



Meet Me in the Middle: Becoming an Accomplished Middle-Level Teacher by Rick Wormeli

Structure

All of us can remember assignments in which our first response was, I don't know how to start. We needed something to help us focus our thoughts. Good writing rarely follows when a teacher says to students, "Write something." Most middle school students do not have enough experience to choose appropriate writing formats to meet the specific objectives we want them to achieve. Sometimes all they need is a hook, such as a good action verb in the writing prompt. For example, instead of "Explain photosynthesis" try "Compare photosynthesis to a computer." Instead of "Tell the story of the Lusitania's sinking," ask students to argue against the government's theory of how the Lusitania sank. Students can rank the causes of the Civil War in order of their impact on the nonfarming citizens of the Confederacy. They can blend two theories into one, and they can critique political actions instead of simply reporting about them.

Sometimes we get in a rut and use the same writing prompts over and over again. If your ideas seem stale, try these action words to spur creativity: analyze, summarize, construct, decide between, why did, argue for, contrast, identify, classify, evaluate, interpret, interview, expand, find support for, predict, paraphrase, show, simplify, deduce, infer, outline, formulate, revise, invent, imagine, devise, compose, recommend, justify, choose, assess, and create. Structure comes in many forms: analogies, written interviews, fill-in-the-blank paragraphs, mind maps, five-paragraph essays, and more. Here's a list of different ways to incorporate writing into subject areas:

Writing Formats

Correspondence	Museum maps/tour guides	Oral histories
Almanacs	Magazines	Radio plays
Newspapers	Scripts	Historical fiction
Commercials	Picture books	Journals/diaries
Science fiction	Mystery stories	Romances
Poetry	Autobiographies	Animal stories
How-to books	Biographies	Alphabet books
Pop-up books	Field guides	Mini-textbooks
Friendly letters	Bulletin boards	Choose-your-own adventures
Time lines	Murals	Coloring books
Calendars	Annotated catalogs	Travel brochures
Manuals	Games	Recipes
Personal narratives	Folktales/myths	Information reports
Persuasive essays	Book/movie reviews	Wills
Contracts	Weather forecasts	Wanted posters
Resumes	Satires/spoofs	Speeches

Songs/raps	CD covers	Soap operas
Slogans	Sermons	Sequels/prequels
Schedules	Lab instructions	Protest letters
Postcards	Pamphlets	Flipbooks
Odes	Requiems	Rebuttals
Play programs	Travel posters	Movie posters
Thank-you notes	Interviews	Telegrams
Sports accounts	Scary stories	Quizzes/tests
Rubrics	Surveys	Monologues
Jokes/riddles	Menus	Job applications
Indexes	Headlines	Grocery lists
Graffiti	Comic strips	Constitutions
Contracts	Conversations	Spreadsheets
Definitions	Epilogues	Evaluations
Fortunes	Comparisons	Character sketches
Certificates	Cereal boxes	Captions
Bumper stickers	Advice columns	Epithets
Codes	Observations	Musical scores
True-or-false books	Cookbooks	Wedding vows
Metaphors	Inauguration speeches	Annotated family tree

Sometimes students are more inspired to explore content and communicate their understanding through alternative writing samples. It's relatively easy to provide options for writing while at the same time ensuring meaningful incorporation of research.

Structure doesn't just refer to writing format. It also refers to the classroom protocols for writing. For example, you might want students to keep their drafts in folders labeled "Works in Progress" and to place these on a certain shelf in your classroom. Perhaps you would like students to keep learning logs in which they complete summaries after each lesson. You might define a procedure for requesting peer critiques from classmates or designate an editor's corner in your classroom where students can go when they're helping each other with writing. Providing both written and environmental structures for students can help them become accustomed to writing as a normal part of learning.