



10 THINGS EVERY YOUNG WRITER NEEDS

Kids have what it takes to become really great writers. Here's what you can do to cultivate their creativity. **By Nancy Peterson**

Do you dream of a class full of students who love writing workshop? With persistence and an enthusiastic approach, you can lead your students to discover writing as a creative outlet and a communication tool, a way of transmitting the scenes inside their heads to the world at large.

Written language, with all its conventions and complexities, of course takes years to master. But it must have a beginning. There is a place for every child to start a journey on a river of words. All they need is someone to recognize their wonderful ideas and inspire them to develop their talents—that can be you!

Adapted from my new book for families, *Encouraging Your Child's Writing Talent*

(Prufrock Press), here's my list of what young writers need to develop and grow inside and outside your classroom.

1 WRITERS NEED WORDS, WORDS, WORDS.

Young writers need immersion in a print-rich environment. That means a warm, engaging classroom filled with books, children's magazines, posters, and word walls. This is especially important if a child's home environment is not print-rich. Celebrate words whenever and wherever you can.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: As a class, compile an ongoing list of words that the students like—such as *Mississippi*, *kumquat*, or *stupendous*. Post the words in a prominent place in your classroom. Talk about them. Play guessing games with them, or

form riddles about them (“Guess which word I'm thinking of?”). Hold a vote to find out the top 10 favorites. Invite children to campaign for their choices.

2 WRITERS NEED THEIR UNIQUENESS VALUED.

Writing is a way for children to discover what they know about themselves and the world. It allows them to explore their likes and dislikes, their passions, and their hobbies. The very act of writing—making something out of nothing—produces a feeling of worth and a sense of accomplishment. Perhaps most important, writing allows a child to hear her own unique voice, to communicate in her own words, and to be herself. Your recognition of and affirmative response to your students' unique >>

voices will allow them to know themselves better. Affirming a child's unique voice is about encouraging him or her to communicate her personal truth—her thoughts, feelings, ideas, and emotions—in writing.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: Give students the opportunity to write in journals on their own terms. A first-grader may choose to write only fairy princess stories, page after page, or meticulously record the stats of NASCAR winners. Middle-schoolers' journals may chronicle the ups and downs of friendships or feature sketches of the video games kids would like to invent. Try to give your students the chance to write at least a few times a week on subjects *they* deem important.

3 YOUNG WRITERS NEED REAL MENTORS.

Young writers need mentors who, rather than present themselves as masters of written communication, share the very struggles and process they hope to see in children's writing. Children do not need strict taskmasters standing over their writing with red pen in hand, nor praise for every word they put to paper or screen. They do need mentors who will sit alongside them and collaboratively struggle through the process and share the fun of the written word.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: Let your students help you write. For example, using the whiteboard or overhead, let your students help you compose a letter requesting permission for a field trip, a thank you note, a parent newsletter, or even part of a grant proposal. Young writers need to see experienced writers draft and redraft sentences, make mistakes, reflect on shades of meaning, and ultimately succeed with a piece of writing.

4 YOUNG WRITERS NEED THE BAR SET HIGH.

All writers should have a sense of what high-quality writing looks



5 Kids Need to Be Published!

Seeing your writing in print, whether in a magazine or on a Web site, is a powerful motivator to do the intense work of drafting and revising. Publish your students' work on your Web site. (Don't have one? Create one with the free Class Homepage Builder at teacher.scholastic.com.) Then, check out these great magazines and sites that publish children's work.

- Stone Soup magazine www.stonesoup.com
- International Kids' Space www.kids-space.org
- Potluck magazine www.potluckmagazine.org
- Potato Hill Poetry www.potatohill.com

and sounds like. In order to develop a sense of the writing to which they should aspire, students must be exposed to a variety of types, genres, styles, and authors. Children deserve to have favorites, and to study and pursue their favorites with breadth and depth.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: How can students learn to distinguish quality writing? By your sharing and discussing how passages, endings, or whole stories make you feel. What's so funny about that comic strip? What moves you about that essay? Write your own classroom volume of books and movie reviews.

Collect student reviews in an alphabetized binder or easy-to-organize spreadsheet. Consider having students create their own rating system. Was that last read-aloud a "four crowns" or a "four

skunks"? Students can begin to understand literary criticism at some level and to develop goals for their own writing.

6 YOUNG WRITERS NEED TO BE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS.

Emerging writers need to take risks, and they benefit from strong and caring encouragement. Writing is a safe way to test the waters with questions and beliefs, to seek answers and feedback, and to observe what happens because of creative ideas. Writing requires all of us to ask questions, dwell at least momentarily in doubt and confusion, and finally reach a breakthrough. Support students when their stories veer, falter, or sink. This is when real growth can happen.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: *Maniac Magee* author Jerry Spinelli once wrote a list of 16 things he wished he could do when he was 16 years old. It included trivial pursuits, such as the ability to "spit between my two front teeth" to more contemplative desires such as to "understand eternity." Ask your students to compose their own inspiring lists. Give students

the chance to do some *Freaky Friday* writing. In *Freaky Friday*, a mother and daughter exchange bodies and learn a great deal about each other's point of view. Encourage children to write from all different points of view—a senior citizen or a baby, an animal or an insect, an immigrant or a historical figure.

7 WRITERS NEED ROUTINES THAT INSPIRE CREATIVE THINKING.

Daily classroom routines that incorporate a variety of writing skills can help your students build and flex their writing muscles. Just like going to the gym, writing every day brings results. Introducing routines one at a time can enhance the effect they have on your students' enthusiasm and interest.

ACTIVITIES TO TRY: Try one or more of these daily language-building routines.

Experts: Invite one child each day to present a fascinating nonfiction fact, such as the existence of the horned narwhal or women pirates.

Poem-a-Day: Choose a poem to read aloud to your class every day. Read expressively so that the sounds and images can be enjoyed. Students can choral-read it, whisper-read it, act it out, or add it to a class collection.

Guess My Riddle: Share a silly riddle with your students every day. Riddles have the potential to trigger critical thinking and problem-solving and allow the whole class to enjoy words and imaginative language.

8 YOUNG WRITERS NEED A CHANCE TO THINK THROUGH WRITING.

The process of writing gives all of us a chance to think through, process, and organize our ideas. Writing gives children access to strategies that can heighten the quality of thinking to a limitless potential for pondering, observing, and extending. In fact, the more complex the subject is, the more difficult and unpredictable the act of composing becomes.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: Have you ever drawn a line down the middle of a sheet of paper and written the pros and cons of a decision? Invite your students to compose their own pros and cons when they are struggling with a difficult issue in history, current events, or in their own lives. Use your own lists as models.

9 DEVELOPING WRITERS NEED TO LEARN TO READ LIKE WRITERS.

Writers read differently. We just do. Constantly link reading to writing in the life of your classroom. Every book, article, or poem you read as a class—every encounter with a written text—is a chance to learn about style and craft. Share examples of good writing whenever you notice them. Collect “golden” sentences. As you read with your students, constantly look for interesting ways to approach writing technique,

such as sentence crafting, getting a point across, or bringing characters to life.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: Every once in a while, send your young writers on a scavenger hunt through the book you are reading together. Ask them to collect 12 outstanding adjectives or six physical descriptions of Ron Weasley or the Littles. Send them searching for cool compound sentences or riveting first sentences. Soon reading closely for examples of great writing will be second nature, and you won’t even have to ask.

10 DEVELOPING WRITERS NEED POWERFUL TEACHING!

The inspiring author Mem Fox once said, “I wish that we [teachers of writing] could change the world by creating powerful writers for forever, instead of indifferent writers for school.” We can! Powerful teachers encourage young writers to examine and explore the world around them, to look closely at their relationships, and to expand

their senses of perspective and personal relevance. They share the power to construct meaning with their students and help them to understand themselves as thinkers, interpreters, and writers.

ACTIVITY TO TRY: Consider writing letters back and forth with your students. This gives you a place for a private dialogue where you can share unique observations, and give encouragement to each of your students. Perhaps write to a few of your students each day during quiet reading time. The children will love the opportunity to write to you alone. Try not to grade or even comment on the writing in their letters. Just enjoy this incredible opportunity to get to know your students and build their writing skills. By the end of the year, you will see the difference in your students’ writing and hear it in the way they talk about literature. □

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