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How to Become a Better Writing Teacher

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How to Become a BETTER WRITING TEACHER

Carl Anderson • Matt Glover

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Heinemann
145 Maplewood Avenue, Suite 300
Portsmouth, NH 03801
www.heinemann.com

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p. 139, Figure 6–7: Adaptation of "Unit of Study Schematic" from *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts* by Carl Anderson, p. 87, 2022.

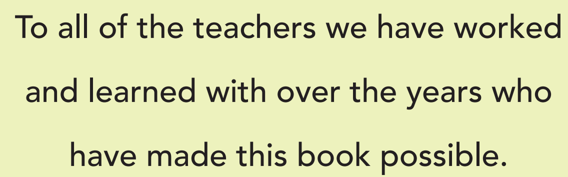
Acknowledgments for borrowed material continue on page xvi.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023943004
ISBN: 978-0-325-13641-7

Editor: Zoë Ryder White
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover and text designs: Suzanne Heiser
Typesetting: Kim Arney
Video: Sherry Day, Heather O'Bryan, Michael Grover, Dennis Doyle, and Alan Chow
Manufacturing: Jaime Spaulding

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
1 2 3 4 5 VP 27 26 25 24 23 PO 4500879512

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit http://heinemann.com/products/E13641.aspx



To all of the teachers we have worked and learned with over the years who have made this book possible.

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Introduction

The goal of this book is to help you become a *better* writing teacher.

That's a different goal from many of the books published on teaching writing in elementary and middle school.

Many of these books are about how to get started with writing workshop. They discuss the structure of a writing workshop, explain the basics about how to do minilessons, small-group lessons, and writing conferences, give you tips on how to manage a workshop, and tell you other important things you need to know when you're starting out as a writing teacher.

Other books are about writing workshop curriculum. They describe units of study you can do across a year of writing workshop and detail the minilessons you can teach in these units. Some of these books are bundled in sets, and you have an entire year's curriculum at your fingertips when you purchase them; others are single books, which explain how to do one or more units of study.

But . . . once you've read these books, successfully launched a writing workshop in your classroom, and implemented a yearlong curriculum, what's next? What's the path, whether you've been teaching writing for a couple of years or for many years?

The answer is to become better at teaching writing. Really good, in fact. Why? Your students need you to be a great writing teacher. That's because writing is such a critical skill, and for students to learn to write well, they need you to teach writing well.

How do you become a better writing teacher?

That's where this book comes in.

The first thing you should know: as you read the book, you'll be in the company of two experienced writing teachers, Carl Anderson and Matt Glover (we will use *we* to refer to ourselves from now on). Between us, we bring a total of seventy-two years of varied and complementary experiences in education to the conversation about teaching writing. Carl taught in upper-elementary and middle school grades for eight years; Matt taught first grade for six years. Carl worked as a full-time staff developer at the Teachers College Reading and

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Writing Project at Columbia University for eight years; Matt was a principal in the Lakota District in Ohio for fifteen. Both of us now work as consultants for schools and districts in the United States and in many countries around the world, Carl for the past twenty-one years and Matt for fourteen. And both of us are authors of professional books, most of which focus on teaching writing—this book is Carl's sixth and Matt's eighth.

And the second thing to know is that in this book, we'll share the kinds of work we did as educators to get better at teaching writing. And we'll share what we do today with teachers around the world—teachers who are relatively new to writing workshop and teachers who have been running writing workshops in their classrooms for many years—to help them become better writing teachers. Whether we're working directly with teachers in schools, doing on-site workshops and webinars, keynoting conferences, or writing books, everything we do is about helping teachers everywhere become really good at teaching writing.

In the book, we're going to replicate the work we do in schools. We'll describe the principles that guide what we do when we teach writing and show you how to align your practice with these principles by describing a wide variety of high-impact actions you can take on your own or with colleagues. We'll supplement these actions with classroom videos and videos of us discussing teaching writing. And we'll provide many Online Resources that you can use when you try the actions.

The work on this book began in mid-2020, when Matt called Carl and suggested they do a webinar for teachers. A few weeks later, nearly five hundred people attended the first of what would become an ongoing series of webinars on teaching writing.

We had a blast doing the webinars. Of course, that's because we love talking with teachers about how to teach writing to children, since that's what we've been doing for many years in our jobs as consultants. And we also had a blast working together, forging a new partnership as we did the webinars—and started writing this book.

Our partnership is built on several foundations.

Very quickly, we discovered we had lots in common. For example, we're both sailors. And we're also fathers to children who are of a similar age—for Carl, Anzia and Haskell; for Matt, Harrison, Meredith, Natalie, and Molly.

Most important, we discovered we have the same vision for our work. Whenever we spend time with teachers, everything we do is about helping them get better at teaching writing.

Several months after that first webinar, when we decided to write a book together, it wasn't hard to decide on the book's focus; we knew right away we wanted to write about how to become a better writing teacher. And now, several years later—after countless Zoom meetings, texts and emails, first drafts, conversations with our editor, Zoë Ryder White, more Zooms and texts and emails, and many, many revisions—that's the book you're finally holding in your hands. Enjoy!

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3

Create Conditions for Student Engagement

Why Is Engagement So Important?

When students are engaged, they're more likely to learn what you teach them (Crouch and Cambourne 2020). Writes Ellin Keene, "We need to increase the amount of time kids spend deeply engaged because it proves intoxicating and has a real impact on whether children retain and reapply what they've learned" (2018, 17).

You can tell students are engaged when they

- are totally engrossed in their work
- lose track of time because they are so into their writing
- can't wait to write each day
- appear driven to write
- get into a flow where ideas come rapidly
- ask to sit where their flow can't be interrupted
- are so excited about their writing they want to talk about it as they write
    - want to talk about their writing at other times of the day besides writing workshop

Chapter 3
ACTIONS

3.1 Help Students Choose Engaging Topics

3.2 Create a Sense of Audience as Your Students' First Responder

3.3 Help Students Identify Authentic Audiences

3.4 Select Engaging Mentor Texts

3.5 Make Time for Genre Choice

3.6 Help Students Choose Engaging Genres

3.7 Value and Teach into Illustration

3.8 Talk About Yourself as an Engaged Writer (see Online Resources for this action)

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- are disappointed when you tell them it's time to stop writing
- can't wait to publish (or share) what they've written

What Can You Do to Promote Engagement?

Student engagement happens by design, because teachers make decisions that lead to engagement (Crouch and Cambourne 2020). Cornelius Minor writes, "A kid can't be successful in my classroom if I have not created the opportunities for that child to be successful" (2019, 36).

In this chapter, we describe actions to help you create the conditions for engagement. Use the chart in Figure 3–1 to help you identify and prioritize which ones to take first.

Action	When to Take It
Action 3.1 Help Students Choose Engaging Topics	• If students say they don't know what to write about or have trouble initiating writing projects. • If students select general topics (my weekend, my vacation, animals, etc.). • If students usually choose the very first topic they come up with. • If students tend to write about very different topics from unit to unit, with varying degrees of engagement.
Action 3.2 Create a Sense of Audience as Your Students' First Responder	• If students don't seem eager to see you when you initiate conferences. • If students have less energy for writing by the end of conferences. • If students seldom take initiative to share their writing with you.
Action 3.3 Help Students Identify Authentic Audiences	• If students think of writing as an assignment to complete and turn in to you. • If students are puzzled when you ask them whom they plan to share their writing with. • If students name audiences for their writing, but these audiences don't make sense, given their topic and purpose for writing. • If students name the class as their audience, even when there are specific students who are a perfect audience for what they are writing about.
Action 3.4 Select Engaging Mentor Texts	• If students ask you, "Why do we have to write?" • If students are disinterested in your mentor texts. • If students have an engaging reading life but haven't yet found writing to be engaging.

Action	When to Take It
Action 3.5 Make Time for Genre Choice	• If students express interest in writing in a genre and ask you when they can write in it and you reply, "In the spring," or "You'll get to write in that genre next year." • If students write on their own at home, even though they seem disinterested in writing in school. • If students have varying degrees of engagement with the genre studies in your curriculum.
Action 3.6 Help Students Choose Engaging Genres	• If students are uncertain about how to choose genres. • If students are in a genre rut, that is, they usually choose genres they've written in recently or have written in frequently in school. • If students choose from a narrow range of genres.
Action 3.7 Value and Teach into Illustration	• If students enjoy drawing but are reluctant to write. • If students find it easier to draw than to write.
Action 3.8 Talk About Yourself as an Engaged Writer (in Online Resources)	• If students describe their own experiences with engagement with very basic language: "Writing went good today" or "I had fun writing today." • If students clearly are engaged with their writing but don't know why. • If students are sometimes engaged in writing, and sometimes not, but don't seem that aware of the differing qualities of their experiences.

Figure 3–1

Action 3.1: Help Students Choose Engaging Topics

When we give students the opportunity to make choices about their learning, they're often more engaged in that learning (M. Anderson 2016). Student engagement in writing begins with topic choice (Glover 2009).

When they choose their own topics, students can experience several kinds of engagement (Bomer and Bomer 2001; Ehrenworth, Wolfe, and Todd 2020; Keene 2018; Muhammad 2020):

- intellectual engagement
- emotional engagement

Further Reading

In Chapter 12 of *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher*, titled, "I want kids to write about what they care about, but so much of what they care about feels brainless and superficial to me," Colleen Cruz (2015) has an excellent discussion of how to help students with topic choice.

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- perspective-bending engagement (when writing about a topic pushes you to reconsider your ideas or beliefs about it)
- aesthetic engagement
- political engagement

Since Donald Graves published his book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983), topic choice has been at the center of writing instruction. However, as literacy educator Peter Johnston has pointed out, giving students the opportunity to make choices in writing workshop doesn't mean they'll know *how* to make good choices (Fletcher, Johnston, and Ray 2007). Educator Mike Anderson (2016) points out that it's the teacher's responsibility to teach students how to make good choices.

It follows that giving students the opportunity to choose topics doesn't *guarantee* students will have engaging writing experiences. Many students, then, will need guidance with generating engaging topics.

There are several tried-and-true strategies for identifying possible writing topics and choosing which ones will lead to engaging writing experiences. Once students have learned these strategies, they can use them again and again across the year, in any unit of study.

Teach Students How to Brainstorm a List of Topics

Brainstorming is one of the best strategies for choosing a topic. When students learn to brainstorm effectively, not only are they able to generate a list of topics but they also know how to decide which ones will be the most engaging to write about (Glover 2019).

Video 3.1
Minilesson: Brainstorming

The best way to teach this lesson is through demonstration. As you show students how you use the strategy, explain *how* you come up with a list of topics and *how* you select one to write about. For example, you can come up with topics by thinking of different aspects of your life, such as important people and places, interests, and opinions. You can then explain how to select a topic by rereading your list and seeing which ideas elicit an emotional response or a sense of excitement and wonder. As you do your demonstration, do a think-aloud throughout. This gives students insight into how to use the strategy themselves.

Teach Students About Writing Territories

Another strategy for finding topics is to use writing territories (Murray 1999; Atwell 2014). Writers often have a few favorite or important areas of interest in their lives, and they deliberately mine them for topics, whatever genres

they're writing in. The topics that grow out of writing territories are likely to be more engaging.

Just as you would do when you teach students to brainstorm topics, teach students about writing territories through demonstration, by showing students how you come up with your own writing territories and then how you mine a writing territory for writing ideas. Once again, the key aspect of a demonstration lesson is thinking aloud as you teach.

Video 3.2 Minilesson: Writing territories

Teach Other Strategies

Of course, there are other strategies for discovering engaging topics. It's helpful to know about them, as the more strategies you have in your teaching repertoire, the more likely it is students will find one or two that will work for them.

You can learn about more strategies in professional books. For example, Georgia Heard discusses the strategy of heart mapping in *Heart Maps: Helping Students Create and Craft Authentic Writing* (2016).

Another source of strategies is your experience as a writer. Which ones do you use? They are just as legitimate as the ones described in this action.

Action 3.2: Create a Sense of Audience as Your Students' First Responder

The main purpose for writing is to communicate with other people. Engagement goes hand in hand with writers having real audiences in mind when they write.

While it's true students are more likely to be engaged in writing when they write for authentic audiences (the subject of Action 3.3), it's also important to think about your role in responding to student writing and how it's connected to student engagement (Crouch and Cambourne 2020). That's because you're usually the first responder to students' work *while it's in the process of being written*. Writes Cornelius Minor, "The role of the educator during the first part of any communicative act is to simply hear" (2019,16). The way you respond to students during this critical time can increase their engagement. By responding to students' topics with genuine interest and enthusiasm, even for just a few

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moments, you help students see that what they're writing about is worth being invested in.

Respond in Writing Conferences

When you confer with students, it's often the first time someone is interacting with them about their writing. Students often are insecure about their work and are thinking, *Is this a good topic?*

This is a perfect time to respond to students' topics with interest and, if a student is writing about a difficult experience, empathy. For students who are already engaged, this response affirms they're on the right track. For students who aren't that engaged, a positive response can be energizing.

One time you can respond to student topics is when students bring them up at the beginning of a conference. For example:

Teacher: *How's it going?*

Student [*Excited*]: Great. I'm writing about getting my new puppy.

Teacher: *You got a new puppy? Wow!*

Student [*Beams*]: I got to name her. I named her Snoopy!

Teacher: *I remember how exciting it was when my dog was a puppy. I can't wait to read your story about getting Snoopy. So what are you doing as a writer to tell the story?*

While it may seem like common sense to take a few moments to respond to what students are writing about, several things can get in the way, for example:

- *You might feel pressure to confer with as many students as possible in a period.* Since responding to what students are writing about can have a powerful energizing effect on students, it's worth the few extra moments you'll spend doing this in conferences.
- *There are times when you have trouble connecting with what students are writing about.* While you may not be interested in Star Wars or Fortnite,

working with student writers requires you to try to enter into their worlds and find value in what they're interested in! Colleen Cruz (2015) points out, "Our students need to know that we value their lives, all of what goes on in their lives, in order to feel that they can bring and share those lives with their writing in the classroom" (119). When students are engaged, they're writing to please themselves and their intended audience, not to please you!

Respond During Informal Topic Conversations

As you walk around your classroom in between writing conferences, you'll be glancing at students' work and noticing what they're writing about. Especially for students who you know aren't that engaged in writing—yet—dropping in for a short one-to-two-minute topic conversation and expressing interest in what they're writing about can help them feel more engaged.

Teacher: *I see that you're writing about Fortnite . . .*

Student [*Sighs*]: Yeah.

Teacher: *Fortnite is such a cool topic. What are some of the things you're writing about the game?*

Student: Well, there are a lot of different kinds of weapons, like sniper rifles and crossbows.

Teacher [*Excited*]: *You don't say!*

Student [*Sits up and smiles*]: And you can build forts with ramps and walls, but you need to use your axe to get materials first.

Teacher: *Wow, you're writing about such interesting facts about Fortnite. I bet your book will really help people who want to get good at this video game!*

Student [*Beams*]

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Respond in Share Sessions

In the share session, students usually talk about things they tried as writers during that day's writing workshop. When students volunteer to share, tuck in your response to the topics they're writing about. For some students, a public response from you is even more affirming and energizing than a response given to them individually. Also, you'll be modeling for your class how to respond to the topics their classmates are writing about.

Teacher: *Who wants to share what they did today?*

Student: Me!

Teacher: *Luciana, what do you want to share?*

Luciana: In my short story, I'm writing about a kid who is being bullied.

Teacher: *Wow, bullying is such an important topic to be tackling, and writing a short story about it is a way to really help readers understand what it's like for a kid to go through such a tough experience.*

Luciana [Nods]

Teacher: *So what do you want to share about what you did as a writer today?*

Action 3.3: Help Students Identify Authentic Audiences

Students need authentic audiences for their writing. When they're able to write for audiences who matter to them—classmates, teachers, school officials, family members, members of their communities—about their experiences, interests, and ideas, they're more likely to be engaged (Boswell 2021).

One of the most powerful questions you can ask children is "Whom are you writing this for?" (Another way of asking this question is "Whom are you going to give this writing to when you're finished?") Too often, we find that students respond to this question in ways that reveal they're writing only because it's writing workshop, rather than writing *for* someone.

For example, Matt asked a child who was writing a book about soccer, "Whom are you going to give this to when your book is done?"

After a long, puzzled pause, the student finally said, "Uh . . . my mom?"

Matt then asked, "Does your mom like soccer?"

"No, she hates soccer!" the student exclaimed.

When Matt read the child's book, he saw he wasn't writing the book to help his mom understand or appreciate soccer. He said "my mom" only because that was the first name that popped into his head.

Contrast what that student said with how these other children responded:

- Zachary, a reluctant preschool writer and hermit crab expert, made his first book when he found out the class across the hall was getting a hermit crab but the teacher didn't know how to take care of it. Zachary made a book teaching her what he knew about hermit crabs. He gave it to the teacher when he finished.
- A seventh grader said, "I'm writing this story about the time I adopted my cat. When I'm finished with it, I'm going to give it to the people at the animal shelter so they can give it to people. Hopefully they will adopt cats also."
- A third grader said, "My friends and I are making a bunch of books, and then we're going to sell them out by the side of the road."

Given that these children each had an audience in mind for their writing, it wasn't surprising they were highly engaged in what they were doing. Children write with more energy when they believe there are people who will find their writing interesting and useful.

For students to have authentic audiences, they need to identify whom they could be writing for. Certain classmates? The principal? Their dad? The mayor of their town or city? And they need the opportunity to choose which audience they want to reach.

However, simply giving students the opportunity to identify and choose audiences for their writing doesn't mean they'll find audiences they want to write for. Just like you teach students how to find meaningful topics, you need to teach them how to find audiences for their writing.

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Video 3.3
Minilesson: Identifying audiences

Conduct Minilessons About Audience

Give a minilesson early in each unit of study to help children identify possible audiences. Why? Children need to learn that their audience may change, depending on the topic they're writing about, the genre they're writing in, and the purpose for writing. For example, a child writing a story about a trip her family took to Myrtle Beach in a unit of study on personal narrative might decide she wants to share it with her family, so she can let them know how special it was to spend time with them. In a later unit of study on craft, the same student may choose to write a feature article on the Marines and decide to share it with classmates whose parents are also in the Marines.

A powerful time to teach students about audience is during units of study in which students can choose their own genres, as the range of possible audiences will be much wider than within a genre study. For example, a child who chooses to write a how-to book on making Star Wars spaceships out of blocks could make his book available in the block center. Another child, who wants to write about her opinion that there should be more vegetarian food on the school lunch menu, could share her writing with the principal or even send it to the school board.

Video 3.4
Writing conference: Identifying audiences

Teach About Audience During Writing Conferences

Conferences are another place to teach children about audience and, when necessary, give them support with identifying possible audiences.

Make it a habit to ask children, "Whom are you writing this for?" Simply by asking this question, you let students know this is an important thing to be thinking about as they write. And when children have some difficulty naming an audience, teaching them how to identify an audience can become the focus of the conference.

Talk About Audience in Share Sessions

In some share sessions, ask students whom they plan to give their writing to when they are finished with it. This kind of share nudges students to think about audience. And when they hear their classmates name different audiences, they get ideas about possible audiences for their writing and writing in general.

Do this kind of share session in every unit of study. Revisiting the idea is another way of communicating to your children the importance of having an audience for their writing and giving them ongoing support in identifying and choosing meaningful audiences for their work.

Plan Class Writing Celebrations

Teachers commonly organize writing celebrations at the end of units of study (Ayres 2013). Often, students read their finished writing aloud to their classmates as well as to parents and administrators who have been invited. In another kind of celebration, students walk around the classroom and sit down at their classmates' table spots or desks to read their writing and then write their responses on a piece of paper that's taped next to each student's writing.

When you have writing celebrations with your class, you can do a lot of teaching about audience:

- Ask your students if there are any people outside of the class—students from other classes, parents, school officials—whom they want to invite to the celebration to hear or read their writing.
- When you have students read their writing to the class, provide time after the celebration for students to meet with classmates or other attendees whom they wrote the piece for so they can hear their responses.
- When you have students sit at each other's desks to read their writing, suggest that students encourage specific classmates or other attendees who are their audience to read and respond to their pieces.
- Be sure to suggest that students share their writing with people who couldn't be at the celebration. This could involve bringing the piece home for their family to read or sending their writing to the president of the United States!

Action 3.4: Select Engaging Mentor Texts

A *mentor text* is a model text we use to teach students about the craft of writing and conventions (C. Anderson 2022b; Marchetti and O'Dell 2015, 2021; Meehan and Sorum 2021; Shubitz 2016). There are three kinds:

- a *published* mentor text—one written by an author outside of the classroom (e.g., a picture book or a poem in an anthology), in a newspaper or magazine (e.g., an opinion piece or a feature article), or on the internet (e.g., a TED talk)