

The “Writer’s Workshop” Organizer

★ MINI-LESSON 5-15 Minutes

A mini-lesson is a short piece of direct instruction focused on a single topic. Mini-lessons fall into three categories:

Procedures: Anything writers need to do to participate effectively in the workshop: How to get paper; How to store and organize writing; How to request a conference; How to conduct sharing, and so on.

Strategies Writers Use: This is the “how” of writing, as in “How do I pick a good topic?” or “How do I write a good lead?” These lessons are best organized around the writing process.

Qualities of Good Writing: These lessons are designed to introduce students to examples of good writing. They involve reviewing and analyzing models of good writing using the language of your classroom criteria. These kinds of lessons often come up naturally during reading time or teacher modeling.

Mini-lessons work best when: 1) They are suggested by the students; 2) They are taught in the context of authentic student writing; 3) The teacher models for students as the lesson is delivered.

YOU DON’T NEED TO GIVE A MINI-LESSON EVERY DAY!

★ CONFERRENCING Durning Writing Time

During writing time you have a chance to work individually with students who need specific help. The keys to successful conferencing are good management and consistent execution.

Management: The key to all successful management is having good procedures in place. Students need to be able to: 1) Know when the teacher is available for a conference; 2) Request a conference in an appropriate way; 3) Be specific about what they want help with; and 4) Have all materials ready.

Execution: To keep conferences brief and make the most of your time, keep these things in mind: 1) Model conferences on whole class sharing; 2) Ask permission and/or start out with questions before you make recommendations; 3) Work on one thing at a time; 4) Before you leave the conference, make sure the student knows what to do.

Conferencing works best when: 1) Students know how to do it; 2) You stay focused on one thing at a time; 3) You keep conferences to less than five minutes; 4) You check back with students from time to time to see if they’re following up on what you conferenced about.

★ STATUS OF THE CLASS 2-5 Minutes

Status of the class is a quick way of finding out what students will be working on that day. There are several ways to do status of the class:

Out Loud: Students tell the teacher and the class what they’re working on. They can tell the title, the topic, the form or genre, or the stage they are at in the writing process. Title, topic, and writing process stage are usually the most useful pieces of information.

Visually: Students indicate on some kind of chart in the room what they will be doing that day. Most of the charts I’ve seen allow writers to indicate where they are in the writing process.

Recorded on Paper: Circulate a sheet of paper and ask each student to indicate what they will be doing that day. Some teachers record status even when it’s done out loud.

Status of the class works best when: 1) You do it out loud; 2) You do it regularly; 3) Everyone can hear everyone else; 4) Students choose their own topics, forms, and genres, and manage their own way through the writing process.

STATUS OF THE CLASS IS A GREAT WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY!

★ SHARING 5-15 Minutes

Sharing gives writers a chance to address a real audience and get valuable feedback about what and how they’re doing. There are several ways to do sharing, each has its advantages and disadvantages:

Whole Class: Gives authors their best chance for feedback, but it takes a lot of time. On most days, you’ll only be able to listen to a few kids. Best tool you have for building classroom community.

Small Group: Time efficient, but hard to manage. Very noisy. Kids easily get off track. Monitor each group by participating as a member.

Partner: Most time efficient but, with only one person in the audience, the feedback the writer receives is often not that valuable.

Sharing works best when: 1) It is voluntary; 2) The author asks the audience to listen for or help with something specific; 3) Kids with long pieces read only a short section; 4) You take an active part as an author and an audience member; 5) Students make constructive comments using the language of the classroom criteria; 6) Everyone knows that all comments, even yours, are suggestions only; 7) Students ask questions instead of making comments.

CONFERRENCING IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING TIME!

SHARING MUST WORK FOR BOTH AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE!

★ WRITING TIME 20-40 Minutes

Writing time is the centerpiece of the workshop and the longest workshop section. During writing time, students write. The teacher can:

Model: Work on your own writing. You can write at your desk or at the board or overhead. Allowing students to see what you write as you write it is very good for them. You will often discover your most valuable mini-lessons when you write in front of your students because you’ll have to tackle the same problems that they do.

Conference: Work with individual students on their writing. This is your most valuable teaching time.

Small Group Mini-Lesson: While the majority of the class is writing, you can take a small group of students and deliver a mini-lesson.

Catch Up: Spend a few minutes on other work you have to do.

Writing time works best when: 1) Students have internalized effective classroom procedures; 2) Students write frequently, and for long periods of time, on a regular schedule; 3) You write with your students for at least a few minutes during most class periods.

WRITING TIME IS THE HEART OF THE WORKSHOP!

★ TIPS ★

★ Concentrate on classroom management by focusing on procedural mini-lessons at the beginning of the year.

★ If you have less than 40 minutes, drop the mini-lesson and sharing; start with a quick status of the class and get right into writing and conferencing. Writing time is the most valuable time.

★ Teach the students to run their own workshop, so you don’t have to run it for them.

★ Keep a list from your reading program of things your students like, and then use that list as the basis for your mini-lessons.

★ Encourage shy kids to share by asking if you can share their writing for them.

★ Keep an in-class library of published student writing for students to read. This helps them get ideas and allows them to compare their work privately to the work of other students.

★ Have fun every day.

IT TAKES ABOUT A MONTH TO GET THINGS RUNNING WELL!