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## The Creative Writing Workshop

### Why *workshop*?

Throughout the school day, as you teach math, science, and social studies, *you* are usually visible and in active control. You teach from material you have provided. You have the correct answers. You teach your students facts they need to know. You supervise your students and steer them from one class to the next.

In creative writing, you switch roles. In creative writing, students work with material *they* provide—*their* ideas, *their* thoughts, *their* experiences—things you know little about. And they portray these in ways that seem best to *them*. In creative writing, you seek to remain more in the background, giving guidance and encouragement where needed.

In light of this difference, many people prefer to talk about the writing *workshop* rather than the writing *class*. When you hear the word *class*, you likely picture a teacher standing at the front of the room lecturing. When you hear the word *workshop*, you may picture people busy thinking, working, and writing, as the workshop leader moves among them.

### How do I plan a workshop?

There are different ways to schedule and conduct a creative

writing workshop. No matter how you do it, keep it regular and predictable.

Schedule the workshop regularly—i.e., every morning for a week or every other afternoon—so that the children know on which days they will be writing. When they know they will write every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, they can be thinking about their writing and planning what to do next.

Structure the workshop predictably. You may decide to have first a mini-lesson, then working time. Or you may begin with a share time, where a few students can read what they have written. Maybe you will end with a share time. But keep it predictable.

Be organized. Teach your students what you expect them to do when it's time for creative writing, so that you don't spend your time choreographing their movements—come here, go there, put away that, get out this.

### **Do I need anything special?**

Naturally, a writer needs writing utensils—pencil and paper. Naturally, your students already have these. And that is all you really need.

However, you may want students to have special notebooks for creative writing. You may want them to use yellow paper for first drafts and save white for final copies. Younger children enjoy writing on large sheets of paper, using markers or pens rather than pencils. They may make a small booklet with one piece of writing, a motto out of another.

You may find it helpful to have a writing supply corner stocked with notebooks of yellow and white paper, large sheets of paper, small tablets, pencils, erasers, and markers. Staples, yarn, and construction paper are handy for “bookbinding.” A dictionary and thesaurus will be useful,

especially in the upper grades. You might tack up an editing checklist (see p. 46) for the students to refer to. You may want folders for finished work and for work in progress.

Providing a supply corner is a way of promoting your students' writing. Because "writing moments" can occur at any time, having material available makes it easier for students to write when the moment strikes. You want to encourage a lifestyle of creative observing, thinking, and writing.

You can put a bulletin board to good use in creative writing class. Post students' writings and revising and editing checklists (see pp. 43, 46). Put up pictures and objects to spark imagination. Put up "word wonderments"—interesting and poetic words and phrases that you and your students run across.

All of this is up to you. It will depend on the amount of time you have—or choose to have—for creative writing. It will depend on the ages of your students. And it will depend on you. These suggestions are only suggestions. Pick, choose, and use as you like.



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## The Mini-Lesson: A Class Confabulation

### What is a mini-lesson?

When students write, they are working with things that *they* know. They use *their* words to express *their* thoughts to produce a piece of writing that is *theirs*. Writing is personal, and you cannot enter a student's mind to give him the thoughts and words to work with.

Yet your students do not know everything there is to know about writing. They haven't learned many of the tricks that a more experienced writer knows. They likely haven't experimented with different ways of doing things or played with words. They still do not know many of the rules of writing. Hence the mini-lesson.

The mini-lesson is a time for you, the teacher, to share your wisdom—to teach your students the things *you* know that can help them. In a mini-lesson, you might discuss ways to make writing specific, so that a reader can see what's happening. You may talk about something so simple as the usefulness of a caret (^) in revising.

But it is more than that. The mini-lesson is a confab time—a time for your students to share the things *they* know. You may ask someone to tell the class what he does when he gets writer's block or how he chooses a title. It is a time for *all*

of you to learn and experiment together. Together you may brainstorm titles, hunt for vivid verbs and specific nouns, or play with the sounds of words.

### **How do I conduct a mini-lesson?**

Some teachers like to gather their class in a group for the mini-lesson time—sit on the floor together or move desks to form a large circle. This, of course, depends on classroom space and on your preferences.

Unless you use a blackboard, try to be in an “unteacherly” place—sitting in the circle with your students, standing in the center of the classroom—to help students feel that this is a whole-class huddle, not a session where the teacher supplies all the information and input.

It may seem that the mini-lesson goes against the whole concept of the workshop approach—here you are, lecturing the class. That’s true, in one sense. Some of the time, at least, you do lecture. Your students are writers who have questions and ideas about writing, and your lectures tell them things they will put to immediate and practical use in their work.

Still, not every mini-lesson will consist of the teacher giving information. The mini-lesson should be a time of class discussion, exploration, and experimentation. Chapter 16 (pp. 75-92) gives you some starter ideas for mini-lesson subjects.

## **How do I know the students will use the good writing tips we discuss?**

The whole purpose of the mini-lesson is to expose young writers to good writing methods and teach them to use them. What good is a wonderful discussion on being specific if students go back to their work and continue to use the same vague words as before?

So how can you be sure your students put into practice what you've just discussed?

First, if you have a mini-lesson on using specific words, get the students involved. Let them suggest specific alternatives to a sloppy, adjective-ridden sentence you give; for example: *The pretty red flower looked nice in the glass vase.* Let them name vivid verbs and precise nouns (see pp. 79-81). The more they are involved, the more they will begin to think in specifics.

Another way to make sure they practice the techniques you discuss is to say something like this before you dismiss them to their work time:

Well, class, now we know how important it is to use good specific words. Before you start writing, I want you to read over what you've already written. Look for a noun or verb that could be improved, and replace it with a more specific word. If you find more than one, that's great, but I want you all to change at least one word to a more specific one. Okay, let's go!

# V

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## Ideas, Ideas

### 16. Ideas for Mini-Lessons:

*A Starter Kit of Confabs*

*Mini-Lessons That Introduce the Writing Steps*

*Mini-Lessons That Elaborate on the Writing Steps*

*Mini-Lessons on Rules and Tips for Good Writing*

*Mini-Lessons That Introduce Writers' Helps*

*Mini-Lessons That Play with Words and Writing*

### 17. Ideas for Writing: Stimulating the Imagination

*Just Imagine!*

*Incorporating Writing With Other Subjects*

*Writing in Bible Class*

*Writing in Math Class*

*Writing in Science Class*

*Writing in Geography Class*

*Writing in History Class*

*Real-Life Suggestions*



# 16

## Ideas for Mini-Lessons: A Starter Kit of Confabs

These ideas are ideas only, and as the title suggests, you will probably use them as jumping-off points, heading in other directions as you see the need. They are not given as a prescribed order of presentation. Use the ones that you see your students can use when you see that they can use them. Many of the lessons—i.e., the ones on specific words, ones that play with words—can be used over and over.

### **Mini-Lessons that Introduce the Writing Steps**

Have a series of mini-lessons on the basic steps of the writing process (see pp. 31-46).

#### *Exploring*

Before you present this mini-lesson, read Chapter 8 (pp. 31-36) for some background. Introduce and discuss the term *explore* in class. Talk about the various ways to find a topic: do some class-wide brainstorming or have older students practice freewriting. Lead them to explore the topic they choose by asking questions about it. Encourage class discussion, with students contributing ideas and asking questions.

### *Drafting*

Read Chapter 9 (pp. 37-39) for a detailed discussion of drafting. Explain the concept in class. You may want to illustrate how drafting works by doing it in front of the class on a projector or the blackboard. First explain what topic you chose, why you chose it, what your theme is, and where you want to go. Then draft. Try to show the students how drafting works: if you're not sure what word to use next, leave a blank to come back to later and keep going; if you misspell a word, leave it to correct later, etc. If this is too difficult, write the draft ahead of time. Then bring it to class. Discuss what you wrote and how and why you wrote it.

### *Revising*

Chapter 10 (pp. 41-44) discusses revising in more detail. How you approach this mini-lesson will depend partly on the ages of your students. For younger students, keep it simple. Introduce the term and explain the concept. Give each child a checklist (see p. 43) and discuss it together.

If you used a draft of your own in the mini-lesson on drafting, you can use it as a teaching tool in the revising mini-lesson. Bring your draft to class and read over it with the students. Point out places that are vague, that bore you, that you don't quite like, or that need to be strengthened. Refer to the theme you wanted to emphasize—did you hit it? Did you end up where you wanted to go? Let the students join you in suggesting ways to revise your piece.

### *Editing*

Chapter 11 (pp. 45, 46) discusses editing in detail. Introduce and discuss the term in class. Give the students your checklist (see p. 46), and explain it.

Practice editing together. Bring a piece of student writing from last year or use the piece you wrote in the earlier mini-lessons, and let the students edit it as a class.