

# Study Guide

**BRIAN KISSEL**

Foreword by  
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WHEN  
WRITERS  
DRIVE  
THE  
WORKSHOP

Honoring Young Voices  
and Bold Choices

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## Summary

In this practical, engaging book, former elementary school teacher and university professor Brian Kissel asks teachers to go back to the roots of writing workshop. What happens when students, not planned teaching points, lead writing conferences? What happens when students, not tests, determine what they learned through reflection and self-evaluation?

Writing instruction has shifted in recent years to more accountability, taking the focus away from the writer. This book explores what happens when empowered writers direct the writing workshop. Through stories from real classrooms, Brian reveals that no matter where children come from, they all have the powerful, shared need to be heard. And when children choose their writing topics, their lives unfold onto the page and teachers are educated by the young voices and bold choices of these writers.

Written in an engaging, teacher-to-teacher style, this book focuses on four key components of writing workshop, and shows what will happen when teachers step back and allow students to drive the instruction. You will find expert examples of:

- conferring sessions where students lead and teachers listen;
- author's chair where students set the agenda and ask for feedback;
- reflection time and structures for students to set goals and expectations for themselves; and
- mini-lessons that allow for detours based on students' needs, not teacher or curricular goals.

Each chapter includes practical ideas, a section of Guiding Beliefs, a list of Frequently Asked Questions, and some Digital Diversions to help teachers see the digital possibilities in their classrooms.

This study guide is formatted as a study group, and it could be used either with a group of teachers or as a reflective structure for those reading the book alone. The suggestions offered in the guide are designed to foster collaboration, spark new thinking, and support the transfer of new ideas into the classroom.

## Introduction

### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Take a few moments and think of a special place. Sketch it out. Who are the people who are part of this place? Sketch them in the space, too. Draw scenes of different memories you have around that special space. Finally, jot down some words, phrases, or sentences that come to mind when thinking of this spot.

### Discussion/Sharing (15 Minutes)

- When you think of your students' role in the writer's workshop, what comes to mind? In general, how do you think students feel about the writer's workshop? What successes have they experienced in the workshop? What challenges have they experienced?
- What role does student choice play in the writer's workshop in your classroom?
- What are your guiding beliefs about the writer's workshop?

### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 5–8. This is an introduction to Brian.
- How is Brian's journey as an educator similar to yours? Different?

### Quotes Worth Discussing (15 Minutes)

*To teach children you must know them (6).*

*It's about how these young voices and their bold choices can help us find our way as their teachers (8).*

*Writers write with passion when teachers create conditions for smooth driving (9).*

### Author's Chair (5 minutes)

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What is one idea that you will continue to think about after today and might integrate into your writer's workshop?

### **Between Sessions**

Think about your beliefs about writer's workshop. Stop and Jot your thinking.

## Chapter 1

### Conferring: Writers Take the Wheel

#### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Take a few moments and jot down a list of special people, places, and things. Choose one idea from your list and draft for 4–5 minutes. You might want to reference the Appendix pages 160–163 (generating ideas for writing).

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- What are your beliefs regarding the writer's workshop?
- What does conferring look and sound like in your classroom?
- What are your guiding beliefs about conferring with writers? How are they similar to Brian's beliefs (pages 12–13)? Different?
- How do you record conferences you have with students?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 27–29, "Document to Discover Emerging Patterns."
- Look at Figure 1.3, Amir's Conference Notes.
  - What are the strengths of this writer?
  - What are the challenges this writer faces?
  - Where do we go next?
  - What can the whole class learn from this writer?
- Discuss Brian's notes on Amir. What do you notice? What do you wonder?

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*To me this is what a conference is: the instructional act of listening (12).*

*If, during a conference with a writer, I make more declarative and imperative statements than interrogative and exclamatory ones, I'm doing something wrong (13).*

*Conference notes provide counternarratives to the testing data that fail to measure the complex, nuanced ways in which our learners are growing (30).*

### **Travelogue (10 Minutes)**

- Read pages 31–34 in which Brian confers with Demetria.
- What do you notice? What do you wonder?
- How does the conference stay true to Brian’s belief system?

### **Author’s Chair (5 minutes)**

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

- What is one idea related to conferring that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?
- Take a few moments to reflect and jot down your thinking around the writer’s workshop.

### **Between Sessions**

Take a set of your own conference notes on a student and apply the questions that Brian uses when analyzing conference notes to discover patterns. You might try the Conferring Sheet template found in the appendix on page 159.

- What are the strengths of this writer?
- What are the challenges this writer faces?
- Where do we go next?
- What can the whole class learn from this writer?

## Chapter 2

### The Author's Chair: Writers Navigate the Response

#### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Continue the draft that you started last session or refer to your list of ideas and start a new piece of writing.

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- What did you notice when you analyzed your conferring notes?
- What are your guiding beliefs about the author's chair? How are these similar to Brian's (page 37–38)? Different?
- What is the role of the student author in the author's chair?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 38–46, "Writers Lead the Response Agenda."
- How is this framework similar to how the author's chair looks and sounds in your classroom? How is it different?
- What do you see as the benefits of letting students drive the author's chair agenda? What might be the challenges?
- The appendix has helpful resources on author's chair on pages 164–166.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*That evening, before anyone shared a piece of writing, Jane asked a simple question: "How would you like for us to respond to your writing?" With one small question, my thinking was transformed (36).*

*The author's chair is a richer, more authentic practice when writers drive the agenda. "This is what I need from you" becomes a powerful agentive stance that turns the chair into a powerful throne. The writer sits and shares, the audience listens and responds, and the entire class learns from the experience (39).*

*There's something magical in an interaction in which a student teaches me something I never considered a possibility. Andrew taught me this: The author's chair is not just a place for celebration; it's also a place for germination. Ideas don't always come easily to writers—some topics come from seed ideas passed*



*across the carpet from other writers whose suggestions provide possibilities for authors to consider (44).*

### **Travelogue (10 Minutes)**

- Read pages 54–55 in which Brian shares the story of Nikki.
- What do you notice or wonder in regards to the intention of the author's chair?

### **Author's Chair (5 minutes)**

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

- What is one idea related to the author's chair that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?
- Take a few moments to reflect and write down your thinking around writing workshop.

### **Between Sessions**

Take some time to document and analyze the interactions of students in the author's chair through an audience response map (Figure 2.6, page 51). You can organize your thinking on the Author's Chair Analysis template (appendix, page 171). What do you notice? What do you wonder?

## Chapter 3

### Reflection: Writers Ponder the Journey

#### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Continue the draft that you started last session or refer to your list of ideas and start a new piece of writing.

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- What did you learn about the interactions of your students through the audience response map in regards to the author's chair?
- What role does reflection play in your writing instruction?
- How are Brian's guiding beliefs about reflecting (page 58) similar to yours? Different?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read "Daily Reflections: Reflective Quick-Writes and Quick-Shares" on pages 61–66.
  - Looking Back, Looking Forward, Looking Inward, Looking Outward
- How might you incorporate daily quick-write reflections into your instruction? What do you see as benefits? Potential challenges?
- Daily reflection questions can be found in the appendix on pages 167–168.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Reflection, when guided by writers, counters the testing narratives. When our writers reflect daily, monthly, and throughout the academic year, they get opportunities to tell us fuller, richer stories of their literate lives (58).*

*Reflection needs to play a prominent role in the writer's workshop. After the mini-lesson, conference, and author's chair, students and teachers can consider what was learned that day (60).*

*When writers reflect, they examine their writing lives and note strengths or acknowledge shortcomings. When writers reflect, they change behaviors because of their insights (76).*

### **Travelogue (10 Minutes)**

- Read pages 76–77 in which Brian shares Rachel’s story.
- What insights are gained into Rachel’s writing life through her reflection statement? What do you wonder?

### **Author’s Chair (5 minutes)**

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

- What is one idea related to reflecting within the writing workshop that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?
- Take a few moments to reflect and write down your thinking around writing workshop.

### **Between Sessions**

Take some time and try a “Looking Back” daily reflection with your students (Figure 3.8, page 67). What insights are gained about your students? What do you wonder?

## Chapter 4

### Mini-Lessons: Writers Determine the Detours

#### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Continue the draft that you started last session or refer to your list of ideas and start a new piece of writing.

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Talk about the daily reflections you tried. How did they go?
- How do you plan for writing instruction with set curriculum so that you are responsive to student needs?
- What are your beliefs about mini-lessons and mini-lesson routines? Brian's guiding beliefs can be found on pages 80–81.

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read "Creating Lessons" on pages 97–98.
- Reflect on the different types of mini-lessons. What are your thoughts on the distribution chart (Figure 4.8) on page 98?

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Students are the center of instruction. By carefully analyzing what they've done as learners, we help them reclaim the instructional agenda (80).*

*It's important for us to map out big ideas: a yearly plan of genre study; general lessons to teach within each genre; ideas to generate purposes, audiences, and ideas for a unit of study; and due dates for the end of units. But the magic of instruction unfurls as students are entrenched in their writing processes and we hear about their struggles and triumphs (80).*

*Once routines and habits are established, we introduce genre study to our students. Every six to eight weeks, we plan to focus on teaching a specific genre that will culminate in at least one published piece for a purpose and audience decided upon by the writer (84).*

#### Travelogue (10 Minutes)

- Read pages 110–111 in which Brian shares the story of working with adult

learners as writers.

- What do you notice/wonder in regards to the experience he shared? How is this similar to or different from your experience of writing and sharing within this group?

### **Author's Chair (5 minutes)**

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

- What is one idea related to integrating lessons driven by student needs that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?
- Take a few moments to reflect and write down your thinking around writing workshop.

### **Between Sessions**

Brian writes about the importance of taking time to reflect on our own instructional practice at the end of each genre study. You can read Brian's person reflection on pages 106–108. Take a few minutes and reflect on a recent unit.

- What worked?
- What didn't work?
- What do you need to bring forward to the next genre study?

## Chapter 5

### Conditions: Teachers Create Smooth Writing Experiences

#### Getting Started: Ourselves as Writers (5 Minutes)

Continue the draft that you started last session or refer to your list of ideas and start a new piece of writing.

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Share your instructional reflections. How might this practice of reflecting on your instruction at the end of units influence future genre studies?
- What are your guiding beliefs in establishing conditions for writer's workshop?
- How does your physical environment reflect your beliefs about conditions needed for fostering writing?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read "Structured Time" on pages 114–115.
- Reflect on the structures that Brian shares. How does this compare with the structure of your writing workshop?

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*The answer is simple: If we want students to get better as writers, they need to write (114).*

*The day I assigned the beach topic was the last day I ever assigned a writing prompt. After reflecting upon that experience, I learned that it wasn't my job to assign what writers write; I was tasked with teaching children how to write about their topics in fresh, interesting ways. In choosing their topics, students found their passion, and I helped them craft their writing in ways that made their voices resonate (118).*

*The most powerful way for us to demonstrate is to build a writing life for ourselves (127).*

#### Travelogue (10 Minutes)

- Read page 142 in which Brian reflects on the conditions for writing workshop.
- What are your thoughts? Wonderings?

**Author's Chair (5 minutes)**

Ask if anyone in the group would like to share. Reference the appendix pages 164–165. Ask the author to request the type of feedback he or she wants from the audience.

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

How has your thinking about writer's workshop changed since working with the book, *When Writer's Drive the Workshop*? Take a few moments to reflect and write down your thinking.

**Next Steps**

- Review Donald Graves's conditions that encourage good writing (pages 113–114):
  - Time
  - Choice
  - Response
  - Demonstration
  - Expectation
  - Room Structure
  - Evaluation
- How might you incorporate these conditions into your writer's workshop?