

Study Guide

HOW DO I GET THEM TO WRITE?

Explore the reading-writing connection using freewriting and mentor texts to motivate and empower students



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* You can find out more about the book, preview the contents, and purchase a print or e-book version on [our website](#).

Introduction: To Write and to Teach

This study guide has been designed to help spark conversations about the teaching of writing. You may choose to focus on one set of questions for each chapter, or take the time to discuss them all. You may choose to concentrate on two or three chapters to support a specific school-wide focus. Regardless, reading and discussing the introduction is always a good place to begin as it invites us to contemplate our fundamental beliefs about writing and the teaching of writing.

Quotes to Ponder

“When I consider writing in the classroom setting, I see two main functions: *learning to write* (something we know is in the curriculum and must teach) and *writing to learn* (a less talked-about function of writing in the classroom)... Ideally, in the classroom these functions dance and mingle throughout the day.” – p. 7

“Teaching students the skill of writing is a gift of empowerment: words change worlds.” – p. 10

Guiding Questions

1. How were you taught to write?
2. Do you consider yourself a writer? Do you enjoy writing? How might your answers to these questions influence the way you teach writing to your students?
3. *Why* do you teach writing to your students? Is it because the curriculum requires it, because it is a form of empowerment, or do you teach writing for another reason entirely?
4. How might our own perspectives and approaches to the teaching of writing influence the way our students perceive writing in our classrooms?

1

Developing a Community of Learners

Quotes to Ponder

“...writing makes us vulnerable. Before you can stimulate effective writing and effective dialogue about the writing, you must establish a community of learners.” – p. 11

“The four walls of a classroom do not necessarily translate into a community of learners — this community must be created.” – p.19

Guiding Questions

1. What is implied by the term *a community of learners*? Why might this be an effective way to view our classroom environment?
2. Make a quick list of the ways that you develop a community of learners within your classroom.
3. What else might you do to ensure your students work within a growth mindset and respect all other learners within the classroom?
4. What are your first thoughts about using Writing Groups with your students? How might Writing Groups help to improve student writing?

2

Setting Up the Year: Planning and Preparation

Quotes to Ponder

“If you accept something for publication riddled with errors, you are sending a clear message about the quality of work you accept and setting yourself up for a year-long battle. Although we do not want students to worry about conventions during initial stages of writing, we do want them to meet high expectations for final drafts.” – p. 20

“Rest assured, though you and your students are writing frequently, not all of the writing needs to be assessed. In fact, it shouldn’t be.” – p. 23

Guiding Questions

1. What are some of the general expectations for student writing discussed in this chapter? Do these expectations match your current practices or are there some differences?
2. As teachers we face many time constraints. What are some of the strategies discussed in this chapter regarding time management?
3. This chapter discusses many possibilities for planning for a writing classroom. Which of the ideas might work for you within your classroom? What current practices might you tweak or change to make your classroom even more effective?

3

Creating a Healthy Attitude towards Assessment

Quotes to Ponder

“We must engage in conversations about strengths, challenges, and learning styles to help our students develop a healthy perspective towards assessment. We simply do not know what our students hear at home or even what their internal dialogue might be.” – p. 31

“Over-assessment robs our students of the freedom that allows them to take risks and become competent, creative individuals.” – p. 32

“Although assessment is a necessary and purposeful part of our job as educators, it should be used carefully and intentionally to provide feedback for improvement. The focus becomes assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning.” – p. 35

Guiding Questions:

1. Do you have a memory or experience surrounding assessment that stands out for you as a student? As a teacher? Share this experience with your colleagues. What are the emotions attached to this experience and how might it affect your assessment practices?
2. How can we ensure we create a healthy attitude towards assessment in our classrooms? What specific strategies do you use? What else might you try?
3. How does Karen suggest we, as teachers, assess student writing to make the time spent on assessment more manageable?
4. Have you ever engaged in a writing conference with your students? If so, what was your experience? If not, how might they be helpful in improving the writing of our students? Would a table similar to the one on page 36 be helpful to keep you intentional and consistent?

4

Freewriting

Quotes to Ponder

“With no other genre or writing process have I been able to uncover my students’ voices as with freewriting. Without the time to censor their thoughts, students tend to write with honesty and heart: thus, their voices begin to emerge through their work.” – p. 37

“Consider this: if we thought every word we spoke had to be dazzling and impressive, how much would we speak? So, too, with our writing. The pressure of knowing our work is to be read and the self-expectation for immediate perfection can be a stumbling block to good writing and sometimes to any writing at all. We can always revise once we have words on the page.” – p. 38

Guiding Questions:

1. Freewriting is a term you may have heard before. In this chapter, Karen describes a specific method of freewriting inspired by the work of Peter Elbow. What would you say are the critical components of freewriting as described in the book?
2. How is freewriting different from other forms of writing with our students?
3. Why do you think the use of a prompt (and the rewriting of the prompt, if necessary) is so important for our student writers?
4. Karen recommends that the teacher writes *with students* during freewriting. What does she suggest are the benefits of writing with students?
5. Freewriting is considered *low stakes* writing. Students know they will have a choice of whether or not to share their writing. They also know that if one of their freewrites is going to be assessed, they will have the opportunity to revise and edit. How is this process and approach different from other writing we use with students?
6. How is writing, especially freewriting, an opportunity for students to write as a form of thinking: *writing to learn*? Why might this be an effective form of writing to use in all areas of the curriculum?

5

Journal Writing

Quotes to Ponder

“As teachers, we know that students are often eager to share stories and events from their own lives. Unfortunately, time does not always afford us the luxury of listening to every story our students yearn to tell us. Through journals, all students are given the opportunity to share their own experiences, feeling, and opinions with us.” – p. 49

“Allow student journals to be a place of expression without assessment being a factor.” – p. 56

Guiding Questions

1. Why might you decide to have your students write in a journal? What might be some of the benefits?
2. Which of the journal writing ideas suggested in this chapter might work with your current group of students?
3. What types of students might benefit most from journaling?

6

Narrative Writing

Quotes to Ponder

“It is not that we want (or expect) all of our students to become authors, but through the process of narrative writing, students can practise and refine their own writing skills and ultimately learn to appreciate the artistry in the texts they read.” – p. 57

“Read, read, and read some more to your students — no matter their age... Not only does this allow us to share our favorites, but it also provides students with an opportunity to hear both effective reading and effective writing. By listening to the work of good writers, we increase our vocabulary, intuitively learn rhythm, internalize the structures of language, and make meaning from text.” – p. 58

Guiding Questions

1. Think about your students’ narrative writing. What are some of the positive aspects that you notice about this genre of your students’ writing? What are some of the challenges?
2. Talk about the idea of *plot patterns*. Why might the teaching of these plot patterns — through mentor texts and graphic organizers — be effective in improving student stories?
3. For maximum effectiveness, Karen is quite systematic when teaching plot patterns to her students. List and discuss the steps found on page 59.
4. In the later part of the chapter, beginning on page 65, Karen talks about the teaching of narrative structure, dialogue, character development, and setting. Reread one of these sections and find a strategy to try with your students. Share *how and why* you think this might work with your students.
5. Karen does not have her students write a new story each time she teaches a new skill. Instead, she has them revise a story *already written* using the mini-lesson on the skill being taught as impetus. Why might this approach be beneficial?

7

Transactional Writing

Quotes to Ponder

“Few of our students will write narratives beyond the school setting: most, though, will write to communicate — to persuade, enlighten, convince, or motivate. Transactional writing is seen as a more functional form of writing than narrative writing: it is writing that students *will* do outside of the school setting, writing that can empower them in our literate-dependent society.” – p. 82

“In exemplary classrooms, students spend their language arts time actively engaged in meaningful and authentic reading and writing activities.” – p. 83

Guiding Questions

1. What is meant by the term *transactional writing*? What types of writing are discussed in this chapter?
2. Why is it important to give our students authentic audiences whenever possible?
3. Each type of writing within this chapter includes a chart listing appropriate mentor texts. How might these mentor texts strengthen our student writing?
4. Does all transactional writing have to exist within a language arts classroom? What might be an example of an authentic writing experience outside of language arts?

8

The Playfulness of Poetry

Quotes to Ponder

“Teachers and students alike are sometimes intimidated by poetry, and yet, when approached intelligently and creatively, it can be one of the most liberating forms of reading and writing for students of all abilities.” – p. 97

“It is not essential to analyze every word of every poem. We can enjoy poetry simply because of its rhythm and cadence. We can enjoy it because of the commonality of experience. We can enjoy it because of the emotion it stirs in us. Very young children approach poetry in this way instinctively. They don’t consider analyzing the poems: they simply find delight in the form.” – p. 98

Guiding Questions

1. How do you feel about poetry? Do you find delight in the form or is it something you avoid? Does this influence how or if you use poetry in your classroom?
2. How might we approach poetry with children balancing an enjoyment of the form with analysis of the writer’s craft?
3. Who are your favourite poets for children? Which of the poets listed on page 99 are new to you?
4. Although you might read and share poetry with your students throughout the year, this chapter uses a three-week approach to the writing of poetry. What do you notice about how each of these weeks are outlined?

9

Reader Response and Author Studies

Quotes to Ponder

“A writer putting words on paper has an intended meaning; however, each reader brings his or her own life experiences to the reading of the text and therefore the interpretation of the words on the page will differ from person to person.” – p. 108

“Because writing is a form of thinking, reader response writing helps students to engage more fully in what they are reading as a class and what they are reading independently.” – p. 108

Guiding Questions

1. What might be the benefits of engaging our students in reader response writing after a read-aloud rather than always choosing a class discussion?
2. How might the sharing of differing reader responses help our students better understand themselves and also the perspectives of others?
3. If you freewrite with your students, why might students prefer sentence prompts to question prompts for reader response writing?
4. Have you ever experienced an author study? What are the benefits that result from a focus on one author? Which author would you consider with your current group of students?

10

Teaching Skills

Quotes to Ponder

“When we stress less about mechanics and, instead, show genuine interest in what they say, students will begin to care about what they write. What happens then is a willingness to revise and edit. Students even become excited about engaging in this process because they want to make their writing the best it can be. When students begin to invest in their writing, they want to learn how to make it more effective.” – p. 118

“...writing alone is not enough: ongoing literary conversations are necessary. Students need effective instruction, exemplars, and scaffolding if their writing is going to show significant improvement.” – p. 118

“As we shift to understand that writing is about conveying meaning (and that all of us want to convey meaning to others), we begin to see how the process of selecting appropriate language, as well as manipulating that language until it is just right, is an essential part of writing.” – p. 118

Guiding Questions

1. What is the purpose of using mini-lessons within the writing process?
2. What makes an effective mini-lesson when teaching writing skills?
3. What is the difference between revision and editing?
4. Consider the sections of your rubric. Which sections would be considered revision? Which would be considered editing?

11

Emergent Writers: Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Beyond

Quotes to Ponder

“If you are lucky enough (and some would say, brave enough) to teach Kindergarten or Grade 1, you know that the realities of writing in these classrooms are unique. In Kindergarten and Grade 1, more so than at any other grade level, our students are *learning to write*.” – p. 133

“For many young students, talk is a precursor to writing — after all, oral language precedes written language. Before asking our emergent writers to write, it is important to provide them with time to talk and listen to others.” – p. 145

Guiding Questions

1. How can you assist your young students in becoming more aware of the print that surrounds them?
2. What are the basic conventions of print? How do we go about teaching these conventions of print to our emergent writers?
3. Letters are the building blocks for words. Words are the building blocks for sentences. How can we expose our students to these building blocks and have fun doing it?
4. Why is oral language essential for emergent writers? What specific strategies can we use to support our writers through oral language?

12

Reaching Our English Language Learners and Reluctant Writers

Quotes to Ponder

“The beauty of teaching writing is that students work at their own ability levels.” – p. 147

“In dialogue with students over the years, I have found that ELLs and reluctant writers tend to have similar fears: fear of failure, fear of someone reading their work, fear of making mistakes, fear of incorrect spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Writing, after all, makes us vulnerable.” – p. 148

Guiding Questions

1. Have you ever learned — or tried learning — a second language? What were the challenges you faced? How did you feel? How might this experience help you relate to, and support, the English Language Learners or reluctant writers in your classroom?
2. Why is oral language essential for ELL or reluctant writers? What specific strategies can we use to support our writers through oral language?
3. Why might reading aloud mentor texts be especially important for this demographic of students?
4. How might we differentiate our instruction and expectations for our ELL or reluctant writers?

13

Daring to Begin

Quotes to Ponder

“Literacy skills are essential regardless of the direction our students take in life. The literacy skills we teach will assist our students throughout their schooling and beyond: whether they are filling out job applications, communicating in their professional lives, or reading stories to their own children in years to come.” – p. 154

“What I have learned to appreciate is that the teaching literacy — of reading and writing — is about empowerment.”
– p. 155

Guiding Questions

1. How will you inspire your students to love the written word? How might you provide memorable literacy moments within your classroom?
2. How might you now structure your writing program differently?
3. What are you committed to trying to improve the teaching of writing? Be specific. Set two specific goals.

How Do I Get Them to Write? investigates the vital connection between reading and writing. This remarkable book argues that reading, writing, and the inevitable discussions that follow lead students to appreciate the experiences of others, open their minds to new possibilities, gain a glimpse into unknown worlds, make connections to their own lives, and reflect on their own choices and learning.

This practical resource shows teachers simple ways to inspire students to learn to write and write to learn. Teachers will discover how to

- structure their language arts program
- establish writing groups
- make assessment manageable
- use mentor texts to teach the skills of writing
- teach freewriting, journal, narrative, and transactional writing
- create engaging poetry units and author studies
- engage emergent writers in Kindergarten and Grade 1
- assist English language learners and reluctant writers
- create an environment where students enjoy putting pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard

How Do I Get Them to Write? is committed to helping teachers get all students writing regardless of their attitudes or their current abilities. Based on the premise that all students can learn to write with appropriate teaching, modelling, and practice, this is an ideal resource for teachers who love writing as well as for those who find it a challenging process.



Greg Campbell

Karen Filewych has more than twenty years of educational experience as a teacher of all elementary grades and most recently as a school administrator. Her passion for literacy began as a young child with nightly bedtime stories and weekly trips to the library. In 2007, she pursued this passion further by completing her Master of Education degree in the area of literacy. Her busy life includes writing, presenting workshops, and leading writer-in-residence programs for students in schools and classrooms. Her website, *Words Change Worlds*, highlights the power of words and provides teachers with regular book reviews and teaching ideas. Karen lives in Edmonton, Alberta, with her family.

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