

Writing Process Workshop

Writing Process Workshop is an instructional model that views writing as an ongoing process in which students follow a given set of procedures for planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing. It allows students to be at various stages of the writing process at one time. Collaboration with peers and teacher is inherent in this model. Process writing focuses primarily on what children want to communicate. Student choice is important.



“It is terribly important for kids to read and write for the reasons that people the world over read and write, which is to communicate, to be delighted, to laugh.”

- Lucy Caulkins

What does a Writing Workshop classroom look like?

Small groups of students are busy throughout the room. In a corner Carl and Steven are conferencing about Steven’s dinosaur story. Kathy is at the publishing center designing the cover for her personal narrative about the day she broke her arm. Mrs. Lyle, the teacher, is conferencing with Carlos about his mystery story. Gregory is intensively working on his book of animal poetry. An author’s chair is positioned at the front of the room. Posters explaining the steps of the writing process are posted on the walls. Student writing is very visible. Children have easy access to the tools they need such as pencils, paper, thesauruses, and dictionaries. There is energy in the room as children purposefully converse with each other about their writing.



Elements of the Writing Process Workshop

- Students determine the topics and form for their writing.
- Students keep a notebook or folder to organize their “in progress” writing.
- Class members are at different points in their writing. Some may be prewriting while others are at an editing stage.
- The teacher’s role is that of a facilitator: monitoring, encouraging, conferencing, and providing help as needed.
- Students seek response to their writing from response partners or response groups for the purpose of improving their writing.
- Instruction is provided to various-sized groups based upon student needs.
- Students have time to orally share their written products.
- Teachers use a “status of the class” chart to keep track of student progress and to determine when teacher conferencing is needed. (See accompanying pages for a sample chart.)
- The teacher meets with individual students to conference about their writing throughout the process.
- The Writing Workshop follows a predictable pattern of a 5-10 minute **mini-lesson** on a timely writing technique, a quick status-of-the-class check, at least 30 minutes for the workshop’s main business of writing and conferring, and 5-10 minutes for the concluding group-share session.

The Mini-Lesson

Lucy Calkins (1986) came up with the idea of mini-lessons—a brief instructional session that addresses some element of writing is targeted in the current scope and sequence or has appeared as a problem in student work. It might be the use of vivid verbs or how to punctuate dialogue. It also can be a time to talk about issues of process or technique. An example would be the difference between revision and recopying. At the beginning of the year, mini-lessons may deal with procedural issues—how to use the daily writing folder, what to do in conference corners, etc. Mini-lessons generally last between five and ten minutes, just long enough to touch on a timely topic.

Source: Atwell, *In The Middle*, p. 77



Benefits of the Writing Process Workshop

1. There is no time wasted with students waiting for others to finish. Each student continues on to the next topic and form.
2. Students develop independence and motivation to be writers.
3. Students learn to write by writing. The stages of writing (prewriting, drafting, response, revision, proofreading, and publishing) occur naturally as students work toward completion of their projects.
4. The more children write—and write about what really matters to them—the greater their chance of growing into able thinkers.

Problems to consider with the Writing Workshop approach

1. Some students might take advantage of the organizational structure to use time inefficiently.
2. The workshop offers freedom, and some classes may become unruly.
3. Some students need substantial direct instruction on the forms and mechanics of writing.
4. If all assignments are self-generated, some students will not experience a variety of writing forms.

What decisions must a teacher make when using the Writing Workshop model? (Quality decisions on these issues will help prevent or minimize problems that may occur.)

- How pure of a workshop approach should be used? There is a continuum ranging from all student choice and direction to teacher choice and direction.
- In a **pure writing process model** student choice determines topic and form.
- In a **shared model**, the teacher might begin the week with a mini-lesson about writing descriptions. The students would spend the rest of the week working on a description of their choice, knowing that it would be due at the end of the week. The teacher determined the form, but the students determined the topic and when they would go to each stage of the writing process.

Teacher Decision-Making

- How will response groups be established? Use of partners, groups, and full-class responses are possibilities.
- How will the writing be stored? In folders? In notebooks?
- What role will the computer play in the workshop approach?
- How will the language textbook support the workshop approach? Models of each type of writing, a handbook of style and forms, models for response questions, and editing tips are some of the features that could be used. Each composition unit is a complete writing process lesson for all of the writing—with models and opportunities for student practice.

- How will direct instruction be given? Will the teacher use the “mini-lesson” format or the more extensive direct-instruction lessons to facilitate the writing?
- What guidelines will the class need for movement, access to the teacher, and behavior during the response sessions? (See management section for suggestions.)

Establishing a Collaborative Tone in the Classroom Through Peer and Teacher Conferencing.

A crucial part of the writing process model is the “**group share**” in which the author reads his or her work to other children in the class. According to Lucy Caulkins, *“Students learn that words can move an audience, can provoke a ‘me too’ reaction, and can make people laugh and cry.”*

Establish journal writing in your classroom early in the year. Allow time daily for students to share their writing. After a student shares his/her work, ask for a compliment from the audience. Model the use of specific praise. Example: “I like how you used the word “rippled” to describe the water.” Not, “I liked your story.”

After students are comfortable with sharing, introduce and model **peer conferencing**. Video-taping conferences for future modeling can be very beneficial. The use of a peer-conferencing guide sheet can also be helpful to students. (see resource page)

Teach the **steps of the writing process** and the vocabulary associated with it. Establish routines and procedures for movement around the classroom.

Do not permit interruptions during teacher-conferencing time. Have students give a hand signal for use of the restroom. While you are conducting teacher conferences, have a place where students can write simple questions that they want to ask you. In between conferences, go to the question board and call the students up to quickly answer their questions.

Teacher conferences should be **brief**. Begin the conference by asking the student how you can help them. At first, they will often want you to tell them what is wrong. Refrain from doing this. Ask them what they think about

their writing. We want to build strong independent writers who are evaluating their own writing in order to improve it. Praise a strong point of the students' writing and offer one suggestion for improvement. You can't correct everything. Record your teacher conferences. Evaluate the recordings. *Did you say too much? Is the student taking ownership of their writing? Did you end the conference with a plan for your student? In what way can you improve your conferencing technique?* Keep a notebook page for each student in your class. Record brief notes after each conference. Sticky notes or labels can also be used to record thoughts as you walk around and informally conference with your students. Place the label on the student's conferencing page.

Allow time after a writing workshop session to discuss what went well and what did not with your students. **Problem solve-together.**



Use the **status-of-the-class sheet** to keep track of what students have completed. A bulletin board with the steps of the writing process posted is also helpful. Place student names on a die cut that has been laminated. Place magnetic tape or ticky tack on the back of the name tag. At the end of the Writing Workshop students place their name under the heading that applies to them. Students will be at different points in the process. This makes the process very visual for the students and helps you to see where they are. It is also very motivating. Children like to watch as they progress through the writing process.

Prewriting	Drafting	Revision	Editing	Publishing
Cindy	Mark	Van	Ken	Haseeb
Tom	Tiffany	Pam	Lucinda	Anna
Mike	Carlos	Stephanie		
	Pam			

Keep in mind that the writing process is recursive. It allows students to move back and forth between the different stages to accommodate their individual needs.

Where can a teacher find additional information for implementing the Writing Workshop approach?

The Writing Institute and Writing Academy offered each summer in Cypress-Fairbanks are both good learning experiences for those wanting to implement a Writing Workshop approach.

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