MICRO-WRITING FOR MACRO EFFECT:
HOW ONE DISTRICT PIVOTED THEIR WRITING INSTRUCTION DURING THE PANDEMIC AND NEVER LOOKED BACK
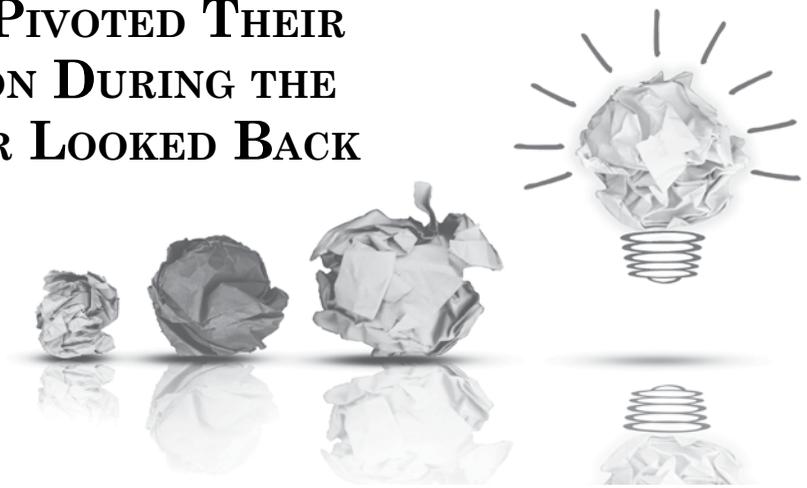
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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain how the authors' district implemented micro-writing in curriculum and instruction. The foundation of micro-writing comes from research and publications by Rief, specifically the *QuickWrite Handbook*, and Gallagher and Kittle's *180 Days*. The article begins by defining and describing the term micro-writing. The authors then discuss the implementation of micro-writing while also giving practical and actionable suggestions for its use in the classroom and in the curriculum. Finally, the article provides important takeaways and observations from the implementation of micro-writing. One of the many outcomes of implementing micro-writing was that it led to better student work because it gave them choice and voice in a non-threatening way.

Keywords: micro-writing, student choice, student voice, revision, trauma-informed instruction

Aquick admission … we must admit to you before we dive into micro-writing and how we implemented it in our district that we stumbled upon micro-writing separately. While the implementation of micro-writing in both middle school and high school looked the same in distinct cases, our discovery was a fortuitous coincidence.

In the summer of 2022, while discussing our summer professional development sessions, my co-author showed me his slideshow, and I started laughing. He did not see the humor in his slideshow, even though he is an incredibly funny guy, until I pulled up my presentation. Both presentations centered on micro-writing.

At first, we kicked ourselves for not having discussed our ideas with each other sooner, but we quickly realized we should partner going forward: one united message for grades 6-12 in English language arts (ELA). Finally, we asked each other how the other stumbled across the same solution: micro-writing as the key to unlocking student engagement, choice, and voice. This article attempts to expand on that conjecture, while giving practical, concrete ways to implement micro-writing in the classroom and offering guidance on how to implement it at the district level.

Before we lay out our peaks and pitfalls in micro-writing, we define micro-writing as opportunities for students to write daily in short, focused bursts for a variety of purposes in a non-threatening environment. This type of writing lives in a low-stakes environment, but it also has the potential to become a more developed draft through focused revision opportunities.

Our Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic's effects on education are well-documented:

> The educational impact most often discussed is that [of] student learning: academic impact. However, students' socio-emotional and physical health are also affected. And a downfall in one area can lead to a downfall in another. Unfortunately, for the majority of students, the impact in terms of both academic and non-academic outcomes has been negative. (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021, p. 3)

We can attest that we observed the impact of the pandemic on the academic, socio-emotional, and physical health of students in Northside ISD in San Antonio, Texas. In our school district, teachers and students were introduced to the pandemic with an extra week of spring break in March of 2020. At first, it was exciting to have an extended time for rejuvenation before the start of testing season, but teachers quickly began asking if we would

return to our classrooms. If we did not return, what would school look like to finish the year?

In the Height of the Pandemic

While teachers enjoyed the extended spring break, district leadership scrambled to define what virtual learning would be like for the remainder of the year. We connected more than 100,000 students to Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots within a week. We created content in a learning management system (LMS) that students could access throughout the week when they had time to prioritize learning. Our district also kept a connection with families within the community to support them beyond learning. We partnered with the city's food bank and ran weekly food distributions from various schools throughout the district. Teachers and staff visited the homes of students to check on their well-being.

While putting these resources in the hands of students and their families was a Herculean accomplishment, it did not ensure learning happened at the end of the spring semester of 2020. Teachers like us lived day-to-day existences, creating—almost overnight—new resources and ways to engage students for weeks at a time. A strategy like turn and talk was replaced with a virtual discussion on a Padlet. Four corners, a strategy used to create movement and illustrate a student's answer choice or point of view on a topic, was replaced with a student moving his or her name or icon to the corner of a slide on a slide deck. Finishing the school year looked vastly different than anyone ever imagined.

When the dust settled and we moved into the 2020-2021 school year, most middle school and high school students were still learning from home. Attendance shifted throughout the school year to be a hybrid model at each campus, with students who came to school and students who learned from home differing from campus to campus. Most classes at the high school level had only between three and five students attending in person. Because of these circumstances, decisions were made to create guidelines for learning throughout the school day for students:

- Each class period included 15 minutes of synchronous virtual instruction.

- Students then had approximately 30 minutes of asynchronous work connected to class. Asynchronous time allowed teachers to work more intensely with the students who showed up in person, and while those students did receive much more individualized instructional attention, we were all humans first. Most of that time was spent ensuring students knew there was someone they could talk to when so many in-person relationships had been put on pause.

- Students received credit for daily attendance either by participating in the 15-minute live-learning session or by logging into the LMS and working on their asynchronous assignments that day.

After housekeeping items, those 15 minutes of instructional time, in reality, came down to between 7 and 10 minutes of instruction. Modeling any sort of writing or reading strategy had to be done thoughtfully and quickly. Instead of mini-lessons, we taught micro-lessons and in turn, developed a habit of micro-writing.

One glimmer of hope during those days of staring at dark screens with names of students we never met in person was the opportunity to engage students for smaller chunks of instructional time, often asynchronously. We wanted to be able to connect with them in a way that felt familiar to our English teacher hearts: through their writing. Those micro-lessons on writing led to a habit of micro-writing in our instructional mindset. Minahan (2019) suggests

giving students a bite-sized writing task that lasts only between 5 and 7 minutes and to give students, especially ones experiencing trauma, the predictability and consistency they need when so much at the time was unknown (para. 13).

But the writing students produced was not the writing teachers had come to expect from adolescent writers; it was often brief and seemed to work most effectively in spurts connected to highly engaging texts, media, or personal prompts. To get started with this new writing focus, we tried various types of engaging media: movie clips, podcasts, and YouTube videos. We tried choice boards. We scoured resources like *The New York Times*' The Learning Network (2020a) and the work of writing gurus, like Gallagher and Kittle (2018) for content that would make teachers hopeful to get something from students—and it kind of worked.

For example, one of *The New York Times*' The Learning Network's (2020b) resource sections is titled "What's Going on in This Picture?" Students are asked to analyze a picture from a *New York Times* article, stripped of any other text, and generate discussion and writing around what they notice and what they think is happening in the picture. This allowed our students a low-stakes entry point into writing. Having students then engage with *The New York Times* brought a follow-up opportunity to extend initial writing into a few directions, including comparative analysis between students' initial predictions about what the actual story was or clarity for initial thinking around the bigger story behind the picture.

This instructional flow mirrored our work in helping students to continue to revisit a text or piece of media and continue to connect writing to it in short bursts, often with a different focus. Kittle and Gallagher (2018) affirm "practicing the generative, pleasurable act of writing in order for students to begin to believe in the power of their words to express ideas" (p. 37). We found that these short bursts were essential in helping our students build confidence in their own writing abilities. It also offered both an entry-point and an opportunity to connect to more depth of thought about the texts and media they were engaging with.

We believe that the power of micro-writing is in the short, focused bursts. As teachers struggled to create student-centered, engaging, virtual lessons, micro-writing not only became a tool, it also became an essential part of creating a classroom community. Micro-writing tasks centered around trivial questions such as, "Would you rather live without air conditioning or without Wi-Fi?" began to bond students and teachers.

Before COVID-19, trauma research supported the idea that teachers can be "critical in [helping survivors of trauma] to re-establish a sense of safety, self, and connection" (Shalka, 2015, p. 25). Micro-writing became a way for us to daily infuse trauma-informed instructional practices, such as establishing predictable routines, building feelings of competence, and empowering student agency (Minahan, 2019). Students became used to the low-stakes writing tasks at the beginning of class. This predictability gave them some form of stability during an unpredictable and unstable time. Because the time and amount of writing asked for was smaller than traditional writing tasks, students had a low-stakes writing space that helped build feelings of competence as writers. Minahan (2019) states, "It is important that students experience competence to develop a more accurate self-narrative and to begin to create a positive future picture of themselves" (para. 21).

Furthermore, since the micro-writing tasks were light-hearted, creative, and self-selected, students were able to find and sharpen their voice. Looking back, it is hard to deny how important it was to give students choice, voice, and opportunities as building blocks for positive self-narratives at a time when our entire planet felt like we had no agency.

The Return to the Classroom

Still living in the tail end of the pandemic's lasting effects, when students came back to school in person in August of 2021, they seemed withdrawn, distracted, and anxious. They were different from the humans we knew and taught before March of 2020.

- Some students were disengaged from their teachers and classmates.

- Some students did not know how to speak to one another or adults.

- Some students were wary of making eye contact with us.

- Some students were not afraid to say that they did not want to participate in class.

- And their phones—some students could not help but check their phones multiple times in one class period.

What we noticed about what our students were experiencing pointed to a gap in communicative social skills, which has now been confirmed by research as globally impactful. In studying what was lost in the online learning environments of German students, the top five categories of loss were related to social aspects (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2022).

We walked into silent classroom after silent classroom; the only noise was the occasional typing on a Chromebook. The sea of bright screens made the classroom silence deafening. Some students struggled to take risks with language—verbal or written. At the high school level, we began to work with our campus instructional coaches to help diagnose where struggle points existed and how we could support success in the classroom.

The broader issue observed was the need for the class period to be broken up into smaller chunks to be mindful of current levels of stamina and engagement around a task. A reduction in concentration as a result of the COVID-19 online learning environment is supported by research (Kmiotek-Meier, 2022). We learned that during each lesson chunk, students needed to be doing something different. In short, we were seeing the effects of students who had gotten used to the 7- to 10-minute micro-lessons they received online the previous year.

Even after taking stock of what was a momentary new normal, we were still so happy to have them back in class. We researched, talked with teachers and students, and kept throwing *strategy spaghetti* at the instructional wall until something took hold. We contemplated:

- How do we make writing engaging, low-stakes, and fun?

- How do we get students talking again?

In the end, we kept circling back to the micro-writing done during the year of distance learning.

Once we realized that micro-writing was not just a one-year panacea to get us through distance learning and embraced it as a vital part of our instructional practice, we had to figure out how to train all teachers on micro-writing and get them to see the benefits of it. This would happen through professional development and curricular resources.

District Teacher Preparation for Micro-Writing Implementation

We trained teachers before the school year started in 2022-2023 to better understand how to set up and facilitate micro-writing in the classroom. This training included highlighting a process for teachers to follow regarding micro-writing, which included:

- setting up for micro-writing (planning),

- engaging in micro-writing (drafting),

- revisiting micro-writing (revising or editing), and

- assessing micro-writing (post-publication).

Each part of the process offered strategies for engaging students. We highlighted several strategies for teachers throughout the professional development. For example, for micro-writing success, we suggested that students generate lists of ideas that hold specific meaning and connect to broader topics, such as important people in your life (see Figure 1).

In addition, we recommended that students:

- Connect micro-writing to a text students interact with in class, such as a list of pet peeves after reading the picture book *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt, 2013).

> Creating a list of words or phrases connected to various topics allows for writers to quickly jog their brain and focus in on people, places, things, and moments connected to them.

Possible topics to add to a list

Important people in your life	Friends	Favorite activities
Memorable pets or animals	Pet peeves (what bugs you)	Things you do online
Special gifts you've given others	Memorable songs	Best inventions of all time
Special gifts you've received	Things you do well	Most prized possessions

Figure 1. *List of Ideas for Student Micro-Writing Success*

- Use an image as a stimulus for writing. *The New York Times'* The Learning Network (2023a) offers a section of lessons and connected resources. Each lesson in this section includes thought-provoking images that *The New York Times* connects to a predictable instructional routine including opportunities for discussion, writing, and interaction online with other classes. This resource ends with a link to an article in *The New York Times* telling the complete story connected to the image. Students find success using the image as a starting point for creating micro-writing.

- Revisit micro-writing with purpose, and use focal points for quick revision, adapted from Reif (2018). She suggests "allow[ing] the students a choice in which [micro-writing] remains undeveloped and which matters enough to expand or craft further into finished pieces" (p. 9). When giving students instructional time to revisit and revise a piece of micro-writing, students find success when they have options for focal points for revision (see Figure 2).

- Highlight one or two moves writers execute effectively in the revision of one of their pieces. Include space in the rubric, or designate time at the end of the writing process, for students to think about their writing process and reflect on one or more choices made to enhance the piece. Possible prompts for students to use for both self-assessment and reflection are:

  › What is one move you made to improve this piece?

  › What are you proud of in this draft?

  › If you had more time to spend working on this piece, how would you improve it?

While implementing micro-writing was not an instant cure-all for quiet classrooms or blank pages (or screens), the positive impact of micro-writing happened more quickly than we anticipated. Teachers sent us emails or found us in hallways to note a class or even a specific student who was able to generate some quality writing, even if it was a few sentences. Some thanked us for our part in bringing back some normalcy to their classrooms. We could not have asked for more fulfilling work that brought back feelings of teaching and learning success from before the days of COVID-19 to the new landscape of our campuses and classrooms.

District Curriculum Preparation for Micro-Writing Implementation

After initial training with teachers, we began the work of solidifying micro-writing as an important part of the district curriculum. At the middle school level, we incorporated the task of creating a micro-writing portfolio into the first curriculum unit grades 6-8. This allowed teachers flexibility in the options they created for students but created the expectation of multiple micro-writing drafts in a portfolio as a summative assessment.

Both before and during the 2022-2023 school year, we included professional learning opportunities for teachers at our annual eNgagement Academy[SM]. This academy is a way to share innovative practices from the previous school year with teachers to implement in their classrooms for the upcoming year. Our district's master teachers highlighted their experiences with micro-writing and shared multiple entry points into generating this type of writing in the classroom.

Currently, at the high school level, our curriculum outlines at least three micro-writing opportunities during each unit. We adopted what Gallagher and Kittle (2018) call "writing laps" (see chapters 6, 7, and 8). Gallagher and Kittle have this to say about micro-writing and developing longer writing works through these laps:

> In designing our writing units, we charm students into a romance with writing—daily quick writing that is ungraded, and thus safe, leads students to a romantic attachment to the act of writing (they develop an interest in finding words and watching them knit together and feel good about the risks and rewards of writing). … They will often write many smaller, ungraded experiments before choosing pieces to take through the writing process. (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018, pp. 83-84)

In our district, we call them "writing passes" instead of laps, and we

Quick Revision

Read through your micro-writing once, getting a gist of what you've written. Then, read your writing again, looking for where you can extend your micro-writing. Try to make the writing better by rethinking one or more of the following:

INTRO – start somewhere else to hook the reader

WORD CHOICE – change any word(s) to add more specific detail

ADD EXTRA DETAILS about a character, setting, or event

DELETE any information you unintentionally repeat

REARRANGE ORDER of a sentence or paragraph

Figure 2. *Micro-Writing Quick Revision Points of Focus*

ask for students to be given at least three opportunities to do some low-stakes writing in the genre of study before starting a rough draft for that genre (e.g., see Figure 3). Our curriculum suggests places for micro-writing and how to scaffold this new structure. Sometimes we use the first sentence from a mentor text as a sentence starter, or we write about the same topic the mentor text just used.

Using the mentor text as a writing teacher in micro-writing is a powerful tool, giving students low-stakes opportunities to imitate writers' moves they have just read and experienced. We also hope teachers are giving other micro-writing opportunities, not only those connected to the genre of study. In our classrooms, students use micro-writing for creative writing, for choice writing, and for developing authentic voice.

At the middle school level during district meetings with campus ELA leaders, we asked teachers to bring and share micro-writing samples with the group. We used these samples and the discussion around them to highlight effective strategies for getting students into writing. We also used these samples to discuss trends on campuses and across the district. Then, we used feedback to focus on the next steps of instructional support and places where adding or creating resources for teachers would be most useful. Based on teacher feedback, we created curricular resources to support taking micro-writing further into the writing process, including opportunities for focused revision.

At the high school level, we modeled opportunities for micro-writing during every professional development session. We sent a quarterly newsletter that highlighted teacher and student achievements, and we regularly showcased creative examples of micro-writing in classrooms. We also had student samples of micro-writing available from all levels of instruction. In essence, micro-writing has infiltrated many facets of our district's instruction: curriculum, professional development, daily teaching practices, assessments, resources, and portfolios.

Conclusion

No matter where you are on your journey of refining and discovering your craft as a teacher and your panacea for the pandemic, we hope you can learn from our errors and epiphanies. Before the pandemic, we thought of micro-writing as an easy, low-stakes way to get students to write. We did not yet understand the added benefits this writing practice created for writers. After venturing through the pandemic together, we now believe micro-writing is one of the most powerful tools a teacher can use to unlock student engagement. Of the wisdom we gained through this process, four ideas about micro-writing and its effectiveness stand out above others:

- Micro-writing built fluency, stamina, and confidence: Writing became easier when it was practiced often and given instructional space for feedback and reflection. We saw power in writers—watching growth from writing a sentence or two in 5 minutes to being able to put down much more on the page.

- Micro-writing became a catalyst for reconnecting students safely and socially as they struggled to reintegrate with peers. Because stakes were often low with generating writing and the writing generated was a smaller, manageable chunk, students were more apt to share with their peers—opening the door for more positive relationship-building through sharing their writing.

- Micro-writing became a safe space to practice revision, editing, and/or grammar strategies because the writing was not a full process paper. Revising to minimize verbs in a paragraph was less daunting than it would have been in a two-page paper.

- Because we encouraged student choice in micro-writing, the task allowed students to "build islands of competence" (Brooks, 1998, p. 564). Students needed to feel successful in areas of strength or interest because they so often felt inadequate throughout the school day (Minihan, 2019, para. 21).

Writing time! 5 minutes

Use the following sentence stem from the personal narrative, "The Pie" to begin writing a personal narrative.

I knew enough about _____ to stop me from _____.

Original Sentence:
I knew enough about <u>hell</u> to stop me from <u>stealing</u>.

Teacher example:
I knew enough about <u>regret</u> to stop me from <u>chickening out</u>.

OR

Write about a time you felt guilty about something.

Figure 3. *Using "The Pie" (Soto, 1990, p. 55) to Create Writing Opportunities Connected to Texts*

The journey from stumbling into micro-writing to full integration into our district's curriculum has been transformative. The unanticipated pivot towards micro-writing during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed its profound impact on student engagement, voice, and agency. As we faced the uncertainties of virtual and hybrid learning, micro-writing emerged as more than just a temporary solution; it became a powerful catalyst for building fluency, stamina, and confidence in our students. Its role in reconnecting students safely and socially, fostering positive relationships, and providing a low-stakes space for practicing revision and editing strategies cannot be overstated. Through intentional, district-wide teacher preparation and curriculum adjustments, micro-writing became a fundamental part of our instructional practice. Our experience underscores the resilience of effective teaching methods and the adaptability required to meet the evolving needs of education. We made micro-writing not just a response to a crisis but a lasting tool for unlocking the potential of every secondary student in our district.

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