# COME IN AND LOOK AROUND!

How does the classroom environment support our writers who face instructional obstacles?

> The classroom environment holds so much potential for increasing student learning and achievement. At any point, students should be able to look around and find tools to support their learning, empowering them to be independent, self-directed members of their community. Chapter 1 contains specific strategies to increase the importance and power of the environment.

When I first started teaching, I loved going to a teacher's store, and I had to hold myself back from buying all the cute materials I could hang on the walls. Alphabet charts, punctuation posters, grammar explanations, parts-of-speech with elaborate graphics filled my shopping cart, but what I've come to realize is classrooms have white noise, and many of those purchased products are disruptive and distracting rather than productive or inspiring. Recent research recommends that at least 20 percent of available wall space should be clear (Fisher, Godwin, & Seltman, 2014). Too much on the walls is distracting and overstimulating, especially for striving writers.
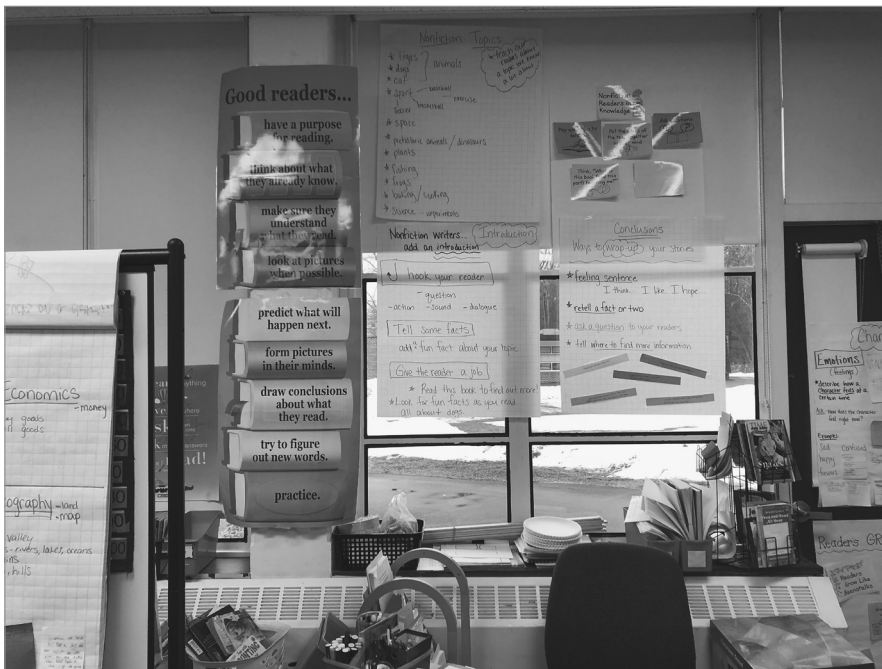

Photo 1.1 Too much on the walls can be distracting to students, as it can become sensory overload, as in this photo.

I'm not saying that classroom walls should be bare. For the nine or ten months that students spend in a given classroom, they spend more waking hours within that space than anywhere else. Just for that reason alone, first and foremost, the

walls should feel welcoming! Students also should know and understand how to work within those walls—and they should enjoy their work, as well. The more they feel a sense of ownership and belonging, the more they grow as learners in that space (Barrett, Barrett, & Zhang, 2015). Perhaps before we do anything else for our striving writers, we should think about the environments we are providing for their learning that set all students up for success in writing. Environments matter. Instruction and learning happen within environments, and it's our job to set them up to be as conducive to achievement for everyone as we possibly can.

The second principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is that we should provide multiple means of representation, and our classroom walls should do just that. Our classroom environments offer opportunities for us to present information and for learners to access it, especially with visual alternatives. My good friend and colleague, Missie Champagne, is a fourth-grade teacher, and I once heard her say to her class, "Everything in this room is made for you or by you." The students looked around, and maybe with a bit of surprise, they realized the truth in Missie's words. When you walk into your classroom next, look around. How does your environment offer learning and reinforcement of the concepts you are teaching?

Photo 1.2 All of the charts in Missie's room have been created in front of the students as part of the lessons so that students understand the meaning and rationale for what is on them.
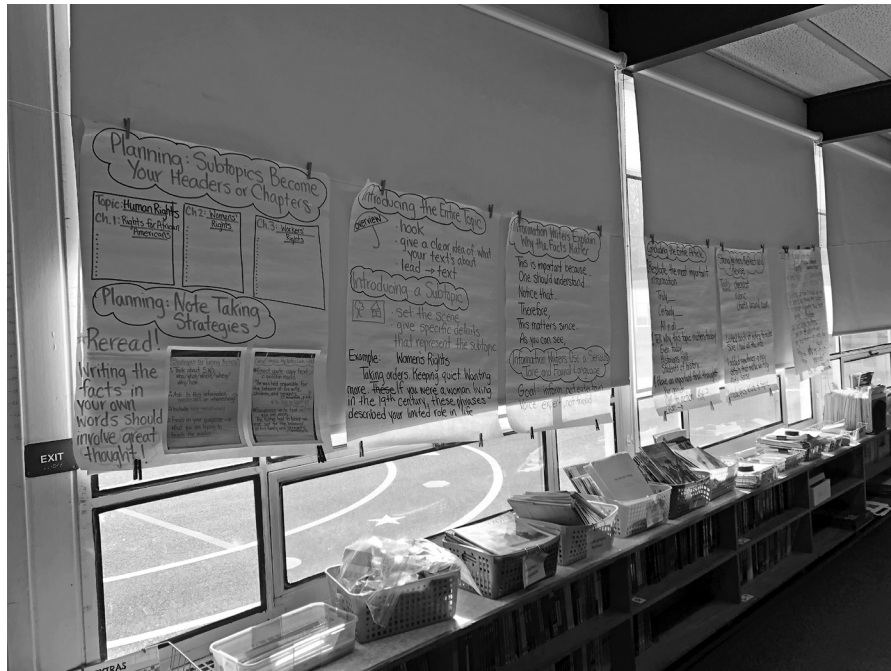
The Reggio Emilia approach to education is frequently associated with young children. However, the concept that the environment can function as a third teacher (after the classroom teacher and a parent/guardian) should apply to classrooms regardless of age and level. In the following pages, I address challenges we face in designing and maintaining classroom environments that support all learners—keeping our striving writers top of mind.

THE BIG IDeas

1. **Our striving writers benefit from an organized environment, and they need routines in order to maintain that organization.** Students can spend a lot of time looking for things before getting to their writing. When they understand where to find their materials and develop systems for keeping themselves organized, their productivity and growth increase.

2. **Our classroom's spaces should contain only materials that foster student learning and independence.** When students look around their classrooms, they should be able to explain how *anything* in there helps them learn. Just as we tend to collect clutter in our homes, we also tend to collect it in our classrooms. One of the most common comments I hear from teachers is "I don't have enough space for all the stuff." Yet, when we really think about it, much of the "stuff" we have in our classrooms does not help students learn and become independent. We want to be mindful of clutter, space, and tools that can scaffold learning.

3. **The more we create, provide, and encourage the use of tools for independence and repertoire, the more learning will happen in our classrooms.** Once students recognize that the environment has tools and resources that can help them, you can suggest that they access those materials instead of waiting for adult availability. And co-creating tools with students gives even more agency. Not only will their productivity increase because they are not waiting around for you to solve their problem, but also their sense of self-efficacy will increase.

Our striving writers benefit from an organized environment, and they need routines in order to maintain that organization.

I don't know about you, but sometimes when I take on a project, I spend a lot of time finding the materials I need. Even when I am baking, sometimes I have to spend time looking for the bottle of vanilla or the box of baking soda—we can't seem to establish once and for all where they should be stored in our house.

One of the differences between me as a baker and many of our striving writers is that I *want* to make those brownies, while many of our striving writers might prefer to avoid writing altogether. They want to look busy, and if they don't want to write (or don't know how), they can look *really* busy by looking for things. All writers benefit from having time to write (Graham et al., 2012), so the better we can establish routines to organize striving writers, the more time they have to practice, and the more they can grow as learners. We all have our preferences when it comes to working environments, but the truth is almost everyone functions better with a sense of organization and an understanding of where to find materials and tools. In the most productive spaces, we don't spend time *looking* for things; we spend time *doing* things. Therefore, it's important to create and revise classroom environments that support the community members with what they need *when* they need it. While this custom-made environment benefits all learners, our striving learners—the ones with attentional challenges, processing differences, or gaps in their mastery—especially benefit when there are accessible tools and resources.

SETTING UP STUDENTS' PERSONAL SPACES

While the classroom has many levels of organization, the first one to consider as we're thinking about striving writers—all writers, actually—is the individual writer's personal space. Leighton, a fourth grader, is the first student that comes to my mind when I think about the need for organization. His teacher and I called him the absent minded professor; he was full of great ideas that frequently evaporated somewhere between his brain and his fingertips. If we were lucky enough that those ideas made it to paper, then chances were that Leighton's paper would end up crumpled at the bottom of his desk. The first two times I worked with him, we spent at least ten minutes trying to locate his work from the previous writing session. By the third session, I anticipated the struggle, and we worked on a system for putting his writing away.

Spend time teaching into where writing is kept, and create simple organization systems that work for each child. Like Leighton, **striving writers will need practice with how to put their writing away**.

Many teachers ask me about how to decide on small group instruction. We can offer small group instruction for skills, and we can also offer it for behaviors and routines. Just as our striving writers may need additional lessons for skills, they may also need additional lessons for routines. It's more than okay to pull a small group and reteach those!

Many of our striving writers have inadvertently (or intentionally) become experts at making their writing disappear or at least take a while to reappear. Here are some ideas to grow good routines:

- Provide each student with a two-pocket folder, with one side for completed work and the other side for work in progress, labeled clearly.
- Plan and directly teach in small group time around the routine of students putting their work away.
- Build in an extra minute or two at the end of your writing time for students to put away their work neatly.
- If your students are using an electronic device, help them set up an organizational system within that device. For instance, they can create a folder for works in progress and a folder for completed work, just as you would with papers. (This is another small group instruction opportunity!) You can even meet with a student one-on-one to determine what system works best—knowing modifications may be needed as the year progresses.

By all means, take the time! If students learn to organize their work early on, they will have more time throughout the year to work on their writing. More time means more practice means more growth.

TIP!

When a unit is over, take the time to clear out the folders! So often pieces of writing straggle from unit to unit, taking up space in folders and making it difficult to find current pieces of work. Make it a practice to collect and keep representative pieces of student writing in a portfolio that is located away from students' desks.

SETTING UP SUPPLIES

While it's great to think that students will always have a pencil sharpened and ready to go or a pen that's easily findable, gathering materials is another chance for students to avoid writing. Here are some ideas to overcome this right from day one:

- Have two containers for pencils, one for sharpened pencils and one for pencils that need attention. This two-container system will create more writing time for your strivers who know how to make sharpening a pencil take a long, long time.

- Decide on and teach into a system for having a pencil ready to use. It could be that one person is responsible for sharpening pencils during a specific time period of the day. It could be that pencil sharpening happens at the beginning of independent writing time, and after that, if pencils break, students get fresh ones from the "sharpened pencil" can.

- Give serious thought to using pens for writing. Their tips don't break, and students can't spend time writing, erasing, and writing again.

- If your students are using an electronic device, then set up time in the beginning to establish routines for their efficient use. I probably don't have to tell you how long a student like Leighton can take to sign onto a device. Until they absolutely know their login credentials, keep these taped to their work stations. And then, once they know them well, make it clear that logging in should take less than a minute. If they can't handle this, they use paper. (Every student I know gets faster when there are consequences in place.)

Just as you take the time to set up the use of folders, take the time to teach students how to access and put away computers. Striving writers might need individualized instruction on how to put away their paper writing, and they may also need extra coaching on how to follow a system for computer use. Make sure this system is in place, that it's understood, that it's possible, and that there are natural consequences in place if it's not followed. Digital writing is an accommodation and a privilege. Students can be productive with computers, but only if they learn to use them efficiently, independently, and responsibly.

SETTING UP A WRITING CENTER

Many high-functioning writing classrooms have communal writing centers for materials and supplies. Give some thought as to how to provision these centers and how to teach for the use of them. Writing centers should reflect

the various needs and habits of the writers who live in the room, and the more that we create a feeling of communal ownership, the more we create a culture of responsible writers.

At the least, writing centers should include these tools for writing:

- Paper—Aside from a writing utensil, paper is the most important tool. Give some serious thought as to how to set up the choices for paper, giving students power and responsibility with the choices they make. (Chapter 5 delves into the power of paper choice for striving writers.)
- Paper strips—As you teach about revision, paper strips become more and more important in your writing centers. Paper strips can be various sizes and colors, contain lines or no lines, and they are designed to be taped or stapled onto drafts of writing. For many striving writers, paper strips are an important tool because they offer a small space that feels less intimidating for trying out a new skill. Paper strips offer flexibility and differentiation options because they can be so many different sizes.
- Staplers—Just know that you may have to have lessons or at least small group instruction as to how to use them.
- Tape—See the note about the staplers!

Writing centers or classroom environments should also include models for writing, such as mentor texts and exemplar texts. At the Connecticut Writing Project 2018 Celebration, young adult author Matt de le Pena told students that "you can't be a good writer until you're a great reader," and he called books the very best teachers of writing. Mentor texts are pieces of literature we can return to again and again to help our young writers learn how to do what they may not yet be able to do on their own—showing, and not just telling, students how to write well (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, pp. 6–7). Mentor texts

are powerful tools for teaching writing craft, and the more we can get students to recognize craft moves, the more that we can get students to use these craft moves in their own writing. When we model for students how to study craft moves and writing impact, mentor texts become important tools for students to build independence. Appendix A includes a list of my favorite mentor texts, as well as sample charts that map out the craft moves in several of them.

Exemplar texts are another resource and strategy to use with striving writers—as well as all writers. While mentor texts are usually far above the grade-level standards, we design exemplar texts to be representative of the level of work expected for the current unit of study. Exemplar texts are created by teachers or pulled from a collection of student-written pieces to offer models of what we are expecting students to produce as a result of our curriculum and instruction. Exemplar texts may contain examples of the grade-level standards at play without necessarily having the craft moves we might find in mentor texts.

Photo 1.5 Mentor texts occupy their own shelf and contain charts of pages and craft moves that students can try out in their own writing.


TIP!

What's important for students, especially students who struggle, is to realize that mentor texts don't have to be difficult-to-read, complex texts. The best mentor texts are ones students can read independently.

PORTFOLIOS TO HOUSE FINISHED WORK

Accessible portfolios are an important part of a classroom environment. Students benefit from self-assessing, reflecting, and making decisions about representative pieces of writing that they create throughout the year. These decisions foster the mindsets that we are all working through the process of continuous improvement, a mindset that striving writers frequently don't have!

A hanging folder box works well for portfolios, as students can have folders for their work, in alphabetical order. Color-coding the folders works well if you are collecting pieces from other subjects as well as writing.
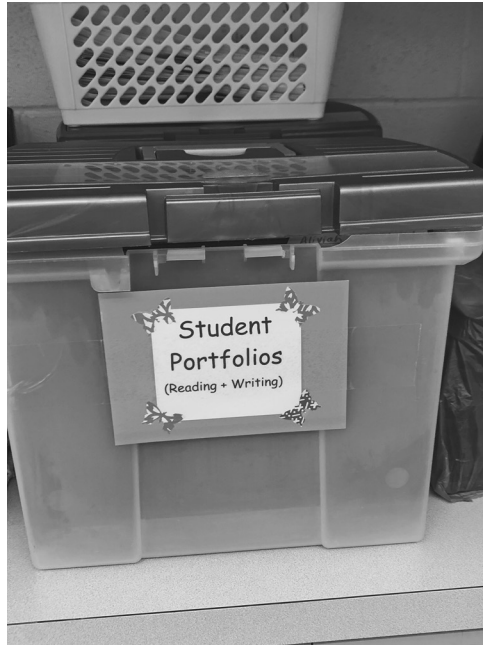
Our classroom's spaces should contain only materials that foster student learning and independence.

What in the room is really for learning? What is just extra? We have all been in rooms that are bright and colorful and full—of just about everything. There are letter charts on the walls, motivational posters, laminated pictures of grammar rules and science processes and book offers and moon phases. Sometimes there's even student work. If there are teacher-created charts, there's tons of writing on all of them, and they overlap each other or poke out from underneath a layer of something else.

These rooms, while well intentioned, are the visual equivalent of very loud places with lots of different noises—music, chatter, maybe even a siren or two. Our striving writers benefit from environments that are quieter, both auditorily and visually. In a recent study, researchers found that children performed better when asked to complete tasks involving visuospatial attention and memory tasks in a low-load visual environment (Rodrigues & Pandeirada, 2018). Visuospatial skills help us imagine and then create, which is an important skill

for writing—as is memory—so we definitely want to pay attention to how we can provide environments that contain the right amount of visual stimulation for our learners. So what can we do?

REDUCE CLUTTER

Spend time looking at your classroom the way a student might experience it. Sometimes the most productive classrooms have the least amount of extraneous materials. Just as we don't see the clutter in our own homes, sometimes as teachers, we don't see it in our own classrooms. A study conducted by the Princeton University Neuroscience Institute examined how people are able to focus when presented with multiple stimuli. The more that was presented to them, the more difficult it became to focus on the task presented. By using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to track emotional responses, scientists found that participants were more distracted, less able to process information, and less productive when facing disorganized stimuli. This study is relevant to classroom environments because we don't always think about how much students have to filter *out* information and stimuli in order to focus, concentrate, and learn.

Getting down and sitting at the level of a student may help you spot clutter you wouldn't otherwise notice, or better yet, invite a trusted colleague or friend to tour your room with a "where's the clutter?" lens. Look for the clutter that impacts *you* as well as the clutter that could impact students. Most of us know the feeling of not being able to find something, and we can think of the time we've taken to find it. Striving writers experience this syndrome often, so take some time to get rid of as much of the classroom clutter as you can. You might challenge yourself to do the following:

- **Clear out storage spaces.** Just as I clear my closet of clothes I haven't worn in three years, you can clear your cabinets and drawers periodically of materials you haven't used recently. How many yellowed posters have we kept and forgotten about? Once we have more physical space, it's easier to organize.
- **Rethink where materials are stored.** Maybe there's a set of books that takes a lot of space but isn't used often. With room in your cleared-out storage places, consider those books would be better elsewhere. What is used most often should be in the most prominent spaces.
- **Take a look at your walls.** Research suggests that classroom walls should be 20 percent clear (Fisher et al., 2014). Are yours? What on your walls truly supports student learning and fosters independence? If students aren't using it, then it probably doesn't need to be there. If you don't want to throw it away, you now have more space in your cabinets and drawers!

Think of your classroom as real estate. When we think about land and homes, the best land should have the best homes. The best classroom real estate is where students look and access the most often. Make sure that what they are looking at and accessing is what you *want* them to be using! What's the highest leverage use of your room and its environmental features, such as wall space, whiteboards, bulletin boards, shelves, and so on?

Partnering with Caregivers

Consider sharing the ideas about organized work spaces and brain research with caregivers. Help parents understand the importance of a clutter-free environment both in school and at home for optimizing productivity and diminishing frustration.

ENSURE THAT WRITERS HAVE PHYSICAL SPACE TO DO THEIR WORK

Once there is less clutter, there is more room for useful materials and physical space for writers.
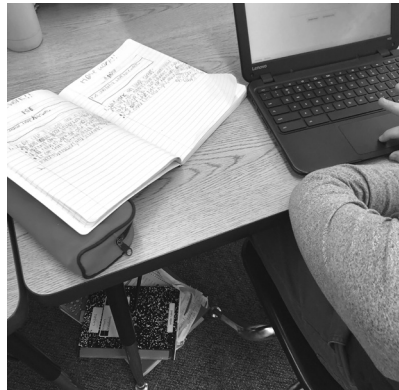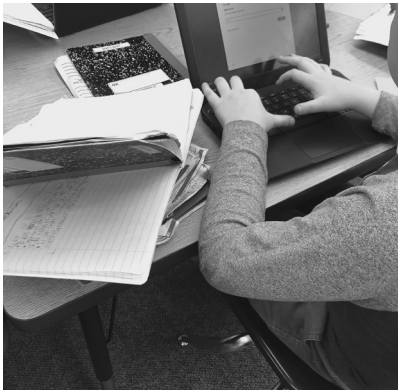
Photos 1.7 and 1.8 These pictures show the difference between a cluttered and clear workspace, which can make a huge difference for striving writers.

The striving writers I know need more physical space than most. As you observe your students at work, take inventory of how much space they are using and how much space they might need. For example, you may have striving writers who cram themselves into tiny spaces, yet you know real productivity requires some elbow room. Work with those students to find solutions they can be comfortable with: Perhaps instead of sitting in a

reading nook to write, they sit at a desk with a cardboard divider that provides coziness but offers more room for paper and materials. Pay attention to your own writing life and recognize the amount of physical space you need in order to do your best work. It would be hard for most of us to write well if our papers were on top of other papers or our elbows were bumping other elbows. You might even pay attention to environmental cues that shift your brain into writing mode. For example, I do most of my writing in a chair in my bedroom, and there is almost always a cup of coffee by my side when I'm at my most productive writing self. Another writer I know leaves her desk and sits down on her sofa with her laptop to enter her world of writing. Students may benefit from hearing about these habits of writers and then developing some of their own patterns and rituals.

Choice is an important element to consider in all aspects of writing. We can offer choices of where students work, and it's important that they develop an awareness of where and how they are their most productive selves. We can explicitly offer students instruction on how to create optimal work spaces for themselves.

Whether your classroom is set up with desks or tables, some quick fixes for creating beneficial work spaces include the following:

- Make sure students put away materials from other subjects when it's writing time. Students are distractible, and writing requires concentration. Clear spaces and surfaces are much less distracting than ones with any sorts of *stuff*. If there's not room in desks for textbooks or pencil cases, designate a place in the room where those sorts of materials stay. When students are writing, they should have only what they need for writing in their immediate vicinity.
- Consider what communal supplies are accessible at which times. Communal bins are great, but a lot of the materials in them are not needed while drafting. Some shared supplies can be stored on a back counter when students aren't using them.
- Designate certain spaces in classrooms as "writing spaces." Some striving students may benefit from a physical shift that aligns with a cognitive shift. In my own home, my writing place is that bedroom armchair, and my brain seems to know and cooperate when I'm there. Striving writers also benefit from this sort of set-up if it is available within your classroom setting.

TOUR YOUR ROOM WITH DIFFERENT LENSES

Look around the room and ask yourself how what's there supports what you're teaching. Some considerations and questions to ask yourself include the following:

- Is what I see proportional to what my learning priorities are?
- Am I using what I'm seeing most on a regular basis?
- If someone walks into the room, can they figure out the recent learning emphasis?
- Are the learning priorities representative of the space on the walls and on the bulletin boards?
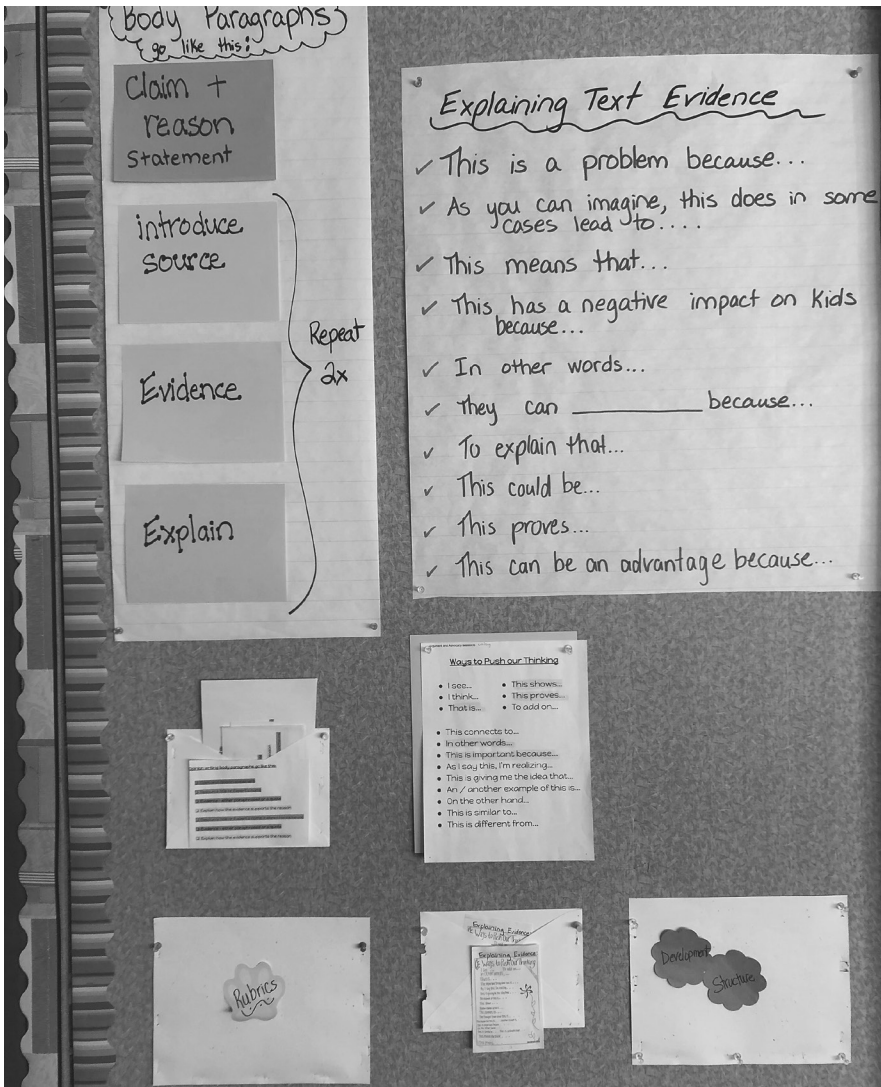
Photo 1.9 The materials on this bulletin board clearly support the learners as they develop their skills as essay writers.

In addition to *you* touring the room with a student-focused lens, it's also helpful to ask *students* what works for them. The lesson that follows can help you do this work with your students. This lesson can not only help clarify where clutter lives in your environment, but it can also help you recognize the tools and resources in your classroom that help students become independent, resourceful learners, the focus of the following section.

LESSON PLAN: *What Helps You Learn?*

MATERIALS NEEDED: Chart of directions, sentence stems, paper, writing utensil

INQUIRY QUESTION: What tools and resources do we have in the classroom that help you learn?

DEMONSTRATION: In our classroom, we have tools and resources that help us learn. Today, you're going to teach me what ones are important and maybe what ones we can take away. Here's your task: [Write the following steps on a whiteboard or chart.]

1. Look around the room and find 3 things that help you in your writing process.
2. Write these things down in order of importance (1 is the most important).
3. Get up and walk over to your #1. (Hint: It's OK if your #1 is different from other people's #1.)
4. Look around at your classmates.
5. Repeat Steps 3 and 4 for your other ideas.
6. Talk to your classmates about their choices.

During Step 6, present students with the following list of sentence stems, either individually or as a classroom chart:

SENTENCE STEMS TO USE TO EXPLAIN OUR CHOICES

- This set of supplies in the writing center helps me because _____.
- One of the places in the room that I look at most often in order to get ideas is _____.
- If the teacher is not available, then I can use _____ in order to help me work and be independent.

CLOSURE: You have now shared and heard about the tools and resources that we have here and now and in the future. I'll be looking for you to use them. Also in the future, if there's something you feel that could help you learn, let me know, and we'll try to get that up and running!

Pause FOR PD

Let's think about your classroom:

1. Draw a floor plan of your room, including the built-in features or immovable objects—the bulletin boards, windows, Smartboard, sink, closets, wall space, and so forth—like the one in the photo below. If drawing isn't your thing, take some pictures of your room and its spaces.

2. Working collaboratively with colleagues or thinking on your own, identify the high-leverage spaces. Where are students most apt to look? What spaces are the most accessible to them?

3. With those insights, plan what should go there. The most accessible places should have the highest leverage tools and resources. Use sticky notes on your original drawing to plan and revise how to set up classroom spaces.

You can garner a lot of information by seeing where students go during this lesson. Students can also learn a lot through this process if you stop and reflect with them, asking why they chose what they did, having them share with one another what's helpful and why. Additionally, any time we can encourage students to learn from one another is a great opportunity to build collaboration skills—this is a quick and high-leverage activity for students to share their processes with each other.

It's important to realize that *if students aren't using it, then it's not needed.* Everything that's in your classroom should be geared toward helping students learn, which leads right into the idea of creating, providing, and encouraging the use of tools for independence and repertoire.

The more we create, provide, and encourage the use of tools for independence and repertoire, the more learning will happen in our classrooms.

Creating, providing, and encouraging the use of tools for independence and repertoire makes it easier for both students and teachers to do their work. One of our goals as teachers is to create independent human beings who are able to bring the skills they've learned within the walls of a classroom to the tasks they're asked to do in the outside world. The gradual release model speaks to scaffolding new learners with unfamiliar tasks, gradually removing those scaffolds so that the new learning is internalized and becomes independent.

Knowing that the gradual release model correlates to effective instruction and learning rates (Fisher & Frey, 2013), we want students to become captains of their own writing projects, identifying what they should do and how they should do it with less and less scaffolding, direction, and guidance from adults. We want students to internalize our instruction so that they no longer need us to teach or remind.

More than other students in the classrooms, our striving writers need explicit instruction about tools and deciding how and when to use them. These are the students who will sit and wait for an adult to be available, thereby reducing the minutes they spend writing or attempting to resolve their own problems. They need the strongest message that writers, regardless of their level, figure out ways to captain their own work and find tools that

lead to independence. Creating bulletin boards that offer individually sized charts, such as the one shown in Photo 1.11 can help all students, especially striving writers, access support and strategies to help them find independent pathways.

The tools within a classroom are scaffolds; they don't exist in the real world, and we don't want children to use them forever. And yet, using classroom tools is a step toward independence and away from raising a hand or getting up to tap the teacher's shoulder. When a student realizes they need a tool and takes a step to get that tool, that student is on a pathway toward internalization and independence. Within the classroom environment, we have several options for providing access to tools for students.
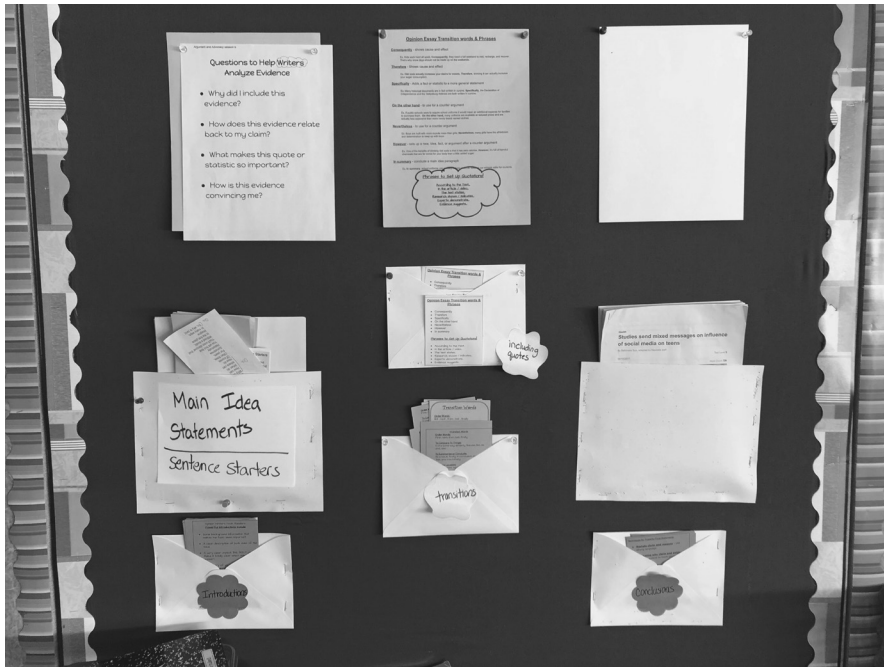
Photo 1.11 This interactive bulletin board is an important part of the environment, offering tools for students to take and borrow as they decide. You'll read more about charts in Chapter 6.

> **THINKING OUT LOUD**
>
> Self-advocacy is an important skill for many striving writers. As they move through the grades, they may find many situations—and not just in the realm of writing—where they'll have to speak up for themselves. You can help them build from dependence to independence by coaching them and reminding them to ask for what they need to do their best writing.

CREATE CHARTS THAT SUPPORT INDEPENDENCE

Within any environment of writing instruction, charts help student to be independent and develop repertoire. Returning to the second principle of UDL that emphasizes the importance of providing representation, when we create charts with students during explicit instruction, we have visual representation for when students are practicing the skill within their own writing. They can access the scaffolding as they need, provided by the charts in their environment. Our goal is for students to get to the point where they own the skills and strategies, and they don't need the visual reminders in order to demonstrate their knowledge.

Bulletin boards are the best place for charts, especially when there's a designated board that is explicitly for writing.

Photo 1.12 Bulletin boards offer students a central place to look for ideas and strategies for their writing. A variety of charts and even pop-out words can help students find what they're looking for quickly.

Many classrooms don't have access to bulletin boards, but there are other ways to display charts. In one classroom, wall space was minimal, so the teacher asked the custodian to hang a wire from one side of the room to the other. Then, she could use clothespins to hang charts—and easily remove them when no longer needed.

Chapter 6 delves into charts in terms of the various types, the ways we can use them, and how we can encourage students to use them. For now, think about where charts can hang in your classroom and how they can be organized so you maximize their impact on student learning.
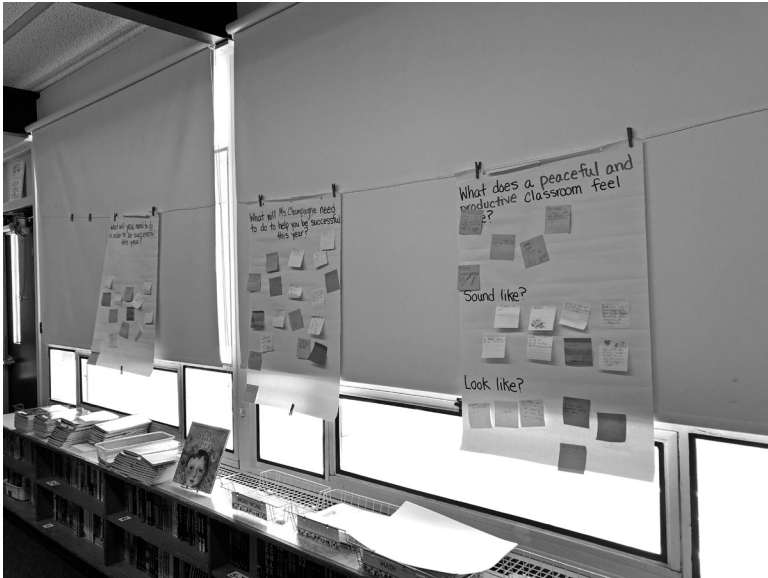
THINKING OUT LOUD

Too many charts become overwhelming and fall into the dreaded category of clutter. This is often a tightrope walk! When students no longer need or use a chart, consider retiring it. When you switch to a different unit or genre of writing, charts from the previous unit should disappear, to be replaced by new ones to scaffold learning. All students, especially striving writers, will struggle to find the chart that helps them if there are too many hanging in the room.

CLEAR OUT SPACES AT THE END OF A UNIT OR LEARNING CYCLE

Bulletin boards should develop as lessons occur and students work on their writing. Likewise, bulletin boards should be cleared off to make space when units end or the type of writing that is happening within the classroom changes.

Any of the charts and tools on a bulletin board can be photographed or reduced if students aren't ready to work without them; I will say more about strategies to individualize the use of these resources in Chapter 6. Many striving writers will need direct instruction on organization and utilization of the tools you provide, but they will benefit from having fewer rather than more tools in front of them at any given time.

TIP!

No matter whether you have one or ten bulletin boards in your room, start the year with blank bulletin boards. Yes, at the beginning of the year, greet students with a blank board. They can be pretty colors—fabric stores sell material for $3 a yard. This is your first step toward making your bulletin board beautiful.

Now, on your beautiful (and clutter-free) spaces, you can add various resources to the bulletin board, and it becomes a place where students know to look. Some of the best bulletin boards I have seen in terms of how they support student learning include the following:

- Charts that teachers have made with or in front of students.
- Examples of student work that serve as mentor or exemplar texts, even in pockets that students can take to their work space if they need to have it closer.

- Checklists that support or enumerate the goals and expectations of the current writing genre. Striving writers benefit from simpler checklists. Sometimes too many words are overwhelming. This is a great time to remember the mantra that oftentimes less is more. As striving writers begin to approximate and master some of the expectations, they can select more complex checklists. But it's helpful to provide a range.
- In some of the most organized classrooms, teachers have specific subjects cordoned off in specific places. Most elementary classrooms include a variety of subjects, and our brain wants to keep those subjects in somewhat of an organized way. If space exists to create separate bulletin boards for separate subjects, do it!

As you teach and create tools together, students start to recognize and use the charts and tools displayed on your bulletin board because they've been part of the process.

When we think about classrooms and how to make them as productive as possible for all members of the community, it's important to remember that everything should have a purpose and reflect what students are doing and learning—much like the artifacts in my daughters' rooms reflect their personal lives. While the girls live in their rooms, I want their walls to relay their stories—and while students live and learn in classrooms, those walls should contain the history of our instruction and students' progress toward independence and mastery. Just as I want my daughters to tell stories about the artifacts on their walls, I love when students can describe and tell the stories or rationales behind everything on their classroom walls. Remember Missie Champagne's words from the start of this chapter: "Everything in this room is made for you or by you."

End-of-Chapter Questions

1. Walk through your classroom with these questions in mind:
   a. Why is this _____ in the room? Do students use it?
   b. How does this _____ help students learn? How could it be more powerful?
2. How much space do the students have to do their work? Is it enough? How can it be more?
3. Are there tools available to students, and do the students know how to access and use them?

Take Action!

1. Go through your classroom as you might go through your closet. Like you'd give away clothes you no longer wear, get rid of materials you no longer use. Reduce the clutter.
2. Tour your classroom using various lenses, especially the lens of a student who is striving to engage in a writing project. What needs to change, move, or appear?
3. Consider ways to store communal materials away from students as they are working. Balance accessibility with distraction.
4. Observe students as they work, and make note of how much space they use and how they could benefit from having more space.
5. Commit to creating at least one set of tools that builds independence and/or repertoire for students. This could be anchor charts for genre-specific writing, strategy charts for specific targets, or checklists that support the learning targets. Create a set and make sure it's available to students. If you want to make additional sets or tools, go for it!