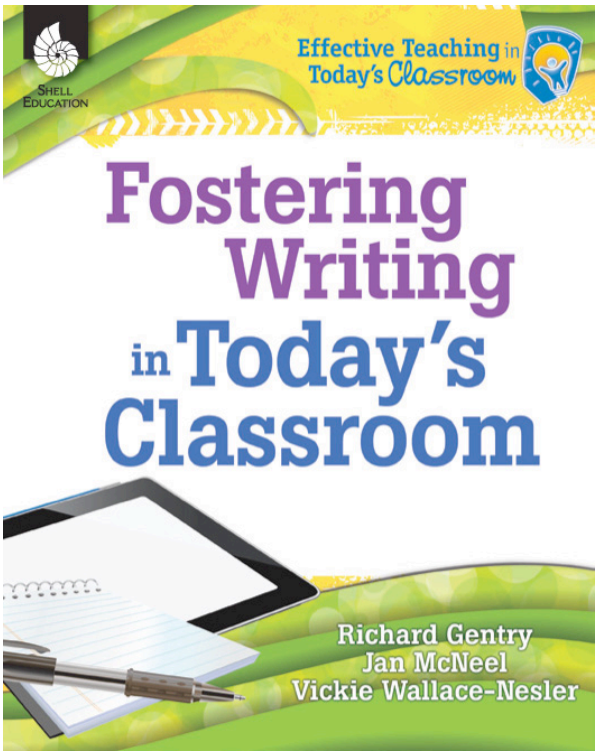
SHELL EDUCATION

Sample Pages from

Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom



The following sample pages are included in this download:

- Table of Contents
- Introduction excerpt
- Sample chapter selection

Shell Education

Effective Teaching in Today's Classroom

Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom

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Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom

Table of Contents

Introduction

Take Your Craft to a Higher Purpose and a Greater Accomplishment

Teach writing. Empower the child. Change the world.

Teaching writing is of vital importance for every teacher in today's classrooms. At no time in recent history has fostering writing in the classroom been more crucial. Propelled by powerful research, including brain scan studies linking writing to reading and thinking, student writing is recognized as being critical for learning and crucial for every child's academic and future career success. In 21st century classrooms, every teacher must be a writing teacher.

This book is intended to be your guide—an inspirational, research- and evidence-based, practical, and accessible compendium to living the life of a writing teacher and fostering the love, need, and life-changing effects of everyday writing in your classroom. For pre-service and novice writing teachers, the foundations you need to get started and move forward are provided. Master teachers will find fresh ideas and enlightenment sprinkled with quotes from the eminent leaders of our craft. This book will help you take the craft of writing to a higher ground.

As we travel across the United States and beyond, we work in many districts where legions of teachers—not well-prepared to teach writing, through no fault of their own—have been thrust into turmoil with high expectations and demands for teaching writing but are given no staff development, no resources, and little support. This book is their guide.

Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom takes a process approach as you become a master writing teacher and your classroom becomes an apprenticeship for training a new generation of writers. Even if you don't feel confident as a writing teacher today, we will show you the way. Writing is often frightening to students. It requires stamina and resilience. Yet it's the job of every student to write. Your apprenticeship will enable your students to get the job done.

If you follow this guide, your classroom will not be a stage with you lecturing up front. Instead, your writing classroom will be a haven for students to develop their voice, trust you to help them express what they feel, explore their passion, and think and speak with confidence. You will be that kind of writing teacher—the kind who is not just the judge but the type of writing teacher who inspires by advocating for students.

Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom follows a research-based workshop model for writing instruction and goes beyond the workshop to incorporate writing across the curriculum. It provides opportunities for students to make choices and develop as independent writers and thinkers. This workshop model dedicates more time to showing students how to write and less time telling students what to do, grading papers, or implementing writing-test prep. Students will be shown how to write to learn and time will be spent on mini-lessons and conferences demonstrating, modeling, and meeting the individual needs of students, which is not only good for your students but invigorating for you. In the wise words of master writing teacher Nancie Atwell, "The workshop is the best, maybe the only, truly differentiated approach to teaching and learning. Here, students can act and are known as individuals. Here, teachers recognize and support the needs and growth of individual students" (2008, 6). *Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom* shows you how to accomplish this goal. We'll show you how to coach, inspire, and guide your students to become the best writers they can be.

Chapter 1 starts with the first question teachers ask when we meet them: "How do I set up my classroom for writing?" We show you how to organize space for group meetings, arrange tables or desks for writing and peer conferencing, organize materials, display publications, and plan space for conferences and small groupings.

Chapter 2 explains how to manage your writing classroom by including sample schedules, routines, and frequently asked questions. Students learn by doing, and management is at the very core of any successful classroom.

Chapter 3 digs deeply into teaching writing as a process. We scrutinize the five-step writing process and go beyond to review the history of the writing process as a revolutionary movement, gleaning wisdom from its founder, the late Dr. Donald Graves.

Chapter 4 explores the natural beginnings of writing, reading, and spelling. We focus on the early reading and writing connection, spotlighting the beginning developmental phases of reading and writing in primary grades. No teaching writing compendium would be complete without full consideration of elevating writing skills using close reading, inquiry-based learning, and writing across the curriculum. **Chapter 5** focuses on spiraling upward with writing to learn and writing in the disciplines, including episodes and lesson suggestions for writing across the curriculum through grade eight.

Best practices are the foundation of this work. Both the writing process and the traits of quality writing are fully covered in *Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom*. **Chapter 6** demonstrates how and why to teach ideas, organization, word choice, sentence building, voice, and conventions with sample lessons. **Chapter 7** rounds it all off with new directions in writing instruction, including the impact of technology, the resurgence of cursive handwriting, and best tips for struggling writers.

Fostering Writing in Today's Classroom is layered with the research base you need to have confidence, but it is our goal to give you the best practices, tips, how-to guides, answers to your questions and concerns, and a report on trends for the future all wrapped into one easy-to-read book. We hope to support teachers through 30 years of synthesis of research, served on a plate of practical advice from our work with master teachers and our combined 100 years of working with thousands of students in the classroom.

Read this book. Tell your colleagues about it. Teach writing. Change the world.

Chapter 6

Developing the Traits of Good Writing

"Language is empowering. Writer's language opens doors for students and changes their thinking forever. It gives them independence."

—Vicki Spandel (2008, x)

Speaking a Common Language

We recognize the traits of writing as the language of our writer's workshop. Vicki Spandel (2008) refers to the traits as "a writer's vocabulary for thinking, speaking, and working like writers" (6). During mini-lessons, partner conversations, conferences, and sharing, the traits are the common vocabulary for teaching and talking about writing. The aim is that the language of the traits transfers across content areas and grade levels, building school-wide continuity in the expectations of quality writing. Imagine if students, teachers, administrators, and parents fully understood and spoke the same language about writing. Even the youngest of writers would begin to recognize and understand those quality characteristics undeniably present in the texts of their fellow writers or in the books of their favorite authors.

The traits of quality writing were identified in 1984 through research projects conducted by teachers searching for an answer to the question *What makes good writing work?* They read and analyzed writing, dedicating their efforts toward developing a simple means of writing assessment for teachers and students. These studies at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, now recognized as Education Northwest, identified the following attributes essential for good writing:

Traits of Quality Writing

- **Ideas**: details, development, and focus
- **Organization**: internal structure
- **Voice**: tone, style, purpose, and audience
- **Word Choice**: precise language and phrasing
- **Sentence Fluency**: correctness, rhythm, and cadence
- **Conventions**: mechanical correctness
- **Presentation**: how the piece looks

(Bellamy 2005, 6)

As we teach writing mini-lessons, collaborate with partners, and develop our writing skills, the traits serve as the core of students' learning. The complex writing process becomes more accessible when students are taught these quality writing traits, writing strategies for developing each of those traits, and a method of using the traits as an objective measure for assessing writing. When we use the language of the traits of writing, we build a community of writers that values writing and sees its members as authors of important work.

Ideas

"The topics to write about are as countless as the stars. I believe that the best ideas live inside of us. It's our job to dig them out."

—Ralph Fletcher (2000, 15)

All writing, from children's picture books to political speeches, begins with an idea. The trait of ideas is often referred to as the "heart" of the message. That idea flows into the writer's theme and is supported by well-developed details that interest, inform, excite, and entertain the reader. This trait not only focuses on establishing the main idea of the writing but also creates descriptive, precise details that pull the audience into the writing. To support students in the development of the trait of ideas, teach them the following skills:

- **Focus on an idea:** What do I want to write about?
- **Zero in on and narrow the idea:** Is my topic specific and manageable?
- **Expand and explain to develop the idea:** Do I have knowledge and/or experience to add anecdotes and details?

Too often, students have the unmistakable notion that they do not have anything to write about. They think if they have not climbed Mount Everest or visited a famous theme park, their ideas are not worthy of a manuscript. In addition, students sometimes appear in our classrooms having been fed writing prompts in previous grades and lack the experience of developing ideas on their own. We need to show our students how to observe details, notice the world around them, take note of the unusual, listen for topics that interest them, and "see the world as writers." It is through our teaching that students will become successful in selecting and developing the trait of ideas.

How to Teach Ideas

Provide numerous opportunities for students to choose their own topics for writing. When students select topics, their writing is often full of conviction, passion, and voice. Young writers can develop confidence in their writing when they are interested in and have knowledge of the topics about which they are writing. Eventually, students see themselves as writers and recognize writing as a personal life skill rather than a teacher assignment.

Modeling and demonstrating how to create a list of topics for writing is the first step in developing the trait of ideas. Begin by creating an "Expert List" of things we are knowledgeable about and care to share with the class. "Think aloud" as each idea is considered and then dismissed or added to the list, sharing briefly why that topic might be a good idea for

writing. Next, after students discuss topics they might write about, create a class chart of *Topics We Can Write About*. This cumulative chart includes writing ideas that many of them have in common, like brothers and sisters, pets, grandparents, sports, and subject matter the class studied. The idea list, along with the group list, will initiate writing ideas for students as they create their own open-ended list of topics for writing. Scaffold and guide students through this process to ensure that students have a clear understanding of the task and the support necessary to succeed.

What is most important in the teaching of ideas is that students are helped to recognize that writing topics are all around them. Writing ideas are found in the following:

- **Family stories:** Encourage students to talk to family members about topics for their writing, such as family traditions, special memories from a younger age, trips and vacations, and family members.
- **The arts:** Use art, music and lyrics, photographs, poetry, and dance to inspire ideas for writing. Every picture tells a story, and using pictures from magazines, books, advertisements, family photos, the newspaper, and the Internet can all inspire ideas for writing. Shel Silverstein's poem "One Sister For Sale" is an excellent example of poetry that generates writing ideas.
- **Classmates:** Through partner discussions and sharing opportunities, writing ideas are sparked. When Gabbie shares her writing idea of getting ice cream with her grandmother after school on Fridays, Jose recalls how when he got ice cream and his little sister's ice cream fell off the cone, she sat down on the sidewalk and started eating it. Sharing starts the brain thinking, "Oh, that reminds me of…."
- **Books:** Share literature from different genres for many reasons. As we share fiction and nonfiction, topics are explored and added to a student's list of writing ideas. When reading with a class, think aloud about how a sentence, phrase, or picture sparks a memory and how to write about that memory.
- **Questions:** What do we wonder about? What do we want to know more about? These are topics that motivate students to research, explore, and write. Writing ideas based on questions can also create a strong voice, particularly when the writer develops passion about the topic (e.g., coal vs. wind turbines).

- **Ourselves:** The people we know, the places we go, the things we treasure, the activities we enjoy, the things we like or dislike, and the everyday stuff are all writing ideas just waiting to be molded into some form of writing.

Once students collect ideas and begin using them for their writing, help them zoom in on and narrow that idea into a focused topic. It is not uncommon for students to select broad topics that leave them overwhelmed with the amount of information or lead to vague writing of "sunrise to sunset" adventures. One of the best ways to narrow the topic with young students is a visual representation of what Calkins and Martinelli (2006) refer to as the "watermelon to seed" topics, and we name "story seeds." The process is to use the body and hands or picture cards to represent the broad topic—football (the watermelon). Next, cut the melon in half and narrow in on the idea—playing football (half watermelon). Continue to narrow that topic—my team and coach (slices of the watermelon). From that, we find story seed(s)—lessons my coach taught me about life or the winning touchdown (watermelon seeds). Refer to Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3.

Another successful approach to teach students to narrow ideas into more manageable topics is to ask questions: *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *when*, and *how.* The following is a nonfiction example.

- **What do I know or care about?—**bullying
- **When?—**bullying during the middle school years
- **Where?—**at school or after school
- **How?—**using social media to bully in middle school
- **Who?—**middle school girls using social media to bully (Focused writing idea)

Students often have difficulty on standardized writing assessment prompts because their writing lacks in idea development. Their essays may be short, with only a few related details. Mini-lessons should support writers in developing details that are interesting, unique, and informative. Details "show" what is happening and don't just tell about the event, and details should hold the reader's attention.

Students can usually add unique anecdotes and interesting details by simply asking, "Why?" If you have ever been around a toddler who asks

a simple question, you can relate to this thinking. You respond with a simple reply, only to hear another "Why?" During this little conversation exchange, you provide information—details for the toddler's story. It may not be written down, but those details are stored and added to that child's knowledge base to be used another time. Other question words will produce some details, but "Why" can manufacture an endless supply.

Drawings, pictures, and webs are used frequently to teach idea development. After the process of selecting and narrowing a writing idea is modeled, we often begin building a sketch of the story. Each object in the sketch becomes a writing detail in a simple beginning, middle, and end storyboard sketch. Even the youngest writers can find details in the colors, sizes, names, and labels they add to their drawings. Pictures and postcards can serve as a resource for students to practice developing details from ideas. Teaching students to be specific, when giving details, will enhance their writing. For example, students may say they see trees in the picture. More specifically, they see "the 3,500-year-old Sequoia." Students can also use their senses to write what they see, hear, smell, feel, and taste when "looking into" the picture.

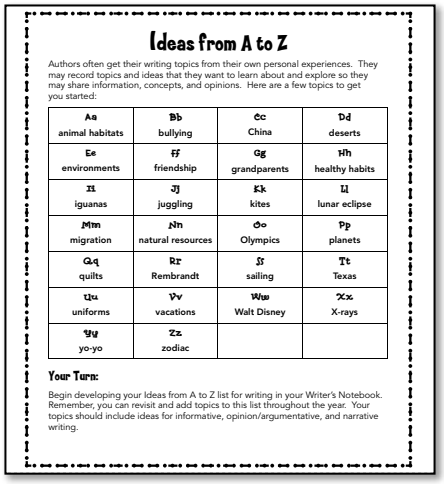
Model and share several examples of ideas developed with authentic texts from favorite authors, your writing, and student writing samples. Students need multiple modeled mini-lessons, a variety of strategies, and opportunities for practice before applying the strategies successfully in their own writing. Creating a class anchor chart with modeled strategies is a valuable resource for supporting developing writers.

Types of Lessons to Teach Ideas

Figure 6.1 shows an additional lesson idea used when teaching students to collect writing ideas. Sharing and modeling lists of our favorites typically sparks numerous writing ideas for students to add to their own lists and has many possible avenues to explore (e.g, favorite people, places, foods, and winter activities). Consider lists of things that are not favorites, such as things that make you sad or angry, or the worst days. The ideas on these lists may be broad initially, but they can be narrowed once students become more confident in their writing.

You can even create an alphabet idea board that can be expanded throughout the year. If space is limited in the classroom, take it into the hallway and inspire other teachers and students with your class's writing ideas. Each letter has its own page or box, and ideas can simply be written in or added with sticky notes. For example, as students expand their knowledge of bats in reading/science, add *bats* to the B section of the board. Provide students with individual alphabet charts so they may add their own ideas for writing. They can be familiar topics or new ideas for exploration.

Figure 6.1 Sample Alphabet Idea Board



Ideas from A to Z

Authors often get their writing topics from their own personal experiences. They may record topics and ideas that they want to learn about and explore so they may share information, concepts, and opinions. Here are a few topics to get you started:

Aa animal habitats	Bb bullying	Cc China	Dd deserts
Ee environments	Ff friendship	Gg grandparents	Hh healthy habits
Ii iguanas	Jj juggling	Kk kites	Ll lunar eclipse
Mm migration	Nn natural resources	Oo Olympics	Pp planets
Qq quilts	Rr Rembrandt	Ss sailing	Tt Texas
Uu uniforms	Vv vacations	Ww Walt Disney	Xx X-rays
Yy yo-yo	Zz zodiac		

Your Turn:

Begin developing your Ideas from A to Z list for writing in your Writer's Notebook. Remember, you can revisit and add topics to this list throughout the year. Your topics should include ideas for informative, opinion/argumentative, and narrative writing.

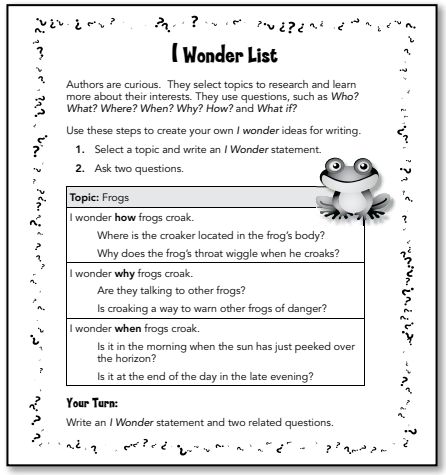
(Gentry, McNeel, and Wallace-Nesler 2013 g)

Use texts to support students as they generate, narrow, and develop ideas. We often think of mentor text as literature from our favorite authors, but they may also include newspaper articles with interesting leads, brochures full of details, Internet blogs with writing samples, and even student writing examples. Telling students about using sensory details, prepositional phrases, dialogue, and similes is not nearly as effective as showing them how these strategies are used in authentic text. Using the text *All About Rattlesnakes* by Jim Arnosky (2002) is one example to teach narrowing the topic. It is not just about animals, reptiles, or snakes. Instead, it provides specific information about that unique type of snake.

Asking questions not only supports writers as they narrow topics but can also spark ideas for writing and expand idea development. Asking questions

like *Who/What do I know a lot about?*, *Where have I been or do I want to go?,* or *How do astronauts brush their teeth?* all create possible writing ideas. We also like to use "I Wonder" questions to narrow topic choice and/or to expand details, as shown in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2 Sample I Wonder List



I Wonder List

Authors are curious. They select topics to research and learn more about their interests. They use questions, such as *Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?* and *What if?*

Use these steps to create your own *I wonder* ideas for writing.

1. Select a topic and write an *I Wonder* statement.
2. Ask two questions.

Topic: Frogs

I wonder **how** frogs croak.
- Where is the croaker located in the frog's body?
- Why does the frog's throat wiggle when he croaks?

I wonder **why** frogs croak.
- Are they talking to other frogs?
- Is croaking a way to warn other frogs of danger?

I wonder **when** frogs croak.
- Is it in the morning when the sun has just peeked over the horizon?
- Is it at the end of the day in the late evening?

Your Turn:

Write an *I Wonder* statement and two related questions.

(Gentry, McNeel, and Wallace-Nesler 2013 e)

Modeling methods for students to add details to their drafts is not only a strategy for revision but also a means for developing ideas without rewriting the draft. Adding "spider legs" on a strip(s) of paper stapled or taped to the top or bottom of the draft provides the space needed to add small details. To add more information, attach a page to each side of the draft to develop the story idea about what happened before and after. Another technique students really enjoy is "story surgery," where they cut their story apart and staple or "stitch in" an additional paper section used to write more information (you can use tape and draw stitches).

Use magnifying glasses, binoculars, cameras, video recorders, or phones to introduce students to developing ideas. Helping students understand that they only need to zoom in or stop the moment to generate details is a valuable writing strategy. Consider showing snapshots and asking questions such as *What is happening in that moment?* or *If we moved in slow motion, what would we notice, hear, and smell?* Encourage students to use their senses when expanding details. Have students create a camera lens by cutting a circle

in a notecard or piece of paper. Peek through the "lens" to take a snapshot and generate a list of details, or create a mental image of one small part of a memory and explode it into ideas and details for a story.

Questions to Use When Conferencing about Ideas

It is important to listen to students. Then, guide them through questioning. Writing conferences should be student centered with open-ended questions that nudge the writer forward. While every conference is a different conversation, these are comment and question examples that can be used when conferring with students about ideas.

- What do you enjoy doing?
- What/Who do you care about?
- What do you think you might like to write about today?
- What ideas did you explore from our classroom list or your personal lists?
- What is the main idea of your writing today?
- You know a lot about your topic_____. Do you have a favorite_____?
- Tell me more about …
- You focused on your idea! I want to know more. Can you describe…?
- Can you add details or an example to clarify what you mean here?
- How can you use your senses to add descriptive details for your reader?
- What interesting details or facts might readers be surprised to learn?
- This is a unique topic! Everyone may not be familiar with the topic, so where might your reader need more clarification or explanation?

Suggestions for Teaching Ideas

What do we do when a student gets stuck and just cannot come up with ideas for writing? Praise and encourage! Praise the student for previous ideas developed in their writing and encourage them to explore other possible ideas by looking through books, magazines, newspapers, talking to their writing partner, or simply closing their eyes and thinking about the events of the past few days.

When student-writing ideas become repetitious or lacking in substance, combine partners or small groups and brainstorm writing ideas with an idea web. Share the webs with the class, and have students add ideas to their personal lists. The collaboration and sharing is sure to spark new and interesting ideas. Encourage writers to be aware of the "happenings" in their lives. Writing ideas are often generated through conversations and the simple question, "What's up?" Students can create a list of "what's up?" topics related to what is currently happening, such as the following:

- **At school:** soccer tournament, spirit week, lunch
- **In class:** new student, test, current topics in science and social studies
- **At home:** a new pet, visiting grandma, baking cookies, swimming lessons
- **In the news:** current government topic, latest fad, weather conditions

There is great value in sharing and providing a variety of genres and texts by authors you and your students admire. Literature provides a plethora of writing topics. The subjects in the text, the personal connections, and the genre easily evoke writing ideas. Just one book may spark a number of writing topics for a student. Take time to model thinking when making connections to writing ideas during read alouds. Quickly jot down class writing ideas on a chart and allow students a minute to add topics to their own ideas lists.

A topic we cannot avoid and are asked about often is giving students writing prompts. We want our writer's workshop to be student-centered and our students to become independent writers. Consistently providing prompts for writing creates a teacher-centered classroom and makes students dependent on the teacher for always choosing a topic to write about. When students select their own personal ideas for writing, they are more confident, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic and thus produce better writing. It is recommended to give writing prompts when practicing a specific skill and when preparing for writing assessments. It is important to do some "test prep" to make sure students know what to expect when they are required to use prompts on high-stakes tests, but prompts should not be made the focus of the writing program.

Be positive in your comments when discussing ideas. The words you say and how you say them can encourage a writer to move forward with confidence and develop an eagerness to succeed.

Organization

> "It is organization that gives direction to our writing. It is the internal structure of a piece and provides the backbone to which all the pieces are connected."
>
> —Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2005, 245)

When a piece of writing is well organized, it flows so smoothly that the reader often loses track of time while fully comprehending the text. Text with clear, logical organization enriches and showcases the idea or theme of the writing. The trait of organization involves the structure and order of the writer's ideas and the transition from one idea to the next. Within that structure lies an interesting and inviting introduction, a well thought out sequence of ideas and supporting details in the middle, transitions that connect all the pieces together, and a conclusion that leaves the reader content yet a bit reflective about the theme of the writing.

Letters, newspaper articles, poetry, essays, and lab reports all have a logical framework that is selected based on the content and purpose of writing. These frameworks are writing patterns that guide readers logically through the text. Readers expect and depend on these organizational patterns to make sense of the information they read. When patterns are illogical or inconsistent, the reader becomes confused and disinterested, and comprehension of material is often lost. The organizational structure affects how readers interpret ideas.

Determining the pattern of organization is an important decision based on the topic, audience, and purpose of the writing. There are a number of patterns, also referred to as text structures, as well as supportive transitional words and phrases from which writers select when planning their ideas, information, and insights.