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## Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K-8 by Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi

### **Setting the Table for Craft**

Alas, there is no Miracle-Gro for growing young writers. There are no shortcuts when it comes to learning how to write. The craft lessons in this book won't mean a hoot unless they are situated in classrooms where students are writing in authentic ways on a regular basis.

Why not skip the time and messiness of a writer's workshop and go straight for the craft lesson? Tempting idea, but it probably won't work.

A soccer coach lines up her players and rolls the ball so they can trap it and shoot toward the goal. One after another, the kids score. But the real question is, Can they do it in the game? Can that girl trap the ball when it comes to her bouncing and spinning? Can that boy shoot when the ball rolls up to the right foot when he's used to shooting from the left?

Kids need to play the game. Scrimmages and actual soccer games allow young players to see the reason for particular skills ("Oh, that's why you need to know how to head the ball!") In the same way, actual writing provides a rich, crucial context for students to begin to improve their writing game using specific elements of craft. This book rests on the shoulders of other books in the field of writing process. While these authors do not speak with one voice, and in fact often disagree with each other, they do draw from a pool of shared beliefs about writing. Among these are the following.

### **Time**

Skiers ski. They are so obsessed with skiing they will deprive themselves of all sorts of creature comforts to scrape together enough money so they can hit the slopes every chance they get.

Basketball players spend countless hours practicing in gyms. The term for these creatures—gym rats—is the highest sort of compliment you can give.

Writers write. We tell students: a writer is somebody who writes a lot. We need to craft our daily schedules so young writers write on a regular basis.

This book argues that direct instruction in the writer's craft has an important role in growing young writers, but it is also important that we don't overemphasize the teacher's role. While there is much we can teach, when the conditions are right there is also much students teach themselves and each other. In a typical writer's workshop the beginning mini-lesson is valuable, as is the ending share time, but the most important time is probably the

precious time you carve out for students to write.

Students need regular, sustained time to write. This means that writing has to be a planned part of the school day. If we try to squeeze it in, well, students will feel the squeeze and their writing will suffer accordingly. In a *Fresh Look at Writing* (1994), Donald Graves describes a teacher who asked what she should do if she could only write with her students once per week. “Don’t bother,” he tells her.

It’s a blunt, but honest answer. Kids need regular time to write. We can come up with the most brilliant craft lessons in the world. But if students write sporadically they will never have the chance to find their stride as writers.

## **Response**

There is no greater challenge than responding to young writers who are engaged in the messy process of writing. Writing conferences can be difficult to manage, and it’s tempting to omit them from the workshop, but these one-to-one interactions are crucial. (In Australia, writing process has been called the conference approach to teaching writing.) Writers need response, not only from their peers, but from us as well. But many teachers feel anxious during student writing conferences.

“I’m so worried about what I’m going to say next,” one teacher remarked. “I’m not really there for the student.” The writing conference is a special kind of dialogue between student and teacher. Miranda introduces the idea to her third graders at the beginning of the year. “I’m going to try to have about one writing conference per week during our writer’s workshop,” she says. “This will probably be the only conversation we’ll have that won’t be interrupted.”

Much has been written about the writing conference. Here are a few practical tips:

- Respond first as a reader. If you want to affect the writers in your classroom, you have to let their writing affect you first. This means responding first to what it’s about—content, meaning, emotional force. Laugh when the writing strikes you as funny, be puzzled if the writing confuses you. Responding in this human way earns you the right to teach specific skill or strategy.
- Be positive. Peter Elbow (1981) has remarked that a good writing teacher is both “a good host and a good bouncer.” A writing teacher needs to have a positive, inviting demeanor while at the same time maintaining high standards. At the beginning of the year, you’ll probably want to err on the side of being a “good host.” As the year goes on, and students become comfortable with their writing, you can gradually become more demanding.
- Try to understand the writer’s intention. Seek to understand what the writer is trying to do. This may involve a great deal of listening. What you teach in the conference evolves from a deep understanding of the writer’s intent.
- Lower your ambitions. When we went to school we wrote infrequently, but our teachers tried to get lots of mileage out of these rare writing occasion. Students need just the reverse. They should write frequently, but we should try to teach no more than one of two things in each piece. When we look at a student’s paper, we often see the chance to teach several strategies. But students quickly tire of having their writing serve as a backdrop for such teaching. Don’t overstay your welcome. Point out one thing in the piece of writing, and move on. What about the other weaknesses or errors you don’t talk about with the student this time? Not to worry: they’ll show up in the next piece of writing!

## Responsibility

When we think back on our writing teachers, it's amazing to consider how much they did for us. They told us what to write, how long it should be, whether or not to skip lines, whether to use cursive or printing. They told us exactly how to organize our ideas. They carefully corrected our writing and, after we handed in our final drafts, gave us a grade. We figured out what these teachers wanted, and gave it back to them. While these teachers surely taught us many things, they rarely taught us the process—the inside process—or learning to write. Writers are people who make decisions. Even a kindergarten writer has important decisions to make: What kind of paper should I choose? Should I start with words or pictures? Who do I want to read this? And all writers must decide, What will I write about?

Students need to feel ownership over what they write. “Choice leads to voice,” John Poeton says. That's true but it doesn't always go smoothly. Donald Graves (1994) has warned about the “vacuum of choice,” that is, giving students so much topic choice and so little guidance they quickly get lost. Graves suggests that teachers much show children how to “read the world” so they can make better choices for their writing topics.

Despite these drawbacks, students need to have lots of opportunities for choice in the writing workshop. When students are making real decisions in the classroom, you feel a heightened energy level in the room.

Time. Response. Responsibility. These conditions alone won't ensure that students become skilled writer. But without regular opportunities for students to do what writers do, they will never develop the fluency necessary to make part of their repertoire the craft lessons that follow. But there's one more thing, and it's a biggie.

## Literature

When we explore conditions that allow students to learn about the writer's craft, we cannot leave out the presence of literature: stories, songs, poems, and books. This may be the most crucial condition of all. The writing you get out of your students can only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds and sustains it.

Of course, this idea is not exactly new. For years good writing teachers have scoured book lists and bookstores for powerful literature to spark their writers. Many of us have proceeded with the assumption that students will eventually internalize the qualities of good writing if we keep exposing them to the best books around.

This may be true. But in this book we argue that teachers need to take it one step further. In order to help young writers make the most use out of the literature they read, teachers also need to use explicit language to address specific issues of craft. For example,

“Notice how the book ends with a detail mentioned in the beginning.”

“Look at how few passive verbs she uses in this paragraph.”

“Listen to the voice in this passage.”

“Let's take a close look at how these details reveal the character's emotional state of mind.”

The writing classroom is built on a foundation of literature. Kids need challenging texts that awe and inspire as well as easier texts over which they have mastery.