

IN THE MIDDLE

THIRD EDITION



Nancie Atwell

IN THE MIDDLE

A Lifetime of Learning About
Writing, Reading, and Adolescents

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DEDICATION

*This one is for Anne,
with love and admiration
and in anticipation*

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PART I

WORKSHOP ESSENTIALS

ALWAYS BEGINNING

*If the angel deigns to come, it will be because you have convinced her,
not by your tears, but by your humble resolve to be always beginning.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE



CHAPTER 1

LEARNING HOW TO TEACH

*The logic by which we teach is not always the logic
by which children learn.*

—GLEND A BISSEX

Forty years into my life as an English teacher, I'm convinced it is one of the great careers—demanding of time and energy but meaning-filled, worthwhile, and *interesting*. Every morning that I step into a classroom I know I'll be surprised—mostly in a good way—by something a student says or does as a writer or reader. I'll experience the sense of literary communion that led me to declare a major in English all those years ago. I'll show or tell something about writing or reading that gets put to good use by my students. And I'll enjoy the kinds of relationships with adolescents that drew me to teaching in the first place.

I'm confident of these outcomes because I teach English as a writing-reading workshop. Students choose the subjects they write about and the books they read. Because they decide, they engage. Because they engage, they experience the volume of sustained, committed practice that leads to growth, stamina, and excellence. Each year my students read, on average, forty books representing fourteen genres. They finish an average of twenty-one pieces of writing across thirteen genres. They win regional and national writing competitions, get published, and earn money. Most importantly, they discover what writing and reading are good for, here and now and in their literate lives to come.

The benefits for me, as the grown-up writer and reader in the workshop, are a teacher's dream. I get to demonstrate what's possible, teach what's useful, establish the conditions that invite engagement, and support the hard work of *literary* reading and writing. The workshop impels me and compels them because here the work of "doing English" is real. Students of every ability are encouraged, hooked, and transformed. In turn, their

growth as readers and writers is such a source of satisfaction to me that, for forty years, I've kept coming back for more.

The third edition of *In the Middle* is my invitation to English teachers, veterans and novices, to understand writing and reading from the inside and recognize our potential to influence our students' literacy for a lifetime. Like the two that preceded it, this edition represents my current best set of blueprints for how I build and maintain a writing–reading workshop—the expectations, demonstrations, models, choices, resources, rules and rituals, pieces of advice, words of caution, and ways of thinking, planning, looking, and talking that make it possible for every student to read with understanding and pleasure and aspire to and produce effective writing. But *In the Middle* also tells the story of my teaching life.

I didn't start out as a workshop teacher. A confluence of experiences drew me out from behind the teacher desk at the front of the classroom and helped me shift focus, from a static curriculum, annual calendar of assignments, and one-size-had-better-fit-all perspective, to the development of methods that uncover and build on each student's intentions, strengths, and challenges. My particular methods grew from my particular experiences in the classroom but also from what I've learned along the way as a writer, reader, researcher, and parent.

One of my essential teachers is Glenda Bissex. Her brilliant book *GNYS AT WRK* (1980) is a study of her son Paul's early literacy learning, especially the spellings he invented as a preschooler. Until then, the received wisdom was that reading came first. But Paul wrote all kinds of messages before he learned how to read. Glenda's observation about the disjunctures between how children learn and how teachers try to teach them is a quote I have come to live by—and the epigraph to this chapter. It reminds me to observe kids, question the teaching status quo, and try to make sense of what's going on in the classroom.

My teaching story begins when the gap between the reality of my students and the logic of my methods yawned its widest. It starts with an eighth-grade boy who challenged me to stop making assumptions and assignments and start learning in my classroom.

MY TEACHING STORY

I moved to Maine in 1975, when I was hired to be the middle school English department at Boothbay Harbor Grammar School. I'd just finished my second year of teaching seventh-grade English in a suburb of Buffalo, where I'd grown up. I moved to Maine because of Maine.

That summer my husband, Toby, and I wended our way north up Route 1, then south down a twelve-mile peninsula to the village of Boothbay Harbor. We were looking for a small, beautiful place to vacation; instead we found a small, beautiful place

to live. The year-round population of the communities nestled along the peninsula is just over four thousand, and water is everywhere—coves and crashing waves, salt pond marshes and mud flats, tidal rivers and freshwater lakes—and everywhere surrounded by towers of pines, firs, and birches.

On the last day of our vacation, we took a final drive around Southport Island. Toby parked at Hendricks Head beach, where we sat and stared at our Triple-A maps, the lighthouse, the islands, and each other. I asked, “What do you suppose you could do if you wanted to live here? You know, as a job?” Toby said, “Well, you’re a teacher.”

I was a teacher. There was an opening. I got the job. We put a new tailpipe on our old Valiant, rented a truck, loaded our furniture, tranquilized our dog, and returned to Boothbay Harbor on Labor Day weekend.

The first time I saw my new classroom was the day before I was to teach in it. The building for grades 7 and 8 was a two-story, two-room brick bunker, separated from the grammar school proper—a classic, clapboard schoolhouse—by ledge, playground, and tradition. I walked up a dark stairwell and found my room, its linoleum floor half gone, bare lightbulbs hanging from a falling-tile ceiling, and walls peeling green paint. One wall consisted of massive sheets of plywood that divided into halves what had once been a normal-sized classroom. Terry, the science and social studies departments, taught next door. The next morning, when our students arrived, I discovered that every word said in either room was perfectly audible in the other.

The principal handed me “the curriculum,” which turned out to be a copy of my schedule: six periods each day of reading and English. Then he scurried back across the blacktop to the safety of K–6 and white clapboard. I took a good look around.

No books sat on the dusty shelves. No papers filled the rattletrap file cabinet. But there were twenty-seven desks to somehow squeeze into position in my half of the room. On Tuesday morning, when my first class of twenty-seven eighth graders chose their seats, one of them was Jeff. He was hard to miss.

He was almost sixteen and *big*. His parents traveled because of their work, and they withdrew him from school over the years to take him with them. Because he hadn’t grown up with his classmates and had missed so much school, Jeff was a loner. He stood out academically, too. All these years and kids later, I’ve still to encounter a student with so many challenges.

Jeff could barely read the primary-level basal readers the school’s reading coordinator provided. He had trouble distinguishing some letters from others: *m* from *n* and *d* from *b*. He could spell his name, the names of his brothers and sisters, and maybe two dozen other words. I talked with his previous years’ teachers and heard six versions of the same report: they’d done what they could in the limited time they had him, tried to assign appropriate remedial work, and either kept him back or, because of his size, promoted him. Jeff’s mother told me he was learning disabled and that nothing could be done for him.

That fall I banished memories of my suburban New York classroom, colleagues, and students. I began to learn about life in rural Maine from kids whose families mostly made a hard living from the sea—small-boat building, fishing, lobstering, and the seasonal tourist industry. I covered the peeling walls with posters, begged funds for a set of textbooks, spent my own money on folders for writing, and tried to figure out what to do about Jeff.

At recess he stayed in most days to talk to me or Terry, whichever of us didn't have playground duty. I liked him. Because of his family's travels, he knew about things I didn't—boats, sailing and navigation, and the American Southwest. But I did know something about books on those subjects. I raided our home library, and *Dove*, *Kon-Tiki*, *Ram*, *Survive the Savage Sea*, and *The Teachings of Don Juan* became the texts for Jeff's personalized remedial reading program. I wanted to inundate him with reading experience, and I figured the best way was to endow his reading with huge measures of personal meaning. All that fall and winter, while the other kids suffered the Scott, Foresman anthology I'd ordered, I gave Jeff time, books, and recess conversations, and he took my breath away. I watched him teach himself to read. First he moved his lips and a finger as he traced words, and then he abandoned pointing when it got in the way of his new fluency. It was my first act of discovery, of *research*, as a classroom teacher—a rewarding experience, but one that was overshadowed when it came time for Jeff to write.

I brought with me to Maine a writing curriculum that I'd developed with my colleagues in New York. It drew on James Moffett's hierarchy of discourse (Moffett and Wagner 1976), and its underlying theory was that students learn to write by working systematically through a sequence of modes and genres, from dramatic writing to narrative to exposition. My former colleagues and I had coauthored an article about the program, which appeared in *English Journal*. It was my first professional publication. I was wedded to this curriculum.

I had a writing assignment, accessorized with a prewriting and postwriting activity, for every week of the school year. On a Monday in September, my students might role-play a handful of scenarios and then choose one to draft as a dramatic monologue. Midyear, I'd start a school week by assigning them to read stories from the literature anthology; then they wrote fictional vignettes in response. In the spring, they read other selections from the anthology and wrote essays about them.

On Wednesday of every week, I took home class sets of first drafts and wrote comments all over them, directing students to revise. On Friday, I collected the final drafts. On Saturday, at home, I groaned whenever I passed the room where I'd stashed them. On Sunday, I wrote comments all over them again, recorrected the same mistakes, and then created a ditto master for the next writing assignment.

Week in and out, my students' compositions broke into three categories. Five or six writers were able to make my task their own and do something wonderful with it, a

dozen kids more or less fulfilled the requirements, and the rest threw me into a state of despair. Yet I persevered.

Teaching this way fit my assumptions. I assigned the topics for kids to write about because I thought they were intimidated by expressing themselves on paper and couldn't write without a prompt from me. I believed that teacher directions were necessary for students to write well. And I assumed my ideas for writing were more valid and worthwhile than any my students might entertain. From my vantage, from behind the big teacher desk at the front of the classroom, it looked as if I were teaching writing, even if many of my kids weren't learning writing. Then came Jeff.

One of my assignments for narrative writing asked students to draw a chain and make each link represent a personal experience. They were supposed to talk about their experiences with a partner, choose one link, and write about it. While the other eighth graders worked through the prescribed steps, Jeff whispered, hummed, and sketched a picture of a boy on a beach, kneeling in front of a pitched tent. At the end of class he folded up his drawing and took it home. The next day he came to school with a one-page rough draft—an account of his baby brother's death on a beach in Mexico. Although I wrote questions all over it that pushed him to elaborate, Jeff just copied the story over, one excruciating letter at a time.

This became his pattern. At school he drew a becalmed sailboat; at home he wrote a *Dove*-like short story. He sketched a desert scene in class, and at night he wrote about peyote, witch doctors, and Don Juan. My raised voice penetrated the plywood wall as I ordered Jeff to *stop drawing and get to work*.

I made assumptions about Jeff and tested them. When they didn't hold water, I made new ones. Since his drafts featured surprisingly few misspellings, I asked him about it. He said, "My sister helps me when I get stuck." I assumed he drew during class instead of writing because he was embarrassed to ask for help in front of the other kids. I told him not to worry about spelling on drafts—he and I could work on correctness later on. Jeff agreed not to worry. Then he drew all through the next writing class.

I assumed he was distracted by the noisy classroom, that he didn't want peers to see how slowly he wrote, that he was frustrated by the absence of an art program. My theories and attempts at remedies accumulated, and Jeff continued to draw in class and write at home. I never asked him why. My focus was on the curriculum. I didn't know how to focus on a writer or his writing.

After suffering my remonstrations for half a school year, Jeff ran out of patience. One morning during recess, he let me have it: "Listen, Ms. Atwell. This is the way I do it, the way I write. As long as I get it done, what do you care?" He was so vehement I backed off, finally conceding his right to use whatever process worked for him, just as long as I got the requisite number of products to file away in his writing folder.

By the end of the year, Jeff's folder was as fat as some of the others. And although he continued to draw in his spare time, he seldom drew during the writing classes of

late spring. He wrote. Maybe something in Jeff changed. Maybe persevering in the face of his teacher's stony disapproval became too much for him. Whatever the reason, once again, I didn't ask. I just held my breath every Monday and hoped he'd go along with the prewriting activity.

Jeff moved on to high school. New kids moved in. I dug out my folder of September writing assignments, cut fresh ditto masters, and began to teach the curriculum again.

Two years after Jeff, I had reason to be grateful for his perseverance. A friend sent me a volume of papers presented at a conference at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo; among them was Donald Graves' "The Child, the Writing Process, and the Role of the Professional" (1975). Graves, who had yet to conduct his breakthrough research at Atkinson Academy in New Hampshire, described his early observations of seven-year-old writers. One, John, wrote slowly, spoke as he wrote, proofread at the single-word level, and, most significantly, rehearsed his writing through drawing. Graves concluded by suggesting that teachers pay attention to the behaviors of beginning writers and learn how to accommodate and build on them.

His words rang in my head for days. Seven-year-old John called up too many images of sixteen-year-old Jeff. I cringed as I remembered how hard I had worked to overcome the evidence that my curriculum had thwarted him. In Jeff's case, the evidence was blatant—all that talking to himself and all those drawings. What about the other students who had faced my big desk, the hundreds of writers of whom I knew nothing except the degree to which they satisfied the requirements of the Monday assignment?

As for Jeff, I felt lucky he had insisted I let him go his own way. Although I had missed the opportunity to understand what he was doing and talk with him about it, even if I'd had the background of Graves' article about John, how might I have helped? What should I have said? I didn't know.

This was the moment I understood that students can't be the only learners in a classroom. Teachers have to learn in our classrooms, too. Credentials and certification, good intentions, a clever curriculum, and adherence to standards are not enough. As Graves observed in the conclusion to his 1975 paper:

It is entirely possible to read about children, review research and textbooks about writing, "teach" them, yet still be completely unaware of their processes of learning and writing. Unless we actually structure our environments to free ourselves for effective observation and participation in all phases of the writing process, we are doomed to repeat the same teaching mistakes again and again.

I didn't want to be doomed as a teacher, and I didn't want students to be victims of my mistakes. Two years after Jeff, I was teaching in the new, consolidated Boothbay Region Elementary School. My sparkling classroom in the middle school wing featured carpeting, books and bookshelves, banks of fluorescent lights, wall-to-wall posters, heat,

and plenty of room for desks to arrange however I chose. I had a smart, supportive principal. I even had colleagues; now I was one of three middle-level English teachers. Yet I felt anxious and uneasy. How could I learn about kids' writing development? How could I learn to look at their processes as writers and make sense of my observations? How could I learn *anything* at the end of a long peninsula in rural Maine?

The next summer I left Boothbay Harbor for seven weeks to try to start learning. The Bread Loaf School of English Program in Writing was then in its second year. Bread Loaf had secured full-tuition grants for English teachers from rural schools, and I applied. My qualifying essay was the story of Jeff and me.

I chose Bread Loaf because its catalog seemed to offer professional resources that Boothbay Harbor couldn't provide. But when I got there, my teacher persisted in nudging me to become *my own resource*, to learn firsthand by acting as a writer and researcher of my writing. Dixie Goswami asked her grad school students to examine and describe how we wrote and to think about what our discoveries might mean for our middle and high school students. It was a summer of contradictions.

I saw that the choices I made as a writer—deciding how, when, what, and for whom I wrote—weren't options for the writers I taught. But I continued to perceive an unbridgeable gap between us. As an adult writer, I knew my intentions, and I had the skills to act on them. As an English teacher, I clung to my belief that students needed explicit direction from an experienced grown-up.

When Bread Loaf ended and school started, I went back to my curriculum, but with a few twists. I implemented a daily freewrite in journals. I gave kids more options for how they might respond to the weekly assignments. And I started to write with them. I took on a journal and the Monday assignments, and I shared my responses with the kids. It was not an illuminating experience.

My assigned poetry was formulaic and cute. Because the scenarios didn't engage me, the assigned monologues and dialogues never went beyond a first draft; I wrote them at the breakfast table the morning they were due. My assigned essays consisted of well-organized, earnest clichés. The worst was the daily freewrite. We started every English class with ten minutes in our journals, and I either had nothing to say or so much that ten minutes was an exercise in frustration.

All the while I was writing with my students, I was trying to conduct a classroom research project. As part of my Bread Loaf course work, I'd proposed to Dixie that I'd show the effects on students' writing when they viewed the teacher as a writer. But this wasn't writing; it was performance. I did my real writing, mostly poetry and letters, at home. I wasn't even conducting research. I was method testing. In January I abandoned the research project, buried my embarrassing writing portfolio in the back of a file drawer, and rationalized hard.

Maybe I needed assignments that were *even more* creative and prewriting activities that were *even more* hands-on. And maybe it was time to look at what was going on down

in K–6. Why weren't entering seventh graders being prepared by the other teachers to make my assignments sing?

In the winter of 1980, mostly, I'm ashamed to say, because I wanted a hand in shaping what happened in the younger grades, I volunteered to serve on a K–8 writing curriculum committee. The teacher in charge suggested that the committee begin by posing questions we could investigate together—a smart move, as it turned out. We brainstormed and settled on a modest little inquiry: *How do human beings acquire written language?*

Our question was so ambitious it was ridiculous, but it had a remarkable effect. It sent us into unexplored—and stimulating—territory. We couldn't exchange writing assignments, borrow philosophies or curricula, adopt someone's standards, or patch together a grade-level skills list. Instead, we began to search for resources to help us pursue answers to our question. Remembering Jeff, I wrote to Donald Graves, by then a professor at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). He responded by sending us Susan Sowers.

Graves, Sowers, and Lucy Calkins were then nearing the end of their second year as researchers-in-residence at Atkinson Academy, a public elementary school in rural New Hampshire. Under a grant from the National Institutes of Education, they spent two years following sixteen first- and third-grade writers and their teachers (Graves 1983; 2003). They observed students in the classroom *in the act of writing* in order to discover how children develop as writers and how teachers can help.

Susan Sowers came to Boothbay Region Elementary School with copies of what was known at UNH as The Packet: a collection of in-progress reports of their research. She also brought her authority as a teacher and researcher, a wealth of knowledge, and patience. What she had to say was not what I was ready to hear.

Children in the Atkinson study learned how to write by exploring the options available to real authors. These included daily time for writing, conferences with the teacher and peers during writing, pace set by individual writers, and opportunities for publication—for their writing to be read. Most significantly, Atkinson students decided what they would write about.

The Atkinson children developed their own topics. They produced an astonishing range of genres. They revised, edited, and grew as writers because they cared about their subjects. And their teachers had come out from behind their big desks to circulate among, listen to, learn from, and write with young writers.

Atkinson Academy sounded a lot like Camelot. As Susan Sowers extolled its merits, I rolled my eyes and jotted snide comments to the teacher sitting next to me. At the end of the committee meeting, I stayed behind to argue.

“But, Susan, what if my writing assignments are *individualized*? Like, what if I give kids a choice of four really funny scenarios, and they get to role-play these and then choose the one they want to write up as a dramatic monologue?”

“Well, that sounds nice,” she answered politely. “But it’s an exercise.”

“Wait, wait. What if, for a prewriting activity, I tell kids to . . .”

It was an exercise. They were all exercises.

My learning isn’t pretty. I’m a resister. For the next week, I fumed about how the implications of the Graves team’s research did not and could not apply to me and my students—how everything in my background as a secondary English teacher argued against the anarchy being advocated by crazy people from New Hampshire. But during free periods at school and evenings at home, I read and reread *The Packet*. The evidence was so compelling that eventually I saw through my defenses to the truth.

I didn’t know how to give students responsibility for their writing. Worse, I was reluctant to give up control. I liked my big desk. I liked being the creative one who came up with the ideas. I liked the authority I derived from establishing deadlines and orchestrating *the* writing process. Besides, I was an English teacher, and this was my job. If responsibility for their writing shifted to my students, what did that leave for me to do?

After a long weekend of reading, fuming, and soul searching, I decided to talk to my students. On a Monday in March, instead of distributing dittoed copies of the assignment of the week, I closed my classroom door and told my students about this elementary school in New Hampshire where kids developed their own ideas for writing, worked at their own paces, produced texts that were read by all kinds of real audiences, and received responses from their classmates and the teacher *while* they were drafting. I asked, “Could you do this? Would you like to?”

Yes. Some said it tentatively, some resoundingly, but every kid in every class voted *yes*. Then, together, we made an amazing discovery: they did have ideas to write about. Even more amazing, given the nonsense I’d been assigning since September, they had interesting, worthwhile ideas. We discovered that school writing could be good for something—could help kids explore and capture what’s important to them, ask questions, solve problems, make sense of experiences, express feelings, and move, entertain, and persuade readers. This was not Camelot. It was genuine, it was happening in my classroom, and it was thrilling.

Brooke wrote a short story about the slaughter of baby seals. Doug wrote about duck hunting, and Greg remembered a day of deep-sea fishing. Shani described the night her big brother died in an automobile accident. Evie wrote letters of inquiry to private high schools, and Ernie wrote a parody of Stephen King. One of my Sarahs told about learning to drive a junked Oldsmobile in her parents’ driveway; another Sarah took us on a bus trip through Harlem that had shaken her rural complacency. Eben’s short story about the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust went through such extensive revisions it became a letter to the editor of the *Portland Press Herald* objecting to the threat of the reinstatement of selective service. Melissa’s letter to the Society for Animal Protective Legislation was forwarded as evidence to a Congressional subcommittee. Lauren’s letter

to the local YMCA resulted in expanded gym hours for middle school students. Erin's letter to author Louis L'Amour questioning the credibility of the plot of one of his West-erns brought a letter from L'Amour outlining his historical source.

Ted wrote an angry essay about the effects of time on his life, Kim wrote a loving essay about the impact of her mother's life on hers, and Joey wrote an essay about himself as a writer. When a Maine dairy announced a Down East story-writing contest, a group of eighth graders decided to enter. They listened to and researched Marshall Dodge's *Bert and I* albums, taking notes about dialect and story structure, and then wrote draft after draft. Roy won the contest and a \$250 scholarship; five of his classmates were runners-up.

There were no longer five or six top writers per class. Now every student could seek help from me and peers in conferences, spend sustained time crafting pieces of writing, and discover that the ability to produce effective writing isn't a gift or a talent. Their commitment to their ideas and purposes made them work hard; their hard work made significant writing happen. Writing took its rightful place in the curriculum, not as an exercise, performance, or regurgitation, but as *self-expression*.

After the novelty of self-selected topics faded, the writing didn't always come easily. By April some students begged, "Just tell me what to write. Anything, I'll write it." Instead I questioned and insisted. "What do you care about? What do you *love*? What have you experienced that make you *you*? What do you know? What do you know about that other kids don't?"

The teaching didn't come easily, either. But despite "blocked" writers, my uncertainty about how to talk with kids about drafts of their writing, and big, administrative questions about grading, record keeping, and classroom management, I couldn't wait to get to school in the morning to see what my students would do next.

I saw them take chances as writers as they tried new subjects, styles, and genres. I saw them take responsibility: sometimes a writer judged a single draft sufficient, while the next time it might take five drafts to meet his or her intentions. I saw them take care as they edited and proofread, so their real readers would attend to their meanings and not be distracted by their mistakes. I saw them take time, as they wrote and planned their writing outside of school as well as in. I watched my English classroom become a writer's workshop.

Here was an approach to teaching writing that allowed me to observe individuals in action, support them, and learn in my classroom. The first thing I learned was that freedom of choice does not undercut discipline or rigor. Instead, students become accountable to learn about and use—and I become accountable to learn about and teach—the structures that serve their diverse purposes as writers. Everyone sits at a big desk in writing workshop, and everyone plans what will happen there.

As I navigated a classroom filled with big desks, I talked with students about their ideas and options. Then I taught the whole class about what I had gleaned from these

conversations, so they could speak writer to writer with one another. I expected that every student would write every day and that none of it would be an exercise. From Mary Ellen Giacobbe and Lucy Calkins, I learned about the power of the *minilesson*, and I began to provide brief explanations and demonstrations at the start of each workshop about topic development, techniques of craft, genre features, and conventions of usage. I organized the room so that students had access to essential supplies and resources, publication opportunities, and a physical layout that supported independent work and the hard thinking of writing. And I started taking notes.

FINDING A BALANCE

The first edition of *In the Middle*, published in 1987, describes my initial understandings of writing workshop and the teacher's role. Afterward, I continued to learn in my classroom. I wrote and spoke about my discoveries, and I read about the teaching of writing, especially the work of Donald Graves and his UNH colleague Donald Murray. I gave birth to a daughter. In 1990, funded in part by the royalties I earned from the first edition of *In the Middle*, I built a school, a place where I could teach kids and teachers at the same time.

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a nonprofit, K–8 demonstration school in Edgecomb, Maine. Its mission is to develop and disseminate authentic, rigorous, joyful methods across the curriculum—to teach and influence a heterogeneous cross section of children of midcoast Maine, along with classroom teachers from everywhere. Teachers come to CTL for a week at a time as “interns,” and we conduct workshops and write about our work. My book *Systems to Transform Your Classroom and School* (2014) describes the methods, innovations, and traditions that define our school community and lead to engagement and excellence for every child. CTL began as a K–3 school in a prefab Cape designed to my specifications. We added wings as we added grades, and in 1994, when we reached grade 7, I became CTL's teacher of middle school writing, reading, and history.

My understanding of writing as a process of discovering meaning and refining it has given me permission to view teaching as a process, too. I gained the courage to change my mind and the humility to revise my practice when experience shows me there's something else I can do to help students grow. I came to appreciate how teaching can be a *life's work*, how my methods are a screen on which my professional and personal identities play themselves out.

When I look back at the 1980s, I'm not surprised by my ecstatic response to the egalitarian community of writing workshop. I was still in my twenties when I transformed myself from *English teacher as ultimate authority* into a *writing coach* and a *facilitator of writing process*. It was a revolution, and I needed its broad strokes to break free from the old English teacher paradigm of assignments and deadlines.

As my kids began to choose their own topics, genres, and audiences, as they wrote and wrote and wrote, I watched and listened. I had to learn how to stop performing, slow down, pay attention, and become quiet. The 1980s were heady times for many English teachers as, under the influence of Graves and Murray, we cleared the way for our kids' voices and abandoned the "old orthodoxies," Graves' term for the so-called *right* ways to teach English, which he argued had become "substitutes for thinking" about effective instruction (Newkirk and Kittle 2013).

But something happened to me, as an English teacher, that's typical of revolutions. As part of my transformation, I embraced a whole new set of orthodoxies. And as child-centered as the new "rules" for teaching writing seemed to me at the time, they had an effect similar to the old paradigm: they put limits on my students' potential as writers and mine as their teacher.

The first edition of *In the Middle* is filled with the new orthodoxies, in the form of *nevers*. *Never* praise students' writing, or they'll become hooked on your approval and won't develop their own criteria for effective writing. *Never* read students' drafts; instead, insist that they read their writing aloud to you, so you can listen to their voices and not be distracted by their errors. *Never* suggest to writers what to do or try next, or they'll rely on you to solve their writing problems for them. *Never* ask kids to attend to spelling or punctuation while they're drafting, because, as writers, they can only think about one thing at a time, and that should be content. *Never* teach a minilesson longer than seven minutes because . . . I can't even remember the rationale for that one.

Above all, teachers should never, ever usurp students' *ownership* of their writing. That means don't write on it, tell them what to do, or require anything. I learned how to orchestrate "conferences" in which my role was to lead writers to guess what was on my mind about how to improve a piece of writing and then to convince them they "owned" the improvement.

The problem with any orthodoxy, however well intentioned, is that it takes away someone's initiative. Instead of engaging in direct, grown-up-to-child conversations and demonstrations—instead of *teaching* my students based on my knowledge of writing, my previous experiences with students, and the needs and intentions of each writer—I allowed the *nevers* to curb my effectiveness as a teacher and my students' growth as writers.

I don't believe that teachers have to be parents to be effective in the classroom, but I've learned we do need to act there as the most thoughtful parents we can imagine. When I became a parent for real, the shift in my identity helped me focus on the nature of the relationship between a nurturing adult and an intentional child. My role as a grown-up in Anne's life opened a window on how a writing teacher could guide students and still respect their intentions. Because of her, I had to rethink the *nevers*.

I remember when Anne was five and told me she wanted to learn how to tie her shoes. I didn't offer hints or make her guess. I showed her how. She watched and listened

as I invented a shoe-tying story and made a bow. Then I molded her fingers into position and recited the story with her, until she felt ready to take over. When she did, I cheered like mad. Later, when I thought she was old enough to set the dinner table, I showed her the conventions, set it with her a few times, and helped her if she missed anything. Then she took over, chose the placemats, put the cutlery where it belonged, created a cool way to fold the napkins, and got plenty of praise from Toby and me.

Jerome Bruner (1986) refers to this phenomenon—when an adult intervenes, demonstrates, and gradually provides less assistance—as the *handover phase* of learning. In handover, understandings and strategies that emerge during an interaction between a more competent grown-up and a less competent child get internalized by the child.

I like the term *handover* because it connotes the fluidity and purposefulness of a productive adult-child interaction. It's not hands-off: the adult is active, directive, and involved in the task. It's not a handout: the child is active, intentional, and involved in the task. And neither one is distanced from the work at hand. The adult and child aren't having a philosophical discussion of principles of shoe tying or table setting—not to mention corn-on-the-cob eating, teeth brushing, or long division. We're both engaged. When I taught Anne, she watched me, I watched her, I did it, she tried it, we talked, and I lent a hand when I saw she needed help, until she got it and didn't need me anymore.

In handover, the teacher is acting like an adult, like someone who is competent, knows some things, and wants to make a new task easy, efficient, and meaningful. The adult gives over control when the child seems ready, because the goal is for the child to act independently. There isn't an orthodoxy or a *never* in sight; there is plenty of child intention and adult intervention. And it feels like a human interaction, not the facilitation-by-formula of my early years of teaching writing in a workshop.

The key to handover is that it draws on an adult's *knowledge*. The assistance I gave Anne was selective. It was informed by my knowledge of the skill I was teaching her, my knowledge of children of Anne's age, and my specific knowledge of Anne. When it came to shoe tying, I had been tying my own for forty years; I knew that five was an appropriate age to learn how to make a bow; my daughter wanted to abandon Velcro and tie real laces; and, since processing physical sequences was hard for her, I figured I'd make up a story to accompany the steps.

In thinking about the implications for teaching adolescents—for handover in writing workshop—I realized I could bring my knowledge of writing to my classroom in a similar way. I started with what I've learned about good writing across the genres. This includes information I glean from my own successes *and* failures as a writer, from a lifetime of reading other people's writing, good and bad, and from the advice of other writers and teachers. I also bring the developmental knowledge I've acquired of what seventh and eighth graders are like. And I work hard, from the first day of school every year, to learn about the individual writers I teach—to understand their challenges, strengths, intentions, interests, and processes.

Handover is the word that characterizes my approach in today's writing workshop. I present myself to my students as an experienced writer and reader, someone who shows them how things are done, gives useful advice, knows what she's talking about, and responds with praise to smart problem solving and effective writing. This doesn't mean I've reverted to playing God and making all the decisions from behind a big desk. It does mean that I don't withhold ideas, directions, or alternatives when something I know can help students solve problems, try something they've never done before, produce stunning writing, and, over time, become independent of me.

What I strive for now is a fluid, subtle balance. I want to serve students as a listener *and* a teller, an observer *and* an actor, a collaborator *and* a critic *and* a cheerleader. Writers learn what they can expect from me. Sometimes they're even grateful—a thank-you after I've conferred with a kid about a draft moves me like nothing else in my teaching life.

Handover manifests itself when I sit shoulder to shoulder with students, help them identify their writing problems, demonstrate solutions, explain my confusions as a reader, and teach the techniques of craft and the conventions of usage that will strengthen their texts. When I show drafts of my poems, stories, and essays and describe the problems I encountered and the solutions I attempted, that's handover. And handover is at work when I illustrate minilessons with relevant writing samples, invent terms and metaphors that make something difficult doable for my kids, and conduct genre studies that help them focus on the attributes of different kinds of writing.

Teacher knowledge and student initiative are *counterweights* in writing workshop. I'm on a quest every day to maintain the balance—to value the choices, intentions, and needs of the writers I teach *and* to respond to them, lead them, and show them how to grow. The persona I present to kids in September is of someone who is serious—passionate—about writing, someone who works hard at writing well, understands writing to be life-changing work, knows techniques that will help young writers craft literary texts, loves literature, and is at the service of her students.

Tess, a student on the receiving end of all this persona, painted a word picture of her vision of handover—of me at work in the workshop and her, changed as a writer and reader because of it.

TEACHER

I.

She perches in her rocking chair at the front of the room,
shows us little pieces of her heart—
Collins, Salinger, Dickinson, Cummings,
Dessen, Draper, O'Brien, Shakespeare—
and invites us to take them into ours.

II.

She leans over my shoulder,
tweaks a verb, rights an adjective,
and suddenly my lopsided poem
shakily returns to its feet.

III.

She quietly confers with me
about my latest journey between the pages.
She shares my love of the new worlds I've visited
and always knows the novel I should devour next.

IV.

She stands in front of the class
compelling us to think for ourselves,
to form our own opinions about the world
even when they're different from hers.

V.

I watch her as she gently steers us onto our paths
and maybe—just maybe—
catch a glimpse of who I want to become.

—*Tess Hinchman*

WHAT ABOUT READING?

At Boothbay Region Elementary School, the same students who took breathtaking initiative in each day's writing workshop reappeared in my classroom when it came time for reading, scheduled as a separate class, to find me barricaded back behind my big desk. While writing had become something students did, literature remained something I did to students. I passed out class sets of anthologies or novels, wrote vocabulary words on the blackboard, lectured about background information, assigned pages, spoon-fed interpretations, and gave tests to make sure students read the assigned readings and got what they were supposed to get. In the mid-1980s, my friend Tom Newkirk drove up from UNH for a visit and, at the end of a day of observation of my classes, wondered aloud about whether my writing workshop wasn't a kind of "writing ghetto": the one period in their day when students made choices, took responsibility, and found meaning and purpose as learners.

While admitting that problems with my old writing program had been painful, acknowledging problems with my reading program threatened a pedagogical heart attack. Literature was my field. I became an English major because I love literature; I

became an English teacher in order to teach literature. Choosing and teaching works of literature was a huge, satisfying chunk of my teaching identity. But then came Tom's nudge, the first in a series of personal and professional circumstances that challenged my role as a teacher of literature and led to the creation of a second workshop, this one for readers.

The next clue came on the heels of research I read that showed that sustained silent reading boosted students' fluency and comprehension. I began to permit my kids to read books they chose one day a week, and my kids began to drive me crazy: "Are we having reading today? Is this the day we read?"

We had reading every day—at least that was my take on it. Although I felt pinpricks of conscience whenever students voiced a desire for more time with books they chose, there were too many class sets of novels I loved, too many worthwhile selections in the literature anthology, and too many lesson plans I'd invested years in to waste time dallying with the unformed tastes of seventh and eighth graders. I continued to cling to four days of curriculum and one day of reading.

Then some Bread Loaf friends came to Maine for a weekend, and over dinner my anglophile husband discovered that one of our guests read and loved his favorite obscure author. Long after the table had been cleared, the dishes washed and dried, and everyone else had taken a walk down to the beach and back, Toby and Nancy Martin, the pioneering theorist and researcher of children's writing, remained at our dining room table to gossip by candlelight about the characters in Anthony Powell's sequence of novels, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. While their conversation didn't help me appreciate Powell, it did open my eyes to the wonders of our dining room table.

It is a literate environment. Around it, we talk the way literate people do. We don't need prompts, lesson plans, teacher's manuals, Post-it notes, or discussion questions. We need only another literate person. And the talk is never grudging or perfunctory. It's filled with arguments, anecdotes, observations, jokes, exchanges of information, and accounts of what we loved, what we didn't, and why. It's a place and time to enter literature together. My next teaching question became, how can I get that table into my classroom and invite every student to pull up a chair?

I considered how I'd found my own seat at the dining room table. I remembered a conversation with a teacher friend who sold encyclopedias on the side. He mentioned how surprised he was when customers told him they'd never owned a book before. I replied, "Well, I get it. The only books in my house when I was growing up were a set of encyclopedias. They represented a major investment for my parents. When each volume of the World Book arrived in the mail, my brother and I read it cover to cover like a novel." My friend, surprised again, said, "From the way you talk about books, I guess I assumed your parents must have been English teachers or something."

My father was a postal carrier, and my mother waitressed. Although my brother, sister, and I had library cards, the turning point in my life as a reader came in fifth grade,

when I contracted rheumatic fever. I spent most of that school year off my feet and secluded in my bedroom. Books, the library, and my mother saved me.

She began to scour the shelves of the local library, looking for anything she could imagine I might like. At first I read out of boredom: no child in 1961 had a television, let alone a computer or telephone in his or her bedroom. But then I began to fall in love—with Ellen Tibbetts, Henry Huggins, Beezus and Ramona, the March sisters, and the heroes and heroines in the Landmark biography series. I escaped my room in the company of Lotta Crabtree, Jenny Lind, Annie Oakley, Clara Barton, and Francis Marion the Swamp Fox.

The day my mother brought home *The Secret Garden*, I wrinkled my nose at its musty cover and put it at the bottom of the pile. When, out of books and desperate, I gave in and cracked it open, I read it straight through. It was my story but not my story. I was Mary; I was Colin. I remember calling downstairs to my mother and thanking her over and over again for the best book I ever read. “Can you get me some more like this one?” I begged.

My poor mother tried, but there is only one *Secret Garden*. She renewed it four times for me that winter and spring. All that quiet time, reading stories chosen for me by an adult who loved me, changed me forever—granted me a passion for stories and the ability to read fast and with feeling. The novelist Graham Greene wrote, “There is always one moment in childhood when a door opens and lets the future in” (1940). This was my moment.

When I recovered from rheumatic fever, I continued to love reading in the company of two teachers. In sixth grade, Jack Edwards read books to our class long after his colleagues had abandoned read-alouds as childish. We talked about the characters in the books and the authors who created them. He loved novels, and through Mr. Edwards, I met E. B. White and understood, for the first time, how reading could be a communal experience. Playground enemies forgot about the playground when Mr. Edwards’ voice took us to the Blue Hill fair, when Wilbur’s broken heart broke all of ours. Remembering this, as a teacher now myself, I wondered: had my students ever laughed or cried together over a piece of literature? I couldn’t remember one time.

The second teacher is Toby. In my sophomore year of college, I was a student in his Survey of World Literature course—yes, reader, I married my teacher. Toby McLeod lives at the dining room table. I had never met—I still haven’t—anyone as knowledgeable about literature or who finds more satisfaction in reading. I know that some of my passion for literature comes from my admiration for Toby, from wanting to *be like him*. Did my students know or admire me as a reader? Would anyone remember me as a teacher who helped them love literature and take it into their lives forever?

Finally, I took a cue from Dixie Goswami. She had asked me to study my writing process and consider the implications. Now I tried to match my habits as a reader against the reading process I enforced in my classroom. It was not a close fit.

Mostly, I decide what I'll read. When my reading isn't up to me—when an application has to be filled out the right way or I want dinner to be edible—at least I decide *how* I'll read. My students never decided. They read selections I assigned at a pace I set and a fragment at a time—a chapter or bunch of pages instead of a coherent literary whole.

I read a lot, and I have routines, times I count on, like before I fall asleep at night and in the early morning on weekends. My students told me that beyond the weekly silent reading period, they seldom read independently. As their teacher, I did nothing to encourage or accommodate the development of reading habits.

Most significantly, there was that dining room table, where my family and friends talk about books, authors, and writing as a natural extension of our literate lives. My students had zero opportunities for congenial chats about books. They were the passive recipients of literature I selected and interpretations I devised. Four days a week I dosed them with my English teacher notions of good literature, and on Fridays, for fifty minutes, they got to be readers.

In response to their pleas for more days like Friday, I began a slow dismantling of the wall around the writing ghetto. One fall, I scheduled a second day of independent reading. In January I added a third and the following September another, until the literature curriculum languished in the drawers of my file cabinet. Students became readers full-time, and I began to learn about authentic reading and response to literature. Here, my students were my best teachers.

They taught me about young adult literature, a field that didn't exist when I was their age, when the rare book for teenagers asked one of two questions: *Will the mystery be solved before it's too late? Will she get to go to the prom?* Other readers of my generation may also recall Trixie Belden, Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, *Jean and Johnny*, and *Seventeenth Summer*.

My students introduced me to contemporary authors of juvenile fiction who write as brilliantly for adolescents as my favorite contemporary novelists write for me. Today, young readers with access to books and opportunities to read them can live vicariously alongside three-dimensional boys and girls who inhabit compelling stories about growing up in every time, place, and circumstance, with crafted language, inspiring character development, and themes that resonate in the lives of contemporary adolescents—identity, conscience, peer pressure, social divisions, prejudice, first love, political strife, loneliness, friendship, family, change. It is a remarkable body of literature.

My students taught me to fill the classroom with irresistible books—novels and also memoirs, journalism, humor, short story anthologies, and volumes of poetry. They showed me that if I provided opportunities, they would devour young adult and transitional literature. The year I scheduled reading workshop for three days a week, my students read an average of twenty-four books. The next year, with four reading workshops a week, they averaged thirty-five titles. I never had enough books.

I learned that the context of books that students choose is ripe for rich dining room table talk. We went deeper than I'd thought possible into such traditional literary features as theme, genre, tone, and character development. We moved beyond teacher's manual questions to new issues—reading processes, the myriad relationships among books and authors, and analyses of writers' choices, styles, techniques, and diction. Our reader-to-reader conversation was a far cry from lesson-plan questions and book-report answers: it was specific, personal, and *critical* in all the best senses of the word.

I am embarrassed to admit it took me so long to discover an essential truth. Everyone, and that includes every student we teach, loves a good story. The lure of stories is an English teacher's superhero power.

My students showed me that in-school reading, like in-school writing, could *do something* for them—that reading for meaning and pleasure has nothing to do with gender, class, family background, or prior experience. It develops through the power to choose, great stories to choose among, time set aside to read, and a teacher who knows the literature and his or her kids. I learned it's not a luxury for students to select their own books, that choice is the wellspring of literacy and literary appreciation. As Virginia Woolf put it, "Literature is no one's private ground, literature is common ground . . . let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves" (1947). I flung open the gates so that none of my students would have to trespass, so that every one of them could find the books, authors, and characters they love.

Inviting my students to select their own books is still the most controversial of my practices as an English teacher. But for me, student choice is synonymous with student *engagement*, in both writing and reading. It's my responsibility as an English teacher to invite, nurture, and sustain every student's engagement with literature. This means finding and stocking the classroom library with books that tell stories that kids will find interesting and worthwhile. My students become avid, skilled readers because they decide what they will read.

Reading workshop is not a study hall, where students "Drop Everything And Read," while I sit back and watch the clock. Here, the English teacher is a reader, a critic, and a guide. In my daily, whispered conversations with readers I say, "Tell me about your book. Who's the main character? What are the conflicts? What are you noticing about the author's writing? Are you happy?" And I'm an enthusiastic reviewer. In frequent booktalks (Lesesne 2003), students or I announce to the group, "Here's the next good story. Here's who and what it's about. Here's why I think you'll love it as much as I did." Reading workshop is a deliberate environment, one that supports immersion in stories, characters, themes, and writing. It points kids, always, to the next great book.

Take Heidi. She entered CTL as a seventh grader with limited experience in choosing or reading books. She *ate* Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series—as far as I'm concerned, not the next great books—like candy. I let her. Stories like these can help an

inexperienced reader learn how to manage the experience of a big, fat book. They're a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

Across the school year, I booktalked, nudged, and challenged Heidi and her classmates. In June, she named *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith as her favorites of the forty books she finished. She said, "You know, I went back to try to reread one of the Twilight books, and I just couldn't get into it, I was so surprised by the writing. She's not really a very good writer."

A realization like Heidi's isn't an accident. It's a response to the power of choice, purposeful teaching about literature, and the dozens of good stories I'd purchased for the classroom library that had spoken to her as a reader. Along the way, Heidi learned to tell the difference between literary novels and popular fiction, which is something many adults never do, as evidenced by any Sunday's *New York Times* best-seller list.

Frequent, voluminous book reading builds fluency, stamina, vocabulary, confidence, and comprehension. It sharpens tastes and preferences, critical abilities, and knowledge of genres and authors. Even the cultural knowledge that E. D. Hirsch espouses is a function of habitual reading and a carefully selected classroom library. My students leave our tiny school in rural Maine as skilled, literary readers, but also as people who are *smart* about the world they'll meet out there—about ideas, words, history, current events, human experiences, and places they've encountered only in the pages of the hundreds of stories they've read.

Malcolm Gladwell writes in his book *Outliers* (2008) about the ten thousand hours of committed practice required for an expert to acquire his or her expertise. Students at CTL get that practice. The year Heidi was a seventh grader, my kids finished an average of fifty-three books. Many were prepared to be able to love *Pride and Prejudice*, *The White Tiger*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Iliad*, *The Road*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Catch-22*, *Life of Pi*, and titles by Russell Banks, Michael Chabon, Dave Eggers, Tobias Wolff, Margaret Atwood, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., when they picked them up on their own. Access to and awareness of good stories, free choice of books, conversations about them, and *practice* create literary readers. A nonreader confronted by the assignment of a novel by Dickens, Twain, or Hawthorne doesn't stand a chance.

Some critics of reading workshop argue that the English classroom is a place for the classics, and the classics only—that, left to their own devices, kids will pick junk, which they can read in their free time. But the evidence is overwhelming: U.S. adolescents *don't* read in their free time. The National Endowment for the Arts reports that only 27 percent of eleven- to fourteen-year-olds read books outside of school. The NEA described "a calamitous, universal falling off of reading" around age thirteen, which continues throughout a student's life (2007).

We know that independent reading declines after the elementary grades. So do reading scores. In 2007, fully 70 percent of our eighth graders read *below the proficient level*

on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The results of every major assessment of reading ability—NAEP, SAT, PISA, you name it—show that the most proficient student readers are those who are habitual independent readers. Beatrice Cullinan’s study “Independent Reading and School Achievement,” funded by the U.S. Department of Education, marshals the compelling evidence (1998–2000) for students to select their own books and read them.

English teachers can engage in magical thinking and assign a strict diet of classics or other whole-class novels, and then watch as students read *maybe* six books a year—if they actually read them, of course. The dirty little secret of secondary English is how many students fake assigned readings through SparkNotes, Wikipedia, listening to discussions, or selective skimming. I know. It’s what I did.

Or English teachers can decide to teach the students we’ve got. The kids I’ve got choose their own books, and they read for twenty minutes each day at school and at least half an hour at home, seven nights a week. Assigning students to read books they love is the most important homework I can give, as well as a high-priority use of class time. My students range from children with dyslexia to inexperienced readers to sophisticated literary critics. The common denominator is that they know what it feels like to be in what they call “the reading zone,” and they want to be there. Instructional fads come, and they go. Human needs and desires remain constant. Our students—*all* of them—want the same sense, satisfaction, and meaning that adult readers of stories seek. Worthwhile, interesting, appropriate books have the power to sustain every student’s interest.

In the end, it’s handover that distinguishes reading workshop from a pleasant study hall. While good books, free choice, practice, and time are essentials, it’s how I structure my teaching that determines whether compelling stories and voluminous reading will become the beating hearts of my program. As with writing workshop, it’s the responsibility of a reading workshop teacher to *know* three big things: the books, adolescent readers in general, and each reader in particular.

Handover is at work when I wax enthusiastic about stories written by authors who dedicate themselves to a young adult audience. It’s handover when I’ve read enough young adult titles that I can put the right one in a student’s hands at the right moment. It’s handover when I present booktalks about transitional, adult, and classic titles and authors: books that are great for some kids now, and for others in their literary lives to come.

It’s handover when I describe my criteria for choosing or abandoning books and invite kids to develop and articulate their own; when I show how and when I skim or scan a novel; when I nudge readers to shelve titles they’re not enjoying; and when I lead a discussion of ways a reader can investigate a book before deciding whether to read it. When I ask students to maintain “someday pages” of the books they might want to read, I’m helping them plan as intentional, independent readers do. And when I give them forms to keep track of titles and authors they finish or abandon, I’m enabling them to consider and develop reading preferences.

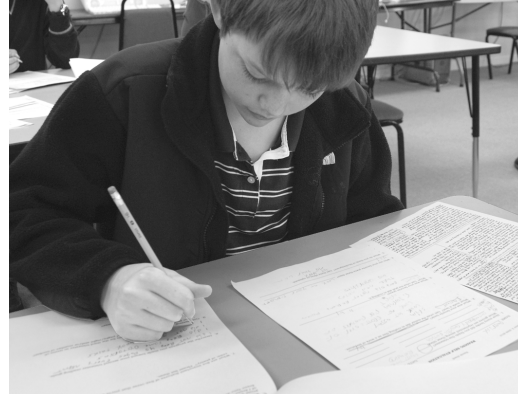
Each day we begin our writing–reading workshop by reading a poem or two (Atwell 2006). Here, it’s handover when I show students how I unpack a poem, teach them to identify and name literary techniques, and introduce poets who have the potential to engage, inform, and provoke them for a lifetime, from Gwendolyn Brooks, E. E. Cummings, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and William Carlos Williams to Billy Collins, Rita Dove, Allen Ginsberg, Jim Harrison, Tony Hoagland, Ted Kooser, Pablo Neruda, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mary Oliver, Marge Piercy, William Stafford, and Wallace Stevens.

Handover is at work when I show students examples of insightful literary criticism, ask them to tease out and discuss the features, and assign them to reflect on books in *letter-essays* to me and their friends. These are informal reviews that readers write to each other about their observations of craft, character, and theme—skills of critical analysis students will put to work in high school and beyond.

Finally, it’s handover when I teach students how and where to find good books beyond CTL—when each June we discuss bookstores, libraries, periodicals and websites, literary awards, and the school’s website pages, and when I help them select books from the classroom library to borrow to read over the summer.

Years ago, when I started to speak and write about writing–reading workshop, teachers sometimes told me, “Your approach is such common sense, I can’t believe I didn’t think of it myself.” At first I was miffed. Little of what I do or ask kids to do is a function of common sense—or intuition or chance. The workshop is an accumulation of my knowledge of writing, reading, and teaching them, of young adolescents, and, every year, of each writer and reader who enters my classroom.

I think a better term than *common sense* is Glenda Bissex’s *logic*. The logic of my teaching stands on a foundation of knowledge, a base that workshop methods are built on *and* build upon. Workshop teachers garner information and give it. We observe learning and participate as learners. We endeavor every day to uncover the logic by which our students learn and support it. The third edition of *In the Middle* is everything I’ve learned over the past three decades that makes writing–reading workshop the only logical way to teach English.



CHAPTER 3

GETTING STARTED

Children grow into the intellectual life around them.

—L. S. VYGOTSKY

The first week sets the tone. If students leave school at the end of it feeling ambitious and excited about themselves as writers and readers, and me as their teacher, we're halfway there.

I plan the first days in more detail than any others. A lot happens—it has to. Kids begin to know one another and come together as a corps of writers and readers. They explore the space, learn how it's organized, and glimpse what it offers them in terms of materials, resources, options, and inspirations. Many of the routines and procedures of the workshop are established during the first week, and so are my roles as teacher, writer, reader of books, responder to literature, and lover and unpacker of poems.

I begin to learn who my new kids are—about their lives outside of school and how they perceive themselves as writers and readers. I communicate the expectations and rules of the workshop. Students organize themselves—put their names on folders and insert forms. And I try to give all of them a taste of the satisfactions of writing and reading so authentic that they leave for the weekend believing this class is the real deal.

On the first day of school, CTL runs a shortened schedule. I use this class to initiate a few routines, get kids talking to one another, invite them to check out the room and its resources, and distribute surveys for students to complete about their backgrounds as writers and readers. The very first routine, a poem, is the way I start every workshop.

THE DAILY POEM

Since my students choose and read different books, the daily poems provide our common experience as readers of literature, in addition to the short prose readings that illuminate genre studies in writing workshop. Because it is a poem, it takes about ten minutes to

read and talk about it. The compactness of the genre makes it possible for kids to enjoy a shared encounter with literature—to develop critical eyes and ears, criteria, and a vocabulary for talking about literary features—without robbing them of the time and practice they need to grow as independent writers and readers.

For students who aren't yet confident responders to literature, the daily poem is their entrée to literary discussion. Each morning I introduce a poem, distribute copies, and ask the group to follow along as I read it aloud. Many of my poems and introductions are included in *Naming the World: A Year of Poems and Lessons* (2006) and permitted to be reproduced for classroom use. In each lesson I describe some of the critical features that students might notice in a poem, suggest an appropriate response stance, and provide a benediction—closing remarks that point kids toward what might come next for them as poets, observers of their world, and thoughtful human beings alive on the planet.

I perform each poem with as much nuance as I can bring, and I rehearse my readings. I want kids to be able to ride on my voice into the world of the poem, hear its meaning, and observe how an experienced reader makes sense of verse forms.

Then I ask students to go back into the poem independently, read it, and mark it up. Depending on the poem, I might ask them to attend to the stanza breaks, metaphors, or verbs; to underline lines they wish they'd written, lines they don't understand yet, lines they can see, lines that surprise them, lines they think are the most important, lines that resonate, or the line where the poem changes; and, always, to mark anything they notice that a poet has done well. I annotate my copy, too. In the discussion that follows, volunteers read and talk about what they marked.

This means that I—and any students who already know some critical vocabulary—will teach less experienced critics about such features as diction, imagery, form, theme, tone, turns, figurative language, cadence, and sound patterns, in the context of shared poems. But students who aren't critical readers yet can still participate in the conversation. They can point to language that struck them or lines they could see as they lean on the security of their marked-up copies to cue their comments. Anyone can have something to say about the daily poem and, eventually, everyone does. It can even get a bit competitive. Here's Josie's account of one of our discussions.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

So, there you are
on a typical morning—
a Monday if you must know.
Mondays are bad enough.
You're given a poem to read. Nancie's voice
echoes in the silence of the room.
You smile
at each *s* in a sentence,

the soothing sound of each line
cascading into another.
She finishes,
and, after a breathtaking pause,
everyone exhales.
You sit back
with a foolish grin.
Nancie assigns the task:
so, mark the lines and language you wanna talk about.

You feel a rush of excitement
as you ramble on and on, a page worth
of notes, critiquing and exploring the wonders
of the beautiful poem before you.
But one word, one line, one part
outshines the rest. The poem would die
without it. It gives the poem air to breathe.
This poem
was imagined, written,
and published for you and you alone.

But
you get so caught up in the revelation
of your genius
that you are half a second too late
to shoot your arm towards the sky
as a peer casually lifts a non-committal hand.
He's called on, naturally,
and asked to articulate
his contemplation
of the masterpiece.
He takes a few moments to react,
gathers his thoughts,
and finally speaks.

And
*oh my God. You were going to say that
Exact. Same. Thing.*
He reads the line. The few lines.
The whole stanza. With greed.
The poem is demolished
by a stolen response.
You are devastated.

Your life is ruined. Never
will you feel such satisfaction
ever
again.

Now

you realize, again too late,
that you've been called on,
your hand still waving pointlessly
in the air. You
utter a dumbfounded response
to some mediocre verb.
You feel tears prick your eyes
as you sit openmouthed,
trying to stabilize
your chaotic mind,
until Nancie asks the class
to turn the paper over
to another poem,
its theme the same.
You flip it, suspicious,
and read.

*Hm. This is . . . good. Wow.
Actually . . .*

On a Monday morning,
at 9:00, you
are asked to react to a poem
you've just read. Your hand
rockets
into the air.

This time
you get it.

—Josephine Cotton

If poetry has become a workhorse of my curriculum because of its brevity, I also count on the opportunities it affords me as a teacher of prose genres to explore issues of craft. There's no genre that can match it in terms of teaching writers about diction—about precise, vivid choices of words. In fact, apart from paragraphing, *every* lesson I want to demonstrate about effective writing begins with the daily poem: the need for a writer to find subjects that matter, the importance of first-person voice and reflection, how most adverbs and some adjectives are clutter, the value of tangible nouns and sensory verbs,

how to use a thesaurus to find sensory verbs and adjectives, why and how to revise, how to polish writing at the single-word level, how repetition can create cadence and move a piece of writing, what titles do, why readers want concrete specifics, how a conclusion should resonate, how writers develop and support their themes, and how periods, commas, dashes, semicolons, and colons give voice to writing. Lessons they learn from poetry about diction, specificity, imagery, intentionality, meaning, voice, audience, organization, conclusions, and punctuation show up in my students' writing across the genres.

And if poetry has become the most effective way I know to teach about craft, I also appreciate its versatility. Poetry appeals and matters to my kids because they or I can find—or write—a poem about any subject that appeals and matters to them: growing up, every sport, childhood, siblings, gender, race, history, comic book heroes, friendship, food, war, peace, toys, nature, God, parents, chocolate, identity, dogs, death, computer games, school, prejudice, and poetry itself.

To find poems that middle school kids will like and want to talk about, I check out online poetry resources such as poets.org, poetryfoundation.org, and [writersalmanac .publicradio.org](http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org). I also read and Post-it note my way through the collections, anthologies, and poetry journals that I purchase for the classroom library. Sometimes a whole book yields only one poem that meets my criteria: it's a poem I like, so I can demonstrate enthusiasm when I share it; it's a poem I found memorable, so there's a chance it might make an impression on my kids; it's a poem I think adolescents will like or at least be intrigued by; and it's a poem that shows something about poetry's range, so students will be helped to understand what their own poems can be about and do. I also save poetry by my kids—brave or funny poems, sensory ones, first attempts, interesting experiments, prizewinners, gifts for loved ones, and noble failures. Many of the authors of the daily poems are my students, current and former.

My students learn that I've taken poetry into my life because it's useful to me. On the first short day of school, I pass out copies of, read aloud, and talk from my heart about a useful poem—"To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy, "The Ponds" or "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver, "How to See Deer" by Phillip Booth, or "Ode to an Apple" by Pablo Neruda. I distribute poetry folders and black Sharpies, and students write their names on the folders and file their first poem of the year. Then, on subsequent mornings, we read and discuss one of the first themed sequences in *Naming the World*, either poems that show "What Poetry Can Do" or poems about identity, gathered under the heading "Your Life."

ICEBREAKING

Every veteran teacher has a grab bag of September icebreakers. Two that do the trick for me and the workshop are a team scavenger hunt and a game of toss.

The night before school starts, I divide each class into four teams. These are the only groups I assign all year. I've found that small groups are more engaged and productive

when their composition is congenial. On occasion I will ask a class to make sure there are boys *and* girls in their groups, or seventh *and* eighth graders, and I always intervene to help a lost soul find a place. On this first day I assign the teams because I want to be sure that students new to CTL have veterans to guide them, mix kids from the two grades I teach, and ask returning eighth graders to take the lead.

When students enter the classroom for the first time, they find the minilesson circle already defined by beanbags and pillows I arranged that morning before school. I announce the team assignments and the task: “Find everything on the scavenger hunt list headed ‘Mapping the Humanities Room’ (Figure 3.1). That means put your hands on it and site it on a map of the classroom by its corresponding number.” Each team gets a clipboard with a map attached and a copy of the list, and off they go. I circulate and help with the clues as they discover how the room is organized or reorganized, where their reading and finished writing folders are stored, some of the systems and resources, and, especially, the books. Every team wins, and everyone earns a Tootsie Roll Pop as a prize.

For the second icebreaker, I bought the biggest beach ball I could find and covered it with nonthreatening personal questions I hope will get kids talking and laughing (Figure 3.2). After they return to the circle, I give the directions: “Play toss, be sure to include everyone, and, when you catch the ball, answer the question closest to your right thumb.” We find out a lot of silly stuff about one another, and I begin to build my knowledge of my new students.

Then it’s time for the first homework assignment of the school year: completion of writing and reading surveys. I designed the survey questions, which appear as Figures 3.3 and 3.4, to get at students’ self-perceptions, histories, preferences, processes, strengths, and plans as readers and writers, plus their working knowledge of basic conventions of usage.

I tell the class, “We started our time together with you learning something about me, poetry, and a poem I’ve taken into my life. Then you learned about this space and what’s in it for you as writers and readers. Finally, all of us learned deep, soul-baring information about one another from a beach ball. Tonight for homework, help me learn about you as a writer and reader. Teach me what you like, what you need, what you do, and what you know. The more you can tell me, the better I’ll be able to teach you and make sure you’re satisfied and successful as a writer and reader this year.”

At this juncture, students will need their yellow homework folders and copies of the weekly homework assignment sheet (Figure 3.5). They label and write their names on the yellow folders, put Monday’s date at the top of the homework sheet, and copy the assignment, which I’ve written on the easel pad, in the space for work due the following day: *Complete my writing and reading surveys as well as I can.* Then they file the two surveys and the assignment sheet in a pocket of their homework folders.

MAPPING THE HUMANITIES ROOM

1. The drawer you'll open when you've finished a book and need to record its title
2. The shelf where you'd look for books by Carl Deuker, John Coy, David Klass, and others who write great novels about sports
3. The place where you'll find collections by Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, and E. E. Cummings
4. A group of novels about the lives of kids during the Salem witch trials, War for Independence, Civil War, Holocaust, and Civil Rights movement
5. The tray where you'll place a piece of your writing after you've self-edited it in red, so Nancie can take it home and copyedit it in black
6. The place where you'll put a piece of your writing so Nancie may give it a quick read, i.e., *eyeball* it vs. copyedit it
7. The bookcases and shelves in this room that are off limits to kids because they contain Glenn's and Nancie's teaching materials
8. The place you'll put a book you want to rave about in a booktalk
9. When you've finished a piece of writing, the place where you'll record its title and genre and file it, together with all its drafts, notes, etc.
10. Where you'll head if Taboo, Mad Gab, or juggling are your cups of recess tea
11. The shelf where you'll find the five subjects of this instruction: "Will you please just take four pieces and *pass it on already?*"
12. The drawer you'll open for a new folder when one of yours self-destructs
13. The bookcase that houses a hero who wonders, "To be or not to be?"
14. The shelves you'll browse for a great true story
15. The center of the reading universe: the place where the best books in the room will soon be found
16. The cards on which you'll sign out, and Nancie will sign back in, every single book you ever borrow from this room from now until June or else
17. The place to look for stories told in the form of free-verse poems
18. The resource you'll crack open when you're seeking an alternative to a weak verb, such as *have, go, do, get, or make*
19. The utensils Nancie provides to you to *edit* your writing and *only* to edit your writing
20. The shelf where you'll find stories in which the future is bleak
21. The shelves to head to if you want to sample an adult or transitional title
22. The shelf where you'll find extra spelling study slips and blank homework assignment sheets
23. The place you'll find Ted L. Nancy acting like a nut, David Sedaris talking pretty, and white people being pale
24. The resource you'll consult if you're drafting a sonnet and need a word that rhymes with *elbow*
25. The place you'll go to satisfy an interest in paranormal affairs
26. The shelf that's home to anti-war and war stories
27. The premier pens on the face of the earth and a reviser's dream utensil

Figure 3.1 Mapping the Humanities Room

BEACH BALL ICEBREAKER QUESTIONS

Directions: Answer the question your right thumb is closest to when you catch the ball.

The story behind your first name?
A favorite flavor of ice cream?
A good movie you saw this summer?
Your middle name?
Right or left-handed?
Favorite sport to play? To watch?
Favorite TV show when you were little? Now?
Your pet's personality?
Your current favorite song?
Coffee, tea, cocoa, or chai?
Dark, milk, or white chocolate?
Last book you read—and would you recommend it?
Favorite Disney movie?
Favorite junk food?
Favorite and least favorite vegetables?
Favorite pizza topping(s)?
Favorite toy when you were little?
Ideal birthday cake?
Do you believe in ghosts?
Worst movie you saw in the last year?
Favorite Crayola color when you were little? Now?
A pet peeve?
Dream car?
Worst injury so far?
Most famous person you've met or seen?
Favorite kind of gum?
Coke or Pepsi?
Did you have an imaginary friend when you were little?
Favorite color M&M?
Someone you admire?
Would you consider a tattoo?
Favorite potatoes: mashed, baked, fries, chips?
Cats or dogs?
Time travel choice: future or past?
Favorite local restaurant and meal?
Comfort food?
Dream job?

Figure 3.2 *Beach Ball Icebreaker Questions*

SEPTEMBER WRITING SURVEY

NAME _____ DATE _____

1. Are you a writer? _____
(If your answer is YES, answer question 2a. If your answer is NO, go on to 2b.)
- 2a. How did **you** learn to write?

OR

- 2b. How did other people learn to write?
3. What does someone have to do or know in order to write well? List as many of a good writer's abilities, habits, techniques, processes, kinds of knowledge, or approaches as you can think of.
4. What are your favorite genres—or kinds—of writing, and why?
5. What kinds of responses from others help you improve your writing?
6. What makes writing easier for you?

Figure 3.3 *September Writing Survey*

(continues)

SEPTEMBER WRITING SURVEY

7. What makes writing harder?
8. What do you think are your three greatest strengths as a writer?
- -
 -
9. What would you like to get better at as a writer? Try to think of three goals.
- -
 -
10. So far, what's the best thing that ever happened to you as a writer?
11. In general, how do you feel about writing and yourself as a writer?
12. Writers use the rules or *conventions* of written English to show readers what to *do* or *understand*. To the best of your knowledge, what are all the reasons a writer might use a . . .
- Period?
- Comma?
- Apostrophe?
- Colon?
- Semicolon?
- Dash?
- Capital letter?
- New Paragraph?

Figure 3.3 *Continued*

SEPTEMBER READING SURVEY

NAME _____ DATE _____

1. If you had to guess . . .

How many books would you say you owned? _____

How many books would you say there are in your house? _____

How many books did you read during the last school year, September–June? _____

And how many of those books did you choose for yourself? _____

How many books have you read since school let out in June? _____

Do you think you read a lot, about average, or less than average, compared with other American kids your age? _____

2. What are the best three books you've read in the past couple of years?

3. In your ideal novel, what would the main character be like?

4. What are your favorite genres—or kinds—of books to read?

5. Who are your favorite authors these days? List as many as you'd like.

6. Which poets are your favorites?

7. When and where do you like to read—what's your best time and place?

Figure 3.4 *September Reading Survey*

(continues)

SEPTEMBER READING SURVEY

- 8.** What are some of the ways you decide whether you'll read a particular book?
- 9.** Have you ever liked a book so much that you reread it? _____ If so, what's the title? Can you think of any others?
- 10.** Do you know the title or author of the book(s) you'd like to read next? _____ If so, please tell me.
- 11.** What makes reading easier for you?
- 12.** What makes reading harder?
- 13.** What do you think are your three greatest strengths as a reader of books?
- -
 -
- 14.** What would you like to get better at as a reader of books? Try to think of three goals.
- -
 -
- 15.** On a scale of 1–10, how do you rate reading as a free-time activity?
- 16.** In general, how do you feel about books and yourself as a reader?

Figure 3.4 *Continued*

Gr. 7-8 HOMEWORK FOR THE WEEK OF Sept. 6th

[THIS FORM SHOULD APPEAR IN THE FRONT, RIGHT POCKET OF YOUR YELLOW FOLDER.]

DUE MONDAY

- If you received a letter last week, respond to a friend's reading journal
- Read a book for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour
- Writing: one hour's worth
(My weekend writing plan: _____)
- Science: complete assigned lab write-up and/or assigned reading, highlighted, with big ideas
- Math: work on current assignment for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour *

Labour Day

DUE TUESDAY

- Read a book for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour
- Spelling: select five new words to study
- Science: science in the news clippings
- Math: work on current assignment for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour *

DUE WEDNESDAY

- Read a book for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour
- Math: work on current assignment for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour *
- Drama: _____
- Read and highlight science-in-the-news article

My writing and Reading surveys, as much as I can tell Nancie

DUE THURSDAY

- Every third week, write a letter-essay in your reading journal to Nancie or a friend

Pre-Lab due -

Read Timeline

of Earth Packet

Deconstruct

Political cartoons w/

Mom or Dad

DUE FRIDAY

• Homework

Slip Signed by

Mom or Dad

- Read a book for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour
- Spelling: complete the word study
- Science: review mini-lesson notes and prompt response
- Math: work on current assignment for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour *

$\frac{1}{2}$ hour of writing, free verse, about a territory that calls my name

- Read a book for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour
- Math: work on current assignment for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour, plus five additional words defined and referenced on your math word wall*
- Science: three-paragraph science-in-the-news reflection

• Computer agreement signed by M.S.D. + ME

* Also see the separate math homework log: the first page in the student's math binder.

Figure 3.5 Weekly Homework Assignment Sheet

The homework assignment sheet is an attempt by my middle school colleagues and me to organize our students to do schoolwork at home. As a K–8 faculty, our homework policy is straightforward: no busywork and no assignment that won't be acted on in a significant way the next day. As the typed entries on the homework assignment sheet indicate, seventh and eighth graders have at least an hour's worth of homework every night: half an hour of math and half an hour of independent reading. Students record ad hoc assignments, like the writing and reading surveys, in the blank spaces.

In a joint letter home and in personal contacts we make with every parent in the first two weeks of school, the math and science teachers and I ask parents to look for the yellow folder and the assignment sheet inside it and help their children follow through, to ensure kids will be able to participate in class the next day, when activity will build on the homework. We also encourage parents and students to call or e-mail us at home if they have any question, ever, about a child's assignment.

Each of our students begins the year with one pass in every subject: one opportunity for a teacher to excuse an incomplete or missing assignment. After that, teachers mail home a form letter that indicates what wasn't completed for which class and asks parents for their involvement and oversight. After three homework letters for one subject, the teacher schedules a meeting with the student and his or her parents to discuss what needs to happen at home so the child can come to school ready to engage. In my classes, when a student is unprepared, I won't let him or her participate in the activity. Since most of my assignments are the bases for small-group discussions and activities, a student who didn't do the homework has to sit out and miss the fun. Worse, he or she has to sit in with me during noon recess and complete the assignment.

I am fierce about homework, but I'm careful to assign only what matters. The nightly half hour of reading is a prime example. Regular reading is essential. When reading isn't happening at home, the focus of my meeting with the student and parents is *why*: Is there no obvious time or place to read at home? Is the child forgetting to take home his or her book? Does the family not understand the importance of voluminous reading to the child's future? Then we negotiate an arrangement for when and where regular reading will happen in their household. I am not hoping that every kid will read every night; I am doing everything I can to make certain they do.

At the end of our first class, I remind students they'll need to bring their two new folders, for poetry and homework, to class with them tomorrow. I ask that they also bring the hundred-page spiral notebooks that will become their writing–reading handbooks. I collect the supplies they brought in—the pencils, red pens, and paper clips—which I store away and add to the materials center as necessary. Then I meet briefly with returning eighth graders to sign back in the books they borrowed from me over the summer and to start lining up veterans to present booktalks about favorite titles in the classroom library.

The other middle school teachers and I meet with all the kids later that day for forty-five minutes to discuss housekeeping issues: the Monday–Friday schedule, homework policy, behavior guidelines, social considerations, lunchtime procedures, recess possibilities, and computer rules.

THE LAUNCH: WRITING WORKSHOP

Students enter the minilesson circle on the second day of school with their writing–reading handbooks, poetry folders, homework folders, and writing and reading surveys, which I collect. At home that night I’ll create a chart for each student and record shorthand notes about their habits and preferences as writers and readers and any emerging themes. I start with the writing surveys.

Yes or no: does a student perceive him- or herself as a writer? Is the individual’s knowledge of the craft of writing *deep, fair, or superficial*? Which genres are favorites? What support is the student looking for as a writer? *Yes or no:* can he or she self-assess beyond spelling and handwriting? *Yes or no:* has the student had any positive experiences as a writer? Is the student’s overall attitude toward writing *positive, neutral, or negative*? *Which* of the eight conventions doesn’t he or she have a firm grasp of yet?

In terms of reading, my shorthand observations include a student’s access to books in the home (*good, fair, or poor*); prior experience as an independent reader (*high, medium, low, or none*); range of genres (*wide, medium, or narrow*); knowledge of authors and poets (*deep, fair, or superficial*—the last means J. K. Rowling and Shel Silverstein); independent reading habits (*strong, medium, or limited*); the kind of support the student is looking for as a reader; the ability to self-assess beyond decoding (*yes or no*); and overall attitude (the rating-scale number and either *strong, fair, or negative*).

Students’ responses to the surveys and my summary notes become the foundation for a year of their self-assessment as writers and readers, my assessment of them, and my plans as their teacher. Kids who own no books or don’t read at home, can’t name favorites, think reading is boring, don’t perceive themselves as writers, demonstrate minimal knowledge of writing process, and can’t name any strengths as writers will need my attention right away. I’ll focus on getting books with great stories and characters into their hands, encourage them to find and raise their voices as writers, and celebrate their initial efforts like mad. In June, I ask students to complete the surveys again, compare their September and June answers, and, when they complete their final self-assessment of the school year, cite the changes they notice as part of their responses.

Back in the minilesson circle, after our first poetry discussion, I ask kids to label and put names on their writing–reading handbooks. I always buy a half dozen spiral notebooks in case any students weren’t able to follow through and I give these to kids as necessary. Then I launch the workshop with a minilesson about finding topics for writing.

All year long I show my students different ways to uncover, capture, and act on their intentions as writers, and I make sure the classroom is a fertile environment for writing ideas. I read aloud, and we read together, poems, memoirs, short short fiction, essays, parodies, profiles, reviews, and advocacy journalism. I conduct the status-of-the-class survey out loud so they can hear one another's ideas for topics. I schedule class readings of cut-and-paste anthologies of their writing. I provide information about publication options—the school literary magazine, national and regional contests, websites and journals that feature teen writing, guidelines for letters to the editor and guest editorials in local papers, places to submit reviews, and the power of gifts of writing for people they love. I also conduct a lot of minilessons about topic development: each is an invitation to students to generate and record ideas they might explore in a different genre. And at every step I remind students: “You could do this.”

I launch the year by demonstrating the range of my interests as a writer and inviting students to begin to name and lay claim to theirs. I call these ideas our *writing territories*: the ground each of us might cover as a writer. In August I update my own list of territories (Figure 3.6). Because I use it both to show kids what writing can be good for and to inspire topics, I make my territories specific, personal, unpretentious, and inviting: ideas of mine that might spark theirs. I reproduce my list on overhead transparencies and use it as the basis for my first minilesson.

Will you please open your writing–reading handbooks and turn the first three pages? We'll set these aside, so later they can become a table of contents for the hundred-page handbook we'll write together this year. Your handbook is where you'll gather ideas for writing, keep track of books you want to read someday, take notes about minilesson information or tape in notes I give you, create a lexicon of literary terms, and, later in the year, respond to prose readings. Right now, please write the number 1 in the upper right-hand corner on the front of the *fourth* page in your handbook. We'll use the front sides of pages only. Title your page 1 as I did the overhead transparency: *My Writing Territories*.

Today the most important thing for you to know about me is that I write, and for lots of different reasons. I call the ideas I'd like to pursue my *territories*. The ground I might cover as a writer includes topics I want to write about and the kinds of writing or *genres* that might fit them.

My territories list is a window on who I am as a citizen, woman, teacher, learner, mother, wife, daughter, gardener, dog owner, food lover, and exercise hater. It's the place I go when I'm trying to decide what to write next. It's the bank where I deposit my ideas. It's a reminder: “Oh, yeah, I remember—I wanted to do *that* as a writer.” And when I get a new idea, which I know I'll lose if I don't write it down, this is where I capture it. Keeping a list like this helps me be more organized, productive, and satisfied. It's a memo to myself—what I know and care about as a person who writes.

NANCIE'S WRITING TERRITORIES

- Almond M&Ms—my favorites: sugar *and* protein—an ode? a humorous essay?
- My love of flip flops—a poem that plays with their sound and rhythm?
- The heron on our pond: his F-R-R-R-A-A-H-H-H-N-N-K-K call when he arrives each June; how we know it's low tide when he comes to wade and fish . . . until this summer, when an oyster farmer took over the pond. Now it may never be low tide or summer again; cormorants have started to perch on the oyster pontoons, and they look like vultures to me—a memoir? a persuasive essay?
- Mashed potatoes: the ultimate comfort food—a personal essay?
- Bacon and O.J.: the ultimate combo—an ode?
- Rosie spitting out a four-leaf clover on the kitchen floor—a poem?
- Rosie then (a puppy) and now (aged eleven)—contrast her morning kisses, ball catching, walking and talking the garden together—a parallel stanzas poem?
- Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk has *everything*: it's salty, sweet, creamy, bitter, smooth, and chunky—an ode?
- Why exercise is stupid and boring—an essay?
- Dangerous stuff my parents let me do/didn't bother to check out: shooting a B-B gun, throwing snowballs with stones in them, dam-building and catching crayfish in a polluted creek, setting off fireworks, building go-carts with lawnmower engines, races and crashes, backyard dumps, midnight hide 'n' go seek, bike jumps, shed jumping, no-helmet-no-hands-no-feet bike riding, scabs, scars—a personal essay?
- An ode to the acorn—Cody's joke—à la Neruda's ode to an apple?
- The *need* for kids to choose their books—a speech or essay?
- Kids' bedrooms: Anne's and how she's long gone, but all the layers remain and create a shrine to her childhood and adolescence—an essay? a poem?
- Wild turkeys: prehistoric beasts that stroll past our screened-in porch and prove that birds did, in fact, evolve from dinosaurs—a poem?
- *In the Middle*, third edition—a professional book for teachers
- A lifetime of bad eyesight—20/500; I need glasses to find my glasses—a memoir?
- Blue—an ode to my favorite color
- Reading ritual: in my favorite chair with a great novel and Rosie in its mate beside me and upside down—a poem?
- Candy corn, Mary Janes, fireballs, candy cigarettes, and Canada mints: the gourmet foods of my childhood, plus memories of making sparks in the dark with wintergreen Lifesavers—a personal essay or a memoir?
- Shopping for shoes as one of my favorite acts of meditation—a poem or an essay?
- Writing by hand: my favorite, hard-to-find Liquid Espresso pens—their glide so easy it feels as if I'm thinking with my fingers—a personal essay? a poem?
- Connections between obsessive gardening and Anne growing up and leaving home—a memoir? an essay?
- Toby's and my all-occasion toast: "To Anne." A gift of writing for her?
- Why everyone in America should read *The New York Times* every day—a rant/essay?
- The sausage and egg McMuffin = my American guilty pleasure #1—a poem? a personal essay?

Figure 3.6 *Nancie's Writing Territories*

I'm going to talk from my territories list for ten minutes. If something I say rings a bell—makes you think of a topic you might like to try someday—please jot it down on your territories list. When I'm done, you'll have ten minutes to continue your list, and then a chance to talk with others and glean even more ideas from them. That's not copying; it's being inspired. The goal is for you to gather as many topics as you can before you leave here today. Don't lose any germ of an idea that comes to you while I'm talking. Listen and write at the same time. Ready?

I've got to start my territories with the candy I can't see without buying it, the sweet treat I know *has* to be good for me, because, well, there's an almond in the middle, and that's a source of protein. Right? *Right?* I'm thinking I could write an ode to almond M&M's, like one of Pablo Neruda's odes to common things. Or maybe a humorous essay about my obsession with it. What's the candy you have trouble walking past without drooling and begging your mom to buy it? Jot it down. . . . [And so on, down the list. My DVD project *Writing in the Middle: Workshop Essentials* (2011) features a complete riff on my territories.]

These are my writing ideas for the year—my obsessions, memories, responsibilities, itches, rituals, and frustrations. My writing about these topics will take different forms—poems, memoirs, essays or articles, gifts of writing, even a book.

Now it's your turn. Please take ten minutes to continue your list of territories. It's fine for you not to consider genres today. It's more important to concentrate on topics. Go for quantity, and try not to censor yourself. See how many ideas you can capture, and anticipate that new ideas will piggyback on previous ones if you let them. The goal is to fill the page.

If you get stuck, you might want to consider this list of categories [Figure 3.7], plus two other writers' territories, generated on another first day of school by eighth graders Tristan and Sophia [Figures 3.8 and 3.9]. The check marks on Tristan's list indicate that these are topics he wrote about that school year.

I circulate among the kids, look over their shoulders, whisper questions, and point out categories of topics they haven't considered yet. After ten minutes, I ask them to partner up with two or three other writers and take turns reading aloud ideas from their lists, with inspiration as the goal: "When a classmate's idea rings a bell, add it to your own territories, because this is the reason your group is meeting." I tell them I'm confident everyone will generate at least a half dozen additions. Again, I circulate and nudge.

When the small groups return to the minilesson circle, I celebrate quantity: "How many people found six new ideas? Ten? More than that?" And I issue an invitation. "Please add to your territories list *whenever* an idea for a piece of writing occurs to

IN COLLECTING YOUR WRITING TERRITORIES, REMEMBER AND CONSIDER . . .

obsessions	clothing and shoes
idiosyncrasies	hairdos and haircuts
problems	pets, now and then
dreams	teachers, now and then
itches	places: school, camp, trips, a beach, times away with friends and relatives
confusions	hobbies
passions	collections
pet peeves	first times doing something
sorrows	holidays and family rituals
scars	sports
risks	games: computers, board, team
accomplishments	music
fears	books
worries	poems
fantasies	songs
memories of:	movies
grandparents	writers and artists
mom and dad	food you love or hate or used to
cousins	beloved stuffies and other possessions
friends, now and when you were little	all the loves of your life
fads	
favorites, now and when you were little	

Figure 3.7 *In Collecting Your Writing Territories, Remember and Consider . . .*

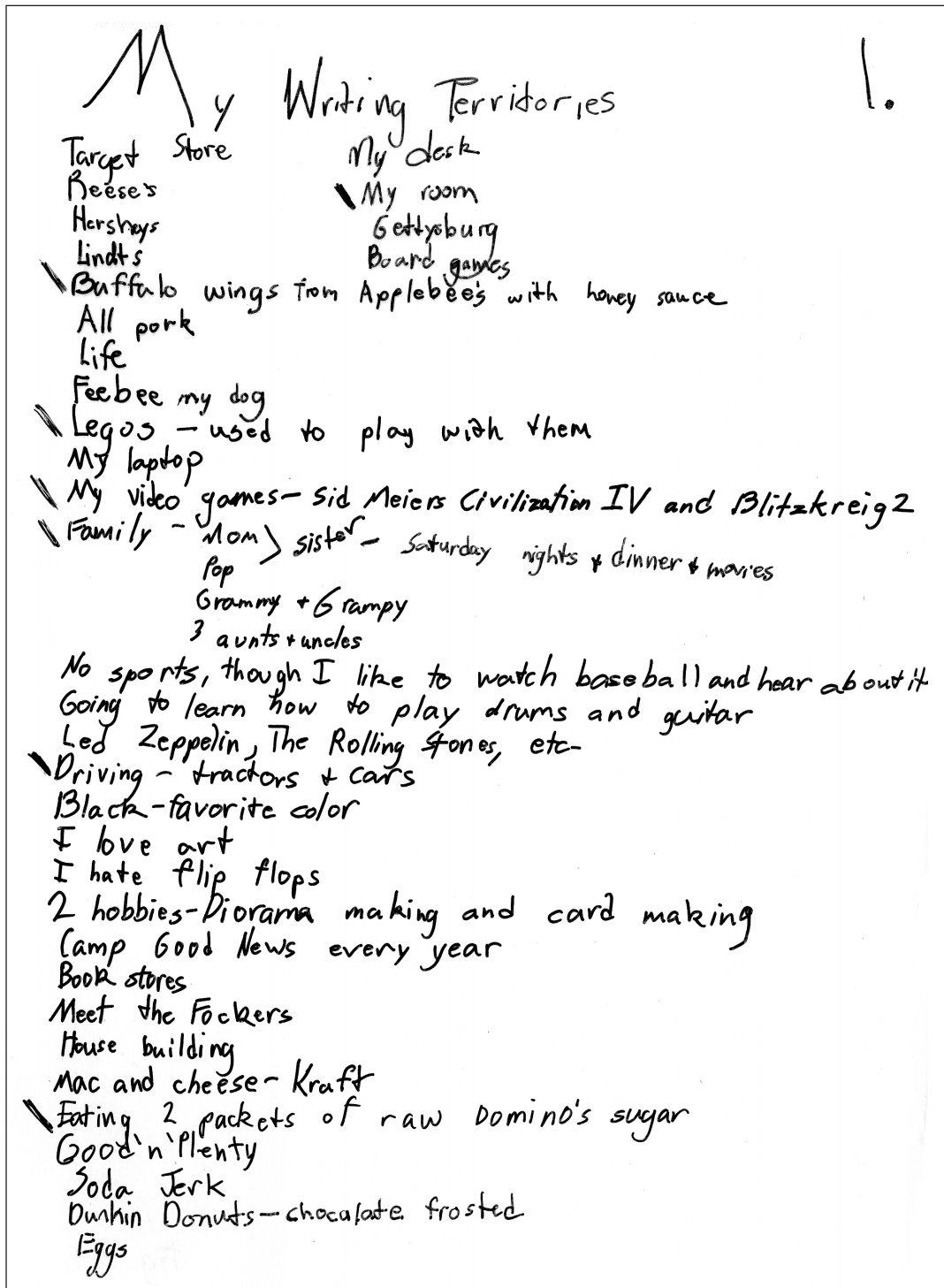


Figure 3.8 Tristan's Writing Territories

Writing Territories

putting make-up on when I was little
needing noise to fall asleep
Little Einstein's videos
Crying when I read The Giving Tree
taste of Christmas (candy cane)
lamb chops - B-day dinner
picking out the perfect Christmas tree
Barbies
Worried I wouldn't fit in because I didn't have A&F or Aero
fudge from Perrie's nuthouse
School shopping
Star gazing
Getting my first American Girl doll
The smell of the plastic food in my grandmother's house
Love sagas w/ Barbies and w/ Josie
Sitting around the campfire
Snow forts
throwing wood in the basement
Riding bikes in dark
My room
Putting down Lilly
Going to the Red Sox
Chocolate lollie-pops
Building the campfire w/ my dad
how my cat presses his forehead to mine
Going to Treats w/ Eloise alone
Jumping waves w/ my dad
Thursday nights
Making fun of newspeople → TODAY w/ my mom
3 dolphins in a arch
Eating in a cafe in NYC
Grand Canyon
car rides w/ mom

Figure 3.9 Sophia's Writing Territories

you—don't count on remembering it if you haven't written it down, and do take responsibility for developing projects that matter to you as a writer."

Finally, I assign homework: "Please draft for half an hour tonight, in the form of a free-verse poem, about a topic on your territories list that *calls your name*—one it would be intriguing and enjoyable for you to explore. We've already read two free-verse poems together. Here's a working definition: a free-verse poem doesn't rhyme and relies on the natural rhythms of speech." And I explain why we're starting with poetry.

"It is the mother genre—the literary foundation upon which you'll build excellence as a writer. Because its form is more compact than prose, you'll be able to finish pieces of writing right away, experience a whole writing process, and feel the satisfaction of finished work. Through writing poetry, you'll also learn how to pay attention, figure out what matters, make sense of it, give shape to it, consider diction or word choices, build themes, craft literature, and, more so than with any other genre, help yourselves lead lives of worth."

Since students don't compose in their writing-reading handbooks, I give each of them a pad of lined writing paper. Then I pass out the writing-in-process folders and demonstrate how to assemble the contents: the pad in a pocket and, inserted in the brass fasteners, the rules and expectations for writing workshop on the bottom and the two copies of the individual proofreading list on top. I circulate a cup of highlighting pens, and together we review and highlight the expectations for a year of writing workshop, with my copy projected on an overhead transparency.

I don't expect students to highlight based on my underlining. The point is for them to decide what's important enough to underline and to engage—eyes *and* ears *and* small motor. My kids agree that highlighting helps them focus, and, because they're twelve and thirteen, they like the bright colors—some so much that certain markers become preadolescent status symbols. Go figure. Anyone who's not convinced it's possible to write a poem about anything might consider Abbey's about blue highlighters.

LEGEND OF THE HIGHLIGHTER

Every weekday morning from 8:50 until 10:15,
my seventh-grade life revolved around one thing:
nabbing one of the two blue highlighters.

Yes—
those highlighters shone bright,
summer and winter
a soft reminder that vibrant orange
and lemony yellow would forever be
second bests.

The competition was tough.
The cup was stuffed with oranges

and filled with all the yellows
I could never want.
They didn't carry the winter sky
or summer ocean.

The two blues
vanished
into the same hands
every time.

The Rule of SO WHAT? OR THEME
was ruined for me.

Two
blue
highlighters.
Whenever the cup rounded our circle,
my face was a hundred-page book that read
disappointment.

But with a fresh year come fresh traditions.
The cup was passed counter-clockwise,
and my hand became a skill crane:
it was the first time I won
the prize.

It was
summer and winter
at once,
and I was an eighth grader.

—*Abbey Hutchins*

The launch of writing workshop is the last day all my kids are doing the same thing. Starting tomorrow, when they bring in the drafts of the poems they started at home, each student will have a different agenda to pursue. This can be a daunting proposition for a teacher to get his or her mind around—it was for me. But because of workshop routines and rules, I know now not to panic. I've learned to look forward to whatever they show up with the next morning—to the diversity of their styles, perceptions, and topic choices, and to getting down to an approach to teaching that will make a difference for every one of them.

The third day of school brings a full-blown writing workshop with all its components in place: daily poem, minilesson, status-of-the class survey, independent writing time, and individual conferences with me. As the minilesson, we read and highlight the rules for writing workshop, and I point them toward the guidelines that make the biggest difference: “Write on one side of the paper, double-space, and, when word processing,

always print double-spaced, so you'll get in the habit of creating the breathing space that makes revision possible." I also stress the need to understand that *writing is thinking*. Conversations and other distractions prevent deep thinking and literary writing. I read to them an essential quotation for the wall of any writing workshop, Kafka's observation, "One can never be alone enough when one writes . . . there can never be enough silence when one writes . . . even *night* is not *night* enough."

I'm responsible to create the potential of night, of solitude and quiet, for every writer. Right from the start I enforce the rule against talking at the tables or computers. As soon as I hear chat, I zoom over to the chatters and get stern: "This space and time is for the hard thinking of writing. When you talk, you're distracting the brains of writers who are working hard to craft literature. *Be quiet.*"

I help keep the volume low by keeping my own voice low as I circulate and meet with writers. I whisper, and I remind anyone who responds to me at a conversational level to whisper, too. If I'm loud, the room becomes loud; it never fails. I try not to be a distraction to the other writers when I settle my chair next to a student's and whisper, "How's it coming?" When there is a disturbance during independent writing time, I've learned to get up and travel to the source, instead of remonstrating across the room and raising the heads of the whole class.

After today's minilesson about workshop rules, I teach kids how to look at a piece of their writing, make plans for it, and then respond to the status-of-the-class survey:

Each day, before you go your own way as writers, I'll ask you to tell me what you'll be doing: your topic, the genre, and where you are in the piece. I'll write down what you tell me. This is called a *status-of-the-class survey*. It's how I'll keep track of your activity and progress, since every writer in the workshop is doing something different.

So, what's your plan for today? Let's consider the options. You might be continuing the first draft of the poem you started last night. Maybe you're starting a second draft: either typing or handwriting a new version of your poem. You might be reading it over and revising it—considering what you've written and making changes on the first draft. You may realize, in the cold light of a new day, that you chose a topic that doesn't call your name. Maybe you made a safe choice. If that's the case, it's more than okay to abandon it. Look at your territories list again, choose a topic that *yells* your name, and begin a new first draft. Everyone, take the next thirty seconds to look at what you have on paper and decide what you'll do today as a writer.

Now, when I call your name, tell me the topic of your poem—not the title, because titles usually come at the end, but what your poem is *about*. Then tell me what you intend to do with it in today's workshop.

Please don't talk while others are reporting their topics and plans. I want to do this quickly, so you can get down to work as writers, but I also want you to hear other writers' topics, because their ideas may inspire yours.

I use the vocabulary of writing process right from the start and teach it in context—*topic, first draft, second draft, revise, genre, abandon*. The last is a crucial concept, especially for students who haven't had experience developing their own ideas. They can settle on tired subjects that offer little potential for developing a theme or topics so broad it would take a book to do them justice. Instead of expecting kids to pursue weak choices to the bitter end, it just makes sense to give them permission to abandon an idea that isn't working and move on to one they can embrace.

Another reason I teach the vocabulary of writing process is to speed up the status-of-the-class survey. Giving kids the words means they can cut to the chase. But I need to cut to the chase, too. This isn't a time to confer with individual writers, since my purpose is to make a record. If status takes longer than a few minutes, I'm wasting the whole group's writing time. If a student hesitates, or if I have questions or qualms, I leave the space blank and come back to the writer once the minilesson circle has disbanded.

By the end of the status-of-the-class, each writer has made a contract with me, one I can hold kids to if they veer into misbehavior. Their responses aren't carved in stone—they can change their plans—but they recognize I'm holding them accountable for working and producing. Before they leave the circle, I offer the benediction I'll pronounce all year long at this juncture: "Off you go. Work hard, and make literature."

And then I'm on the move as I try to meet with every writer in this workshop or the next one, make sure everyone has an intriguing topic, and check that they're producing text and on track. It's a busy time. It passes so quickly I can never believe it when I look at the clock and see we're about to encroach on reading workshop.

In my first conference with seventh grader Carl about his first piece of writing, I encountered a writer who had gone off track. When I stopped at his desk, I found a rhyming poem about a general subject, without a first-person presence or the hint of a theme, and with a last line I could only regard as the act of a desperate rhymer (Figure 3.10).

"Carl," I said, after I skimmed the draft, "why are you writing about this?"

"'Cause, you know, it's my rep," he explained. "I'm in a lot of plays—everybody knows that."

"So, if you and everyone else already knows this, why are you writing about it?" Carl shrugged. I continued. "Do you think maybe you chose this topic *because* it's obvious? The problem with a list of things about school plays is that it doesn't let you see or feel anything. As a reader, I can't see or feel anything either. I'm wondering if maybe this was a safe choice, you know, for the first week of school. Would you consider abandoning it and moving on to a topic you do have strong feelings about?"

By the end of this nudge, Carl was ready. Together we looked at his territories list for an idea that yelled his name, and he jumped at a subject he did love and find compelling: Hans, his dog. But I had another question for him.

"Can you tell me why you rhymed this? The assignment was to write free verse."

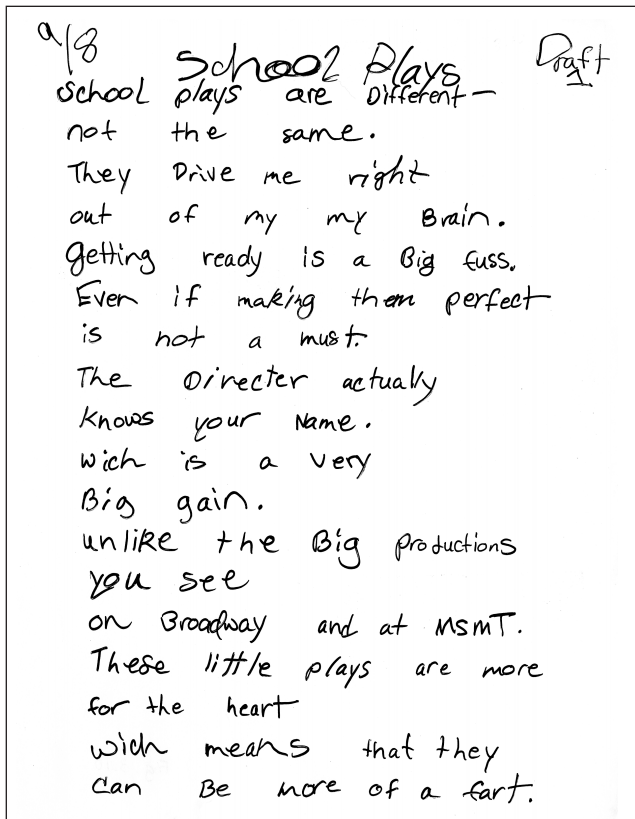


Figure 3.10 First Draft of Carl's First Poem

would otherwise have devoted to attempts to salvage “School Plays.” That poem did not have good bones. I could see it, and I helped Carl see it, learn from the experience of a poor topic choice, and move on. This is an example of teacher knowledge that makes handover possible in writing workshop. Yes, I’ve read a lot of good poetry and can bring what I’ve noticed to the advice I give kids. But I’ve read at least as many bad poems, and I recognize ways a student poem can go south. I wasn’t willing to let Carl muddle along and produce mediocre work.

“Treasure,” the poem about Hans, was Carl’s first-ever work of free verse. I recognize in it techniques he drew from the poetry toolkit we built in minilessons. These include a first-person voice and presence that give readers someone to be with, simple color words and sensory verbs that create imagery, a title that’s not a label, figurative language, repetition that creates a bit of cadence, a conclusion that resonates, and even some embedded rhyme. Here is a poem that captures Carl, the dog of his boyhood, and the shared treasure of a ritual they love.

“Oh, my poems always rhyme,” he said. “I’ve tried to write some free-verse ones, but all my poems come out rhyming.”

“Carl, are you trying to tell me you have, like, rhymers’ Tourette’s syndrome? Look, free-verse poetry is based on the way people talk. If you can speak without rhyming, you can write a poem without rhyming. Talk to me about Hans—tell me something you love about him or like doing with him, and I’ll start drafting a free-verse poem from what you tell me.”

I scribed two or three lines from Carl’s dictation, just enough to get him started. Then I made him a promise. “I know so many great things a poet can do besides rhyme. I’ll teach your class all of them in minilessons. I promise you’ll have a toolkit of free-verse techniques to bring to your poem about Hans.”

Although longer than usual, this conference eliminated the need for the many subsequent meetings Carl and I

TREASURE

I head outside
to where Hans
sits with an old,
worn tennis ball
in his jaws.

His green eyes
capture mine.
They beg me
to fling that ball
into the air
so far up
that only his keen
dog eyes can spy
the yellow sphere.

“Sit,” I say.
I try to pry
the tennis ball
from his jaws.
He turns his head,
reluctant to surrender
his worn-out treasure.

Finally I get a hand
on the ball.
I yank it away,
then toss it
to my throwing arm.
Hans stares at the yellow
in my hand.
He wants it.
He needs it.
So I pull my arm back
and let it fly.

—*Carl Johanson*

My first meeting with another seventh-grade boy, Patrick, about his first piece of writing illustrates a different kind of handover. Here, the draft I encountered didn't look like a poem (Figure 3.11). In addition, Patrick had preceded every *s* at the end of any word with an apostrophe, except for the single possessive noun that requires one. Some sentences didn't make sense, there were lots of misspellings, and random words had gone missing.

9/9 PATRICK

D 1

AS I LEAP OFF THE PIER WHICH IS
 CRACKED AND BUMPY FROM WEATHER
 TIME STOPS DOWN AS THE FAMILIAR
 FEELING OF WEIGHTLESSNESS COME
 BACK TO ME WITH A YES/COME
 OTHER MEMORIES OF JUMPING OFF
 THE PIER COME BACK TO ME/
 FOR A SPLIT SECOND WALLACE'S
 HAPPY EYES MEET MINE
 BEFORE THE WARM SEA WATER
 SWALLOWS ME AND CHILLS
 MY WHOLE BODY AS EMERGE
 THE SUN HEATS MY HEAD,
 AS TRADITION THAT HAS BEEN
 WHEN MY GRANDFATHER WAS A KID
 IS DONE.

Figure 3.11 First Draft of Patrick's First Poem

That night at home, when I read Patrick's responses to the September writing survey, I learned he didn't believe he was a writer. Thirty years ago I wouldn't have known where to begin with Patrick because of the severity of editorial issues in his draft. I'm afraid I might have just red-penned the apostrophes and told him to copy it over.

But look again: Patrick is already such a writer. Notice the strength and life of his verbs, nouns, and adjectives: *leap*, *pier*, *cracked*, *bumpy*, *familiar feeling of weightlessness*, *Wallace's happy eyes*, *warm sea water*, *swallows*, *chills*, *emerge*, *tradition*, *my grandfather*. The voice is first person and immediate, the tense is active, and as a reader I'm with Patrick in the moment. I can infer *why* this topic might matter to him.

I recognized in Patrick a writer who will need help with *parts* of the process, specifically legibility, editing, and proofreading. My priority today was to help him present his meaning as powerfully as possible and take pride in his accomplishment as a writer. This is the conversation that unfolded when I sat down next to him for our first conference.

"Hi. How's it coming?"

"Okay. I'm not sure. I can't really get a *so what?*" He paused. "The slashes are for line breaks."

I realized that Patrick had overheard me in conversation with his classmate Graydon, who had also drafted his first poem in prose form. I was appreciative of Patrick's slash marks, which indicate line breaks. "Can I just say, thank you for understanding, even though I wasn't having that conversation with you? That was smart—thanks for picking up on it."

"Yeah," he acknowledged, as he ducked his head.

Then I scanned his draft. "Oh, gee . . . this is nice . . . 'Wallace's happy eyes' . . . nice verb . . . nice verb . . . oh, this is lovely." A smile stretched across my face.

"Maybe I need to get more verbs?" Patrick mumbled.

"Oh, I don't know," I answered. "What you may want to do is go on to a second draft and see this as a poem. Hmm, I don't know if a tradition is 'done.' Do you know what I mean?"

“Completed?” Patrick offered.

“Fulfilled?” I suggested.

I had known Patrick’s grandfather Eldon, who died the year before. “Is this one of the Eldon family traditions?” It was. “Want to make your mother cry?” I asked. Patrick laughed. “Can you end with a line about Eldon, say, *Eldon would have loved it?* Bring it back to your family, and find your *so what?* there?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, ducking his head again.

“This has the bones of a great poem,” I enthused, “the bones of a poem you can read in twenty years, and it will all come back to you. So, want to try a second draft, in lines, as a poem with a conclusion about Eldon?”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

A few days later, after an editing conference with me, Patrick recorded two items on his individual proofreading list: “Apostrophes only on two kinds of words: possessive nouns (Patrick’s dog) and contractions (don’t)” and “Slow down and proofread for the missing words that readers need.” In the meantime, he had typed and revised a second draft and edited it in red, and I had edited it in black and chosen what conventions to teach him. Then he typed a final copy of a poem I think he’ll read with pleasure and nostalgia in the years to come.

WEATHERED

As I leap,
time slows,
and the familiar feeling of weightlessness
comes back to me,
along with all the memories
of jumping off the weathered pier
for the first time
summer after summer.
For a split second
Wallace’s happy eyes meet mine.
The sea
cools my whole body.
I emerge,
the sun heats my head,
and the tradition that’s been ours
since my grandpa was a kid
is fulfilled.
Eldon would have loved
to be here.

—Patrick Jackson

In handing over, I focused on Patrick’s meaning and intentions, helped him realize them, and taught, in context, the conventions he needed to learn. He did not master these errors in his next piece of writing—apostrophes on plurals were a longtime bad habit—but I reviewed them with him and handed off responsibility to Patrick to find and fix them the next time around. By the end of the school year, his drafts were transformed in terms of their adherence to the conventions of standard written English.

THE LAUNCH: READING WORKSHOP

When I wrote CTL’s faculty handbook, I opened the section about teaching reading with an epigraph from Frank Smith: “Children learn to read by reading. Therefore, the only way to facilitate their learning to read is to make reading easy for them” (1988). I would also add *inviting to them*. A big goal in the first days of school is to help every student find and enter a story he or she enjoys, no strings attached. This means lots of good books, intriguing booktalks, and time for kids to browse and read, along with teaching them how the reading workshop should sound and feel and why we have it in the first place.

Students should know the gist of the relevant research. Reading makes readers, and frequent, sustained, voluminous experience with books is the single activity that correlates with high levels of reading proficiency. I tell my new students the average number of books read by kids the previous year and that I anticipate more of the same. Then I distribute the highlighters and my lists of expectations and rules for reading workshop, and we review them together, with particular emphasis on the requirement to read books only, abandon a title if it isn’t making the reader happy, be silent, and, when I come along to chat, whisper to me, so that no one is jarred out of the worlds created by the authors of stories they love. The overarching goal is for everyone to be able to enter and stay in the reading zone every day.

I acknowledge to kids, “It can take a little while to feel comfortable reading silently in a group, even a quiet, thoughtful one—this is something we’ll talk about when we debrief at the end.” Students pocket the highlighted expectations and rules in their reading folders and file the folders, and I start booktalking—enthusiasing about 9s and 10s I read over the summer.

I learned about the power of booktalks from young adult literature expert Teri Lesense. In sessions at NCTE conventions, she introduced great titles to middle school teachers with such delight, enthusiasm, and specificity that I bought every book she recommended. I recognized that I wanted to excite kids about books the way Teri does their teachers.

Efficiency was another consideration in introducing booktalks to the workshop. I found that in my daily check-ins during independent reading time I was synthesizing the

plot of the same latest young adult novel a dozen times to different kids. In addition to these one-to-one recommendations, I needed a forum to inform the whole group about worthwhile titles.

So I started booktalking, and it does save time, but the most pronounced effect is on kids' book choices. At the end of any school year, around 90 percent of the titles my students name as favorites were the subjects of enthusiastic booktalks, either mine or a classmate's—spiels that brought life and color to the spines that line the shelves of the classroom library.

There's no prescribed format for a booktalk, no props, posters, reports, or notes, although I do keep track of my summer reading of y.a. titles on index cards, to jog my memory in September about books I finished in July. A booktalk is informal. In tone and content, it resembles the way adult readers talk to our friends about titles we love and think they might: tell how the book made us feel, describe main characters and conflicts, sketch the plot without giving away the surprises, mention theme, style, or genre, describe our encounter with the book—how we reacted to or read it. At the end of a booktalk, the booktalker takes questions. When a questioner pushes for plot resolution, I jump in, give a minilecture about the need to learn to tolerate ambiguity, and point out that the book itself is the answer.

My kids put an index card with their name on it inside a book they loved and want to recommend to the group, and then put the book on a shelf next to my rocking chair. A booktalked title must be one they rated at least a 9. A rating any lower is the kiss of death for a book for the rest of the school year. It should also be a title that hasn't already been booktalked by a classmate. The goal is to inform the rest of the kids about a great read, not for students to booktalk every title they loved.

The only exception to the no-repeat rule occurs when I am the initial booktalker. Some students regard my 9s and 10s with a healthy dose of skepticism. But when a peer rates the same book a 9 or 10, that title has been kid-tested, and the recommendation carries a different weight.

With a new book that I haven't had a chance to read yet, sometimes I explain what led me to order it—an award, good review, or previous encounter with the author—and read aloud the jacket flap and Library of Congress summary. Then I ask who wants to give it a shot and, if it's any good, booktalk it. I also introduce titles from my I-can't-go-there genres, science fiction and fantasy, and pass them along to fans to preview.

On rare occasions I break the no-lower-than-9 rating rule when a young adult novel has puzzled, disappointed, or even enraged me. I tell my kids, "This recommended book surprised/angered/flummoxed me, for these reasons. I'm not sure what to make of it. Will someone else try it and see what you think?"

When a competition breaks out about who'll get a booktalked title first, I do the time-honored, fair thing and ask everyone who's interested to raise his or her hand. The

booktalker thinks of a number and asks for guesses. The closest guess gets the book, and, if a lot of hands are raised, I try to purchase another copy.

Before I give my first booktalks of the school year, I ask students to open their writing–reading handbooks and continue to number the right-hand pages in the upper-right-hand corner, through page 19. Then I explain:

What you’ve just done, on pages 1 to 17, is create the skeleton for the *writing territories section* of your handbooks. All year long I’ll issue invitations to you to come up with ideas for pieces of writing in different genres. This is where you’ll capture them. Pages 1 to 17 are your ideas bank and, trust me, you will all be rich by June.

Please turn now to pages 18 and 19 and copy this heading at the top of each: *My Someday Books*. These pages are the place to keep track of the titles you think you might want to read someday. I ask that you take responsibility for planning your reading. Open your handbook to your someday pages whenever I or a classmate conducts a booktalk and, if it’s a title you’d like to check out, jot it down here. If a friend of yours is reading a book so enthusiastically that you want to remember the title, record it here so you don’t forget it. [Figure 3.12 is the table of contents page from a student’s writing–reading handbook, to show how it’s organized, and Figure 3.13 represents a page of an eighth-grade girl’s list of someday books.]

It’s important for you to become independent, intentional readers: readers with *plans*. Here’s an easy, convenient way to plan a diet of great reads *and* feel a sense of security as someone who chooses and reads books—a way to relax and say, “Look at all the great stories still waiting for me when I finish this one.”

So, let the booktalking begin.

I booktalk several titles at a time. Sometimes I group them by author or genre—free-verse novels, antiwar fiction, dystopian fiction, humor, memoirs—and other times by theme: peer pressure, censorship, friendship, first love, sports. I try to strike a balance between new titles and proven reliables. I began a recent year of booktalking with an old favorite and a new one.

Neverwhere by Neil Gaiman was published back in 1996. His *The Graveyard Book* was the first book ever to win both the U.S. Newbery Medal and the English Carnegie Medal. I have to say, I rated it an 8. I liked it, but I didn’t love it. I love *Neverwhere*. I think it’s Gaiman’s best book. I rated it a 10.

The main character is Richard Mayhew, a young man who leaves his village in Scotland to head to the big city. In London he works at an office, makes friends, gets engaged, and gets caught up in the routines of a nine-to-five grown-up life. Then, one night on the street, he rescues a battered, bleeding girl named Door, and Richard encounters the *other* London.

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Figure 3.12 Table of Contents of a Writing-Reading Handbook: First Page

My Someday List (Cont'd)

One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest ✓
 If I stay ✓
 Boy's Life ✓
 This Boy's Life ✓
 Beautiful Boy ✓
 No Country for Old Men ✓
 The Good Thief ✓
 A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius ✓
 My Left Foot ✓
 Rocket Boys ✓
 Where the Heart is ✓
 The Dog Stars ✓
 I Capture the Castle ✓
 What is the What ✓
 I Hunt Killers ✓
 The Art of Fiddling ✓
 Stern Men ✓
 Say Goodnight Gracie ✓
 Flight Behavior ✓
 The Round House ✓
 The Chocolate Girl ✓
 P&G ✓
 Never Let Me Go ✓
 What I Was ✓
 Between the Lines ✓
 Override ✓
 Schooled ✓
 Into the Wild ✓
 Strange Piece of Paradise ✓
 Goldengrove ✓
 The Lock Artist ✓
 The Sun Also Rises ✓

Home/and ✓
 Sex on the Moon ✓
 The Wandering Life of Oscar Wilde ✓
 City of Thieves ✓
 Game ✓
 Black Ice ✓
 Diary of a Young Girl ✓
 The Girl in the Green Sweater ✓
 Night ✓
 Bringing Down the House ✓

Figure 3.13 Helena's List of Someday Books, Second Page

The system of subway trains in London is called the *Underground*. Gaiman uses it to imagine a mythological London Underneath. It's a parallel universe to the city Richard is living in, a place where people who fall through the cracks live, and it's filled with unforgettable characters. Some have magical powers, including the most horrific villains I have ever encountered in fiction, Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar. They terrified me.

This is a scary book. It's also suspenseful, funny, and surprising. I thought of *Alice in Wonderland* when Richard went underneath and lost himself. Except Richard isn't Alice—his experiences change him. He starts out a conformist who wants a safe, predictable life. And then he goes below, and he finds himself.

The themes of *Neverwhere* are big: compassion for others, loyalty, trust, and, especially, good vs. evil. Plus, it's a rollicking good adventure story. As I said, it's a 10. Any questions or comments?

Of all the new releases I read this summer, I loved this one best. It's by E. Lockhart, who wrote the trilogy of novels about Ruby Oliver. I rated *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* a *bella*. First I'd better explain what a *bella* is.

One year an eighth-grade girl asked, "How do I rate a book that's higher than a 10, it's that good?" The girl's name is Bella; *bella* in Italian means beautiful and good. In her honor, I decreed that a beautiful, good, beyond-10 book would forever more be known in these parts as a *bella*.

E. Lockhart has written a *bella*. Frankie, her main character, is smart, brave, independent-minded, and funny. She attends an elite prep school that Lockhart calls Alabaster Academy—think Exeter or Andover. Something amazing happens to Frankie in the summer between her freshman and sophomore years: she becomes beautiful—as Lockhart puts it, she goes from “a homely child to a loaded potato.” As a result, Frankie becomes the girlfriend of her crush, Matthew Livingston, a senior, the acknowledged hottest boy at Alabaster, and the leader of a posse of rich, privileged guys. But Frankie discovers it's more than a posse. It's an all-male secret society, the Loyal Order of the Bassets, which her dad belonged to when he was a student at Alabaster. She's intrigued, and then she's angry. Frankie isn't content to be Matthew's arm candy. Her guts, intelligence, and imagination won't let her accept her diminished role as a female in Alabaster's power structure. And the plot thickens.

I can't tell you what she does. I can tell you it's cool, convincing, and I was with her every step of the way, because Lockhart describes Frankie's thoughts, feelings, and motivations so well. Lockhart writes like a dream—funny dialogue, convincing and memorable specifics, and great character development: not just Frankie's, but also tons of secondary characters who are believable, stand-alone people *and* who help us get to know Frankie better.

In my next life, I'd like to be as brave as Frankie. A *bella* for *The Disreputable History* was a no-brainer for me. Questions? Comments? Takers?

Each class of students and I conduct around 250 booktalks a year about titles we think are too good to miss. These are sales pitches, pure and simple. I liken them to the movie trailers that advertise coming attractions. They're the number one motivator for students to enter the reading zone, because they solve the number-one problem U.S. kids cite in explaining why they don't read more: they can't find books they want to read (Scholastic 2007). By creating frequent occasions to brief students about the great stories still waiting for them, booktalks make books visible, intriguing, and available. If a student hasn't yet given one by the end of the first trimester, I'll nudge him or her to make that a goal for the second trimester—to break the ice and take responsibility for helping peers, just as other kids pointed the reader to great stories.

After my first couple of booktalks, I show the class where their packets of book-borrow cards are stored, explain how to sign books out and in, warn them that they *may never* take a book from the classroom without signing it out, and turn them loose to browse among the titles in my library, chat about them, and make choices. Since I want everyone to have a book by the end of class, I hang out at the shelves and offer assistance—pull previously loved titles, introduce characters and summarize plots, explain genres, and encourage students to recommend to others the good books they're already familiar with.

Then students sign out their selections on their book-borrow cards and curl up on the floor, in beanbags, heads down on tables, it's their choice. The goal is comfort. A former principal of mine was irritated no end by the sight of adolescent readers sprawling, so I learned to spare him by taping a sign over the window in my classroom door: DO NOT DISTURB. READERS AT WORK.

Once kids are settled, I grab the clipboard to which I've attached their group's reading status chart, perch alongside or behind each reader, and note titles. "What did you find?" I whisper. "Why this one?" My essential responsibility, today and every day, is to make sure nobody is reading a book he or she doesn't like. A dissatisfied reader will learn the one lesson I never want to teach: reading is boring. Students need more than permission to abandon books that aren't pleasing them. They need strong encouragement—even the occasional cease-and-desist order. So I escort a reader who isn't happy back to the bookshelves and pull three or four acknowledged great stories for boys or girls. I tell a little about each one and ask the student to read the flaps, back jackets, and leads to see if one of them strikes a chord.

This has always worked. In the event it didn't, I'd pull another three or four books, tell their stories, and put those in the student's hands. The most important *should* in reading workshop is that every reader should be happy. Once kids develop a reading habit, the books themselves will form their tastes. Readers, like writers, need to begin the year feeling engaged and productive. I devote a lot of energy to choices and plans in the first week so individuals can find their seats at the dining room table as soon as possible, understand and trust the pleasure to be found in books, practice reading, and

start growing as readers. This is the essence of handover in the reading workshop. The DVD *Reading in the Middle: Workshop Essentials* (2011) brings the day of the launch to life.

Everyone has homework tonight: to read for half an hour and remember to bring his or her book to school in the morning. Of course, someone will forget. When it happens, I growl, say, “That’s your homework pass for reading class,” and refer the student to my collection of short story anthologies from which to select a story or two to read during that day’s workshop. I don’t want the student to begin another book or for anyone to be reading two books at once. They should be enjoying, sustaining, and gleaning the benefits of one whole, literary experience at a time.

In the next day’s workshop, after booktalks by me or a couple of eighth graders, I circulate with my clipboard again, this time recording page numbers. If they did their homework, readers should be around twenty pages beyond yesterday. If not, they’ve just used their pass for reading workshop; next time, it’s a letter home. If my teaching schedule didn’t allow for a reading workshop every day, I’d multiply twenty pages by the number of days since I’d last taken the reading status-of-the-class. Each student should be at least that far ahead.

Then I continue the whispered conversations we started yesterday. Some days, after I’ve checked in with every reader, I have a little time to return to my rocking chair, read my own book, or watch them reading theirs. Here are the same adolescents who at recess yesterday argued during a raucous game of horse as they exchanged iPods, sang, screamed, and teased. And now here they are, silent and *gone*—each one lost in the reading zone and living inside a story. It never fails to move me.

I hate to interrupt them, but it’s time. “Boys and girls, please come up for air and segue out of the reading zone. Let’s review: tomorrow you’ll need your book, writing–reading handbook, yellow homework folder, teal poetry folder, and blue writing-in-process folder. I have loved our first three days together. I can’t wait for all the days to come—to see what you’ll do next, then next, then next, as real writers and readers. I’m already impressed and excited. It’s already a privilege to be your teacher.”