READ
WRITE
TEACH

Choice and Challenge in the Reading-Writing Workshop

LINDA RIEF

Foreword by Maja Wilson

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2014 by Linda Rief

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review, and with the exception of reproducible pages, which are identified by the *Read Write Teach* credit line and may be photocopied for classroom use only.

"Dedicated to Teachers" is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

Maja Wilson's foreword copyright © 2014 by Maja Wilson.

Excerpt from "What's Right with Writing" by Linda Rief. Originally appeared in *Voices from the Middle* (May 2006, Vol. 13, No. 4). Copyright © 2006 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

Credits continue on page vi

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rief, Linda.
Read write teach : choice and challenge in the reading-writing workshop / Linda Rief.
pages cm
ISBN 978-0-325-05360-8
1. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Elementary) 2. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Middle school) 3. Teachers' workshops. I. Title.
LB1576.R5194 2014
428.0071'2—dc23 2013047428

Editor: Holly Kim Price
Production: Hilary Goff
Art direction: Lisa Fowler
Cover design: Suzanne Heiser
Interior design: Monica Ann Crigler
Photo credits: Dave Ervin, Laura Fant, Linda Rief
Typesetter: Gina Poirier, Gina Poirier Design
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
18 17 16 15 14 VP 1 2 3 4 5

Credits continued from page iv

Excerpt from “The Power of Reading: Practices That Work” by Linda Rief. Originally appeared in *Voices from the Middle* (December 2000, Vol. 8, No. 2). Copyright © 2000 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

Excerpt from “In My Room I Read a Poem to Dad” from *The Secret of Me* by Meg Kearney. Copyright © 2005 by Meg Kearney. Reprinted by permission of the author and Persea Books, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

Letter to students composed by author Robert Jordan. Reprinted by permission of Sobel Weber Associates, Inc.

“If Dress Code Doesn’t Suit Teens, School District Will” by Elizabeth White, Associated Press, from the *Houston Chronicle*, August 1, 2008. Reprinted by permission of The YGS Group, on behalf of The Associated Press.

Excerpts from the poem “The Teachers” by May Sarton. From *Queen’s Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3, Autumn 1945. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Maja Wilson *xv*

Acknowledgments *xix*

Introduction   Story: At the Heart of All We Do *xxiii*

The Essential Questions That Frame Our Year *xxxiv*

CHAPTER 1 *Grounding Our Choices in Our Beliefs 1*

- **What You Will Find in This Book** *1*
- **Goals for Students** *3*
- **Language Arts Goals** *3*
- **Core Beliefs About Teaching and the Language Arts** *4*
- **What Students Need** *5*
- **Student Examples of Writing** *8*
- **Beliefs About Writing** *17*

CHAPTER 2 *Getting to Know Our Students 23*

- **Choosing a Book** *24*
- **Checking Out Books** *25*
- **Name Cards for Portfolio Wall** *26*
- **Portfolio Wall** *27*
- **Marshmallow Challenge** *28*
- **Poetry Challenge** *30*
- **Covering the Writer-Reader Notebook (WRN)** *34*

CHAPTER 3 *Planning for a Successful Year 36*

Framing the Year in Choices *36*
Curriculum Overview *37*
Expectations in the Reading-Writing Workshop *37*
Pamphlet to Parents *37*
Overview of Expectations in the Writer's-Reader's Notebook *38*
Bookmarks *38*
Writer's-Reader's Survey *39*
Student Feedback from Survey *39*

CHAPTER 4 *Why a Writer's-Reader's Notebook? 42*

The Importance of the WRN *42*
Examples of Students' Thinking in Their WRNs *44*
Responding to the WRNs *45*
Keeping a WRN for Myself *47*
Focusing the WRNs with Younger Students *48*
Focusing the WRNs with Resistant Students *50*
Students' Responses to the Value of the WRN *51*

CHAPTER 5 *Immersion in Writing (and Reading) 56*

Finding Writing *56*
Quickwrites *56*; Interviewing *71*; Positive–Negative Life Graph *77*; Likes–Dislikes Chart *83*; Writing and Reading Memories *84*; Mapping the Neighborhood *98*

CHAPTER 6 *Immersion in Reading (and Writing) 101*

Finding Reading *101*
In the Spirit of Ass Kicking! *101*; My History as a Reader *102*; An Aunt's Story About Reading with Her Nephews *104*; A Bit of Historical Background on Giving Students Choice *105*; Reading Books of Their Own Choice *106*; Reading Together: Whole Class *119*

CHAPTER 7 *Essentials in the Reading-Writing Workshop 132*

Conferences *132*
Describing the Characteristics of Effective Writing *139*
Revising Writing *143*
Assessment and Evaluation *155*

CHAPTER 8 *Whole Novels* *159*

- **For the Maxes in Our Classrooms** *159*
- **For the Fionas in Our Classrooms** *161*
- **Reading Aloud as Story Theatre** *161*
- **In Summary: Promoting Reading** *164*
- **Highly Recommended Books** *165*
- **Suggested Books for Read-Aloud** *167*

CHAPTER 9 *Under the Influence of Writers: Author-Genre Studies* *186*

- **Goals for the Students** *186*
- **Guiding the Students Through Models** *188*
- **Planning and Timing of Author-Genre Study** *192*
- **Minilessons During Study** *193*
- **Fiction: Short Stories** *194*
- **Fiction: Let's Try Some** *194*
- **Using Pictures to Find Writing** *194*
- **Memoir** *197*
- **Poetry** *200*
- **Using Pictures to Stimulate Poetry** *201*
- **Graphic Writing (in Pictures)** *201*
- **Book Reviews** *203*
- **Examples of Author-Genre Study Writing** *204*
- **Studying Robert Jordan** *204*
- **Learned from the Author-Genre Study** *208*

CHAPTER 10 Exhibeo Humanitas *(Persuasive Writing)* *210*

- **Vote with Your Feet: Getting Kids to Realize They Do Have Opinions** *212*
- **Showing Students Examples of Opinion/Editorials** *214*
- **Showing Kids How to Compare and Contrast Varying Viewpoints** *215*
- **Using TED Talks to Enhance Students' Understanding of Persuasion** *217*
- **Using Previous Students' Writing as Examples** *218*
- **Katya: Eight Belles, "Too Young to Race," Political Cartoons, Process Paper** *220*
- **Beginning the Writing for Themselves** *227*
- **Political Cartoons** *229*

CHAPTER 11 *A Model of Writing* *232*

- **Madi: Becoming Me** *232*

Afterword *247*

References *249*

ONLINE RESOURCES

How to Access the Online Resources

STEP 1: Go to www.heinemann.com.

STEP 2: Click on "Login" to open or create your account. Enter your email address and password or click "Create a New Account" to set up an account.

STEP 3: Enter keycode and click "**Register**"

CHAPTER 2 *Resources*

Online 2.1	**What I Learn About Each Student**

CHAPTER 3 *Resources*

Online 3.1	**Curriculum Overview**
Online 3.2	**Expectations in the Reading-Writing Workshop**
Online 3.3	**Pamphlet to Parents**
Online 3.4	**Overview of Expectations in the Writer's-Reader's Notebook**
Online 3.5	**Bookmark**
Online 3.6	**Writer-Reader Survey**

CHAPTER 4 *Resources*

Online 4.1	**Madi's WRN Response**
Online 4.2	**Aidan's WRN Response**
Online 4.3	**Neville's WRN Drawing**

Online 4.4 Linda Rief's WRN Drawing
Online 4.5 Madi's WRN Responses
Online 4.6 Isabelle's WRN Responses
Online 4.7 Pete's WRN Response
Online 4.8 Jewelia's WRN Response
Online 4.9 Natalie's WRN Responses
Online 4.10 Kennon's WRN Response
Online 4.11 Linda Rief's WRN Notes
Online 4.12 Molly's WRN Response
Online 4.13 Jeff's WRN Response
Online 4.14 Alex's WRN Responses
Online 4.15 Rahul's WRN Responses
Online 4.16 Hunter's Third Grade Circle Journal

CHAPTER 5 *Resources*

Online 5.1 In-Class Interview Instructions
Online 5.2 Likes–Dislikes Chart Template and Examples
Online 5.3 Writing Memories Template
Online 5.4 Reading Memories Template
Online 5.5 Reader's-Writer's Poster Instructions
Online 5.6 Reader's-Writer's Poster Evaluation

CHAPTER 6 *Resources*

Online 6.1 Short Book Review Template for Rough Draft and Final
Online 6.2 Book Recommendation Examples
Online 6.3 Your Question for Author Here Handout

CHAPTER 7 *Resources*

Online 7.1 Conference Sheet
Online 7.2 Peer Conference Comments
Online 7.3 Characteristics of Effective Writing
Online 7.4 Revision Sheet
Online 7.5 Process Paper and Evaluation

CHAPTER 8 *Resources*

Online 8.1 ***The Outsiders* Vocabulary**
Online 8.2 Blank Storyboard Sheet
Online 8.3 Character Analysis Guide
Online 8.4 Character Analysis or Art-Biography
Online 8.5 Process Paper for *The Outsiders*
Online 8.6 Tableaux Instructions
Online 8.7 Questions to Guide Discussion
Online 8.8 Elizabeth's Storyboard on Johnny, Art-Biography, and Process Paper
Online 8.9 Katya's Art-Biography and Process Paper on Sodapop
Online 8.10 ***The Giver* Vocabulary**
Online 8.11 Vocabulary Card Example
Online 8.12 Hair in *The Giver*
Online 8.13 ***The Giver* Questions to Consider**
Online 8.14 ***The Giver* Storyboard**
Online 8.15 Morgan's Writing Sample
Online 8.16 Isabelle's Writing Sample
Online 8.17 Yasmine's Writing Sample
Online 8.18 Jules' Drafts of Writing

CHAPTER 9 *Resources*

Online 9.1 Overview of Author-Genre Study
Online 9.2 Synopsis of Expectations
Online 9.3 Recommended Authors
Online 9.4 Interest Sheet
Online 9.5 Author-Genre Study Grid
Online 9.6 Summarizing Ideas for Writing from Reading
Online 9.7 Quotes from *How Writers Write*
Online 9.8 Fiction: Let's Try Some (Exercises for Developing Fictional Pieces)
Online 9.9 Short Story Characteristics
Online 9.10 Notes on Poetry Writing

Online 9.11 Notes on Cartooning
Online 9.12 Book Review Characteristics
Online 9.13 Book Review Recommendation Template
Online 9.14 Completed Book Review Recommendations
Online 9.15 Process Paper: Author-Genre Study
Online 9.16 Learned from My Author Study
Online 9.17 Evaluation of Author-Genre Pamphlet
Online 9.18 Kobi's Process Paper and Writing
Online 9.19 Danielle's Process Paper, Graphic Story, Graphic Novel Pamphlet, and WRN Responses
Online 9.20 Jules' Process Paper, Realistic Fiction Story, and Book Review
Online 9.21 Kailey's Process Paper, Historical Fiction Story, and Book Review
Online 9.22 Katya's Reading Chart, Realistic Fiction in Free Verse Poetry, Process Paper, Short Book Recommendation, and Learned from the Authors
Online 9.23 Jeremy's Story and Robert Jordan's Letters

CHAPTER 10 *Resources*

Online 10.1 Opinion Writing Sheet
Online 10.2 Keerthi's Writer's-Reader's Notebook Responses
Online 10.3 Keerthi's Belief Statement and Write-Around Questions
Online 10.4 Keerthi's First Draft
Online 10.5 Keerthi's Second Draft
Online 10.6 Keerthi's Final Draft
Online 10.7 Keerthi's Process Paper

CHAPTER 11 *Resources*

Online 11.1 Madi's Rough Draft of Multigenre Writing
Online 11.2 Madi's Process Paper
Online 11.3 Madi's Year-End Self-Evaluation
Online 11.4 Year-End Self-Evaluation Template

FOREWORD

by Maja Wilson

Giggles and nudges are passing through Linda Rief's eighth-grade language arts classroom faster than a rumor. Linda is reading aloud from Gary Paulsen's *Harris and Me*. In an act of revenge, the narrator is urging Harris to pee on an electric fence. The students are waiting for it—the moment the yellow arc hits the wire and Harris gets what's coming to him, retaliation in the form of an angry stream of electrons going you know where!—but Paulsen and Rief are dragging it out, building a long slow agony of suspense, and these thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds who walked into the room as cool, calm, and collected as high school seniors are now acting their age, sharing their glee with knowing smirks and raised eyebrows and barely contained titters.

There's more going on here than the pleasure of a good yarn about pee and pain. At the beginning of class, Linda told the class about meeting Gary Paulsen in person. He spoke about the difficulties he faced as a child, how a librarian got him off the streets, how it was dark and cold outside when he wandered into a warm, bright library. How the librarian gave him hot chocolate and told him he was welcome anytime—he didn't need to read anything. How, many visits later, he asked if she had any books he might like. How he began to read, gobbling up books, "hungry like a wolf," and realized he had stories to tell, too.

Linda asked if anyone had read anything by Gary Paulsen. They blurted out titles: *The River*, *The Winter Room*, what about that one with the kid who is stranded in a plane crash? Oh yeah, *Hatchet*. Linda talked about how "the seeds of these stories"—characters, settings, conflicts—came from Paulsen's life. That's the theme of the day, as it turns out: how reading helps us turn our experiences into stories.

When Linda finishes reading and the laughter and groans at Harris' electrifying conclusion subside, students pull out their notebooks. They've only got two minutes to jot down ideas—words, lists, sketches even. They could note an experience Paulsen's story reminds them of or write the stories they collected for last night's homework assignment: to ask their parents to tell them the stupidest, scariest, most dangerous, or most embarrassing thing that ever happened to them.

After this "quickwrite"—Linda's term for it—students clamor to share. There are the requisite pee stories, and then one student tells a story his dad told him. His dad grew up on a military base overseas and was playing outside one day. He thought he'd found a toy. Only it wasn't a toy. It was a hand grenade. There's a murmur of awe, some discussion about what it might be like to be a kid in a place littered by the remains of war, and then Linda talks about how the student might use that story in his own fictional writing project. He could extend it, embed it in something else, tell it from another character's point of view, or ask the *What If* question: "What if your dad hadn't realized it wasn't a toy?"

Linda points out that one of Jodi Picoult's books starts with a *What If* question: Picoult read a newspaper story about a girl conceived to provide her sick sister with bone marrow, and asked herself, "What if that girl grew up and didn't want to give her bone marrow to her sister?" That question turned into *My Sister's Keeper*. The *What If* question, Linda tells her class, is an important one for a writer.

Now they're into the real work of the class. They've each already chosen and read three books by the same author in the same genre—historical fiction, horror, science fiction, whatever they've been drawn to—and they've noticed and written about the characteristics of that genre. They're using this genre study to write a story of their own. They've got hundreds of "seeds of stories" to draw on, many of them already recorded in their notebooks.

After just twenty minutes of observing Linda's class, I've got a hundred ideas and am itching to pull out my own notebook. But I want to know how things are going for those who aren't so thrilled about school in general and English class in particular. There's a kid across the room with a stack of historical fiction on his desk, brows furrowed, looking like he's going straight from eighth grade to a 1600 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. A lanky young man flips through a book with a picture on the cover of a giant robot lurking over high rises, a mechanical King Kong of sorts. I walk over to him.

He isn't much of a reader, he confesses, but he's become obsessed with this series. Each story involves a robotic villain and the violent takeover of a well-known city, and he's noticed that the first line always involves extreme weather. It sets the mood, he says. He reads me the first line of the book, then the first line of his own story: "It was the hottest, muggiest day on record in Dover, New Hampshire." By the end of his half page start, I'm starting to sweat despite the January chill, wondering what awaits the inhabitants of Durham's neighboring town.

Students are working on different projects with varying degrees of sophistication, but they all talk about where their ideas come from and what they're trying to accomplish and what they might do next and how other authors have done similar things. This isn't a room full of students doing school. It's a room full of readers and writers who, for all the laughter and talk of body fluids, are working seriously on their writing, inspired by their lives and their reading.

* * *

But don't take my word for it. Don't even take Linda's word for it. Find out what the kids have to say about it. It's a year later, and I've just shared some of Linda's practices with the education majors in my literacy methods course, pointing out how they express the same principles about literacy and learning we've spent the semester exploring. But I'm warning my preservice teachers that good teaching is not distributing someone else's good handouts. "If the students feel it's hoop jumping, it isn't going to work. In the end, best practices and your best intentions matter less than how the children in your class experience them. To find that out, you've got to ask them."

As it comes out of my mouth, I realize I've just backed myself into an interesting corner. I've got to take my own advice. So, it's back to Linda's classroom in New Hampshire—not to watch her teach, but to talk to her students. I randomly pick fifteen of Linda's students to interview twice—in pairs or small groups—at the beginning and the end of the school year. We talk about reading and writing—what they're working on, what it means to them—and how they experience Linda's class.

While these eighth graders talk enthusiastically about various writing projects they're working on and books they're reading, the first thing that emerges most strongly from these interviews is the powerful effect of Linda's dogged insistence that *their intentions matter*. Sam kicks off the discussion of choices in reading. "Last year, we had to read a book, and we had to read it chapter by chapter." He leaves an agonizingly long pause between the words *chapter by chapter*. "And some days we would only read like four pages. But this year, when we read *The Outsiders*, I told [Mrs. Rief], 'I like to read books really fast-paced.' She said, 'If it helps you read better, and understand the book better, then go ahead and read ahead.' She lets you do what's best for you."

Andrew jumps in, "We get lots of choices in the class, which really helps because you get to write about what you want to write about, and when you get to do that, it really makes it better. You enjoy it and want to go on with it."

But it becomes clear that Linda's concern for her students' intentions isn't confined to what and how they read and write. It also permeates her responses to students' writer's-reader's notebooks, which they turn in every two weeks. Joey discusses how those responses make him feel. "It's really nice because she reads every single piece in our notebook for every student and . . . and when she comments on it, where she highlights stuff, you know that she cares about it. So that's really nice."

Then, Joey begins to grapple with how to describe the quality of Linda's responses. He is trying to articulate something complex, and his hands get involved where his words fail. "She helps us shape [our writing], but she shapes it in the way *we* want to. She's not fixing it for her, she's fixing it for us. Because she knows how we feel about writing. So she's not trying to fix the *way* we write, but . . . " At this point, Joey is speechless, gesturing wildly, and the four other boys in the room talk over each other trying to help him out. In the end, Andrew supplies an acceptable ending clause, "But, you know, improve it."

Then, Jake nails the effect of Linda's concern for their intentions. "The way that she shows us that she really cares about us makes us really care about what we're doing, so that just really motivates us. And really, like . . . I don't know, I just feel better about writing than I have in the past."

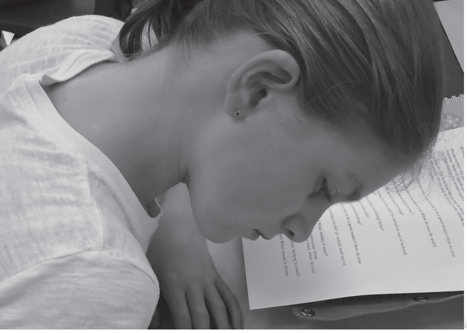
I ask Jake if he's now more likely to want to write outside of class. All five answer affirmatively, nodding vigorously. But they become most animated when Jake explains that Linda has her own notebook and writes with them. Andrew says, "It feels like she's respecting us because she's not above us."

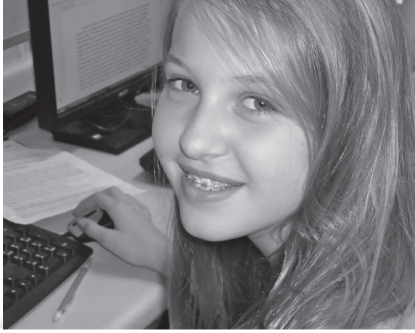
Joey interrupts, "Some teachers in the past, they feel like, they already passed seventh grade, so they don't have to do it anymore. But Mrs. Rief, she likes to [write], and that makes us like to do it, because she's really good at it and she inspires us. So when she writes about something, we're like, 'Oh, we should write about that too.' And it really helps when she shares her own writing, because then she can reflect on it, like, from her, and it really helps us to know what she felt."

Joey is reminding us that *process matters*—that writers need to read what other writers write, but also to know what they think and feel as they do. But process matters to teachers, too. The products of Linda's teaching—her assignments, her handouts, the list of books in her classroom library, how she sets up notebooks and the number of times she collects them—aren't a five-paragraph essay formula that all teachers should follow for a proficient score on the teaching rubric. Teaching, like writing, is contextual. It's one thousand decisions made every day, in context. It's holding and honoring relationships and principles and a dogged insistence that students' intentions and experiences matter.

In the end, it is important that this book isn't a compilation of tear-out reproducibles designed to help us replicate Linda's practices. Instead, it's the most powerful gift that a master teacher can give us: the story of her thinking and feeling as she teaches. Because, to borrow Joey's words, "She can reflect on it, like, from her, and it really helps us to know what she felt." This is a book grounded in stories, because Linda's teaching is grounded in stories—her own, published authors', the students' stories—and they all inform each other. We would be wise to let Linda's story—and her students'—inform ours.

Maja Wilson is the author of *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, which won the NCTE James Britton Award in 2007.





INTRODUCTION

Story: At the Heart of All We Do

August 2010
I am taking a creative nonfiction writing course with Meredith Hall, the author of *Without a Map*. Each day we read and discuss short pieces from professional writers: Mark Spragg, Sandra Cisneros, Sherman Alexie, Natalia Ginzburg, Jamaica Kincaid, Frank McCourt, and many other fine authors. We write, read aloud, and discuss our own drafts. I am learning from Meredith how to build an essay from a variety of scenes, each one a montage that can stand on its own but contributes to the whole. Lee Gutkind, editor of *Keep It Real*, describes montage writing as "an interpretive duet between the writer and reader, . . . a steady closing out of one scene and the unannounced opening of the next, fluidly and confidently. . . . At each opening discovering another component of a suggested truth" (Gutkind 2008, 104–105).

On one of the days in the course, I write:

> She is wearing turquoise Bermuda shorts, a sleeveless cotton blouse, starched and ironed, and white Keds that walk her across the lawn, down the ramp, and onto the dock. She starts to untie the dinghy, then stops, turns, looks—from dock to ramp to rock wall. She recleats the boat, and walks up the ramp, across the lawn, and into the garage. Then out. In her left hand she clutches two oarlocks. The oars rest across her right shoulder, clamped against her waist with her forearm. White Keds—across the lawn, down the ramp, onto the dock.
>
> She steps into the small boat, setting her legs firmly across its width, as the dinghy rocks with her weight from side to side, scraping, creaking against wood and canvas. She lays the oars across the seats from bow to stern. She plunges each oarlock into its cradle, unwinds the rope, and shoves off. She

> sets each oar in its lock. Leans forward and pulls back. Dip and pull. Dip and pull. With only the splash of wood paddle striking water, my mother dips and pulls, her feet planted firmly against the empty seat in the stern. The small rowboat weaves in and out of cabin cruisers and unmasted sailboats, a speck disappearing behind Pumpkin Island.
>
> Inside, he maneuvers down the stairs. He is not an old man, nor a young man. He is thin. Graying hair scatters in short, damp clumps just as they were when he stepped from the shower. He has been drinking for three weeks: beer, scotch, rum, whiskey—cough syrup, vanilla extract, if he can find nothing else. He doesn't like alcohol. But once he starts, he cannot stop. Today he is trying to stop. He is wearing the beige, terrycloth robe, tied at the waist, the robe he always wears when he's trying to stop.
>
> His bare feet read each stair as his trembling hand grasps the rail. Step down, one foot then the other. Wait. Rest. Step down, one foot then the other. Fourteen stairs. He turns in the hallway and his hand skirts the fading wallpaper—dahlias and lilies—that leads him into the kitchen, where a cup of instant coffee—strong, two scoops, a little milk, no sugar—waits. He places trembling hands on the Formica countertop, . . . and leans over the cup. His lips meet the edge of the mug, and he sucks in the warm liquid.
>
> Outside boats turn with the tide, drifting on buoys anchored between World's End and our back porch. My mother returns, up the ramp, across the rock wall, up the stairs and across the back porch. She catches the screen door so it doesn't slam. She does not look at me, or my father, or the cup of coffee she has placed earlier on the kitchen counter. But she says, as if to both of us, as if to neither one of us, and not about the coffee—"If he takes one more drink I'm tying him to the raft and floating him out to sea."

September 2010

Howard Colter, our superintendent, closes his remarks to all the teachers in our district on the opening day of school with the following story about himself.

As a little boy, he was awkward and uncoordinated when it came to sports. His parents forced him to go to a camp out west that focused on athletics. He did not want to go, but they insisted, thinking it would be good for him. He was as miserable as he thought he would be, as the campers, all athletes, continually made fun of him.

Eventually he made friends with a little boy who had polio. They walked slowly to the river, as his friend was in leg braces. They spent one entire day fishing, catching one trout after another. He said it was the best day he had had at the camp.

On their way back from fishing they had to go past the baseball diamond. The players spotted Howard and his friend and their line filled with trout. “Whatta ya got there?” the baseball players yelled, as they walked toward the two boys. They grabbed the line. These boys proceeded to pull each fish from the line, stood at home plate, and smacked each fish like baseballs across the diamond into the dirt.

Howard and his friend watched, unable to do anything to stop them, until the boys had had their fill of entertainment and left them staring at the remains of the fish in the dirt. Howard gathered the fish, and he and his friend started back to their cabin.

On the way they passed the dining hall, where one of the cooks spotted the boys. “Whatta ya got there?” the cook asked. He listened to their story, cleaned up the trout, cooked them over an open fire, and served them to Howard and his friend for their supper. They sat at a picnic table, talking, laughing, eating. The best meal he had ever had, he said.

He ended his remarks with, “You know, we have to keep testing in its place, as only one way of understanding if kids are succeeding. There are so many other ways. If you see a little boy with a trout, cook it for him.”

August 2011

I am in Val David, a small town in the Laurentian Mountains in the province of Quebec, doing a weeklong writing workshop with teachers and administrators. I ask them to think about those indelible moments of reading and writing in their own lives that left an impression on them.

Julie tells the story of passing by her three-year-old daughter, who is sitting on the floor, legs crossed, head bent into a picture book. She looked down and noticed her daughter was “lire a l’envers,” reading the book, she says, not knowing quite how to translate “l’envers.” “Upside down,” another teacher says, when Julie looks around for help with the word. She tells us, she reached down, picked up the book, turned it right side up and handed it back to her daughter. With no hesitation her daughter flipped it back, upside down. “Mama,” she said, “I’m reading in my imagination.”

September 2011

My eighth-grade classroom. Jewelia writes in her writer’s-reader’s notebook:

> As I sat she smeared the goop on my plate. My heart sank like the Titanic. I couldn’t take much more anxiety. I used my fork as a plow, pushing mashed potato mush everywhere. I spear a bite of lettuce with my fork, as the voice in my head screams “Put it down!” It sits in my mouth for a moment, the ranch dressing oozing in my mouth.

> There is a small part of me that wants to just chew, swallow, chew, swallow. The majority wins though, and when I eat less, it consumes more of me. I spear another bite of salad. I guide it towards my ungrateful mouth. I'm on my second bite (two bites too many). This bite is killing me. I count how much I chew: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, swallow. It's in my stomach, it's packing on more whale blubber. I can't do this anymore. I need to run, I need to move. I can't move.
>
> I can tell. She's watching me, but I don't look up, I won't look up. I can't see her disappointment; it will only make things worse. I swallow the lump of tears in my throat. Can't eat. Can't live here. Can't eat. Can't live with the tubes in the horrible hospital.
>
> The only reason that they let me stay is because I'm fat enough to stay. They say 93 is stable, but they want 100. They say 93 is stable, but I want 85.

October 2011

"We have to put all those stories of kids and families out of our heads and look at the data, the numbers," says the presenter at our staff meeting. We are about to be taken through a two-hour training in how to read the data, the numbers, from the latest round of more reading assessments we are forced to give—a mandated test for having *only* 83 percent of our students score in the proficient range and above on the *New England Common Assessment Program,* our state's test under No Child Left Behind, and not high enough to make AYP (the percentage gain defined as "adequate yearly progress"). I turn to one of my colleagues and ask with my eyes, "What? Put those stories aside—just look at the numbers?"

We are given a worksheet with the acronym ORID, subtitled Focused Conversation Data Analysis. To summarize, the presenter says: This is Focused Conversation Data Analysis: I notice (Objective), I feel (Reflective), I wonder (Interpretive), I need (Decisional). (To myself, I wonder if *decisional* is even a word.)

We spend the next hour and a half examining the scores of one class of students—what we notice, how those scores make us feel, what we wonder about these scores, and what we think we need to do as a result.

The teacher who has volunteered his students' scores to be used to train the rest of us to read the data says, "Isn't it odd—the scores don't seem to show what I notice in the classroom," but no one asks him what he notices. I notice 89 percent of our kids are at or above benchmark on this test. I raise my hand.

Normally, I say little to nothing at staff meetings. I cannot help myself this day. I want to know what we want for our students that these numbers reveal to us. Where do we want them to be that can be shown by these numbers?

The presenter calls on me. "What is that, the *benchmark*?" I ask. The presenter looks surprised at my question. "It's where we want kids to be," she says. "No, I mean, what *is* the benchmark? Where do we want them to be?" She pulls her shoulders up, lifts her chin with her thumb, curls her fingers into a loose fist, and presses them into her face just below her bottom lip. "*At* or *above* the benchmark," she says, and turns back to her PowerPoint presentation on the screen.

I forgot. We are here to focus on the data—the numbers. I do not pursue the question.

With these five stories I have attempted a montage, a series of scenes that reveal some truths—who I am as a person, who I am as a teacher, who my students are, what I value, and what they value. If I have presented them clearly, the reader takes his or her own truths to them, and from them, even as I have my own reasons for telling these stories.

Why tell about my mother and my father? Because I loved them, no matter their failings and flaws and struggles. No matter my failings, they loved me. I want my students to know me. I want them to know my stories. I read them my drafts of writing because I also want them to know I value what I ask them to do enough to do it myself. I use my writing to show them how to respond in a productive way to help me better my writing, so they will respond to each other in the same constructive ways.

I want my students to understand that I am what I teach—a writer and a reader. I am writing along with them in the risky business of telling some truths about my personal life and my professional life. I know that if they write about those things that matter to them, they will make it the strongest writing they can, because they have stories, opinions, knowledge, and feelings that matter enough to them to write convincingly and compellingly, for themselves and for an audience beyond themselves.

I want my students to see all kinds of writing, including the memoir as essay. I use this writing as one example of looking at the craft of writing in this genre. I show them what I learned about crafting a scene, putting the camera on the character and the action. I help them through the implications and truths in the story by looking at what I chose to include and not include. What conclusions can they draw about these characters from what is there, what is not there? What questions do they have that I need to consider as I write? I show them several more scenes as I build a more complete story.

As they read and write, what do they notice about the craft of writing in any genre? What are they attempting to do, and growing stronger at, as they craft writing with intent and use the writing of so many fine writers to mentor their writing?

After reading the writing of Karen Hesse, Meg Kearney, Ann Turner, and Sharon Creech, Cece writes a personal narrative in poetry—fourteen poems so far—about a father she has never met, never seen, who shows up at their front door the year she turns nine with a kitten in his arms. "He thinks he can buy back our love with a kitten," her opening line reads.

Mike writes a two-page essay about observing his dad perform surgery—an aorta bifemoral bypass, a cesarean section, a knee surgery, and a femoral-to-femoral bypass—after his dad asked him, “Do you want to come see me cut people open?” He did.

In his writer’s-reader’s notebook, he made lists of the kinds of doctors present, the extensive equipment used, jottings about happenings (cesarean section: make incision to abdomen, . . . pull out womb, cut open womb, literally manhandles baby’s head to pull out, baby comes sliding out in bluish color, put in heater, replace womb, sew up fascia, . . .), and drew diagrams of all of the surgeries, labeling the equipment used, the body parts, and procedures for each of the surgeries. He drafted his essay from these sketches.

The essay begins:

> If your dad came up to you and essentially said, “Do you want to come see me cut people open?” would you have said yes? I did. I didn’t exactly know what I was putting myself into. It would be an experience of interest, some slight

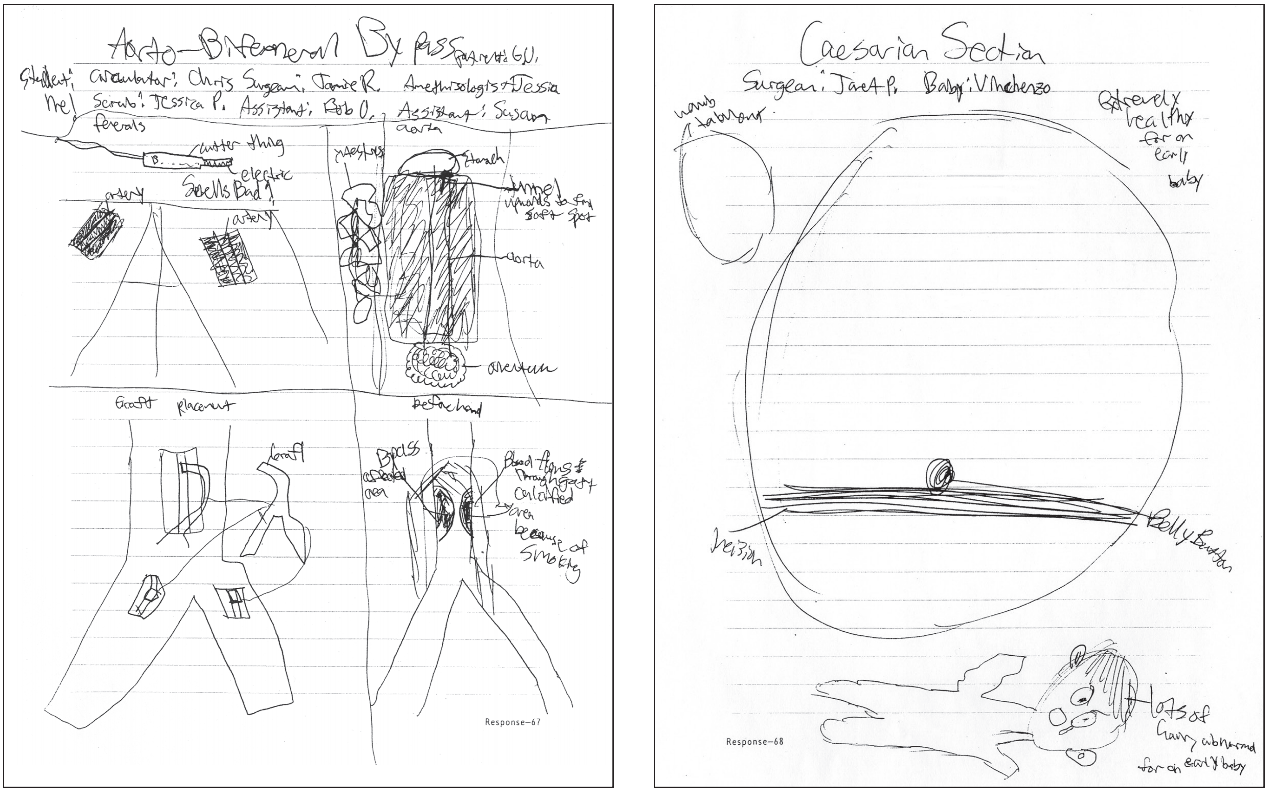
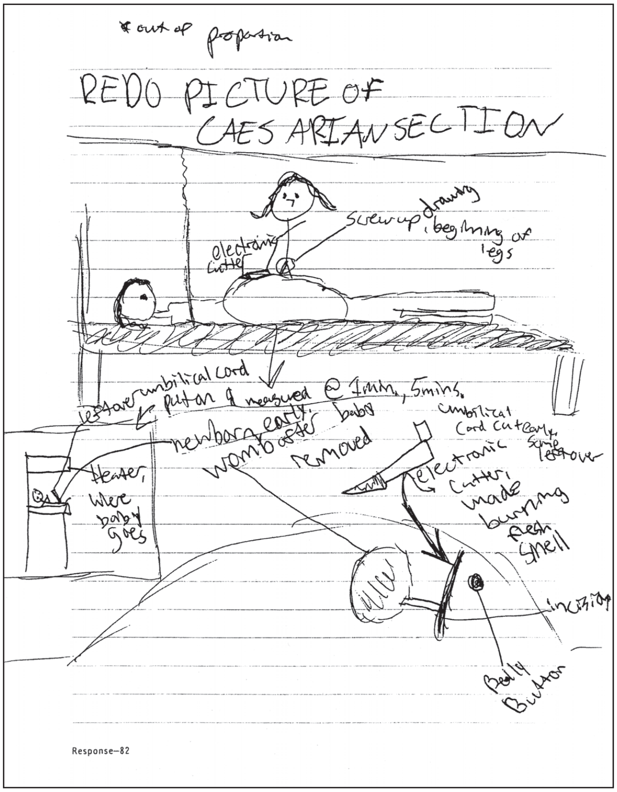

Aorto-Bifemoral Bypass
Student; Circulator; Chris Surgeon; Jamie R. Anesthesiologist; Jessica
Me! Scrub; Jessica P. Assistant; Bob O. Assistant; Susan
femorals
cutter thing
electric
Smells Bad!
artery
artery
aorta
intestines
stomach
tunnel upwards to find soft spot
aorta
omentum
Graft placement
graft
Before hand
Bypass
affected area
Blood flows through gets calcified
area because of smoking
Response–67
Caesarian Section
Surgeon; Janet P. Baby; Vincenzo
womb taken out
Extremely healthy for an early baby
Incision
Belly Button
lots of hair abnormal for an early baby
Response–68

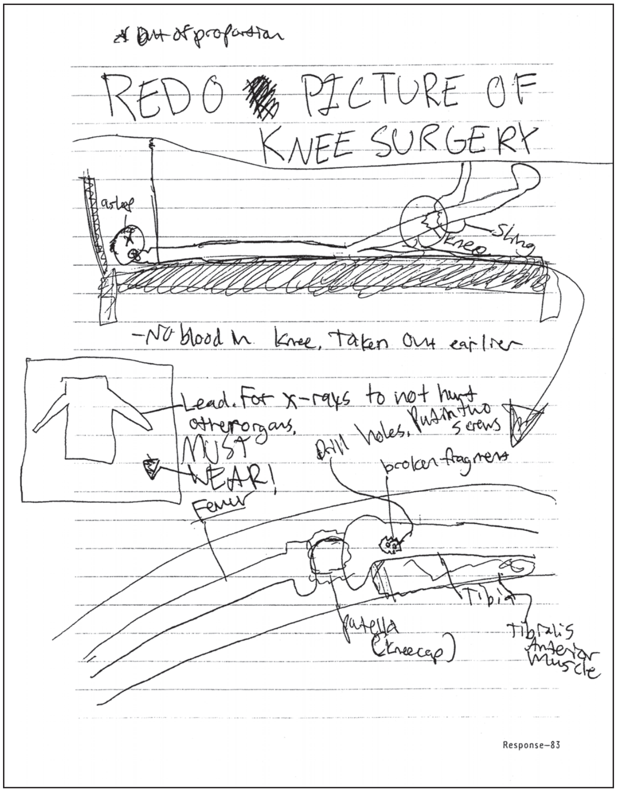
Figure Intro.1 *Mike’s First Draft Sketches of Observations During Various Surgeries*

> gore, perseverance, and a little bit of hands on. I also thought it would be an experience of a lifetime, so I said yes.
>
> Surgery is important to me because it's my dad's job, and I am considering practicing medicine someday. Surgery saves people's lives and can make them a whole lot better. Surgeons must have very steady hands, smart and quick minds, and be able to not have their skin crawl at the sight of blood.

In the essay, Mike admires the characteristics of the surgeons—their knowledge of body parts, their confidence in knowing what to do when a procedure does not go exactly as planned, and their ability to work efficiently and skillfully while holding someone's life (and body parts) in their hands. Mike's dad found his son composed and intrigued throughout the surgeries, concluding that watching these operations made him even more interested in medicine in his future.

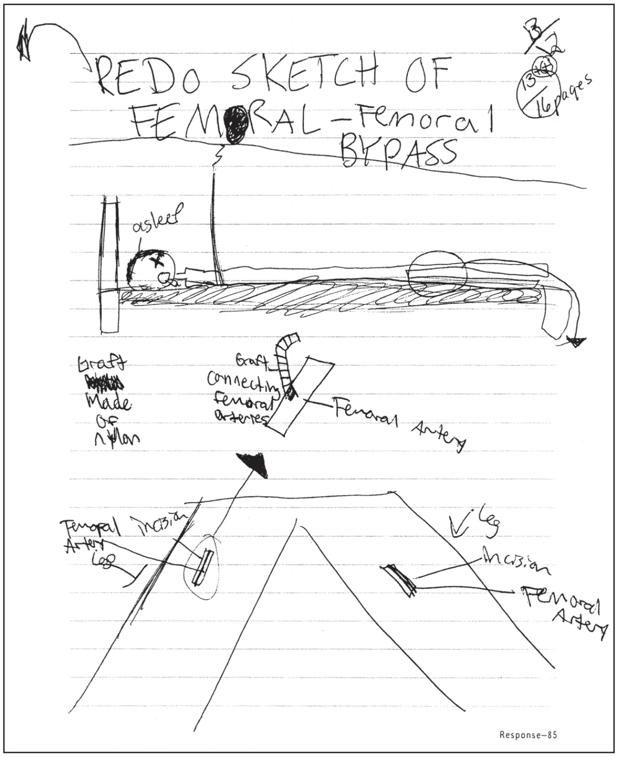

* out of proportion
REDO PICTURE OF CAESARIAN SECTION
Screw up drawing, beginning of legs
electronic cutter
leftover umbilical cord
put on & measured @ 1min, 5mins.
newborn early,
womb after baby removed
umbilical cord cut early, some leftover
electronic cutter, made burning flesh smell
Heater, were baby goes
incision
Belly Button
Response–82

Mike's Second Draft: Caesarian Section


* Out of proportion
REDO PICTURE OF KNEE SURGERY
asleep
Sling
Knee
-NO blood in knee, Taken out earlier
Lead. For x-rays to not hurt other organs, MUST WEAR!
Drill holes, Put in two screws
broken fragments
Femur
Patella (kneecap)
Tibia
Tibialis Anterior Muscle
Response–83

Mike's Second Draft: Knee Surgery

continues


3/2
13/16 pages
REDO SKETCH OF FEMORAL-Femoral BYPASS
asleep
Graft Made of nylon
Graft connecting femoral arteries
Femoral Artery
Femoral Artery
Incision
Leg
Leg
Incision
Femoral Artery
Response—85

Mike's Second Draft: Femoral–Femoral Bypass

Morgan writes about her love of the beach, until her parents take the family there, sit them down in the sand, and tell them they are getting a divorce. The beach changes for Morgan and her siblings. In her second draft she begins:

> When you think about the beach, you probably picture the dazzling sapphire waves spilling onto the sun-drenched sand, wisps of happiness swirling around with the wind. The icy water engulfing your toes until they're numb. You probably remember the sun's hot kisses. But when I think about the beach, all I picture is sadness. The bright, colorful memories concealed by sorrow and confusion that ripped our family at the seams.
>
> * * * * *
>
> One . . . two . . . three minutes of complete silence pass. I glance back and forth at my parents. Why haven't they said anything? I can feel the salty wind blowing my hair.

Stories define us and nourish us—intellectually, aesthetically, imaginatively, and emotionally. Our stories, and the stories of others, teach us to be human.

I was shocked to hear a presenter tell us to "forget the stories of our students." I cannot forget Jewelia's story, as she describes pushing food around on her plate and all it implies about what is going on in her life. Even as a first draft, she knows how to effectively write a poignant, compelling scene. She slides back and forth between past and present tense. But this is first-draft writing. We will talk about being consistent with tense if she chooses to take this to a more finished draft. What is more important is that I let her know that I care as much about her, and all she is going through, as much as I want to help her continue to craft a piece of good writing that helps her negotiate her world, a piece of writing that helps her clarify her thinking and speaks to a larger audience.

I cannot help Morgan craft her story as a piece of literature until I let her know how sorry I am her entire family has had to go through this troubling time—for all of them. Since writing is helping her work through all that is still going on in her life because of this divorce, I want to help her craft the event and feeling into the strongest writing.

Now we can talk about ways of entering this story in a surprising way, to reflect the shock she and her siblings felt when they learned the truth of this trip to the beach. "What if you start with what you, and most readers, expect at the beach, and then jump right to the scene? What if you sit us down next to you on the sand?" I ask her as we talk about the writing. Through the entire piece of writing, she continues to work out her surprise, her anger, her disappointment, and her eventual understanding of this event. She will draft and redraft this writing until it clearly portrays her feelings, her story, because it matters to her.

Our emphasis *should be* on the stories. The numbers give us a look through the window into our students' strengths and weaknesses, too often as test takers, not in the context of their lives. It's in their experiences, their efforts, and actual accomplishments as writers and readers that a much wider and deeper picture is revealed. I want to invite them into the house, not just take a peek through the window.

I carry Howard's story with me into the classroom in September. I can see it, hear it, feel it. What is the truth he reveals to me in this story about this little boy and the trout? How well do I know my students? What matters to them? What has hurt them? What makes each of them different? How do I let them know I care about them? How do I help them care about and respect each other? How do I build on their strengths?

It is the stories we remember that define us as thinking, feeling human beings. Every time I look into the faces of my students, I try to remember, "If you see a little boy with a trout, cook it for him."

Ursula LeGuin told us this when she said, "The story—from Rumpelstiltskin to *War and Peace*—is one of the basic tools of the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories" (Pink 2006, 105).

Daniel Pink confirms the importance of story in our thinking in the twenty-first century, when he reminds us:

> Stories are easier to remember—because in many ways, stories are *how* we remember. “Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought,” writes cognitive scientist Mark Turner in his book *The Literary Mind*. “Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. . . . Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories.” (Pink 2006, 101)
>
> Stories are important cognitive events, for they encapsulate, into one compact package, information, knowledge, context, and emotion. (Pink 2006, 103)
>
> Stories can provide context enriched by emotion, a deeper understanding of how we fit in and why that matters. The Conceptual Age can remind us what has always been true but rarely been acted upon—that we must listen to each other’s stories and that we are each the authors of our own lives. (Pink 2006, 115)

In the education of our children, we must remember their stories and work to invite and encourage them. As Daniel Pink reminds us, it is how they remember their past and shape their future.

Children are not numbers. My teaching cannot be defined by the data of numbers alone. Numbers may be a portion of the story, but they are just that—a small piece. My teaching is defined by the stories my students tell. Stories in the classroom—that fill their portfolios and journals. Stories that tumble out of them in response to stories they hear and read. Stories in the hall, or out at recess, in the lunchroom, the locker room, or study hall. Stories of historians and scientists, musicians, and athletes. Stories of their lives that I can help them craft into essays, poetry, memoirs, letters, reviews, speeches, short stories, and so on.

Story shows that we are thinking, feeling human beings with connections and relationships to each other. When I write about those things that I believe, and think, and feel, students do also.

What have I learned, after years of teaching? I want the same things for kids that I wanted when I began teaching. I want them to like reading and writing. I want them to be the best they can be at both. I want them to know that their opinions, their beliefs, their imaginations, their voices, and their lives matter. I want them to ask big questions of themselves—who am I and where do I fit in this world? I want them to ask big questions of each other and their worlds. I want them to notice what is going on around them and imagine the ways they might solve the dilemmas and situations in which we find ourselves.

I want them to be curious and creative. I want them to see and understand the lives of others. I want them to gain empathy and understanding of just what it means to be a human being. I want them to read and write with their head and their heart.

I want them to have choices in their lives, and the better they are at reading and writing, the more choices they will have, and the more thoughtful they will be in those choices they make.

I want them to be articulate, compassionate citizens of the world who can communicate their thoughts and beliefs and feelings well to others, and who can understand and evaluate the thoughts and feelings and beliefs of others. I want them to work together cooperatively and collaboratively to solve the problems in the world. I want them to have a voice.

I want my classroom to be a place where we value stories, not just numbers. I want a place where our curiosity and creativity are valued. I want to honor Julie's three-year-old daughter, where I let my students "lire a l'envers." (Read in their imaginations.)

Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, said that after twenty years of conducting he had a life-changing realization. "The conductor of an orchestra doesn't make a sound. . . . My picture appears on the front of the CD—but the conductor doesn't make a sound. He depends, for his power, on his ability to make other people powerful. . . . I realized, my job was to awaken possibility in other people."

He continues, "I wanted to know if I was doing that. And you know how you find out? You look at their eyes. If their eyes are shining, you know you're doing it. If their eyes are not shining, you get to ask a question . . . Who am I being, that my children's eyes are not shining?" (Zander 2008).

These are the questions I am trying to carry into my classroom when I begin again each September. Am I awakening possibilities in my students as writers so they see their voices have power—the power to make others think, or feel, or learn something?

Who am I being to *get* my students eyes shining? In what ways have I awakened possibilities in each of these students as readers, as writers, as people?

What are the questions you carry into your classroom every September? In what ways are you awakening possibilities in your students? How are you offering them choices and challenges as readers and writers?

My hope is that my students, through their writing and speaking in this book, will help answer some of those questions as you think about your students.

The Essential Questions That Frame Our Year

Choice is the focus for my students' learning and my teaching. These are the essential questions that frame the year for students and for me:

- What choices do you make as a writer and a reader? In what ways do those choices lead you to becoming a stronger writer and reader?
- What choices do writers make that you notice in your reading of their works that make their writing so strong, and that you will try in your writing?
- In real life, and in literature, what are the consequences of little to no choice in a person's life? What choices do these real people and these fictional characters make in response to their experiences? What choices do they make to nudge the world a little?
- What would you still like to do as a reader and a writer that you have not had a chance to do? What topic or issue would you like to investigate and present in a variety of ways? What choices do you make to nudge the world a little?

CHAPTER ONE

Grounding Our Choices in Our Beliefs

Everything you find in this book comes from thirty years of learning from adolescents, from thirty years of writing and reading myself (both professionally and personally, but only after I began teaching), and from thirty years of constantly questioning myself daily about the things that went well and the things that went badly. The challenges. Why did that work with one class and not the others? How can I reach this student? How do I convince all kids that reading and writing well will matter to them? From asking kids every year, "What makes writing easy for you? What makes reading easy for you? What helped you the most as a reader and writer? What could I have done differently? What could you have done differently?"

When we offer our students choices, the challenges often feel exacerbated. They choose a difficult topic. They choose a controversial book. They choose not to write. They choose not to read.

Writing and reading are not options in my classroom. I expect students to read and write. *What* they read and write is mostly up to them. My job is to help them find that writing and that reading that matters so much to them that they want to keep writing and they want to keep reading. My choices are guided by the students, who they are, and what they walk through the door of Room 201 knowing, thinking, and believing. And my choices are guided by my beliefs and experiences drawn from the past thirty years.

What You Will Find in This Book

- The beliefs that ground my teaching and the students' learning.
- How I frame the year for an abundance of writing and reading.
- The goals I have for the students, guided by the goals they have for themselves.

- The reading and writing opportunities that lead the students to deeper understandings of themselves, others, and the world around them.
- The handouts—the expectations and the guidelines—I give to students throughout the year.
- The voices of adolescents—examples of their writing, drawing, and thinking—as thoughtful readers, writers, and citizens of the world.

I do not do everything I am sharing with you every year. I have the students for forty-five to fifty minutes a day—all reading and writing—in the language arts class. The students are heterogeneously grouped with a range of abilities, including some kids who struggle with decoding words to others who are reading well the works of Malcolm Gladwell, Jane Austen, or Khaled Hosseini. I have kids who tell me they hate reading and writing and kids who tell me they love reading and writing. I try to find out what all the children are capable of doing at the beginning of the year, what has made reading and writing easy or hard for them, and I encourage, cajole, nudge, shove, and teach them to be the best they can be at reading and writing by the end of the year.

When I talk to the students about writing, I frequently remind them that they must write for themselves first. I tell them, "You have to like what you are writing. You have to have a strong desire to figure out what needs to be said and how best to say it. You have to have feelings about the subject about which you are writing. We all write for ourselves first—because we have something to say."

I am writing this book for myself. It is an attempt to organize my thinking, my planning, my materials—for my students, and for me. The kids are different every year. I can't anticipate what they already know and can do, any more than I can anticipate the experiences they come with. This year I have a young woman who only speaks Arabic or German. I have a young man who is only well enough to attend two classes a week. I have a young woman who spent the past six months in Patagonia, another who has never left New Hampshire. I have another who is homeless. What I do know is that I will try to get to know each of them to figure out what works best for each. Who are they as readers and writers, and how do they learn best? What are their stories?

You will find the what, the how, and the why of a year's planning. It's the frame that guides me, but it is flexible and malleable. Make this book yours. Take what's helpful of mine, but reconfigure, extend, change anything to fit you, your students, and your beliefs. But do think through your own beliefs.

What grounds your teaching? What do you believe about language arts, about writing, about reading? What do you do to get to know the stories of your students?

Our students want to know what's expected of them and why they are doing certain things. How they choose to do something may—and should—look different for many of our students. I want them to challenge themselves to find unique ways of representing their understandings.

For years I was comfortable with the *what*—get kids reading and writing—but I quickly realized I needed to know more. I read a lot of professional journals, took courses, went to workshops and summer institutes to figure out more of the *how*. I paid attention to the students and asked them constantly why something worked for them and why something else didn't. I asked, and still do ask, "How'd you do that?"

"Common sense" was my reasoning for the *why*. But that, too, wasn't enough. For myself I wanted to answer *why*. What beliefs did I, do I hold that ground my choices of the *what* and the *how*?

I have set the book up as a road map for designing, framing, and teaching writing and reading, with speaking and listening embedded in all that we do. What are the goals and beliefs that ground my teaching and learning? What do I want my students to be able to do? What evidence will they give me that shows they are reaching the challenges? How do I go about designing and planning the experiences they need to get there? How do I frame the classroom in ways that offer choices and challenges?

Goals for Students

I want students to:

- write and read with their head and their heart
- know that their abilities to write, read, and speak well offer them the greatest range of choices in their present and future lives
- enjoy reading, writing, speaking, and listening
- challenge and respect themselves and others as writers, readers, and speakers
- realize that their stories, beliefs, knowledge, questions, and opinions matter to themselves and to others
- know that their reading and writing are meant to help them make discoveries about themselves and connections with others by affirming, questioning, and extending their thinking
- develop into the strongest writers, readers, and speakers they can be, by showing growth from September to June.

Language Arts Goals

In all of our classrooms, we have to frame our curricular choices—what we do and how we do it—on the goals or outcomes we want for our students. Therefore, language arts goals are designed with curricular choices that are meant to enable, guide, inspire, motivate, and teach students to:

- become competent, enthusiastic, lifelong readers, writers, and speakers, who are able to understand, create, interpret, appreciate, evaluate, and critique language and literature
- develop into literate, articulate, thinking, feeling young men and women, who contribute creatively and productively to society by communicating effectively with others, by understanding the world in which they live, and by finding their places in a complex and diverse world
- become informed, clear-thinking citizens by participating actively as readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and viewers
- use language effectively to create knowledge, make meaning, challenge thinking, and build community in their lives
- reflect on, and evaluate, their own use of language
- recognize and evaluate the ways in which others use language to affect them.

Core Beliefs About Teaching and the Language Arts

What we do, and how we do it, has to be grounded in the *why*—our core beliefs about teaching and the language arts:

- Being literate and using your literacy puts you in control of your thoughts, ideas, beliefs, opinions—and life.
- Learning occurs best in a safe, stimulating, challenging environment that encourages curiosity, imagination, exploration, and risk-taking.
- Teachers form trusting relationships with students that build a community of learners when they know their students' strengths, interests, and needs and when they model and demonstrate their own writing and reading.
- Language learning is a developmental process with students progressing at varying rates and therefore necessitates a variety of materials and teaching techniques.
- Writing is a complex process through which the writer moves recursively, shifting back and forth among steps of finding ideas, rehearsing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.
- Conventions of language are best learned in the context of the student's writing and reading.
- We learn to read by reading and writing; we learn to write by writing and reading.
- Reading and writing draw upon the user's experiences and prior knowledge and require critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

- Students develop fluency and grow as readers, writers, and thinkers through regular, frequent, and ample *time*; through opportunities to *choose* writing topics and books; through *constructive response and suggestions* from teachers and peers; and from involvement with a variety of *good models*.
- The acts of writing, reading, and speaking are thinking processes that involve varying degrees of recall, comprehension, application, analysis, inference, synthesis, and evaluation.
- Process is as important as product.
- Using visual tools—drawing as both thinking and performance—allows and deepens students' abilities as writers and readers.

What Students Need

To become fluent writers (and readers), students need:

- real writing—for real reasons, for real audiences
- reading that engages, interests, challenges.

Students can do their best work when given:

- time
- choice
- response (toward revision, while drafting)
    - Point out what they did well.
    - Ask questions they need to consider.
    - Offer suggestions.
- *models* of fine reading and writing (both fiction and nonfiction, from professionals, their peers, and their teacher)
- *strategies* for entering into, strengthening, and extending that writing and reading
- a writer's-reader's notebook—a place to collect their thinking
- encouragement to use visual tools to show their thinking as writers and their understandings as readers.

I have the words of Tom Stoppard on the wall in my classroom.

> Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.

That is what I want for my students—to know their words *can nudge the world a little.* And I want the world to nudge them a bit. I want them to be thoughtful, caring citizens of the world, who are respectful, and respected, human beings. I believe that if they read critically, talk out their thinking often, and write compellingly, they can influence the thinking of others.

As I work in my own classroom, and with teachers throughout the United States and internationally, I am increasingly aware, and concerned, that kids are not being allowed, encouraged, or taught to "nudge the world." At every turn there are new sets of standards, new scripted programs, new standardized tests, new mandates that do everything in their power to standardize kids. It feels like we are moving backward, not forward, in our understandings of how learning and growth happen.

Growth happens by trying things we haven't tried before. By making mistakes and trying again. We try to solve problems through our speaking and writing. Maybe we didn't say it clearly enough, or persuasively enough. We try again. Our teaching happens when we push, guide, and teach our students how to do that.

The importance of writing was underscored for me in 1990, when I was invited to spend several weeks in the small town of Haapsalu, Estonia, teaching seventh graders. The desks and chairs were bolted to the floor. There were few supplies. Even fewer books.

On the first day, the students arrived twenty minutes early to find chairs (that I had scavenged) arranged in a circle. They were shocked. They were not accustomed to facing each other, let alone talking to each other. They were used to a teacher delivering information, and understood that their role was to parrot back that information, exactly as it was presented. No diversions. No questions. No disagreements. No imagining. Absolutely no critical or evaluative thinking. At least that they dared to voice.

They were still under Soviet rule, as they had been for fifty years. It took awhile before *this* wall began to tumble. It started with a whisper from Irinni, "Are you sure we may say what we think?" Then Tiuu, then Havel. "You want us to write what we think? Will it not be trouble?"

"It won't be trouble!" I assured them, not sure myself if that was true.

They talked and wrote. I heard their lives. Their disappointments. Their tragedies. Their wishes. Their beliefs. Their dreams. Their questions. Their ideas. They arrived thirty minutes early for class every single day and stayed later and later. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get to class before they did. Sitting in a circle, they waited patiently and enthusiastically, to talk and question, to think and write.

These thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds had not been allowed to voice their thoughts. Young men and women I didn't even have in the class began showing up, ostensibly to "learn English." It didn't matter what language it was. I could have spoken Swedish or Spanish or Tagalog. They wanted to talk about important issues, world issues, which mattered in their lives. They were hungry for books. They wanted to know what others thought, how others lived. They wanted to be connected to the world. They wanted a voice.

I knew then, as I know now, that if we want children to become adults who are articulate, literate, and thoughtful citizens of the world, they must learn to think deeply and widely as both readers and writers. They must talk and share their thinking. They must commit their thinking to paper, learning how to be memoirists, poets, essayists, journalists, playwrights, activists, speechwriters, novelists, critics, scientists, historians, so they and others can examine, support, debate, challenge, and then refine those beliefs, feelings, and thoughts.

Writing and reading are about using our imaginations, our understandings, our questions, our creativity, our feelings, our humanity to work through our thinking about ourselves, about others, about the world in which we live. Surely this is crucial enough to merit our attention. It is, after all, what we are about in our classrooms. In an era of test mania (in the United States, anyway) we tend to forget, or dismiss, the importance of writing and often concentrate on reading "strategies" or writing "exercises" at the expense of real writing and real reading. If we allow that, others will do our thinking, as I learned only too well in Estonia when it was under Soviet rule.

Writing is hard work. It is time-consuming. It is frightening. It is rewarding. It helps us pay attention to the world. Good writing lets writer and reader learn or think or feel something. Putting words on paper—or on the Internet—gives us voice—allows us to be heard. All the more reason to do it at every opportunity. And then to do it some more.

The best writing not only gives us voice, it is filled with voice. Tom Romano in his book *Crafting Authentic Voice* says:

> Voice is the writer's presence in a piece of writing. My bias as a writing teacher is to teach students to write in accessible, engaging, and irresistible voices. Such voices . . . have certain qualities in common:
>
> - They deliver interesting information.
> - They often employ techniques of narrative.
> - They exhibit perceptivity.
> - They offer surprising information and observations.
> - Quite often, they demonstrate a sense of humor.
>
> (Romano 2004, 24)

The best way to understand what Tom is saying is to look at the writing of several students. These are drafts of writing that went through conferences with peers and with me, asking questions and offering suggestions, to help the writer craft the strongest voice.

Student Examples of Writing

Alden: Essay

Alden studied Rick Reilly as a mentor author, reading one of his books, *The Life of Reilly*, and numerous op-ed pieces, looking at the craft of his writing. He wrote several book reviews, an analysis of all he learned from this reading, and the following persuasive essay that captures the essence of his study of Reilly's writing: writing often laced with sarcasm, but for the purpose of making a profound point in a convincing argument about the unfortunate way we value sports in this country.

> This year in the NHL was definitely one of the most memorable in a long time. This is the first year in the history of the NHL that every single goalie had a Goals Against Average (GAA) of 0.00 and no players scored any goals. Not even one. Oops, maybe I forgot to mention the fact that the NHL didn't happen this year, and that it was officially cancelled a few weeks ago, when Gary Bettman, the commissioner of the league, announced that the players association couldn't come to an agreement with the NHL about the salary cap limit.
>
> At the point of the cancellation there had been a total of 155 days missed because of the lockout, and there had been 1,161 games cancelled. During that time, the average person would have taken 3,100,00 breaths, slept for 1300 hours, watched 600 hours of television, and gone #2 about 150 times. Personally, I think the league should have been cancelled a long time ago, right around the 20th trip to the john. After canceling over 100 games, I gave up all hope and decided that the NHL had absolutely no chance of making it.
>
> But seriously, let's take a minute to stop and figure out what these people are having such a grueling debate about. The NHL proposed a rejected salary cap of $44.7 million. If the money was distributed evenly throughout the team, each player would earn somewhere in the area of 1.9 million dollars a year. 1.9 MILLION dollars! I would die for a salary like that. I'd be blowin' my nose in Benjamin's and wipin' my butt with Grant's if I was rakin' in that kind of dough! (That'd be pretty sweet, huh?) Anyways, after the players rejected that offer, they suggested a $49 million cap. With $49 million per team, each player would get about $2.1 million. Wait! What?! This entire debate has been over 0.2 million dollars! Wow!
>
> Well, at least we Americans can say that the athletes of our era aren't getting greedy. I mean, that would be just so horrible if they were so greedy as to not play for an entire year because they want $0.2 million more on

> their contracts. The average player makes around $2 million. So it's great that our athletes are mature enough to play hockey instead of arguing over the measly sum of $200,000. I mean $200,000 is only like the salary of five Americans in one year. But that's nothing to the pro hockey players of our day. Adding $200,000 to their salary is only adding 10% to the total. Basically, 10% of a pro hockey player's salary is worth as much as the salary of five Americans. Gee, I sure am glad there's not a massive debate over that kind of money!
>
> I can't wait until I get older, and I have a chance to pursue my hockey career by joining the players' association. Maybe by the time I'm there we can debate over $250,000 when each player is making about $8 million a year. That'd be great! And then everyone in the U.S. would think so highly of me, and I'd be a star!
>
> Pssh! Who am I kidding!? The NHL is a joke! This year has probably been the most pathetic year in the history of our sports. The athletes are getting so amazingly greedy that the entire Great Wall of China would be needed to stop the landslide of greed our athletes created. If I, or any of my children, grow up to be athletes, I'll definitely make sure that our minimum salary is $20 mil and I wouldn't stand for anything less. I mean, that's not greedy or anything, is it?

Alden read Reilly deeply. He understood how Reilly presented his opinion, but in an engaging and biting way, using humor and sarcasm to leave the reader thinking about the issue presented.

Nate: Personal Narrative

Like Alden, whose opinion comes through loud and clear in this piece, Nate's final draft was filled with his presence in a piece of writing that engages the reader with humor, yet wends its way with dramatic *emotional restraint* to a startling conclusion. (Mike Winerip, Educational Columnist for the *New York Times*, used those words—*emotional restraint*—to describe Nate's writing. Mike spent the morning in my classroom, in the process of doing an article. He sat in on writing conferences. After Nate read his piece, for response from his peers, Mike leaned in and said to Nate, "You know, you have done things as a writer that many professional writers have not yet learned to do.")

Nate held the tension well throughout the piece, pulling the reader between the house and all he can get away with in the absence of his mom, and the hospital, where something serious seems to be happening.

Diagnosis

No moms, no sisters. That left me, now at the superior age of nine years old, and my dad at home. That meant eating large bowls of ice cream and watching movies on TV that mom would never allow.

My mom grabbed the keys with one hand and Anna in the other and said, "We'll be home by 8:30 at the latest, hopefully earlier," and walked out the door. That meant I had about an hour to an hour and a half to do essentially whatever I wanted.

As soon as I saw the headlights of the Honda Odyssey disappear around the corner, I ran to the couch in front of the TV and slammed on the remote button until I reached what I was looking for, Oceans 11, a movie about a bunch of criminals who were going to steal billions of dollars from a casino. A commercial started to roll, so I ran to the refrigerator to get myself a bowl of ice cream.

When I sat back down my dad walked into the room. This was the moment of truth. If my dad noticed that I was watching something that my mom would not allow, he wouldn't just make me change the channel, he would make me turn off the TV for good. He stopped in front of the TV to see what I was watching. When the commercial ended and the show started up again, my dad realized what I was watching and said, "Oh, Oceans 11? Good show!" and he plopped down on the couch next to me. It was then that I realized I was in for the night.

We had just moved to New Hampshire a week earlier, so we still didn't have a doctor. This was a problem because Anna, who was now three, was looking sick. She would not eat any dinner, the glands under her chin on the top of her throat were swollen, and she had a temperature of 102 degrees. Since we didn't have a doctor, my mom had to take her to the emergency room just for having a fever. I guess Kelsey, my six-year-old other sister, was too scared to stay at the new house without my mom, so she went, too.

After two hours of shooting, swears, and sex, it still had not occurred to me or my dad why the three females in the family had not arrived back home yet or, at least, called to let us know that they would be late. A half an hour passed of not really focusing on the movie and worrying why my mom and two sisters were missing.

My dad peeled away from the TV and started to do dad-like things for the first time. He called my mom's cell phone. No answer. Again. No answer. On the third attempt, Kelsey answered. She said that Anna was in one of the rooms and my mom was in there with her and that she had been in there for about an hour and she had no idea when she would get out. That was it. My sister had given us all the information she had, so we were just as clueless as she was.

My dad and I went back to our vegetative state for a half hour more when the phone rang. It was my mom. This time it was her voice on the phone. She was saying that the doctors did not have a clue as to what Anna had. My mom explained that she and Anna would have to ride in an ambulance to Children's Hospital of Boston, where there were better doctors and more advanced technology. My dad told me this on the way to pick up Kelsey at the emergency room.

The ride was the longest of my life. My mind raced through all of the worst possible things that could happen. My hands were clenched so tight my knuckles were bone white. I wished this were a dream.

When we arrived at the hospital, Kelsey was standing with a police officer, who informed us that my mom and Anna were on their way to Boston in an ambulance already. Kelsey was wrapped in a blanket and shivering. Her red eyes led me to the conclusion that she had been crying. It was then that I realized that this was very, very bad.

Nobody spoke on the ride back to the unpacked house. When we shut the door and locked it for the day, Kelsey broke out in tears and sobbed, "I want Mommy!" My now red-eyed dad rushed her upstairs to bed, leaving me alone, hyperventilating in the half-lit house.

The phone rang. My dad and sister were upstairs, so I answered the phone. I picked it up, cradled it in both hands, took a deep breath, held the phone to my ear, and croaked, "Yes?"

"This is the Children's Hospital of Boston. Is this the McCrone residence?"

"Yes."

"Is Matthew available?"

"No."

"Well, . . . doctors have taken tests and we have the results." I heard wails in the background, the saddest wails I have ever heard in my life, and realized they belonged to my mom. My hands started to sweat. My eyes started to cross.

"Anna has Leukemia, a cancer of the blood."

I did not know what "Leukemia" meant, but the word "cancer" was enough. I dropped the receiver as my legs buckled. My insides burst. Knives stabbed into my brain. I was left there wondering, why Anna? Why us?

Before Mike Winerip left the classroom, he asked if he could take copies of the writing from several of the students, including Nate. In a subsequent email, I asked him what he noticed in the student writing, particularly Nate's. This is how he responded:

> I reacted so strongly for several reasons. Nate displayed a storytelling ability that I've rarely seen in someone his age, along with an ability to convey emotion so powerfully, and yet with restraint, a rare talent for writers of any age.
>
> He breaks his larger drama—going from a cozy night at home to the horror of his sister's illness—into several smaller dramas. There is the story of waiting for his Mother to drive off so he can watch Oceans 11 and the tension over whether she will find out. Then there's the question of whether his Dad will scold him or join him in his sinful pleasure; then the story of why he was alone—his sister's fever—with just enough information to give the reader a vague sense of worry; the tension of what his Dad will discover as he makes the calls and at the hospital; the hospital with the awful truth—what's going on with his Mom and sister—literally hidden behind the (hospital) curtain; and the final horror of a child answering the phone and mistakenly hearing the unbearable news meant for an adult.
>
> Each story progresses seamlessly to the next through subtle foreshadowing: "We had just moved to N.H. so we didn't have a doctor." "The ride was one of the longest of my life."
>
> He uses simple language to convey great emotion—"leaving me alone, hyperventilating in the half-lit house."
>
> And finally, the curt realistic, thoroughly-believable dialogue we can't read fast enough so we can get to the end of that extraordinary phone call. We want to know exactly what Nate wants to know. The rhythm of those sentences hits one after the other, like a heart pounding: I dropped the receiver. Boom. My legs buckled. Boom. My insides burst. And finally the question that applies to his family, but has been asked by every human in this situation, why us?
>
> I edit narrative essays all the time for the *New York Times* and can sincerely say this is as good or better than many.

This is the kind of response—so insightful, so thorough, so positive—that I wish I could give, and try so hard to give, to all of my students on every piece they write. It will keep Nate writing for years. What *can* I do—be positive enough to keep them moving forward and thorough enough so they know what they did well enough to do it again.

Hannah: Poem from Illustration

On another day we were using drawing to find writing. I asked the students to draw a shoe or boot that held significance for them. I asked them to bring in that shoe or pair of shoes. Mike brought in a construction boot. Erika brought in her ballet slippers. Jackie brought in her first dress shoes—a pair of patent leather Mary Janes.

In pairs I had them explain to each other why they brought in these shoes or boots or slippers, and how they were special to them. They spent an entire class period drawing the shoe and talking with each other about the stories behind the shoe. I did not tell them they had to continue talking about the significance of the shoe, it just happened as they drew. More stories, deeper stories began to emerge as they drew. Hannah drew a riding boot.

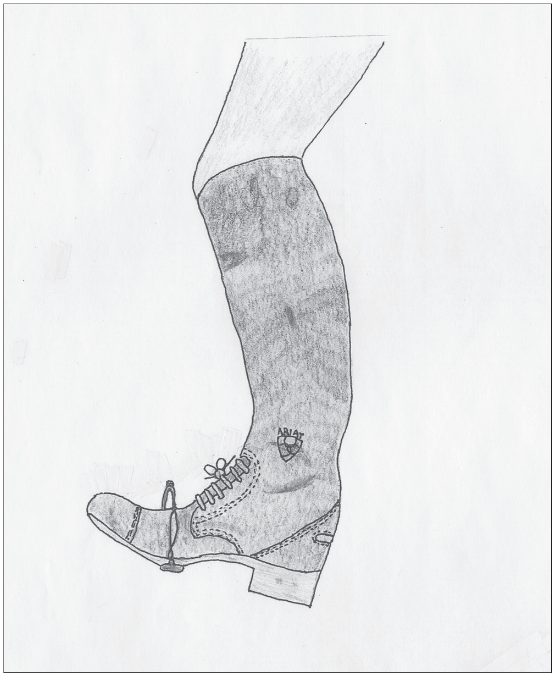


Figure 1.1 *Hannah's Drawing of Her Riding Boot*

We then looked at how other writers use pictures from which to write. Using the writing of these professional writers as a stepping-off point, we wrote. What began as a two-minute quickwrite in response to Ted Kooser's poem "Abandoned Farmhouse," which he had written in response to a piece of art, eventually became a polished piece of poetry for Hannah. In her thinking, she worked hard at making the writing say exactly what she wanted to say in the clearest, most compelling way, not just about the riding boot, but how it made her think about all she noticed about her riding coach. She drafted, redrafted, read, reread, answered questions, corrected conventions, and found great satisfaction, pride, and joy knowing her piece mattered to her and elicited response from a real audience, her classmates.

She Rode Often

(With thanks to Ted Kooser for "Abandoned Farmhouse")

She rode often
say the wrinkles
on the black leather.
She worked hard says
the dust covering the boots, one folded
and fallen over to the side. She
loved the pony says the box
of pictures and ribbons sitting
next to the boots. She quit
says the box by the trash. She
made a mistake say
the empty beer bottles
cluttering the floor. She
left quickly says the empty
apartment with the phone
ringing and the TV still on.
She's recovering says the car
parked at the barn. She's
safe say the pony's eyes
as she holds its head

and the world
with all its troubles
melts away.

Hannah told a story in her poem, conveying strong perceptions of the world, with a sense of play with language, even in the most serious of pieces. Her voice was palpable. It was convincing in conveying astonishment at the adult world, her riding coach, and the poignancy and honesty about all she notices.

Sanam: Constitution Day Essay

In response to a Constitution Day essay contest—Should the United States put into law compulsory voting for all its citizens?—sponsored by the State of New Hampshire Supreme Court and local newspapers, Sanam wrote the following essay.

Not Every Horse Must Drink

"The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within." —Mohandas Karamhand Gandhi

"Democracy is a device that insures we shall be governed no better than we deserve." —George Bernard Shaw

I don't believe that citizens should be forced by law to vote, for ultimately, it is their choice. However, voting is an immensely important privilege. People have a chance to determine how they are governed at the city, state, and federal levels. Although the Electoral College process in presidential elections implies that every vote doesn't count, people should assume it does. The general direction of the vote is determined by each individual vote.

Voting should not be made mandatory. Forced voting will make people who don't inform themselves of issues to vote for the sake of voting, and not because they care. Care comes with political awareness. A certain level of knowledge is required for a vote to be meaningful. Although Enlightenment philosophers, like John Locke, advocated for democracy on the belief that all people had the ability to reason, I do not believe everyone in a democracy develops their innate ability to reason and attain knowledge. Mandatory voting can compound the problem of ill-informed and arbitrary choices.

Voting under compulsion results in unfairness to those who choose to vote based on reason and knowledge. Forced votes can end up being based on shallow reasons. Such votes can hurt by countering the informed vote. A candidate can end up being elected based on extraneous rather than on well thought-out reasons.

In conclusion, as Gandhi's words suggest, enforced voting itself contradicts individuals' constitutional right to freedom of expression. However, if the horse led to the water does not drink, then, as Shaw suggests, the horse should not complain of thirst.

I look for every opportunity for students to write for real reasons for a real audience beyond the classroom. Local, state, and national contests afford them the opportunity to develop and extend their voices. I asked all students to try this essay. I began by giving students several quotes that might lead their thinking to agree, and several that might lead them to disagree, with the essay question. The students wrote fast. This was first-draft thinking that gave them a place to begin. What's their position, what's their reasoning that supported their position, and what conclusions did they want to leave with the reader? We talked about what makes an engaging lead, what makes a strong impression for an ending, and how using a brief comment by knowledgeable well-known writers or thinkers is one way to introduce and reinforce your thinking.

Like any other piece of writing, students read the writing to me and to their peers for response—what was clear, and what needed clarification through questions and suggestions? All of the students wrote; not all of them chose to send their writing to the contest. Sanam did send hers. She was the statewide winner in her age group, invited to a reception at the Superior Court hosted by Chief Justice John T. Broderick, Jr. Her essay was not dismissed because it did not follow a format—it only had four paragraphs. It was honored because she provided a clear opinion in an engaging format with strong evidential reasoning.

Alden's, Nate's, Hannah's, and Sanam's writing make us think *and* feel *and* learn something. None of it is first-draft writing. They received feedback in progress, as they were writing: this is what you did well, these are the questions we have, and here is a suggestion or two that would help you further develop this piece of writing.

These students are only four of the many adolescents with whom I work daily, who learn how to develop their ideas, how to express their opinions, how to dig into their imaginations, how to develop their thinking, by learning how to manipulate words and ideas to say exactly what they mean. They learn how to use their voices. This hard work of writing gives each student deep satisfaction and pleasure because they not only clarify their own thinking, they nudge someone else's thinking.

As teachers, what we do has to be based on sound philosophical, theoretical, pedagogical, and humanitarian underpinnings. What do I believe and why? How do I shape those beliefs into sound practices in the classroom? Who are the students with whom, and from whom, I learn, to whom I teach, and for whom I care and have a responsibility?

When we ask questions of ourselves, when we think about what it is that keeps students growing or not growing as readers and writers, when we gather student work over time as evidence to support our beliefs, to confirm our suspicions and wonderings, when we continually ask the students to describe those things that help them and don't help them (and why), and when we use all this evidence to inform our instruction, we are contributing practical, meaningful, valuable, and valid information to the educational conversation. To grow as learners and teachers, we must always be researchers in our own classrooms. What I have learned frames my beliefs about writing and forms the foundation—the why—for all that I do.

Beliefs About Writing

- Writing is thinking—it is a complex, cognitive, idiosyncratic, *reading* process through which the writer moves recursively, building meaning by finding ideas, gathering information, organizing material, trying out ideas in drafts, revising and restructuring the content, editing for conventions, and publishing.

> Studies of how writers actually work show them shuffling through phases of planning, reflection, drafting, and revision, though rarely in a linear fashion. Each phase requires problem-solving and critical thinking. (National Writing Project and Nagin 2003, 10)

- Writers learn to write by writing, not by filling in worksheets or taking notes about writing.

Students need to be engaged in the act of writing and reading on a continual basis. "A constant state of composition" as Don Graves so often said, so they are always thinking about writing—looking for ideas, rethinking their ideas, and noticing in their reading what writers do.

- Writing grows out of many different purposes and many different audiences; therefore, writers do their best work when they have a real reason to write for a real audience.

No one wants to write for a meaningless exercise. Writing is hard work. We want our efforts to mean something by knowing our words affect someone or something. The writer may be writing to clarify her own thinking—thus, the writing is for self first, but often, when done well, speaks to a larger audience, whether it is intentional or unintentional.

- Conventions of language are best taught in the context of writing—either with individual writers or in whole-class instruction.

> Experiments over the last fifty years have shown negligible improvements in the quality of student writing as a result of grammar instruction. Research suggests that the finer points of writing, such as punctuation and subject-verb agreement, may be learned best while students are engaged in extended writing that has the purpose of communicating a message to an audience. (Anderson et al. 1985, 22)

In my experiences as a teacher and as a writer, I have found that the more students are engaged in a piece of writing that means something to them and has an intentional audience for the writing, the more the students want to, and do, edit for the purpose of clarity for the reader.

- Writers need to be taught a repertoire of strategies for finding, starting, developing, and polishing that writing.
- Writing grows in a social context that encourages writers to share their writing with others who are taught how to give helpful feedback.
- Response to writing is most helpful when it is given in the process of drafting and shows the writer what she did well, asks questions as a serious listener, and offers suggestions that help the writer move the writing forward.

Reading his own writing aloud to a listener for feedback, questions, and suggestions allows the writer to hear his own voice and helps the writer revise and edit. Revision and editing are best taught through intentional craft lessons that may be as whole-class instruction or focused toward the individual writer.

Ideally, response through conferences is the most helpful, where the writer can read her writing to the teacher or peers to get immediate feedback. Unfortunately, large numbers of students and limited time often make a written conference, focusing on the strengths of the paper and offering a few well-placed questions and suggestions, the best we can do.

- Writing is reading. The more students write, the stronger they become as writers and readers, always asking, "Have I made my meaning clear in the simplest, most compelling ways?"

When students write, they are engaged in a recursive process of critical thinking–critical reading: Have I said clearly what I want to say? Is this well organized in developing my ideas? Have I used the sharpest, tightest, most vivid language? Does my lead capture a reader and give them a clear direction and focus? Does my writing make the reader think or feel or learn something? When kids are engaged in the process of writing something that matters to them, they do write, and they do read, thoughtfully and thoroughly.

We want students to read the same way, questioning the text. Does the author do all he can do, and how does he do it, to let the reader draw meaning from, and take meaning to, the writing?

- Meaningful assessment takes into account the process, as well as the product, always showing students what they did well, what they could do better, by suggesting and by teaching ways to improve their writing.

Evaluation should consist of understanding the process students go through as they compose a piece of writing, as well as the quality and effectiveness of the final product (content and conventions). Collecting the drafts of writing as a student composes her ideas allows the writer and the teacher to understand the process that works best for each student as she writes.

Understanding the process in which students engage to craft a piece of writing is as important as the final product. Asking students to verbalize that thinking through a process paper

("How did this writing come to be? Where did you get the idea? What did you do, and why, as you went from one draft to the next? What problems did you encounter? How well did you solve those problems?") shows teachers the multiple strategies writers use and teaches students to pay attention to that process so they become more independent as they develop skills as writers.

Evaluation should move the writer forward, helping him grow as a writer by identifying the strengths of the process and the product, as well as those elements or characteristics that need to be worked on.

- Writers do their best work when they are given *choice* about what they write and what they read, *time* to craft their writing and time to read, and *models* or examples of the finest writing from a variety of genres, professional writers, and their peers.

Writers need to care about, or be interested in, the topic they are writing about to craft the strongest piece. When writers care and are invested in their work, they write with passion and with voice. Even if they are asked to produce a particular genre, they will engage more fully in developing the best piece if they are given a choice of topics within that specific genre.

Students rethink their drafts and edit for the correct conventions when that writing matters to them. Students should be given ample opportunities to write so that choice includes selecting what pieces of writing best represent all they are capable of as writers.

Students need ample opportunities to write on a continuous basis with choices into the topics and genres that engage their interest and/or to which they can connect. When writers are engaged in the process of writing something that matters to them, for which they have their own purposes, that writing often surprises, delights, and empowers them, and therefore, they make a stronger commitment to the crafting of the writing.

Although there are times when students must write to deadline, the best writing usually develops when students are given adequate time to consider their topics, draft and redraft their ideas, and receive feedback while engaged in the process of writing. Asking students for less writing so that they have more time to develop their ideas more fully often produces stronger writing. Students need good models of writing from which to draw their understandings of writing, both from professional models, the writing of their peers, and our writing. Using others' writing to mentor one's writing is *reading as a writer*. Each genre of writing exhibits different characteristics. Showing students models from each genre (book reviews, essays, short stories, poetry, memoir, for example) allows them to step inside that genre and draw greater understanding of its inherent characteristics.

- I must be what I teach: writer, reader, speaker, listener.

When students see me struggling with a piece of writing, when I ask for and use student feedback in my writing, when they hear my drafts and final pieces, when they notice I keep a writer's-reader's notebook, they trust me as a writer who values all I ask them to do, and trust me as a listener who has some valid questions and suggestions for their writing.

When I suggest a book, they trust me as a reader, because I read books and I try to know the interests of the students. They trust me to know them and to challenge them.

More than twenty-five years ago Don Graves and Jane Hanson invited me to accompany them to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual convention in San Antonio to give a presentation with them focused on writing. It was my first national conference. It was my first presentation. My talk centered on the research I had done on *audience in writing* in a graduate course I had taken with Don. After our presentation, I said to him, "In ten years every teacher and student in this country will be so engaged in writing, I don't know what you'll talk about." Don looked at me, shook his head, and said, not unkindly, "Linda, . . . Linda, . . . Linda. . . ."

How smart Don was, and how much I have learned and am still learning—about teaching, about kids, about writing. I still have more questions than answers. No matter how long I teach, I will never be where I want to be, nor will I get the students as far as I think they could be as writers or readers. Every year I am haunted by the same question: How do I find the time to do all I want the kids to do as readers and writers, especially in the forty-five minutes I am given with them? I have come to understand I can't do everything. But I must remember that writing and reading are processes that grow from sustained daily engagement; therefore, students must actively write and read as often as I can make that happen.

I was especially excited about all I heard at that first NCTE conference, not only from Don and Jane but from so many other teachers and researchers looking at writing. It was so different from the way I had been "taught" writing. Book reports, essays, analyses of literature were never taught. They were assigned. I did well because I took careful notes on everything *the teacher thought* and gave back exactly what he said about an issue, a piece of literature, or a topic. I gathered any supportive information from encyclopedias or critiques written by *experts*. I footnoted everything I said. I wrote neatly and edited the conventions carefully. I constructed great covers.

I can't find a single piece of writing I did, through junior high or high school, which was grounded in my thinking. I have an autobiography I wrote for a seventh-grade class that says nothing even remotely interesting. The two pages are bland, meaningless words. The cover is lovely: carefully drawn babies, obviously copied from some greeting cards. No comments or questions from the teacher, just an A+. I did very well on all my *writing*, none of which included my beliefs, feelings, discoveries, opinions, or stories. Covers counted more than thinking. "I" was never present in my writing.

There has been so much focus on literacy *as reading* over the last two decades that we have forgotten, even abandoned, writing. We have forgotten that a person can read without writing, but she cannot write without reading. If we neglect writing while focusing our attention almost exclusively on reading, it is also *at the expense of reading.* Writers are readers. If we really want to teach kids to be the strongest readers, they need to be taught how to be the strongest writers.

We need to give students ample opportunities to write often—including short, quick responses to literature on a daily basis: "What did this reading bring to mind? What did you think or feel or learn as I read? What questions came to mind? What in your own experience is similar or different? How does this make you view the world? What did you notice the author did as a writer?"

They need time to write longer pieces of wider range and depth—and time to read those pieces aloud to their peers and teachers in conference. They need choices into the topics and genres that engage their interest and to which they can connect.

Given these opportunities for engagement with their own literature as readers, they will write and read and begin to recognize and craft their strongest pieces of writing.

Hearing the writing emerge gives me such joy and satisfaction as a teacher. It gives me energy. It is what keeps me teaching—hearing the "accessible, engaging, and irresistible" writing voices as they come to be.

Putting a book in a child's hand that they love has the same effect. "Read this," they say to each other and to me. Watching kids sprawled on the floor in front of my bookshelves, handing each other books, or seeing others so engaged they don't want to leave for the next class, keeps me teaching. It keeps me constantly on the lookout for books that the most reluctant reader "can't put down."

I try to teach writing and reading in a way that encourages, allows, and fosters the voices of our students. They are our future. If we stifle their voices by offering them only inauthentic writing and reading tasks through standardized testing and preconceived, scripted programs with little knowledge of who each child is in front of us, or what that child already knows and can do, we will get what we ask for—mediocrity.

We are headed directly toward everything Don Murray warned us about when he said, "We should be seeking diversity, not proficient mediocrity." Thus the title of my 1992 book *Seeking Diversity*. I was seeking diversity then, and I am seeking it now, even more earnestly. We have to be careful that standards don't standardize our students into proficient mediocrity. I have standards, challenging standards, but they allow for the voices of the students. I want their writing to surprise me, to keep me awake, to challenge my thinking.

Students tell me the class is hard because I make them think. I actually had a young man confront me several years ago, feet planted firmly on the floor, hands shaped into fists, voice raised and shaking as he reamed me out: "I *know* what you're doing. And *you're doing it on purpose*. You're . . . *you're trying to make me think*!"

"Yes, yes, I am," I told him. "I am trying to make you think." (I tried not to smile too broadly, and I did not apologize.)

That young man was really saying to me: "Just tell me what to do, what to think, it is so much easier. Making me think is hard work."

Mine is not the perfect classroom, nor am I the perfect teacher. Far from it. There are kids I can't seem to reach, and things I say and do I wish I could take back. I have failed kids and they have failed themselves. I have not worked hard enough or smart enough to reach some of them. I carry those failures like blisters that often have me limping from the classroom. But I go back again and again, trying to find the best ways to give kids choices in their lives for life.

In the beginning of this chapter, I shared my goals and beliefs. They are the foundation upon which I make curricular decisions—they are the *why* grounding the *what* and the *how* of all I do. Those goals and beliefs form the very foundation—the core—of all that I believe—and won't give up—even in a world that is trying its best, as ee cummings says, to make us like everyone else: "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting."

I have spent months, years, writing this book. Some days I can sit for hours, others I do everything I can *not* to write. I realphabetize books on the shelf to my left. I make my fifth cup of coffee. I pull the dead blossoms off the hanging plant at the front door. I sweep the garage. I reorganize the food on the shelves in the freezer. I vacuum the inside of my briefcase. "Get a grip," I tell myself, "or you'll be dragging that vacuum out to the barn again to vacuum cobwebs!"

I pull all the books about writing from my shelves. I must reread them all, I think. See what others have to say that I've forgotten. I search the NCTE and International Reading Association journals for articles specifically on writing. I am encircled with piles—stacks I cannot possibly get through. In the end, it is my thinking, my experiences, my students, my teaching, my learning that will have to inform this writing about writing and reading.

As I write, I force myself to clarify my thinking. What *is* working in my classroom with respect to writing and reading? What makes it hard? What makes it easy? What questions need to be answered? What examples should I use to show what I mean? How can I explain even a fragment of all I've learned about writing and reading in the clearest, most logical way?

What are the choices I make as a teacher, to give students choices as writers and readers? How can I nudge the world a little—to remember or rethink what it means to teach, to write, to read, to learn?

I hope my teaching, my writing, my learning are affirming for you or nudge you to think about your teaching, your writing, your learning. What are the choices you make as a teacher? What are the beliefs that ground your teaching of reading and writing? How do you get your kids to nudge the world a little?