

## **In the Beginning, There Was Writing Workshop...**

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### **Introduction**

As I prepared to leave my class in the hands of an assistant while I went to a doctor's appointment, I gave instructions for their writing workshop: "Today is a free-write day. You may write anything you like. You can write a story about yourself, you can make up a story, or you can write about a topic on which you are an expert." My students immediately got excited, for several different reasons. One, free-write day means they can add drawings to their writing if they want instead of focusing solely on the words. Two, they didn't have to stick to a personal narrative (of which several students are not fans) as we had been studying for weeks. Three, they didn't have to worry about editing what they wrote.

When I was a student, I always despised assignments such as free-writing because I was the kind of student that liked to have directions very clear; I liked to be guided every step of the way. I liked to get good grades, and I liked to please my teachers, so I tried to do everything just right. As an adult, I am finding that I've become quite the opposite. I enjoy knowing the basics of what I need to be doing, but having the freedom to do what I feel is best for my students. It is almost as if I'm rebelling against the inflexibility of my childhood in school.

I see both kinds of students in my classroom. I have students who will not put a word down on paper until they understand *exactly* what needs to be done. I have other students who can't wait for me to give them free reign – they test the boundaries throughout the day. As a member of the Charlotte Teachers' Institute seminar Writing for Your Life, I have begun to see how offering both types of writing opportunities (guided and free) can build my students as writers. As a teacher, I am beginning to see that it is important that students simply feel free enough to write in their own styles. Ralph Fletcher agrees: "The cost runs high when we coerce students (through grades, praise, favoritism), however subtly, to shoehorn their emerging language into the narrow parameters we set for what constitutes "good writing" in our classrooms. Writing teachers need to ask ourselves some hard questions. How can we encourage students to internalize their own high standards for writing? Are we willing to allow these standards to differ from our own?"

Teachers need to maintain a balance by teaching good grammar and mechanics but also allowing students the freedom to just write.

## **Background**

I am in my fourth year teaching at Tuckaseegee Elementary School in west Charlotte. We are located minutes from the airport, as evidenced by the number of airplanes that fly over our school daily. We are a partial LI/TD (Learning Immersion/Talent Development) magnet for Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, which means that many of our scholars come from out of our area specifically for the gifted education program. Students must test into the TD program, but they may be placed into the LI program based solely on parents' wishes and the student lottery.

I was given a partial-LI class of students, which means that I follow both the curriculum for CMS as well use the resources available from the TD department. Being an LI classroom, my students did not qualify for TD, but most of them are bright and hardworking, and they have parents who expect a lot from them. This bodes well with both my classroom expectations as well as our school expectations. We set very high goals for academics and character, and most of the students are successful as reaching them.

In addition to our magnet students, we have many neighborhood children at our school as well. We have a high African-American population and a high Hispanic population. We recently became a Title I school and we have met AYP for two years running. Our student population can be very transient as students move with their families throughout Charlotte. It is not unusual to get several new students throughout the course of the year, even as late as May. Our population has remained steady at more than 800 students.

For our writing curriculum, we use a writing workshop approach based on Lucy Calkins' *Unit of Study*. Students are guided through the writing process, beginning with brainstorming and followed by writing a rough draft (discovery draft), revising (adding more details), editing (for mechanics), and publishing into a final draft. Calkins focuses a lot on getting students to write about small moments and including lots of details to make their writing interesting. Our first unit of study is on personal narratives, and I have found that my students struggle to think of events from their own lives that they can turn into personal narratives. I would like to delve deeper into personal narratives to give my students a better understanding of what they really are. More specifically, I want to show

my students that their little moments of life that they may view as mundane are really just stories waiting to happen. We should encourage students to “think small. The best things to write about are often the tiniest things – your brother’s junk drawer, something weird your dog once did, your grandma’s loose wiggly neck, changing a dirty diaper, the moment you realized you were too old to take a bath with your brother.”

For example, one of my third graders this year began writing a story about how he went with his family to the mall to buy a new video game. His first draft of the story consisted of simple sentences about going to the mall, buying the game, bringing it home, and playing it. After having a conversation with him, I learned that he had to go to a bunch of stores for his parents before he was allowed to go to the video game store and he was very excited to get there. When he got to the video game store, he watched as another customer took the last copy of the game that he wanted; his mood turned to disappointment. He bravely asked the cashier if they had any other copies of the game and was elated to discover that they had just received a shipment in the back of the store. He bought his game and took it home. He played until it was time for bed. After brushing his teeth and putting on his pajamas, he climbed into the top bunk in his bedroom. A few moments later, he heard quiet sounds coming from beneath him. He peeked over the edge to find his little brother playing the game he had just bought under his covers!

Having a conversation with my student about his initial story led into a wonderful narrative about the “boring” story of going to buy a new video game. He got so excited once he realized how much he had to write about that he developed the story into three chapters and titled it “My Sneaky Brother”. We edited his mechanics and he published the piece and was so proud that I let him take it to read to his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher. In that classroom, the teacher let him read it out loud to the other students, and they applauded him. He came back to my class beaming and pumped up about the idea of writing another story to take to share. All of this excitement stemmed from a few moments in his own life and a conversation, a perfect example to show that “the act of rereading our lives, like the act of rereading a text, propels us forward with a sense of direction and momentum.”

## **Rationale**

Teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade brings along both blessings and challenges. Unlike students in lower grades, 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are familiar with writing and are able to express their thoughts through the written word. Most of my students understand the conventions of capital letters and punctuation, and most of them can spell enough words correctly that their writing is easy

to reread. As young children, however, many of my students still struggle with the brainstorming piece of the writing process and once they begin a rough draft, they write in a very boring, storyboard-style.

I believe that writing is one of the subjects that get pushed to the curb to make way for the “important” subjects of math and reading (also known to elementary teachers as the “subjects that will be tested”). By the time many young children make it to fourth grade, where writing becomes one of those “testing” subjects, they are woefully lacking in the necessary mechanical skills as well as in the imagination required to write great stories.

Through this unit, I would like to accomplish two main goals. First, I want my students to love writing. I want them to really look forward to getting their writing notebooks out of their desks quickly so they can get their thoughts down on paper. I want them to brainstorm idea after idea that they would like to write about so they never run out of fuel when writing. I want them to view writing as a fun release rather than a boring chore. I want to “give them the lens to appreciate the richness that is already there in their lives.”

Second, I want my students to learn how to write correctly. By correctly, I do not mean style. As a teacher, I know it is important for students to know how to express themselves in writing using the appropriate spelling and conventions. Many of their assessments throughout their school experience will be written, and even if they can write the most imaginative solution to a problem, they will most likely get marked down if they leave out their periods and capital letters.

Although it is only the beginning of the school year, I have already seen obstacles to these two goals. We have been working on a unit of study on personal narratives, with a real focus on choosing a tiny moment and building it into a great story. For many of my students, this is a challenge as they think they have nothing to write about. We talk in class about how a great story does not have to stem from a vacation or a life-changing event – it can come from a family tradition, a trip to the store, or an afternoon at the park. For some of my students, being faced with an empty page of paper is still daunting. For others, they come up with ideas very quickly, but write their story in a sequential, step-by-step method that includes a lot of run-on sentences and very few details.

The second obstacle is that of poor writing mechanics. My young students are still getting used to expressing themselves through their writing and often leave out words or

phrases. They can easily write an entire page that tells a fabulous story, but they have only one period – at the end of the page. Some of my students still capitalize “b” and “d” when they write because they struggle with knowing which direction to write the letters.

In my strategies below, I outline and describe some of the ideas I have for overcoming these obstacles (as well as others) and reaching the two goals that I have set for myself. Hopefully, by overcoming obstacles and reaching goals, my students will become lifelong writers (in addition to becoming lifelong learners) who simply love to write.

## **Objectives**

The purpose of my unit is to explain how to launch a writing workshop in an elementary classroom. There are many ways to introduce students to a workshop format for their writing instruction. I have chosen what I feel best suits the students I have in my classroom this year as well as strategies and activities that support their needs. The strategies and activities that I have included in this unit are meant for the beginning of a school year because they can be used throughout the remaining months and are usable in any genre of writing.

I will start the unit by explaining some of the specific strategies that can be used both in writing workshop and across the curriculum as writing is integrated in other content areas. These strategies have proven useful and effective in my own classroom. The activities are designed to launch a writing workshop by providing a solid foundation upon which to build the rest of the year.

## **Strategies**

### *Writers' Notebooks*

At the beginning of the school year, preferably the first day of school, pass out a composition notebook to each student. Explain that they are all writers, and the notebook will be theirs to use as writers to collect their thoughts and ideas. Explain that they may choose to decorate their writers' notebooks to make it personal, and that they will be writing in it often. Explain that the writers' notebooks will not be graded for correct spelling or punctuation. It will be a safe place for students to be writers at their own levels, because “one use of a journal or notebook is to jumpstart the mind. But another purpose, equally important, is to provide a place to relax, to settle into a comfortable writing stride.”

A writers' notebook need not just be used during writing workshop. It has the potential to be a tool that is used across the curriculum. For example, students who are very interested in nonfiction texts will probably enjoy science class as they learn about new concepts. They may write reflections about their science lessons in their writers' notebooks that they could later turn into nonfiction texts. Students who are successful in math may write reflectively in their writers' notebooks about strategies they used to solve math problems; these reflections may be turned into "How to Survive 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Math". The possibilities for cross-curricular use are endless.

### *Musical Partners*

Materials: Music, CD player or computer

When students have enough brainstormed ideas in their writers' notebook to have a smorgasbord to choose from for a rough draft, ask students to choose one or two of the ideas to discuss with a partner. Discussion with a partner has two purposes. First, many young students speak better than they write, especially those who are still learning English. Second, "ideas need to be talked about and shared to get thoughts flowing."

Ask students to briefly think about each idea, and when the music starts playing, they begin walking around the room. When the music stops, they freeze where they are and choose a partner who is closest to them. As the year progresses, students should become more and more comfortable with talking to each other about their story ideas. At the beginning of the year, however, chances are that students will be shy to talk about their personal ideas. To guide them in their conversations, have several sentence frames available for speakers and several questions available for the listeners. Some examples of sentence frames include:

- *I really like to eat \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
- *My favorite place to be is \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
- *One of my favorite memories is when I \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
- *I really do not like when \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
- *What do you like most about school?*
- *What would you change about our class?*
- *What is your favorite thing to do after school?*
- *How do you feel when...?*

When students pair up, they will take turns talking about their story ideas. The focus will change depending on the genre in which students are writing, but the routine should remain the same. For example, students will always move when the music is on and freeze when it stops before choosing a partner. But if the genre is personal narratives, then partners may talk about the sequence of their stories or how they plan to start or end their piece. If the genre is expository text, partners may verbally teach each other how to do something or become a verbal expert on their topic.

Give students three or four minutes with their partner, and then turn the music back on. Students will move around again, freezing when the music stops and choosing a different partner with whom they will share their story. Continue the routine for three or four rounds, depending on the students you have in your classroom. After the activity is over, ask students to return to their seats to begin writing their rough drafts. Verbalizing their thoughts should help most students be able to begin writing what they have been thinking.

### *Going through the Writing Process*

After brainstorming in their writers' notebooks, students will start their rough drafts. Hopefully, these rough drafts will be written in whatever genre we have been studying, be it personal narratives, fantasy, or expository writing. While working on their rough drafts, I want students to naturally reread what they have written and revise it as necessary, adding details and words that enrich their story. From there, students will edit such things as spelling, punctuation, and grammar so they can publish their story to share with their peers. Third-graders should be somewhat familiar with the writing process, but by the end of the unit, I want it to be second nature to them.

Many of my students speak English as their second language, and they have to learn to speak English before they can easily write it. Because of this, I allow my students to verbalize what they plan to write about before they write so they can really think through their ideas. Verbalizing also helps my LEP (limited English proficient) students to think about wording and phrasing before they put their ideas on paper.

### *Brainstorming*

Ideally, I want my students to get comfortable with the writing process. They will begin by brainstorming in their writers' notebooks, either from a prompt or on a free-write day. From their brainstorming, students will begin working on a rough draft – such things as page layout, supplemental illustrations, and text features that they have observed in mentor texts.

Do not push students into beginning rough drafts too soon. You want the students to have a lot of ideas to choose from so they can be excited to turn their ideas into stories. Janet Elliot suggests giving students four to six weeks at the beginning of the school year.” After students are comfortable with brainstorming, “allow students adequate time to read over their notebook entries and attach a sticky note to a couple entries that they are interested in developing.” Although time may be limited due to pacing guides within your school or district, try to allow as much time as possible for students to simply brainstorm and free-write. The more ideas they have, the more choices they have, which will result in more thoughtful writing from any age group of students. Elliot supports this idea as well, saying that “once students have collected a variety of ideas in their notebooks, they have a resource to use for writing project ideas...with their notebooks always at their fingertips, budding writers have a wealth of ideas to choose from, and more time is available for writing.”

### *Revising*

When I taught first grade in previous years, I had a difficult time explaining the difference between revising and editing to my young students. Looking back, I suspect this difficulty came from the fact that their writing abilities are just coming into existence. Their stories are simple as they learn how to write letters and make words. The focus is more on *how* to write than on *what* to write. After moving to third grade, I am able to help my students see the difference between revising and editing.

Start by explaining that authors do not write a single draft of their books. They write multiple drafts, changing things over and over and over again until they are just right. While third graders may not create 20 drafts of one piece of their writing, they will need to create several. The focus on the first draft is simply getting their story on paper. Once students have completed a rough draft (or a sloppy copy, as it is often called), invite students to conference with you one-on-one. Read their story and write questions in the margins of their paper. These questions will vary based on the genre in which they are



writing, but the goal of the questions is the same – to help the students think about what they could add to their next draft.

For example, in my unit on personal narratives, my students and I discussed using our senses to describe memories. We brainstormed a list of emotions and wrote stories about times we felt various feelings. We thought about and discussed the turning points in our lives. All of these mini-lessons were reflected in their writers' notebooks as brainstorming. When I sat to revise their papers, I referred back to the mini-lessons and their focuses. I wrote questions that asked students to explain how they felt during their stories. I encouraged them to use their senses to describe what their experience was like. If you were teaching a unit on nonfiction writing, you might write questions that encourage students to do more research on their topic. If you were teaching a unit on poetry, you might write questions about rhyme, syllables, or language.

Regardless of the unit of study or the focus of your mini-lessons, write questions that will make students delve deeper into their memories. Have a brief conversation about the questions you have to allow students to verbalize their answers and plans for their next draft. Emphasize the fact that for the next draft, students will not merely copy their first draft but will completely rewrite the *memory*, making sure to answer the questions you had for them. You may also wish to ask students to write on every other line for their revised draft so they are prepared for the next step of the writing process, which is editing.

### *Editing*

Editing is the second-to-last step of the writing process. Hopefully at this point, students have included lots of details and descriptions to their drafts. They have discussed their memories with partners and they have had a conversation with you. Introduce students to the idea that writers must check for grammar and conventions before they send their own stories to their publishers. Students may not know the terms “grammar”, “conventions”, or “mechanics”, but they do understand that published books include capital letters, correct spelling, and punctuation.

Depending on the age of your students, you can give them more responsibility to edit on their own before sitting down with you. In my own classroom, students refer to an editing checklist that is posted on the wall (see Appendix 1). Other teachers at my school give each student an individual checklist that they keep in their writing folders to refer to.

Some checklists are simply the categories that will need to be edited; other checklists include detailed descriptions to remind students what they need to be looking for as they edit their writing. The types of editing you look for from your students will vary based on their age and their writing ability. The checklist that I have attached is one I use for my third graders. Regardless of the checklist you choose, include a few key features of editing. Students should be checking their own writing for correct capitalization, correct punctuation, missing or extra words, and spelling (as correctly as is developmentally appropriate).

Once students have reread their own writing and corrected the errors they were able to find on their own, encourage them to work with a partner to edit. Peers can be valuable resources in the writing workshop. After self-checking and peer editing, sit down with students one-on-one, similar to when you revised with them. Using the same checklist, read through their writing and make corrections as you see fit, verbally explaining what you are doing each step of the way to be a model for students. If students have skipped lines on their revised draft, editing will be a breeze as you can write corrections in the lines between their writing.

The amount of editing you do is up to you. Some teachers at my school prefer to correct no more than five mistakes in a child's story so as not to discourage them from writing. I have found that my students make the same mistakes over and over again throughout an entire piece of writing. If I limited myself to correcting only five mistakes in my students' writing, I might only correct a single error that they repeat. To boost their confidence, I explain to students that everyone makes mistakes and the only way we can improve our writing is to keep practicing. I also make sure to point out positive aspects of their writing so they will continue to be enthusiastic about it. I do leave some errors, particularly spelling, because I do not believe that a third grader's writing should be perfect because they are still developing as writers. Once the editing is complete, students are free to move on to the next step, which is often their favorite – publishing!

### *Publishing*

Publishing is the final step of the writing process. Many students enjoy it the most because they are allowed to illustrate and use crayons or colored pencils on their work. How students publish their work is dependent on their age level as well as what you allow in your classroom. Younger children will create only picture books, with a sentence or two on each page. Older children will be able to write several single pages on their

idea and may not want to create books, preferring rather to keep their writing in “chapters”.

Once students have begun to publish their writing, it is beneficial to spend a few mini-lessons on features of books that authors use to draw readers in. Features include borders around the pages, placement of text on the page, types of fonts used, and many more. You may choose to point out these features in books that you read to your students, or you may encourage students to find features in books that they like to read. The possibilities are endless!

### *Authors’ Celebration*

When all students have completed at least one piece of writing, taking it from brainstorming through publishing, it is time to let students share their writing with each other. In the writing workshop, this sharing time most often takes place during an authors’ celebration. Like many other steps in this unit, how you structure the authors’ celebration is up to you. In order to keep all students engaged, it is important to have some form of response from students as they read or listen to their peers’ stories. I will offer a few suggestions that teachers in my school have used for their own celebrations.

### Authors’ Chair

Students are audience members as one person at a time sits in the author’s chair to read his or her story. If you have a short time for writers’ workshop, it may be good to set up several groups around the room and split students up. Each group would have its own authors’ chair, and students would hear the stories from their peers in the group. Responses from students may be verbal, where several students give comments and suggestions to the author that they may use during their next piece of writing. Responses also may be in the form of a comment sheet, where students write their classmates’ names and a comment they have on their story.

### Gallery Walk

Students will place their published pieces of writing on their desk. Armed with sticky notes, students will meander through the classroom, stopping to read various pieces of writing. They can write comments and suggestions on the sticky notes and attach them directly to the stories they read. After students have had sufficient time to read and walk,

allow them to return to their seats to read the comments and suggestions left by their classmates.

## **Student Activities**

### *Introducing Writers' Notebooks*

Materials: Composition notebook for each student, pencils

Give students several opportunities to free-write in their writers' notebooks throughout the first week or so of school, so they can become comfortable with the idea of how it will be used. Give prompts several times so students who struggle to write freely can have some guidance about what to write. Some good beginning-of-the-year prompts include:

- Discuss how the school year is a journey, with a beginning and an end. Discuss different journeys we might take and how we get from our beginning to our destination. Ask students to think of a journey they recently took. It might be a long journey to the beach or to visit relatives or a short journey to the store to get groceries. Ask students to write about their journeys and include as many details as they can.
- Show students photographs of three or four different shoes. Ask students to choose one of the pairs of shoes and write about a journey that those shoes took from the shoes' perspective. Some examples of shoes include work boots, ballet slippers, basketball sneakers, sandy flip-flops, or glass slippers.
- Ask students to think about someone else's shoes. It might be a classmate or a family member. Ask students to write about what a day in that person's shoes would be like.

### *Student Activity: Listing Emotions*

Materials: Writers' notebooks, pencils

This activity is primarily a brainstorming one. It helps students build a plethora of ideas from which they can draw on future drafts and projects. Read students a mentor text that contains a character who feels a very strong emotion. It also helps to read a text that students can easily connect with. In my own classroom, I chose to use *Eleven* by Susan Cisneros, which is a short story told from the perspective of an eleven year-old girl (see Appendix 3). The story contains very strong emotions, and my third grade students completely identified with how the main character felt throughout her story.

After reading the mentor text, have a brief discussion with students about the emotions that the character felt in the story. Start writing a list of emotions on the board. Students may use this list as a starting point for their own lists. In their writers' notebooks, they should begin a list of emotions. Explain that this list will help them in the future if they get "stuck" and can't think of an idea for a story.

Using one of the emotions from the list, create a bubble map with the emotion in the center bubble (see Appendix 2). In the outer bubbles, write a sentence or two about times in your life that you felt that emotion. These bubbles have the potential to each become their own stories. Model how to take one of the ideas from a bubble and begin a rough draft based on that idea. Encourage students to do the same for their next writing project.

#### *Students Activity: Personal Narratives – Mentor Texts*

Materials: Select children's books as mentor texts, poems, other examples of personal narratives

My class is split about half and half on whether or not they like writing personal narratives. It's not that some of my students live really exciting lives and the other ones do not. Most of my students live similar lives – they have limited experiences, spending much of their time at home or playing in the neighborhood. Vacations and family outings to places such as museums and zoos are few and far between. Visiting the local amusement park is one of the more popular topics, but these "exciting" topics that so many of my students want to write about are HUGE topics that could be turned into so many personal narrative moments. Helping my students to break these topics into little pieces of writing is a challenge.

Many of my students also struggle to find excitement in their everyday lives. Last week, I asked them to write about something they did over the weekend, explaining that

it could be anything. I had flown home to Ohio for a bridal shower, so my personal narrative example was more exciting than a usual weekend at my home. I explained that students could write about riding their bike or playing with the neighbors or even taking a trip to the grocery store or library. Several of my students sat for the entire writing workshop time and did not get a single word on their page. When I asked them what they did over the weekend, they said, “Nothing.” When I tried to discuss with them what they did starting on Friday after school until Sunday night before bed, I got answers such as sleeping, playing video games, watching TV, and eating dinner. It made me wonder if maybe many of my students do spend their time indoors, being fed entertainment from video game consoles and DVD players. Because my own weekend had been eventful, I tried to give several examples of other, more normal, weekend events that students could write about.

I asked my students to help me brainstorm anything they did over their weekend – places they went, people they interacted with, and events they went to. Their ideas included sporting events (mostly football and soccer as it was fall), going to various stores for shopping, going to church, playing with other kids in their neighborhood, visiting a relative in another city, and playing a video game with their brothers and sisters. Once we had these brainstormed ideas, I encouraged the students to talk with an elbow partner (a student who sat close enough that they could touch elbows) about their “normal” weekend activity. I walked around, listening to the groups of students, offering suggestions for details for the speakers to think about and questions for the listeners to ask. Another strategy that would have been good for this brainstorming session would have been *musical partners*, as described above in the strategies section.

You can find examples of personal narratives about moments in the authors’ lives that are events that could have come from the lives of my own students. There is a wealth of knowledge in author’s biographies as well as in the authors’ notes at the front or back of picture books and novels. In this technological age, most authors have websites with details about their lives and their writing. As teachers, we need to be “fascinated by stories of authors...We love knowing that Robert McCloskey kept four squawking mallards in his Greenwich Village apartment while he worked on *Make Way for Ducklings* and that E.B. White’s original drafts of *Charlotte’s Web*, which he wrote while sitting on a bale of hay in his barn, is full of sketches of pigs, barns, and a spider at work.” Be vigilant and always on the lookout for insight into the story behind beloved picture books and novels, and encourage students to do the same.

### *Student Activity: Great Beginnings*

Materials: Writers' notebooks, pencils, mentor texts

One of the most important parts of a piece of writing is also one that students struggle with most – the very beginning. Many of my students begin a story with “One day, I...” If I’m lucky, the students who understand that they are supposed to add details to their stories will write “One summer day, I...” It is important to help students understand that published writers do not begin their stories with “One day...” They use a variety of beginnings to get the readers’ attention and make their writing exciting. Helping students realize this and getting them to the point where they can step away from the boring and toward the great takes a lot of time.

Author Ralph Fletcher gave this input about writing openings: “The first word, sentence, paragraph, or passage – commonly called the *lead* – represents the author’s first step toward finishing a piece of writing. But the lead is more important than the first step toward getting somewhere; the lead is an integral part of the somewhere itself. The lead gives the author his first real chance to grapple with the subject at hand.”

Author Mark Levitt suggests beginning the search for great beginnings with “a discussion about what your students already know about *openings* or beginnings. Remember, this does not necessarily mean the openings of stories, but rather techniques and tactics that, for instance, salesmen, advertising executives, and movie producers use to entice us to enter into a new environment. Have students make a list of these strategies and then look at them, talk about them, and give a homework assignment to spend a few days looking for more.”

Author Lucy Calkins echoes Levitt’s sentiment, explaining, “I search for examples that can help me envision the tone, structure and voice that I want to assume.” She continues on to talk about how she has to write a wedding toast, so she is going to study other wedding toasts until she is able to write one that really gets her meaning across.

Both Levitt and Calkins, as well as other authors, emphasize the importance of exposing students to great beginnings before asking them to write great beginnings for their own stories. Levitt says, “Have students look for opening sentences in literature that they like. You do the same. Then have a discussion with them about what they like about the openings.” These mentor texts become invaluable for other units of study as well. As

teachers, we can ask ourselves, “How can our students write great beginnings if they have never *seen* great beginnings?” I propose starting with a variety of mentor texts, allowing students to search for the beginnings that they greatly enjoy and find interesting, and asking them to analyze the strategies that the authors used to pull us in as readers.

Search for children’s literature, poetry, and other texts that have great beginnings. Give students several days to examine these texts, and guide them in discussions to creating a list of strategies that they may use to create great beginnings in their own writing. Levitt offered some suggestions in his book:

- Have students come to the front of the room and get the class’s attention *without* the use of words...
- Have students pretend they are on an infomercial, selling a product that they’ve invented.
- Have students create an opening for a horror movie. Write the first scene...
- Have students create a first sentence using different senses, one at a time...first smell, then sound, then taste, etc.
- Have students write two first sentences, one purposely boring and the other exciting. Have the class decide why they like one better than the other...

Once students have been exposed to a variety of mentor texts that have great beginnings, students can begin writing beginnings for their own stories. They may choose to take a story that they have already written and revise the beginning, or they may choose to start fresh. Whatever their decision, be sure to have the list of strategies available somewhere in the classroom so they can refer to it throughout the writing workshop all year.

#### *Student Activity: Great Endings*

Materials: Select children’s books as mentor texts, poems, etc.

Just as there is a lot of information and research about helping students write great beginnings, there are suggestions for helping students to write great endings as well. My students will write great stories and then end them with “we went home and I went to bed.” According to Ralph Fletcher, mentor texts can really help out with teaching students how to end their story in an interesting and meaningful way. He says that “we can help our students improve their endings by first helping them become aware of the various kinds of endings available to them.” In his book *What a Writer Needs*, he goes on to describe several kinds of endings that are often used in published books.



- In a circular ending, characters often start and end the story in the same place. Many times the story itself is about a journey with the character leaving home for a purpose and then returning home after accomplishing a goal. Often times, the character experiences life-changing events or gains wisdom that he or she then takes back to share with the rest of the family.

- In an ambiguous ending, readers are left wondering about the end of the story. The author may give clues about how the story ended, but he or she leaves it up to the readers to use their own knowledge and experiences to determine what really happened. There is no right or wrong answer to a question about how an ambiguous ending was resolved. Also called a cliff-hanger, ambiguous endings are many times used in books to which sequels have been or will be written.

- In a poignant ending, the author strives to make his or her readers feel a powerful emotion. When this type of ending is used, it is as if the last piece of a puzzle has fallen into place to help the reader understand what the whole story was about.

- In a surprise ending, the author throws in a twist to the story that leaves readers going, “Whoa, what just happened?!” This is a fun ending for students to read, but a difficult one for them to use unless they have the ending in mind from the very beginning of their writing.

Helping younger students to understand the different kinds of endings will require you to use lots and lots of mentor texts. Look for picture books that are well-known or easy for students to read, and let them explore the endings themselves to see what they uncover. It may be helpful to create charts for students to use as resources when they are planning their stories so they can have an idea at the beginning of their writing process as to how they are going to end their story.