Writing is a mighty way to communicate, express, question, synthesize, persuade, and teach (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Hence, growing strong writers is crucial for all students. A writing workshop approach allows teachers and students the essential elements needed to perfect their writing. The author seeks to provide relief to teaching professionals by sharing many of the main components of the writing workshop, a research-based instructional method that can be implemented quickly and is highly effective. In a writing workshop, the focus is creating conditions where our students can thrive as writers (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). The author describes how choice, minilessons, freewriting, sharing, and conferring help create a successful writing workshop environment. It is important that teachers establish a writing workshop early in the year and focus on short-term goals. The author also explains that the writing workshop model supports, rather than distracts from, helping students write effectively in statewide writing test conditions. Throughout, the author supports the idea that the writing workshop has one primary goal in mind: growing students into strong writers.

Keywords: writing workshop, strong writers, minilessons, freewriting, conferring

Writing and Community

Writing defined is letters or characters, proof of ideas, words and symbols, and a style or form of composition. However, writing cannot simply rest here because it does not assign an accurate value of its worth. Writing is a mighty way to communicate, express, question, synthesize, persuade, and teach (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Writing is versatile, adapting to the author's personality, knowledge, and voice. Powerful in its ability to influence others and create community. Hence, growing strong writers is crucial for all students. Elementary teachers give our students the identity and confidence to influence and create their own community when they transform into strong writers. The time allotted during the school day to teach writing must align to growing strong writers. A writing workshop allows teachers and students the playing field to perfect their writing.

Teaching and Learning Writing in a Writing Workshop

Teaching writing is hard. A writing time during the school day typically consists of building skills such as forming letters, words, and sentences; drawing to explain meaning, thought, and/or connections; the act of reading writing, both their own writing as well as others; and teaching the writing stages. Teaching writing can be difficult, for teachers and the students, as it is not one skill but a culmination of all of those skills. The writing workshop allows teachers to confer with students on an individual basis and build minilessons based on the needs of students, which maximizes time devoted to writing. Writing is hard for students. A writing attitude survey was created to capture how elementary students, ranging in grades first through sixth, felt about writing. The survey was completed by sixteen students, seven girls and nine boys. Forty-three percent indicated a love for writing, while twelve percent indicated a hatred of writing. Seventy-one percent of the students that had a love for writing were boys. All of the

girls, one-hundred percent, indicated they hated writing. Upon analysis, the majority of the focus was in response to these four questions: How do you feel about writing? What do you need help with in your writing? What is your favorite thing about writing? and What is your least favorite thing about writing? Students indicated that the least favorite when writing is being forced to write a story over something boring, having set time limits, and having to generate ideas. The writing workshop overcomes those student gripes through choice, free writing, conferring, feedback, and differentiated instruction from the teacher. Students who learn to write well truly have one of the most powerful tools imaginable, and nobody can take it away (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Public school students in Arlington, Texas, indicated favorite aspects of writing include self-selection of topics, making up stories of their own, being allowed to express themselves, feeling confident in spelling, and writing with paper and pencil rather than writing digitally. Students indicated that thinking of ideas and choosing the best words are the top areas of need. The writing workshop is an unmatched, effective approach that has one main goal: to grow strong writers. The writing workshop provides teachers and students a path to grow the students that love to write. I hope to provide relief to teaching professionals by sharing a research-based instructional method, one that can be implemented quickly and is highly effective, where the focus is creating conditions where our students can thrive as writers (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

Let the Doers Do!

What is a student's favorite part of the day at school? You may have heard responses such as P.E., band, music, lunch, and even recess. When I was in high school, I would have said home economics. Why? What do all of those student favorites offer? Fletcher & Portalupi (2001) expressed the common factor: time for students to "do." In fact, the entire emphasis is on students doing the activity. The writing block is no different and requires the same. The writing workshop lets the doers do or the writers write. The writing workshop allows the students to grab the steering wheel and holds them accountable for their learning. This means that teachers adapt to a "responsive" teaching style rather than on a preset lesson plan (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). A writing workshop classroom sounds busy—you will hear discussions, texts being read aloud, students giving and receiving feedback, and teachers delivering a minilesson and conferring with students. A writing workshop looks like a newspaper writing room—students writing with pencil and paper, students filing papers in a folder, discussions between peers and teacher, teachers observing students, everyone listening to writing samples being read, and teachers gathering data for future success. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) emphasize, "We don't teach students to write so much as create a safe space where they can teach themselves by doing" (p. 5).

Elements of Time

The three main elements of time in a writing workshop are whole group instruction or minilesson time, writing time, and share time. While teachers have implemented other routines and procedures, those are the three foundational elements that must appear. Providing consistent writing, sharing, and conferring time is crucial for the writing workshop effectiveness. Students must have frequent, and a predictable, time devoted solely to writing. Teachers should plan writing time three to five days per week for one hour at a time. It sounds scary but many successful writing teachers find a way to overcome the time issue. Through one-on-one conferences, teachers gain valuable knowledge of student strengths, gaps, and

needs. Those gaps and needs then become the minilessons of the writing workshop. To ensure that students create finished writing samples, students will most definitely need teachers to guide and coach them and their writing through the writing stages from drafting to publishing. Teachers must pay close attention to the writers and their needs and then must act accordingly. During writing time, students and choice go hand in hand. Students choose what they write about, students choose when the writing piece is complete, and students set their own agendas and their own pace. Sharing time consists of students sharing their writing with other students. It is a time for students to gain valuable feedback and create a safe and thriving writing community. Teachers set up conferences to listen to students' writing and gain valuable teaching points for minilessons. The effects of proving these three elements of time will be great. They result in classrooms that are filled with fun, laughter, exploration, and a spirit of adventure that are conditional on choice, engagement, ownership, audience, and voice (Fletcher, 2017).

Minilessons of the Writing Workshop

The minilesson aspect of the writing workshop will look like traditional teaching, so find comfort in minilessons and their purpose. Minilessons last five to ten minutes and can be described in three simple, familiar words: short, focused, and direct. Teachers have something to teach, and students can all gather in a community to learn it. Minilessons look different throughout the year and vary based on the need of the classroom. Sound familiar? Yup! Although the "what" varies, here are some categories for minilessons. Teachers can teach students how to operate the writing workshop classroom, how to get or use materials, how the workshop runs, the expectations, where to confer with peers, and so forth. You may be teaching one of the writing processes, the qualities of good writing, and/or editing skills. But remember, minilessons are short, focused, and direct, so instruction must reflect that. Instruction should be purposeful, engaging, goal-oriented, crisp, and clear. Much like a Formula One racing car that is headed to the pit stop. The driver stops and the pit crew changes tires or completes mechanical repairs or adjustments, all within 2.4 seconds. The driver stops with purpose and intentionality with the entire focus being on finishing the race. Minilessons are similar in that they must be short and intentional. Minilessons are meant to introduce a certain skill; they are not meant to direct the course of the rest of the writing workshop. When the pit stop ends for the Formula One driver, the race to finish resumes as normal. Same for our writers: When the minilesson is over, the working workshop continues.

Freewriting in a Writing Workshop

Teachers must devote most of the writing workshop to actual writing time for students. In an hour writing block, students should be writing for 35 to 45 minutes. It is not a time for finishing up other teacher-assigned writing tasks. Students' writing time is known as freewriting time. It refers to the act of students writing nonstop in a spontaneous matter (Beach et al., 2010). Essential to freewriting is avoiding the urge to edit, censor, block, or revise initial reactions. Just write. Idea generation, or not knowing what to write about, was the top complaint according to a survey of elementary students in Arlington, Texas. Hesitant writers, if given the freewriting with intentionality, will manifest into strong writers. There is nothing scarier than a blank page in a writing task. The writing workshop will help combat not knowing what to write through the use of freewriting. Freewriting time makes writing easier by helping students with the root psychological or existential difficulty in



writing: finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper (Elbow, 1998). In classrooms, teachers choose the essay, they choose the prompt, they choose the structure, they choose the feedback, and then wonder why the student's voice is missing (Bernabei, 2005). So, if you want to grow strong writers, students need freewriting. Students with a teacher's guidance and support are to perform self-directed writing that include drafting, planning, rereading, proofreading, and/or conferring with other students. Writing workshop without freewriting should not exist and will not yield the results your students need. As Stephen King (2000) advised, "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot" (p. 145).

Party for Two, Please

One of the elements of time in a writing workshop is sharing time which typically lasts roughly 10 to 20 minutes. Research (e.g., Beach et al., 2010) has found that students need to learn how to collaboratively share and construct knowledge as an essential literacy skill involved in working with others. Sharing time provides the opportunity to strengthen this essential literacy skill. Sharing in the writing workshop is known as conferring. This will take place in a peer-to-peer interactions or peer-to-teacher interactions. During the share time, students share their writing its current form, whether initial draft, second draft, third draft, or final form. It is encouraged for students to share to the whole class too. Sharing time is extremely beneficial because it allows students the opportunity to practice and reinforce speaking, listening, and thinking skills that are so crucial to school success. The use of freewriting can help foster more involvement in discussions (Beach et al., 2010). Additionally, conferring during share time will provide alternative perspectives to students which broadens their thinking and knowledge base. Conferring lives at the core of the writing workshop because it provides talk time, a time for dialogue, a time for suggestions, a time for guidance, and a time to exit. Swirling around in the core of conferring between teachers and students is the art of deep listening—listening with eyes, ears, hearts, signals, body posture, and gestures. Teachers' reactions should evoke the joy of reading, an understanding of the writer and their energy, building on their strengths and pulling out teaching points. Teachers should build

up the writers and stretch their weaknesses and strengths. Enjoy this time—show its value in everything that you do and say.

Goals: Short Term

You might be thinking, what are the goals of a writing workshop? First, let's talk about what they are not. The goals of a writing workshop are not long-term goals. Long-term goals are the responsibility of the writing curriculum. However, a writing workshop is a powerful tool to ignite the joy of writing for students and one that will lead to meeting the long-term goals. The goals of the writing workshop are to grow strong writers, getting students to love writing, establishing a safe environment so that students can take risks in their writing, and setting up a workable management system to handle the flow of paper and so forth (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Fletcher (2017) cautions teachers to not lose themselves nor does he want teachers to get focused too much on the long-term goals. The writing workshop is designed to stimulate the social and emotional side of writing first. And Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) have emphasized that it starts by giving them regular writing time, real choice, and your genuine interest in their writing. Short-term goals for the writing workshop will require some prerequisite tasks such as setting up the space. Setting up your writing workshop environment involves creating a designated space for materials and tools, and arranging desks or tables first for comfort then functionality. Traces of teaching such as anchor charts and discussion boards should be displayed throughout the classroom. There should be access to literature, and the classroom sounds include rereading notebooks, talking with a friend, and revisiting old drafts. Another goal is to launch the writing workshop early. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) recommend launching the writing workshop right after the first day jitters wear off. The link between reading and writing is undeniable, so use reading to help grow strong writers. Begin the launch by connecting writing to reading. Using rich, quality literature will help you break the ice and ease into the workshop. For the initial launch, provide an essential question or thought to begin writing. You could begin by telling personal stories of writing or begin with a writing survey that will help you find the best topic for your minilessons.

Statewide Writing Tests and the Workshop

Using the writing workshop model while also preparing students for statewide writing tests sounds like an oxymoron, right? But Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) have devoted one chapter to providing an explanation why the writing workshop can yield positive results on statewide writing tests. The workshop's foundation involves choice, freewriting, unlimited time, and the response of a supportive, outside reader. None of these is present in statewide writing tests. In fact, these tests implore the opposite; they require a student to write to a prompt, in a specific amount of time, and certainly do not include an outside reader. Let's think again about a Formula One driver. How can a Formula One driver perform outstandingly and place perhaps in the top three of the race? The driver has to know the course, but most importantly, he has to have lots and lots of time practicing; sometimes that practice is just for fun and sometimes it is with an instructor or master driver. The writing workshop is the same. Your students need time to write, to write what their heart feels like, to explore many different subjects, to write deeply about the subjects they want to. They need to write for fun and at times will need guidance and help from a teacher. It is often suggested in teacher communities that students will perform just fine on these tests as long as the teacher provides them with time—time to freewrite, time to confer, and time to share. And as students do those things consistently, they will transform into strong writers. Strong writers use their own tools, knowledge, experience, and confidence to perform their best. Overlapping writing tasks exists between writing workshop classrooms and statewide writing tests: Students have to generate ideas on a topic, work through the writing process, include supportive details, stay focused on the topic throughout the writing, reread for meaning, write according to an audience, reread their writing, proofread their writing, and make decisions for themselves. Strong writers will conquer all of those things, plus write with voice, write with confidence, and write with purpose.

Writing Workshop Equals Strong Writers

I believe that if you implement the writing workshop and its elements, your students will grow into strong writers—and they will “ace” the writing standardized test. Teachers: Together, we can grow strong writers because we have devoted time where it matters! When we have intentionally and consistently implemented freewriting time, time to share, time to confer, and a safe place for students to grow into strong writers, then they can identify themselves as strong writers. Students said it themselves: “My favorite thing about writing is that I am a good writer,” “my writing is important,” and “I can write something and someone is delighted to hear my writing.”

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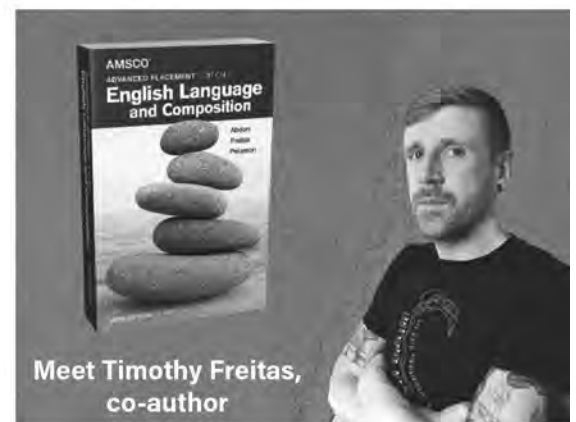
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