

Cultivating High-Impact, Low-Stakes Writing



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Ralph Fletcher

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## INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL NOTE

Part One of this book is titled *The Big Chill*, with apologies to the popular movie that came out in 1983. Still, you can't copyright a title, so those words are fair game. Moreover, I believe they provide an apt, if unfortunate description of today's writing classroom.

This title appealed to me for another reason. *The Big Chill* got released in 1983, which happens to be the same year I joined the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. In the autumn of that year I started the MFA writing program at Columbia. This led to a famous first encounter, at least for me. In September I wandered uptown from 116th Street to 120th Street, walked into Teachers College, and met Lucy Calkins for the first time. She was a brand-new professor. I signed up for Lucy's first course on the teaching of writing. Soon after that I took a position with the TC Reading and Writing Project as a consultant in New York City schools, helping teachers find wiser ways of teaching writing.

I didn't realize it then, but more than taking an interesting job, I had embarked on my career. I have spent most of my professional life speaking, demonstrating, and writing books about the teaching of writing. Recently I ran into a teacher, a man in whose classroom I had worked twenty years earlier.

"Wow, you're still doing this," he marveled. "Still talking and writing about how to teach writing."

Well, yes. I believe he meant it as a compliment, though that word *still* hovered in the air. I felt a brief spasm of insecurity, and wondered if perhaps his words concealed a buried criticism. Maybe after all these years I *should* be doing something different. Many of my former colleagues have gone on to different jobs. JoAnn Portalupi, my wife and coauthor, left the field a dozen years ago and eventually became a fine artist. Me? Still talking writing, still trying to figure out the best ways to nourish young writers.

I cut my teeth on the writing process movement. I lived through its infancy, passionate youth, and mature adulthood. We grew up together. I want readers to know that this isn't a book of theoretical posturings. It's personal to me. This stuff is in my blood.

Institutional memory has been defined as a collective set of facts, concepts, experiences, and know-how held by a group of people. Because institutional memory is bigger than any one individual, it requires the ongoing transmission of these memories between members of this group. Age has always been considered something of a

mixed blessing in this country (“Never trust anybody over thirty”), but after thirty-plus years in this field, well, I can’t duck the fact that my years have given me a big dose of institutional memory. We certainly need strong new voices in education; Heinemann and Stenhouse have made major contributions in this regard. But it’s equally important to listen to those who have been in the field long enough to have experienced the ebbs and flows, the ins and outs, the new fads and fresh expressions that eventually get replaced by newer fads and fresher expressions. Individuals with institutional memory are important to any organization. They (I) can tell you not only what things were like in the old days, but equally important—*why*.

The writing process à la Graves, Murray, Calkins, Atwell, and others was a reaction against the repressive writing practices of the 1950s and 1960s in which so many young writers felt disengaged. The writing process movement (and yes, it really was a movement) proposed a refreshing change, a bold new vision: let’s allow young writers to do what real writers do.

Some professional books aim to explain and instruct. Others challenge orthodoxies and hope to prompt readers to revise their thinking. In this book I hope to do both. In Part One, I stir the pot, create discomfort with established writing dogma, and suggest better alternatives. In Part Two, I introduce a new concept: *greenbelt writing*. We’ll explore writing that is low-stakes, informal, student-centered. We’ll see that it is an ideal place for students to:

- find their stride as writers
- experience the joy, pleasure, and passion of writing
- define/identify themselves as writers.

In the second half of the book, we’ll look at various kinds of greenbelt writing, some sparked and structured by teachers, others student-generated. I call this latter category *feral writing*, and I believe we have undervalued its importance in growing student writers.

Low-stakes writing is important because it builds muscles that strengthen other kinds of writing. But such writing is often tentative and represents a kind of thinking-on-paper. If we want to encourage it, we need to respond to it differently than we would to the traditional writing assignments.

You’ll find a number of metaphors in this book. I can’t help it: I’m a metaphorical thinker—maybe it’s the poet in me—though I realize that people sometimes find that exasperating (just ask my wife). Still, a well-chosen metaphor does have an uncanny ability to open up a concept and lay it bare so we can grasp it.



Teachers need to rely on the very best ideas for our instruction. This involves a measure of critical thinking because not all methods are equally effective. In this book, I will describe certain prevailing approaches to teaching writing with which I don't agree. It's not my intention to bash any program, philosophy, or individual who believes in the practices put forth in such programs. However, I do think it's fair to draw distinctions between various approaches. Otherwise how can we get down to what's truly important?

In our march from womb to tomb there's only a brief time when our ideas about writing/reading are in flux: when we're forming attitudes we'll have for life. For many children, preschool is probably too early. By middle school and high school, student attitudes about writing, their identity as writers and readers, have become fixed. But during elementary school (age six to twelve), children are both intellectually aware and open-minded. Those first six grades give us rare opportunity to instill in them positive attitudes toward writing and reading. Are we taking advantage of that sweet spot, or are we squandering the opportunity?

In Plymouth, Connecticut, I ate lunch with a group of fifth-grade writers, something I often do during my author visits. While we passed around slices of pizza, I asked each boy to introduce himself as a writer. There was one boy named Jason, a kid with a soft voice that quite didn't fit with his large body.

"I like to write in my notebook," he murmured.

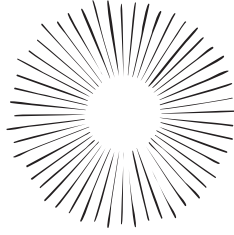
I nodded. "What kind of things do you write in there?"

"Well, I collect my memories there—in a good way," he said. "So I can cherish them, and have them forever."

He stated this without a shred of embarrassment. None of the other boys snickered or rolled their eyes. They understood what he was saying.

In the final analysis, my interest does not lie with policy, standards, assessments, or vying methodologies. What I care about are the kids like Jason, Emilio, Liza, Racheed, Solomon, Aaron, and Laverne. We have a few, precious years to inform their identities as writers. We must strive to see the writing curriculum through their eyes, as they experience it, from their points of view.

What kind of writers do we hope to see in our classrooms? Will they flourish or languish, be engaged or bored? Can we provide the necessary conditions so they can develop a genuine love of the craft? Having them go through the motions as we check off the various genres—is that really good enough? No, it's not. We can do better than that. I want to create the kind of writing classrooms where they can look down at the sentences they have written, and cherish every last word.



## CHAPTER 5

# Greenbelt Writing

.....  
His food in a can is tame and mild, so he's gone out for  
something wild.

—**LOIS EHLERT, *FEATHERS FOR LUNCH***

.....

In recent years the writing workshop has become more restrictive. It is less free-flowing, less student-centered, with less value placed on the creative part of creative writing. Academic genres, fueled by the standards movement, now proliferate. The workshop has become more content-rich and rigorous. From a kid's point of view, writing is much harder. This may not sound like such a bad thing, at least at first blush, though many teachers have observed an alarming trend—diminished energy, excitement, and investment from their young writers.

The purist in me wants to offer this advice: forget all those academic genres. Or, at the very least, cut them way back. Close your classroom door and design a writing curriculum that makes sense for your students. Some teachers have done exactly that (*#subterraneanteaching*), but if you're an untenured teacher, just trying to hang on to your job, this option may not seem feasible. Many teachers find themselves trapped between a rock (rigid curriculum) and a hard place (students who no longer love writing).

What to do?

The problem seems intractable, but I believe there is a solution. To find it, let's turn to a completely different realm, the world of community planning and land

management. Stay with me, reader. You have already watched me insert grit into bivalves, and accompanied me on a hot-air balloon ride, but I think we'll find that the metaphor in this chapter is the one that offers the most hope.

The U.S. population has grown steadily since the first census in 1790. Although the rate of increase has slowed, the total population continues to increase. In 1940 there were roughly 142 million Americans living in this country. By 2000 that number had more than doubled to 291 million. Today there are about 320 million people living in this country. A growing population creates a demand for roads, power lines, and affordable housing, and puts tremendous pressure on our natural resources. This is an undeniable impact of population growth: wooded land gets subdivided, cleared, and developed to build houses. This creates a host of new problems including pollution and erosion, not to mention the loss of habitat for wildlife.

Recognizing the dangers of unchecked growth and urban sprawl, many community planners have embraced the idea of a greenbelt. This is not a new concept (the idea actually got mentioned in the Old Testament), though it has been refined in modern times. A greenbelt—sometimes called a green way or green wedge—is an invisible line designating a border around a certain area, preventing development of that area, and allowing wildlife to return and be established. The objectives of greenbelt policy include:

- protecting natural environments
- improving air quality within urban areas
- ensuring that urban dwellers have access to countryside
- protecting the unique character of rural communities.

“It’s all about connectivity,” says John Carroll, professor of Natural Resources at the University of New Hampshire. “Greenbelts create a passageway allowing species to move from one habitat to another. That’s critically important for the survival of those species.”

Carroll explained to me the ecological value of a greenbelt, but emphasized the value to communities as well: cleaner air and water, plus enhanced outdoor recreation opportunities (camping, biking, boating) close to cities and towns.

“And there’s a psychological value, too,” he points out. “There’s a comfort just knowing that wildland is there, whether or not you actually use it.”

It is a fundamental axiom of ecology that *diversity leads to stability*. When you start limiting diversity—a manicured lawn, for example, that contains a single kind of

grass—the ecosystem quickly gets unstable and vulnerable. With its wider diversity, a greenbelt brings a measure of ecological stability into a developed area.

Some wildlife can thrive without a greenbelt. Robins, sparrows, crows, rabbits, voles, and skunks can survive perfectly well within the confines of a neighborhood development. But many other species of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, plants, and trees need the conditions provided by raw, wild forest. Otherwise they will struggle and eventually disappear.

All well and good. But what does all this have to do with teaching writing?

In recent years the writing workshop has come under intense pressure: state writing tests, Common Core State Standards, various commercial programs. Writing workshop as we once knew it has been “developed.” Many old-growth trees have been cut down. A great deal of curricular land has been cleared, parceled off, and subdivided. It’s harder and harder to find the essential wildness—the unique intelligence found whenever children freely express themselves—that once infused the workshop.

In this book I’m proposing a new concept: *greenbelt writing*.

Writing that is raw, unmanicured, uncurated.

I’m talking about informal writing. Writing that is wild, like the pungent skunk cabbage that sprouts haphazardly along the edge of a swamp.

I’m talking about low-stakes writing, the kind of comfortable composing kids do when they know there’s no one looking over their shoulder.

Some educators would insist that writing workshop must continue in its more developed, academic form. “The reality of schools . . .” I don’t agree—but that’s a battle for another day. If, for argument sake, I do concede this, I would add that it’s essential to supplement it with a greenbelt, a wild territory where kids can rediscover the power of writing that is:

- personal
- passionate
- joyful
- whimsical
- playful
- infused with choice, humor, and voice
- reflective of the quirkiness of childhood.

It’s true that some kids, like some species, may be able to survive and even thrive in this more developed workshop atmosphere. But I submit that many students

find today's writing workshop too narrow and constricting for them to generate any enthusiasm for writing. Those writers would benefit from being allowed to do more writing that is free and unguided—writing that they generate themselves.

Would those kids still participate in the writing workshop? Certainly. But I believe we'll find that their greenbelt writing will spark them, engage their imaginations, and help them find their stride as writers.

Simply put: let's make sure that kids have spaces and opportunities to experience the pleasure of writing.

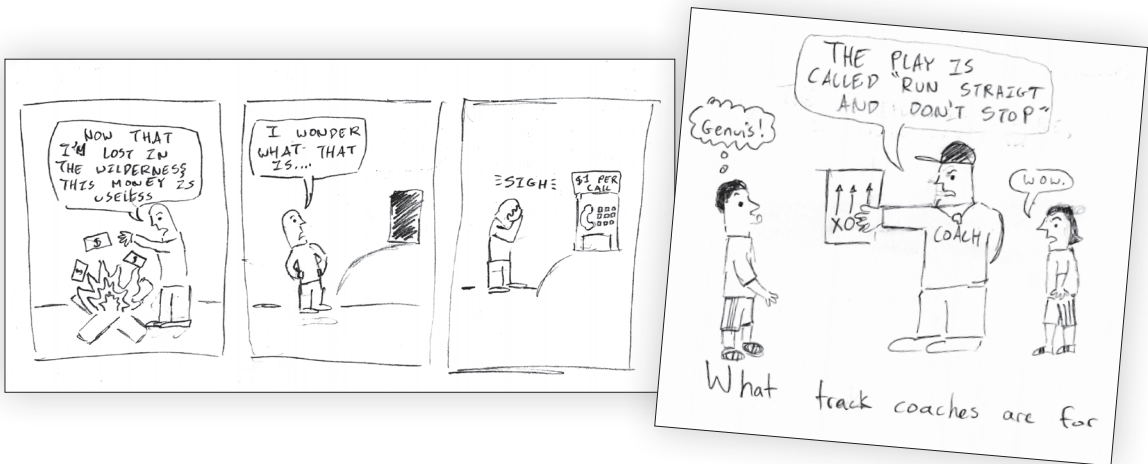
What do kids remember about their teachers? Passion, a sense of humor, making things fun, and genuine caring—a sense that each student matters.

What will kids remember about writing in school? I want them to remember similar things—writing that is fun, passionate, and joyful, and reflects what matters to each student. This is the best way I know to create writing classrooms where the student can develop the concept: *I am a writer*.

In the next few chapters we'll look at various examples of greenbelt writing. This concept raises questions, among them being: how should we as teachers respond to this kind of writing? Or should we respond at all? Is this a teacher-free zone?

No.

The operative phrase for a natural greenbelt is not *keep out* but *hands off*. We might decide to walk through an area like this to savor the quiet, maybe to sample a few wild blackberries growing there. But nobody ever visits a greenbelt hoping to improve it by pruning, weeding, clearing brush, and so on. These areas are, by design,



Comics by Otis

## GREENBELT WRITING

unmanicured. Officials might opt to protect its borders by posting a sign, or erect a small fence to keep litter from blowing in, but that's about it. Once a corridor of land has been designated as a greenbelt, we leave it alone.

A greenbelt doesn't have to be managed. Indeed, its very wildness is its virtue. The same principal holds true for greenbelt writing. We need to recognize its value, establish its sovereignty, and then get out of the way—leave it alone.

## APPENDIX

# Exploratory Writing

This kind of informal writing can be used to:

- Activate prior knowledge.
- Generate questions, wonderings, speculations.
- Make a map or web of your topic.
- Collect surprising information, facts, statistics.
- React: What amazes/appalls you about the topic?
- Make a prediction.
- Build a lexicon or glossary of words or terms specific to the subject.
- Draw or sketch.
- Sift, sort, summarize.
- Try a “flashdraft” on the topic.

# The Writer's Notebook

RALPH FLETCHER

*Writing in a notebook is a way to fuel up. Supreme superior unleaded. And it's free.*

—**NAOMI SHIHAB NYE, POET**

## Breathing In

1. What moves you?
2. What do you wonder about?
3. What do you notice?
4. List seed ideas or “triggers.”
5. Use small details.
6. Include snatches of talk.
7. Add memories.
8. Use lists and artifacts.
9. Create writing that inspires.

## Breathing Out

1. Reread: dig out the crystals.
2. Experiment with wordplay: write off a text, for example.
3. Try out a set piece.
4. Make a place to write badly.
5. Create writing that scrapes the heart.
6. Write about writing.