

## 1

# Writing to Learn and Understand

Kennady looks furtively over her shoulder as she slips a note low and behind her to Alexis. As she props her book in front of her with one hand, she holds the paper patiently between her fingers in the other, waiting for Alexis to take it from her to pass to James and then on to Marissa as planned. Ms. Fletcher is busy at her desk, so unless she looks up or somebody acts suspicious, all will be well.

Good! Alexis has it. Now, on to James. He's such a dork! He'll probably read it, but who cares? It's not all that private. All Kennady really wants to know is if Marissa still plans on hanging out together after school.

Oh! Alexis has flipped it across the aisle to James. Only one more step to go. Kennady pretends to be reading her book, but she is scrutinizing James out of the corner of her eye. He is not passing the note.

Marissa is silently imploring James with her hand out, pointing at her palm, indicating she wants him to flick the message over to her. He, however, is enjoying all the interest he is receiving from the girls. As holder of this important missive, he has gained power and attention. He chuckles to himself as he slowly starts to unfold the note, enjoying the annoyed looks from Kennady and the insistent appeals from Marissa. Suddenly, he feels a thump at the back of his head. Diane, sitting immediately behind him, is warning him. Pass the note, or else!

James tosses the note and then turns around to face Diane, who is looking back at him innocently.

"James," calls out Ms. Fletcher. "Why aren't you reading? Turn around, take out a piece of paper, and write a brief essay on Why I Should Read During Free Reading Time."

The girls grin smugly at one another as James reluctantly complies.

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**H**ow many countless classrooms have witnessed this same scenario? Generations worth. Students have seen writing as a form of social interchange as well as an instrument of discipline for countless years. Variations on the discipline approach include the forced essay that James encountered above as well as sentence writing, “I will not forget my homework” and also copying pages from the dictionary. (One of us still has 20 dictionary pages from *horse* to *insufferable* tucked away as a keepsake of just how insufferable she was as an eighth grader.)

There is some irony in punishing students with what we hope to instill in them as an intrinsically rewarding way of creating and communicating knowledge and understanding. The real purposes of writing in classrooms offer a variety of reasons to practice writing daily. Yes, that means every day.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and writing teacher Donald Murray has a quote from Horace (65–8 B.C.) posted above his writing space that says *nulla dies sine linea*, which translated means, “Never a day without a line.” This is a good motto for all writers, students and professionals alike.

## PURPOSES FOR WRITING

The many purposes for writing are as varied as the many ways of thinking and communicating, and they sometimes overlap within a single piece of writing. Here is just a sampling, which we will expand upon later in this book.

1. *To learn.* The audience is usually the writer. Students take notes and draw diagrams and other graphics to make meaning of new concepts and ideas. Readers responding to this work can best help by asking questions and offering suggestions to make sure students are arriving at accurate information about concepts to form conclusions.

2. *To inform.* As in writing to learn, the audience is usually the writer but can also be the teacher or another reader-responder as a check on accurate understanding. By having students restate new information in their own words, the information takes on new meaning and awareness. Readers of this writing can best help by asking clarifying questions to make sure all the important details are included.

3. *To describe.* The audience for descriptive writing can vary with the overarching purposes of the piece. Students can describe processes, objects, and/or events in content areas, or with more personal narrative writing they can describe anything they want their audience to visualize from their

perspective. Readers can help by providing their interpretation of the description so writers can check for accuracy.

4. *To convince.* The audience is the person(s) targeted for influence. Sometimes the topic is a point of view and sometimes it is a specific action to be taken. Readers can help by questioning reasons, examples, and/or facts.

5. *To entertain.* Certainly, Kennady's note from the scenario at the beginning of this chapter was created to entertain. The audience is the intended recipient and the reader can respond best by being entertained.

6. *To connect new information to old ideas.* The audience can be the teacher but is more often the student. Making new subject matter personal by connecting it to established context is a way to learn and remember the new ideas and to know both old and new information in unique ways. The reader can respond best by asking comparison questions about both sets of information.

7. *To think about and revise ideas.* The audience is usually the writer but at some point can also be a peer editor. The reader can ask the writer for the kinds of feedback needed and then phrase responses based on those needs.

8. *To generalize.* The audience can be a teacher for evaluation or the writer to help solidify some specific details into a more general organization. Readers can best assist by asking questions about each category/generalization to see if details fit.

9. *To analyze.* The audience is usually the teacher but can also be the writer. In examining details, that is, parts of the whole, the reader can help by making sure all the parts are defined and asking for information on why those parts are important.

10. *To clarify relationships.* The audience can be the teacher, a peer, or students themselves. The best way for the reader to offer response might be to restate a new understanding of the relationship based on information in the writing. Clarifying questions will also help, as might graphic organizers made by the reader in response to the writing.

11. *To explain simple to complex issues.* The audience can be another classmate or perhaps a younger student in a cross-peer tutoring situation. The best way this reader can provide response is to ask clarifying questions and to demonstrate understanding of the complex issue through summarizing or providing examples.

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12. *To problem solve.* The audience is everyone engaged in the problem. Helpful response could include checking for strategies used and questions that deal with the process, problem, and possible/probable solutions.

13. *To problem find.* Looking at broad issues for problem formulation and solution can be aimed at a specific audience or simply for self. Students need to come up with their own problem-related questions, plans for answering those questions, and possible solutions. Donald Graves (2004) calls this “long thinking” (p. 167). The best response to this type of writing project could be, believe it or not, more questions.

14. *To make a request.* The audience is the person or entity to whom the request is being made. The best response is undoubtedly to grant the request; however, for a peer reviewer who is taking the role of the reader, the most helpful response would be to play devil’s advocate and point out any flaws in logic or reasoning.

15. *To remember.* The audience is usually the writer himself or herself, and the best response is to recall information or ideas. This can also, however, apply to memoirs. The reader and writer connect an experience or memory, and the reader can relate what he or she believes the piece is describing or relating. The writer then can check for accuracy of message.

16. *To reflect.* This is usually focused on self-expression as well. A responder can ask for details or clarification to help the writer dig more deeply into a reflective piece of writing.

17. *To demonstrate knowledge and understanding.* The audience is usually someone in authority. It is designed to assess how well students understand information and/or concepts. Chapter 5 will deal with how to assist students in preparing for this type of writing task.

18. *To get better at writing.* The audience can vary, as can the formats. Like any craft, the more writing is practiced, the easier it becomes and the better students get at it. Teachers need to provide a safe, nurturing environment, lessons in formats and correct forms, and feedback and response to support student writers’ growth.

## YESTERDAY’S AND TODAY’S CHALLENGES

Writing, as the second *R* in the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic curriculum, has been around throughout American education (Coulmas, 1989). Have you ever wondered why, after all this time, there doesn’t seem to be complete agreement on how to teach it?

Writing instruction has meant many things to teachers and students over the years. Some have seen it as lessons in spelling, grammar, handwriting, and the simple encoding of words, while others have noted its value in creative expression, as a meaning-making activity, and as an evaluation tool for content areas and literacy assessment. In most cases, it has been viewed as the exclusive responsibility of English language arts teachers throughout elementary and secondary schools.

The issue of correctness in conventional form and visual presentation has shifted from being the most significant aspect of student writing to an important but not always essential feature. Although the relationship between correct conventional features (e.g., grammar, spelling, and handwriting) and written quality (e.g., features centered on ideas, organization, and style) has recurred often throughout the history of U.S. education, it is an issue that is still not completely resolved today. Finding a balance among the important components of well-written compositions is a challenge we invite you to explore with us in this text.

The choice of writing topics is another issue that, while debated thoroughly over the years, is still not firmly resolved. Prominent educators agree that self-selected topics produce improved student writing performance and learning (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Moffett & Wagner, 1992; Tchudi & Tchudi, 1999). They also suggest that students will write better about those topics with which they already have established background knowledge and understanding. While there is much evidence that writing about familiar, self-selected topics produces more authentic writing and more motivated writers, it does not address the issue of how to assist students with assigned writing assessment topics and written tests in content areas with which they must contend during their educational years. It also does not address teachers' concerns about the availability of writing papers over the Internet, which encourages students to engage in plagiarism. We will look at ways to address both types of writing: divergent, student-centered topics and convergent, instructional-centered assignments.

Finding ways to assess student writing to demonstrate progress and to evaluate for targeting instruction has also been an important issue that continues to demand attention. In content areas, the use of *quick writes* as an exit ticket from a class can provide classroom teachers with important evaluation information about students' perceptions of their subject-matter competencies. Formats like those in the examples at the end of this chapter can help students to practice summarizing, in one or two sentences, the main idea of the lesson or provide lingering questions or concerns they may have on the content. These cards can then be used not only for evaluative purposes and for individual teacher-student dialogue, but they can

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also serve as a review for the next lesson when they are read aloud to open the next day's lesson.

In terms of evaluating writing proficiency, the two most common ways in which writing assessments are used today are those that measure writing proficiency objectively or holistically and those that use writing to measure content area knowledge. In a later chapter, we will explore some of the issues dealing with writing assessments and how they impact instruction.

Writing, as it connects with speaking, listening, and reading, as well as to other curricular areas, makes it in essence the instructional responsibility of all teachers, not just language arts and/or English teachers. The question of just who is responsible for students' writing throughout their academic classes is another issue that remains unresolved. Writing across the content areas and as an essential part of classroom culture is an important area covered in the next chapter.

## LITERACY CONNECTIONS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

### Speaking and Writing

*Miranda comes into Ms. Fletcher's classroom, chatting happily to her friend Sue. They are going to join the girls in Mrs. Frost's and Mr. Stelling's classes to challenge the boys to a soccer match at lunchtime today. Miranda is animated in her speech. Her hands wave, her head bobs, and her step has a bounce to it that exudes her excited anticipation of showing the boys' team just how skillful the girls have become after numerous practices. Sue doesn't seem to be able to get a word in edgewise.*

*There isn't enough time to finish their conversation before the bell rings and Ms. Fletcher signals for quiet and the beginning of daily journal writing. Miranda sits silently, staring at the blank journal page, waiting for ideas to happen.*

How is it that a chatty student like Miranda, with so much to say, can freeze up in front of a piece of paper? She seems to expect words to appear fully formed from the tip of her pen. She sighs, looks around her, and wonders where the other students seem to be able to find any ideas about which to write.

In the 1960s, Walter Loban (1963) conducted a longitudinal study with over 300 students and found those third graders who wrote well were also above average in speaking and reading. He determined that proficient speaking skills are a necessary prerequisite to learning how to read and write. Somewhat later, a confirming study found a positive relationship between advances in grade and increasing word-length responses (O'Donnell, Griffin, & Norris, 1967).

While the connections are strong, there are some ways to think about how students learn and practice speaking and writing skills to best understand the differences between the two in instruction (see Figure 1.1). While the earliest lessons in speaking typically occur in the limitless hours of a home environment, writing instruction is usually reserved for a specified time frame within formal schooling. Beginning speakers, surrounded by family members who encourage and reward early errors, mispronunciations, and confused meanings with humor and encouragement, are a marked contrast to formal writing instruction, where correctness to form is often stressed from the outset. In comparing early attempts at speech and writing acquisition, this points out the fewer writing possibilities for continued and consistent practice in nonevaluative situations

**Figure 1.1** Integration of Speaking and Writing Skills

	<b>Speaking</b>	<b>Writing</b>
When and how learned initially:	Home setting	School setting
Speed of planning and production:	Immediate	Extended over varying time periods
Mode of transmission:	Verbal with nonverbal cues	Manual
Mode of reception:	Listening	Reading
Feedback:	Immediate feedback to clarify and add details	Delayed feedback, recipient must make more inferences
Lexical devices specialized for it:	Somewhat repetitious, self-correcting, slang	More formal and precise
Syntactic devices specialized for it:	Stops and starts Fragments and phrases Lots of pauses, plus "and," "uh," and "um"	Punctuation, capitalization, complete sentences, paragraphing

SOURCE: Adapted from Coulmas, 1989, p. 272.

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that are offered to mark an evolving sense of control over conventional forms.

Other notable differences between speaking and writing instruction are the modes of transmission and reception. While writers must rely on more formal and precise devices to communicate their messages, speakers have the additional communicative assistance provided by nonverbal cues as they deliver their message, repeat, and self-correct based on their audience's responses and reactions. As Richard Hughes's (1998) eighth-grade student Angie states,

There's no worrying about how to say something—I just keep spitting words out until someone interrupts me or I'm understood. Writing is different. I have to be understood without all those things helping me out. Yep, writing has to stand by itself. (p. 89)

However, while speakers have the advantage of nonverbal cues to assist in their message delivery, they also have a limited time to gather their thoughts and deliver a message. Writers, on the other hand, have the security of extended time for written response, thus lessening the possibility of hasty and/or inaccurate responses. This delay provided by the act of writing often gives learners time to revise their messages as they are being delivered.

Connecting oral and written language activities is a circular phenomenon. As children speak about material for a topic on which to write, they are also experimenting with the knowledge they have to construct and write about both real and imaginary experiences. By combining speaking and writing activities, teachers build on the strengths of both spoken and written ways of thinking and communicating and use the social aspects of each to motivate reluctant writers.

Miranda might benefit from interviewing or being interviewed by a classmate about favorites (foods, hobbies, events, pastimes, etc.) and using a tape recorder and graphic organizer to collect the information prior to writing. She could later compare the processes of written and spoken information. (See later chapters for more examples of writing activities involving speaking and writing.) She needs to see the connections between the stories she tells and the stories she can write so she can *talk with a pencil* as well as with her lips.

John, like his classmate James at the opening of this chapter, views writing as a form of punishment, not as a means of making connections between old and new information or even of communicating with others.



## Reading and Writing

*Ms. Fletcher surveys the class as they are silently reading their social studies books. She notices how unusually attentive John is to the assigned chapter titled "Colonial Society on the Eve of Revolution." As she swings around to the back of the classroom, she notices the small paperback book inserted inside John's textbook. She sighs, walks up behind him, and waits patiently for him to notice her. When he does, she holds out her hand and he deposits the paperback book into it.*

*"Aw, Ms. Fletcher," he complains as she commandeers the book, "I was just at the good part."*

*This is not the first time she has had to confiscate a sci-fi or fantasy paperback from John during class time. John is an avid reader and video games player. While Ms. Fletcher is pleased that he is engaged in reading, she is worried that he is too preoccupied with a single genre. She is even more concerned because he refuses to participate in the reading points program at their school. Worst of all, he says he hates to write.*

*"It kind of ruins the book to have to take a test on it," he explains. "And book reports are dumb. I just want to read the book."*

Reading and writing are transactive progressions through which readers and writers negotiate with print to construct meaning on their own. Both processes involve the readers' backgrounds and expectations, the writers' backgrounds and purposes, and the world of the texts themselves. As readers read text, they remember what has been read and also anticipate and predict what the text might say. As writers compose text, they remember what has been said and anticipate what will be said next. Figure 1.2 demonstrates some of the interconnectedness of reading and writing in terms of instruction.

Vocabulary and syntax assist beginning readers and writers in similar ways. Vocabulary studies allow the oral pronunciation and written spelling of words, while instruction in conventional syntax assists in reading and writing words within meaningful contexts. The importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension is well documented (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Hayes & Tierney, 1982; Rumelhart, 1980); it is equally essential in written composition to write with authority and purpose (Davis & Winek, 1989). Readers need to have a sense of the author's purpose in interpreting constructed meaning, just as writers need to have a sense of audience in constructing interpreted meaning. Sustained practice in both oral and silent reading and writing can lead to improved

**Figure 1.2** Interconnections Between Reading and Writing

<b>Reading</b>	<b>Writing</b>
Word study to predict word pronunciation	Word study to predict word spelling
Syntax to process more sophisticated sentences	Syntax to produce more sophisticated sentences
Concept of word to print to read	Concept of word to write
Initial practice by oral rote and repetition	Initial practice by written rote and repetition
Sense of author to help reading comprehension	Sense of audience to help plan, compose, and revise
Prior knowledge is important to comprehend	Prior knowledge is important to write with purpose
Sustained silent reading	Sustained silent writing
Can improve readers' writing development	Can improve writers' reading development
Can provide models for writing	Can create reasons for reading
Learned strategies and practice can improve performance	Learned strategies and practice can improve performance

performance; they are natural partners, as writing can create reasons for reading, while reading can provide models for writing.

Some researchers (Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002) have found that reading comprehension exerts a significant influence on the quality of student writing at Grades 1 through 6. Furthermore, they suggest that it may be the result of an interest in reading literature that inspires a greater interest in composing text and in understanding how authors construct text.

Since the practice of activating prior knowledge (Levin & Pressley, 1981) is important to both reading and writing, it makes sense to use that information in helping both John and James as writers. Since John has so much background knowledge in a single genre, it might make sense to engage him in that genre to work on crafting his writing skills. By building characters, settings, and plots of his own, he can experiment with the form and content of conventional English to provide readers with a story line defined by their shared interests. James, a sports enthusiast, might find satisfaction in recapping a game he has witnessed or in which he has participated.

### ***Writing as a Reward***

Writing as a reward, not a punishment, might encourage those students like John and James to change their views on its merits. One of us has successfully used the usually forbidden *note-passing* practice as an incentive for finishing other classroom work. The rules are simple. When your work has been accurately completed and checked by the teacher, you may write notes to anyone in the class. However, they must not contain anything inappropriate or unkind, and they cannot be passed until that person is also finished with his or her work. As an alternative reward, students may also play *dueling pens*, where they draw a controversial topic from a list based on their interests or studies and provided by the teacher (e.g., baseball is the best sport, the movie last night was awful, country music is the best). They silently argue back and forth on paper to present their own side, again mimicking a note-passing situation. (Sometimes they both agree on an issue and they have to flip a coin to see who will present the opposition, or they both can write to both sides, alternating positions.) In any case, writing as an extension of living through a means of communication must be seen as a vital part of their student lives and a reward, not a punishment, in the educational process.

### **Listening/Viewing and Writing**

*Ms. Fletcher likes to teach science with lots of hands-on activities, but there are some parts of the science curriculum that she just can't completely cover with hands-on experiments. One of them is black holes, white dwarfs, and neutron stars as wonders of the universe. Therefore, she has obtained a video from the district office that deals with this complex topic. It is brief, only 15 minutes, so she is hoping it will provide enough information to get the class started on this portion of their science unit.*

*After she briefly introduces the topic and begins to set up the equipment, she acknowledges Tyler's raised hand.*

*"Can we turn off the lights?" asks Tyler.*

*"No," replies Ms. Fletcher. "I don't want you zoning out during this film. It's packed with important and interesting information and I want you awake. We'll leave the lights on."*

*The resulting groans from several of Tyler's friends signaling their disapproval reinforces her conviction that she is correct about the lights-on policy.*

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*During the film, she watches the class, noting their levels of attention, and is gratified at the intensity with which Sam is engaged in the film. His head is forward and his eyes appear transfixed on the screen. She is reassured that, at the end of the film when she reviews the information with questions, Sam at least will have the needed facts and information.*

*As she flips off the screen, Ms. Fletcher turns to the class and asks, "Who can tell me two interesting facts they just heard in the film?"*

*No response.*

*"How about one fact?" she tries.*

*Tyler's hand comes up. "The part about black holes not radiating light, and that if an object falls inside a black hole, it doesn't emit light either. That's why finding black holes is so hard."*

*"Great," replies Ms. Fletcher as she writes this on the board for all to see. She is somewhat surprised at his answer, since he appeared to be doodling on a piece of scratch paper during the entire film. Since she is writing, she calls on Sam to add more information. He can be talking while she finishes writing Tyler's ideas on the board.*

*"Sam, how about you? What was something you found interesting?"*

*"I don't know," said Sam. "I wasn't really listening."*

*Ms. Fletcher turns and, seeing Diane's hand up, calls on her next. However, she is wondering how Sam could not be listening, when he seemed so intent.*

Active listening and/or viewing—that is, participating in an event beyond the semiconscious world of the mandated lecture or video series—provide students with models for thinking about and conversing about topics and processes. By actively questioning and engaging in new information, students can be led to question ideas, present solutions to problems, and collect information on which to write. Imitation is a natural means by which people have learned for centuries. Viewing and listening provide the example for such imitation.

While we often consider having students produce a piece of writing after a film or other type of presentation, using writing before a viewing event can be even more important. Sam might have been a more efficient listener if he had engaged in some writing prior to watching the film. Discussion following the viewing could also begin with individual writing to allow for personal differences and unique thought processes prior to the discussion, which can sometimes lead students on paths other than their own.

Listening is also an important aspect of the writing process, certainly in terms of peer response. Donald Graves (2004) suggests that children need to earn the right to ask questions or make suggestions by first showing they are good listeners. One technique suggested by Graves is requiring those who wish to make comments or ask questions to first engage in dialogue with the author and audience by summarizing a piece of writing, restating important details, or suggesting the focus of the piece of writing. This practice assists both the writer and the listeners in developing important literacy skills and in remaining actively engaged in the process. It provides the listener with practice in summarizing strategies and with an awareness of the author's efforts. In addition, it is a means of helping the writer to discover how the message is being perceived.

Questions to or responses from students:

1. Restate as many details as you can from the piece.
2. What is the main focus of the piece?
3. What do you think the author wants you as the reader to know, think, feel?
4. What is the most vivid impression you have from the piece?
5. What do you want to know more about?

Another means of assisting with the listening-writing connection is to provide opportunities for *second-chance listening*. After providing students with a purpose for listening and/or viewing and participating in the production, have them write out all they can remember. Then replay the audio or video and have them add details and sequencing to revise their original writing. An alternate type of activity might be to have students, after the first viewing or at a re-viewing, write out questions, then sort questions by category. Topics for reports can be brainstormed from question categories.

## THE THREE HARDEST CHALLENGES IN HELPING STUDENT WRITERS

### Getting Them Started

Perhaps the most difficult part of helping students to write is to get them started. That blank page is daunting, even for adults. As mentioned previously, the single best way to get your students engaged so they can

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learn and practice the craft of writing is to help them in self-selecting topics of interest on which to write. The support of writing about a subject of interest can help provide sufficient motivation to work on the processes of idea gathering, organizing, word crafting, experimenting with style, and editing for conventions. However, you need to know your students well to help guide them in this process.

Interest inventories that focus on your students' current literacy lives can provide a good starting place, especially at the beginning of the year. See the end of this chapter for student interest inventories for primary (K–1), intermediate (2–4), and middle (5–8) grades. These provide a good starting place for teachers to plan instruction in a way that meets their students' individual needs and interests.

Individual or small group conferences with students can also help teachers in finding possible topics of interest and assisting students with connecting their topics and collaborating with one another. For example, if two students are studying adjoining states that share a natural landform like mountains or a river, they can collaborate on sources and even compare how that landform influences each area in similar or different ways. Or, as another example, if several students are studying various animals, they can collaborate on some generalizations that can be made about these animals as vertebrates or invertebrates.

While self-selected topics have become the accepted custom because of their motivating aspect for real writing, students throughout their educational lives do not always have the luxury of selecting their own topics. They need strategies for dealing with the assigned topic as well. Self-questioning strategies to help collect information, graphic organizers to arrange information, and revision strategies to ensure complete responses are covered in Chapter 5.

### Keeping Them Going

Student understanding and practice in a writing process follows a scaffolding sequence from teacher-directed to more student-centered, independent writing. It begins with teacher-*modeled* writing, where the teacher writes to a topic while *thinking aloud* and demonstrates decisions made as a piece of writing progresses. It advances to *shared* writing, where the teacher and students think together and the teacher writes a collaborative piece with ideas and information collected from the class and the teacher. In *interactive* writing, the next step in the progression toward independent writing, the teacher and students also collaborate with the writing; however, the students *share the pen* with the teacher and one another. They take turns writing the ideas in a list or cluster, adding words and sentences,

making corrections, and discussing choices in the writing. In *guided* writing, the teacher sets up the writing activity through a focused lesson, and students write, sometimes independently and sometimes in groups, with teacher supervision and guidance. *Independent* writers apply and practice all the skills and strategies learned using self-selected topics, and the teacher acts as a monitor and coach to support them in writing workshop-type activities.

### Getting Them Finished

Helping students to become task oriented and to meet deadlines is an important life skill that many procrastinating adults have yet to master. Monitoring student activity to help them to use their time wisely, breaking down large tasks into smaller, more manageable ones, and helping set short-term goals are important parts of the writing process that require much teacher attention.

Students need assistance in setting and meeting realistic targets for working on their writing. Sometimes this needs to begin as very small baby steps. "In the next five minutes, write one or two sentences about your topic" or "Write a who, what, where, when, why, or how question about your piece of writing and then answer it in a complete sentence. See if you can add that to your piece of writing so far."

Techniques for student conferences and checklists for revision will be covered in Chapter 4. However, one of the most valuable tools available for student learners is to assist them in short- and long-term goal setting within a responsibility framework that can be consistently monitored for progress.

Getting them to *the end* of collecting and writing down ideas is not the completion of work on a piece of writing. There is still the matter of correct standard usage and forms, maybe the most difficult of all in the process for student writers. How can teachers get students to really revise and not simply supply surface edits? Which conventions are most important for mastery at which points in a student writer's school history? How can teachers make sure students review and edit all the possible errors in their writing? How much correcting is *too much* correcting?

The issue of correctness to form and conventions, even with the assistance of word processing software with spelling and grammar checks, is still an issue today. The balance between providing instruction and emphasis on form and conventions over attention to ideas and content is a difficult decision for most teachers, especially as they try to engage and motivate student writers to experiment with longer and more complex writing styles.

## WRITING TOGETHER AS A WAY OF COMMUNICATING, LEARNING, AND MEANING-MAKING

*Miss Eastman, a university preservice student visiting Ms. Fletcher's class, flips open her cell phone, lights flash, and she starts punching buttons rapidly.*

*"Are you calling someone?" asks Marissa, as she lines up with the rest of the class for lunch and recess.*

*Several other students move out of line and crowd around Miss Eastman, curious about her communication with her "outside" life.*

*"No, I'm just sending an instant message to my brother. I forgot to feed the cat, and she'll probably register her anger by shredding the dining room curtains. I'm telling him to get cat food on his way home from school."*

*"How do you know which buttons to push?" asks James, leaning over to place his head directly in front of Miss Eastman's line of vision with the receiver.*

*"Well, see how each button has letters on it as well as numbers? I use the letters on the keypad to spell out my message, like this."*

*She demonstrates the process for them.*

*The class is fascinated with the speed with which the message is relayed as well as the lights and sounds of the phone.*

The use of writing and reading as a fast, efficient means of communicating has advanced with new technologies and made writing an essential skill in navigating new systems of information. E-mail communications, instant messaging, and chat rooms have launched writing as a communications tool into an important realm that requires succinct and fluent writing skills.

In fact, the text messaging that was a novelty to these younger students has quickly evolved to become a banned digital note-sending device in some school settings and is beginning to evolve again as cell phones morph into the next classroom-incorporated digital learning device.

In addition, writing can help students to see the implications of the things they are learning throughout the curriculum. In reading and writing about texts, they appreciate the details and explanations that parts make of a whole, an important aspect of problem solving. By working from different perspectives and in different contexts in a community of writers, students learn to appreciate complexity and controversy as well as the viewpoints of others. Revision as a result of peer response or self-editing



moves students to problem-finding situations. Exploring new questions and multifaceted challenges in all content areas promotes a deeper understanding of improving their environment and taking a critical stance to become informed citizens.

*“So, Julio,” the visiting Miss Eastman remarks, trying in her most sociable soon-to-be-teacher manner to engage this brand new student in talk about his writing. His name tag, prominently displayed on his desk, is brightly colored with zigzags and stars, a sure sign of creative talent. “Can you tell me a bit about what you are writing?”*

*He looks up at her blankly. She sees he has only managed to write two sentences on his paper, and the class began writing about 30 minutes ago. That’s quite a bit of writing time without much to show for his efforts. She wonders, Do you suppose those sentences are just copied from one of the motivational posters from around the room? She tries again.*

*“Will you read me your story? So I can hear your words?” she cajoles, hoping at least for a yes or no response. Again, those bright eyes return a vacant stare.*

*“Miss Eastman?” Marissa hails her from the set of desks two rows back. “Miss Eastman, Julio doesn’t speak any English. He doesn’t understand you.”*

*Forehead slapping time. Looking more closely, she sees that Julio’s sentences are written in Spanish. What was she thinking?! And now what is she supposed to do? She hasn’t encountered this in the texts she has read about engaging students with writing. The authors talk about having rich discussions and having students write and talk and respond in oral discourse. She asks Marissa, who knows some of both languages, to join them.*

*“Can you help me to understand what Julio is saying on his paper?” she asks. Marissa looks at the paper and speaks quickly in Spanish to Julio and he responds in kind.*

*“He is writing that he is hungry and can’t wait for lunch.”*

*“I’m hungry too,” she replies. She leans over on his paper and writes, “Julio is hungry. I am hungry too.” With a combination of gestures and pointing to the words, she reads it aloud to Julio. He smiles.*

With the help of Ms. Fletcher and her students, Miss Eastman has grown in her appreciation of the diversity of learners’ needs, and the entire class will together come to new ways of knowing and understanding through writing.

## 18 ● Improving Students' Writing, K–8

## Exit Cards

These can be on index cards for individual students in a class. For teachers with multiple classes, you can cut up construction paper so there is one color for each of your classes, and during the last 5–10 minutes of class, one or two times a week, students can spend the last several minutes writing to you about what they've learned or failed to learn and what you might be able to do to help.

**10-Minute Quick-write**

Here's what I've learned this week.

**10-Minute Write-in Requests**

What do you want to learn more about tomorrow?

### 10-Minute Survey

I'm sponsoring a survey.

What was something new you learned today?

What was the best part about this week's class?

### 10-Minute RFA (Request for Assistance)

Here's what I need more help with in today's class.

Some things you could do to help me might be . . .

### 10 Minute Survey

What was the best part about this week's class?

### 10-Minute Write-in Requests

Write about an important "aha!" you may have had during class today.

### 10 Minute Evaluation

Write an evaluation of your performance in class today.

What did you do well? On what other things do you want to work?

### 10 Minute Quick Check

Write 3 test items you can answer that demonstrate what you learned today.

## INVENTORY 1.1

### Primary Student Interest Inventory

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you write stories or notes to others?



YES



I DO NOT KNOW



NO

2. Do you like to write?



YES



I DO NOT KNOW



NO

3. Show me what you like to write about.



4. Do you want to learn how to write things to other people?



YES



I DO NOT KNOW



NO

**INVENTORY 1.2****Primary Student Interest Inventory (Grades 2-3)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you like to write? YES NO

2. Do you sometimes write at home? YES NO

3. Do you need a starter? Never Sometimes Always

4. To whom do you like to write?

5. How do you get your ideas for writing?

6. What is easy and what is hard about writing?

7. Do you like to share your writing?

8. Do you want to learn more about writing?



## INVENTORY 1.3

### Transitioning Student Interest Inventory (Grades 3-4)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you consider yourself a writer?      YES      NO

2. Why do we write? What are some good reasons?

3. What do you like to write?

4. What does someone have to know to write well?

5. How often do you write at home?

6. How do you feel about using free time during the school day for writing?

**INVENTORY 1.4****Intermediate Student Interest Inventory**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you like to write? YES NO

2. Do you sometimes write at home? YES NO

3. Do you need a starter? Never Sometimes Always

4. To whom do you like to write?

5. How do you get your ideas for writing?

6. What is easy and what is hard about writing?

7. Do you like to share your writing?

8. Do you want to learn more about writing?

## INVENTORY 1.5

### Middle Grades Student Interest Inventory

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the *easiest* part of writing for you? The most difficult?
2. How do you start a piece of writing? How do you find out what you want to say?
3. How do you know when a piece of writing is finished? How do you decide you are "done"?
4. What do you think are the characteristics of "good writing"? Is most of your writing good writing? Why or why not?
5. What instructions have you been given in writing stories and/or informational text? Do you follow them? If no one has ever taught you how to write, how did you learn?
6. If given the choice of free time in school, how often might you choose to write?

## INVENTORY 1.6

### Middle Grades Student Interest Inventory (Grades 7-8)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Rank: 5 - strongly agree  
 4 - agree  
 3 - disagree  
 2 - strongly disagree  
 1 - no opinion

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I like to write.   | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. I worry about getting poor grades when I do writing assignments.                                     | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. I am able to write on many different subjects and for different people.                              | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. I worry a great deal about spelling and grammar when I write.  | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I enjoy sharing my writing with others.  | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. I would rather pick my own topic than be provided with a prompt when I write.                        | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. I like to use the computer instead of paper and pencil/pen when I have to do some of my own writing. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. Describe some occasions where you seem to do your best writing.                                      |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9. What are some things your teacher can do to help you succeed as a writer?                            |   |   |   |   |   |