

Jim Vopat

Writing Circles



Kids Revolutionize Workshop

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Foreword

Recently, I've had a chance to watch Jim Vopat introduce writing circles to groups of teachers. It always unfolds the same way. As Jim outlines the structure and then engages teachers in trying it for themselves, people start to smile. The conversational volume in the room gradually rises, as people share their writing, laugh, and say things like: "Whoa, this is really cool." "I never thought of this." "This is really different." And "My kids would totally love this activity."

Writing Circles is that elusive something new under the sun, a genuine departure and an exciting step ahead. It's what's next. And it is also something big.

On the surface, what Jim has done is take the successful model of literature circles—which might be concisely defined as small, peer-led reading discussion groups—and created a parallel structure for composition. Instead of kids picking a common book to read and discuss in groups, they choose a common *topic* to write about, and each person creates original text in whatever genre and style they prefer. Then, groups meet to share, celebrate, and give each other helpful, constructive responses. Periodically, students choose one draft to develop further, and the group morphs into an author's support team, serving as agents, editors, and publishers.

If you are already using literature circles or book clubs in your classroom, you will immediately see this as a fresh and engaging adaptation. But, as Chicago teacher Nancy Steineke says in the book, there's much more here than novelty and enjoyment:

A writing circle is much more than a fun variation. This is a whole new kind of writing workshop. The kids get more useful feedback in their writing circles than they do from individual conferences with me. I kind of hate to say that—I grew up with the original workshop model, where the key structure is one-to-one conferences with the teacher. But with writing circles, I see the kids' writing progressing faster than it does when I am the main source of feedback. The power comes from the audience, I think. Having three or

four other kids as an immediate audience, peers who care about you and attend to your every word and will give you honest feedback—that’s the driving motivation, instead of teacher approval or grades.

What? Those short one-to-one, teacher-kid conferences that we struggle so hard to cram into our busy writing classes might not matter as much as we thought? Could it be that young writers can grow even more effectively in well-structured, kid-led teams?

But wait. Our student writing groups haven’t always worked so well, have they? For many years, we teachers have struggled to perfect what we used to call “peer editing groups.” Now, with *Writing Circles*, we have a fully elaborated structure for the whole process; that helps kids support each other at all stages, from topic selection and drafting, through thoughtful revision, and onward to sharing and publication. Jim’s subtitle is no overstatement: this is how *Kids Revolutionize Workshop*.

This book is just the latest in a string of Jim’s special contributions to our field.

- In an era when teacher minilessons too often morph into endless, lumbering maxi-lessons (read: the return of lecturing), Jim gave us a practical corrective in his 2007 book: *Microlessons in Writing*, a set of 75 one-page structures that brings out the best in student writers K–12.
- Jim has created a whole body of work—books, videos, and workshops — about parent involvement in schools, especially in neighborhoods with poor, minority families who are reticent to get involved. The key to Jim’s amazing Parent Project program: invite adults into workshop style learning, just like their kids enjoy in the classroom.
- Jim has been a Fulbright scholar, studying and helping to improve educational systems in India and Sri Lanka.
- Jim has curated spectacular exhibits of children’s art in a large Milwaukee gallery. These well-attended shows taught adults who work outside schools what priceless and original art gets made every day in American classrooms.

Allow me to introduce you to a very special voice in our field, Jim Vopat, a true renaissance educator. And welcome to something really new, energizing, and transformative. Welcome to *Writing Circles*.

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The Tao of Writing Circles

Writing Circles?

Groups of four to six kids—some gathered around tables, some sitting on pillows on the floor, two groups out in the hall. The Mall Monkeys are furthest down the hall; the Penguins—some sitting, some standing—settle in just outside the classroom door. Los Viejitos, Smooth Operators, and Purple People Eaters sit around tables in classroom corners, listening to one of the other members of their group read their work. Silver Snakes are on pillows near the windows meeting with their teacher, excited to hear he’s written about unknowingly making camp on a huge anthill. The Femme Lattes have pushed desks together at the front of the classroom and are one-upping each other on the topic “why we should be able to have cell phones in school.” Los Viejitos’ topic is “favorite animal”; “friends” for the Smooth Operators; “when I grow up” for Purple People Eaters; “music” for the Mall Monkeys; “bugs” for the Silver Snakes; and “shipwrecked on an island with your worst enemy” for the Penguins. Each Penguin has approached the topic in a unique way: a struggle for survival, provisional reconciliation, epitaph, some gore, an unexpected letter to a friend who moved away, rescue by cruise boat. After listening to each draft, the Penguins practice the day’s response strategy called *point out*: “Tell the writer one thing you liked. *Point out* something interesting.”

What are all these students in the middle of? Writing circles. Small groups of students meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and, in general, help each other become better writers. The writing circle dynamic includes the following steps:

- Groups of kids name their writing circle and choose their group’s writing topic.
- Kids write on this topic, using any format or genre.
- Writing circle minilessons focus on circle management and writing craft.

- Writing circles meet.
- Kids share their writing.
- Kids respond to one another's writing.
- Each circle chooses their next writing topic.
- New topics and some writing from each circle are shared with the whole class.
- Kids think about the writing circle sessions they've just completed and jot down their reflections and notes in their writing circle notebook.
- Periodically, kids review their rough pieces and select the most promising one to revise.
- Writers participate in a circle devoted to collaborative revision, editing, and publication.
- Classmates serve as one another's agents, illustrators, reviewers, and editors.
- Finished works are shared and celebrated in some public form.

Writing circles are a fun, low risk opportunity to “just write.” Kids freely and spontaneously explore questions or subjects that fascinate them—any topic or issue within a particular subject. While the small groups do choose common topics, individual kids in the group decide which genre (poem, story, letter, blog) and approach, stance, and specific subject matter suit them best. Then, after getting plenty of guidance on how to give friendly feedback, they share their drafts in a positive, supportive context. Participating in this process helps students shed their fear of the blank page, build fluency, develop confidence, learn content, and explore the various text structures they can draw on as writers.

If you're familiar with literature circles, writing circles need less introduction. Literature circles have revitalized many classrooms by giving kids choice in what they read and authentic structures for meaningful and engaged peer-led discussion. As Harvey Daniels defines the strategy in the second edition of *Literature Circles*,

Literature Circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group

follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community. (2002, 2)

The structure of writing circles mirrors that of literature circles, with kids' writing serving as the text. In writing circles, small groups of kids write on an agreed topic, share and discuss their drafts, receive positive response, choose a new writing idea, and end with a brief reflection. When compared to the eleven "key ingredients" of literature circles that Daniels lists (2002, 18), the parallels one can see between literature circles and writing circles emphasize how important student choice and small-group collaboration are to learning.

Even if you're unfamiliar with literature circles, much of the writing circle dynamic is similar to writing workshop, your own participation in a writer's group, or what you've heard from someone you know who belongs to a writer's group. Adult writers groups are as abundant and pervasive as adult reading groups (although perhaps not as visible, since Oprah hasn't featured any on her show). Don't you know someone in a writing group (or someone who knows someone)?

Writers sharing and talking about what they have written with other writers has likely been happening for as long as people have been writing. As Anne Ruggles Gere puts it in *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, "Writers have always asked friends and colleagues for feedback" (1987, 22). For famous authors as well as kids reading stories they've written to each other, there is something immensely satisfying in sharing writing and getting a response.

From Virginia Woolf's famous Bloomsbury group to the third-grade Peanut Butter Jellies sharing their stories in their circle of desks by the windows, writing groups are an historic and enduring component of writing. Just Google "writing groups" and view their long history and abundance: the Diversity Writer's Group for Men, River Voices, Turning Point, League of Extra Ordinary Revisionists, Dreaming in Ink, the Word Painters, and the Yet Unnamed. Small town, big town, rural, suburban, urban, every state, every country, worldwide.

Writers groups come in many forms—in and out of school. Literary salons, peer revision groups, helping circles, author collectives, therapy sessions, writing workshop share sessions, peer review and peer editing groups, writers linked by geography or theme or genre, in person or on line,

Literature Circles**Writing Circles**

Kids choose their own reading materials.	Through consensus, each group chooses a writing topic. Each student decides how he or she will write about the topic.
Small temporary groups form based on book choice.	Small temporary groups reach consensus on a common writing topic.
Different groups read different books.	Different groups write on different topics.
Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.	Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to share and discuss their writing.
Kids use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.	Kids use structured ways to share, respond, and discuss their writing.
Discussion topics come from the students.	The type of response that guides discussion comes from the kids and is usually initiated by the writer.
Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.	In group meetings, kids have relaxed, supportive conversations about their writing. There's a spirit of community and collaboration.
The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.	The teacher serves primarily as a facilitator, and when possible participates in a group.
Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.	Evaluation is through teacher observation, kids' "think-back" reflections, and documentation of "good faith effort."
A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.	Kids are interested in how other kids write about the agreed-on topic—they laugh, clap, or listen in silent suspense. They are engaged in the joy of sharing and responding to writing.
When books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then new groups form around new reading choices.	After writing a good number of drafts, kids choose all or part of one to develop, revise, edit, and publish. Each writing circle becomes a publishing circle.

voluntarily and involuntarily. What connects them all is the sharing/response dynamic, the positive paradox of the solitary writer as collaborative participant.

The nature of writing groups is connected to the purpose of the writing group—the reason that has brought the writers together. Is the purpose to help improve participant writing, provide an audience, learn how to adhere to genre conventions, focus on details of language and structure, provide emotional support, or network with publishing professionals?

According to Gere (1987, 3), writing groups have three defining features: (1) *immediate response* (instead of waiting for the teacher's written comments), (2) from an *audience*, (3) affirming the *social aspect of writing* (“tangible evidence that writing involves human interaction as well as solitary inscription”).

For many teachers, writing groups are associated with the work of Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Nancie Atwell, although the term takes on somewhat different meanings for each of them. In writing workshop classrooms, writing groups are an integral part of the recurrent structure—from “receiving” drafts to final peer editing and publishing. They often become carefully structured peer conferencing and response groups. In the most recent edition of *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994), for example, Lucy Calkins lists “peer conferring and/or response groups” as one of the five essential components of writing workshop (the others being minilessons, work time, whole-class share sessions, and publication celebrations) (188–91). As described by Calkins, response groups meet “almost daily for at least twenty minutes” with the group serving “mostly as a sounding board” for the writer. “Response groups are usually formed by students at the teacher’s suggestion, and there are usually four or five members in a response group.”

As kids move up through the grades, writing groups have tended to take on a more critical dimension, to the point that, in graduate school, writing groups often feature negative “critiques” from which some members never fully recover. For many older student writers, the invitation to “get into a group and critique one another’s writing” sends a chill down the spine. Most kids aren’t looking forward to their writing being “critiqued”—especially when it is a draft.

As valuable as they *can* be, writing response groups are largely underutilized in classrooms. When push comes to shove in our time-and-test-driven contemporary classrooms, “group response” is often the first component of writing workshop to be shortened or abandoned.

Writing circles restore group response to its essential place in the writing process. In contrast to “critiques,” writing circles are all about confidence, fluency, joy, and delight. In writing circles, kids expect to be listened to and enjoy being listened to. Because students often write about new topics in new ways, writing circles continue to challenge students to take their writing to the next level while remaining low risk, friendly, and supportive. When kids form writing circles they become part of a history and movement for writers, by writers.

Why Writing Circles?

Writing circles help kids become better writers through a recurrent workshop structure that defines an ongoing supportive audience, honors and develops writing “voice,” encourages experimentation and collaboration, and rehabilitates the writing wounded through low-risk writing experiences. Go Penguins! Go Silver Snakes! Go Smooth Operators!

The Missing Link

Writing circles don’t just happen but exist within the framework of a balanced writing program. What exactly constitutes a “balanced” writing program depends on how the word *balanced* is defined. In *Invitations* (1991), Regie Routman defines a balanced writing program as an interplay of four “approaches”: writing aloud (teacher models as she thinks aloud), shared writing (teacher and students write together), guided writing (writing workshop, small-group instruction), and independent writing (writing “without teacher intervention or evaluation”—including writing to learn and freewriting). In their comprehensive language and literacy framework, Irene Fountas and Gay Sue Pinnell (2000) exclude writing to learn but add investigations (“students pose original questions that form the basis of research.”) The “6 + 1 Traits” writing framework uses a common language to create a “common vision” of good writing (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation). Through the 6 + 1 model, teachers and students “pinpoint areas of strength and weakness as they continue to focus on improved writing.”

In addition, it makes sense to consider other aspects of balance: balance between teacher-guided and student-directed approaches, between informal drafts and polished pieces, and in the kind of social interaction kids

experience with their writing. “Balance” can then be visualized as “parallel continuums,” to use Daniels’s phrase (2002, 28):

<i>Student directed</i>			<i>teacher directed</i>	
Individual	↪	small group	↪	whole group
Informal drafts pieces				crafted and assessed

How writing activities play out varies from classroom to classroom, teacher to teacher. That said, given their basic characteristics, here’s a sense of how major writing approaches/activities—including writing circles—sort out on the continuums:

<i>Student directed</i>			<i>teacher directed</i>	
Independent writing, writing to learn, investigations, writing circles, writing workshop				writing aloud, 6 + 1 Traits, shared writing, whole-class writing
<i>Individual</i>	↪	<i>small group</i>	↪	<i>whole group</i>
Independent writing, writing to learn, writing workshop investigations		writing circles		writing aloud, whole-class writing, 6 + 1 Traits, shared writing
<i>Informal drafts</i>				<i>crafted and assessed pieces</i>
Independent writing, writing to learn, writing workshop		writing circles		investigations, whole-class writing, 6 + 1 Traits

Writing circles are the missing link: “missing” because what’s largely missing from the current balanced writing program is an ongoing collaborative writing structure, “link” because writing circles combine collaborative small-group work with self-sponsored writing in a workshop format.

Just as literature circles provide a structure for independent reading in small groups, writing circles provide small-group independent writing. *The bottom line is there are only two delivery systems for independent writing—writing independently in the classic workshop format and writing circles.* Writing circles provide a structure for a neglected part of what kids need to become better writers: independent small-group collaboration to motivate and support self-sponsored student-directed writing.

At what grade levels do writing circles “work”? The examples in this book range from second grade to graduate school. If writing workshop or literature circles “work” with your kids, so will writing circles. As teachers, we make the necessary developmental adjustments—smaller circles and shorter time periods in the early elementary grades, for example. In a way it’s more a question of kids being comfortable with group work and sharing drafts than grade level (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Writing Circles and Writing Workshop

Writing circles revolutionize writing workshop by harnessing the power of kids to help each other become better writers. Kids working together animates the basic writing circle rhythm of topic selection, drafting, sharing drafts, and constructive response. In writing circles kids not only write a lot; they also talk a lot to each other about writing, about topics, about different ways to develop an idea. Ever exhaust yourself trying to conference one-on-one with every kid’s writing? It’s impossible if they are writing every day. And yet kids need to write everyday and get specific supportive response. In writing circles, this happens through kids conferencing with kids. This frees the teacher to participate in writing circles as well and to conference one-on-one when they can.

There’s certainly much writing workshop here. Writing circles would not exist without writing workshop. There’s a shared belief in kid-selected independent writing, conferencing, minilessons, and the inherent worth of moving from draft through revision and editing to finished work. What’s revolutionary about writing circles is that small groups of kids work *in an ongoing collaboration* to make writing workshop happen. The circle drafts kids write are individual and independent, and each kid responds to the chosen topic in their own way—whatever genre, style, or point of view. And yet the writing clearly exists within the community of the other kids in the writing circle. Kids move quickly from draft to draft but each draft receives a hearing

(read aloud) and positive feedback. All of it by kids for kids. If we believe that all writing benefits from sharing and response, the only way we can consistently achieve this is to have kids respond and conference with each other. In writing circles kids also learn firsthand about small group dynamics: the advantages of working together to help each other write, write, write.

Let the revolution begin.

Low Risk

We are gathered here in praise of low-risk learning. As the name implies, something that's low risk has little formal consequence. For writing, low risk means kids initially write without fearing the grade or the mistake. Low risk does not mean low quality. When kids don't write for a grade, they can focus on what they think rather than spelling, wording, or punctuation. Writing can be more creative, adventurous, fun, and compelling. Peter Elbow (1997) has noted that such low risk writing "is usually livelier, clearer, and more natural—often more interesting—in spite of any carelessness and mistakes . . . I've almost never seen a piece of low-stakes writing I couldn't easily understand. But I've seen *lots* of high-stakes writing that students have worked very hard on—and found it impenetrable" (7). Writing circles are a low risk way to high-quality writing—low-risk drafts, low-risk response, and low-risk whole-class sharing—so that kids become confident and stronger writers.

Audience

Writers write for themselves but just as surely they write for readers, listeners, and an audience. In writing circles, kids often write with their audience in mind. When surveyed about their writing circle experiences, kids repeatedly mention how much they enjoy sharing their writing with a small group of other kids. The result is kids start to give extra attention in their writing to ways of engaging their potential listeners. Join a writing circle and you will hear the comic, the heartfelt, the sentimental, the rhetorical, the parable, the letter, the memoir, the inanimate point of view. Join a writing circle and because there is an audience of other kids, you will hear writing voice—distinct stylistic passages that set out to engage and entertain.

The writing circle emphasis on response from other kids provides motivation and encouragement. Other kids' drafts offer a sense of alternative writing possibilities—different points of view, genres, and stylistic

flourishes. As writers, kids need to explore unfamiliar writing territories and do so in the spirit of adventure instead of in fear of error. Isn't that part of what makes a strong and resilient writer? As one student said about her writing circle experiences, "I love showing my true writing style rather than the cookie-cutter way the teachers have us write."

Collaboration

Kids do not want to write about themselves or by themselves all the time. Increasingly, we lead collaborative lives—and that includes our writing. Yet in many classrooms writing often remains solitary and competitive. Unlike the competitive classroom in which success is measured in terms of other kids' failures and writing becomes the means of sorting and grading, writing circles are collaborative and noncompetitive. In writing circles, kids work with and for one another, not against one another. Kids also come to know one another through their writing; sharing drafts becomes a bonding experience. "My circle meetings are the bomb!" says a high school sophomore. "It may seem exaggerated, but it's true. I like my group. We're all humorous people, so we work well together." Kids collaborate in selecting writing topics, responding to one another's writing, and taking on basic management responsibilities like "time keeper" and "first writer." Kids collaborate in naming their writing circle and deciding what writing to share with the entire class. In the publishing circle, kids take on framed roles to help one another improve and formalize their writing.

Many kids haven't had much experience working together—especially when it comes to writing. The keys to successful writing circle collaboration include:

- Kids feel *comfortable* writing, sharing their writing, discussing their writing, and simply working with one another.
- There are *clear guidelines* for managing the writing circle and responding to one another's writing.
- There is a *predictable structure* to the writing circle: minilesson, writing, sharing writing, new writing ideas, reflection.
- Kids *understand* what their writing circle *responsibilities* are and how to fulfill them.
- There are *mechanisms and strategies* to help kids *reach consensus* regarding topic choice and whole-class sharing of writing.

Learning by Doing

Talking ain't knowing, right?

—Detective Lester Freamon on *The Wire*

When kids do the work, they learn.

—Stephanie Harvey, Walloon Institute 2008 keynote address

The writing circle dynamic is all about the doing—individually and as a group. In writing circles, kids decide the writing topic, they write, they share, they respond, they think of new writing ideas, they reflect on what they've learned, and they take on circle management responsibilities. After kids have written and shared numerous drafts, they choose one to revise and edit in a publishing circle. Kids keep their own records and document what they are doing and learning in their writing circle notebooks. They think back over what they've done and make meaning from it. Through all this doing, kids inevitably, playfully, define themselves as writers.

Kids as Teachers and Writers

Kids have a lot to teach one another about how to become better writers. Writing circles are a new kind of workshop that facilitates this teaching without making it seem like teaching at all. The job of a teacher of writing is to take all students to the next level: support what they are doing well and give them a way to move forward. It's a challenge for a single teacher to accomplish this one-on-one with every kid in the classroom. The teacher's very attention to their writing can feel intimidating to some kids. But when we encourage kids to teach one another, writing and writers flourish. When kids listen to one another's writing about the same topic, they all learn something about language, voice, and audience. Sometimes the learning is subtle; sometimes it's a breakthrough moment in which the writer comes to a new understanding of how language works.

Figures 1-1 through 1-5 show responses by the No Names writing circle (grades 6 to 8) to their chosen topic of “a stranger.”

A Stranger
 -poem
 You don't know who they are or
 what they can do
 You don't know their life or
 how they were raised
 You don't know if they're
 coming for you
 or getting ready to shop at the
 grocery store
 A stranger can be a hero or
 an evil villain
 Just warning you,
 Don't be chillin'
 when that stranger becomes a
 villain.

by: Jaesed

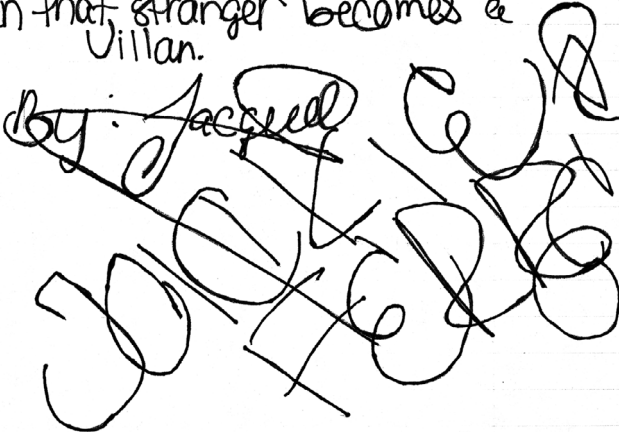


Figure 1-1

You don't know who they are or what they can do
 You don't know their life or how they were raised
 You don't know if they're coming for you
 Or getting ready to shop at the grocery store
 A stranger can be a hero or an evil villain
 Just warning you,
 Don't be chillin'
 When that stranger becomes a villain.

Dear LaMont,
The other day I was walking
down the street and
some guy was following
me home. So naturally I ran
like crazy. He ran up and
grabbed me so I poked him
in the throat then in the
heart. He coughed up blood
and I ran. I knew he
was probably homeless but
he grabbed me and I didn't
know who he was. Just
thought you should know.

Sincerely,
[Signature]
Spencer.

Figure 1-2

Dear LaMont,

The other day I was walking
down the street and
some guy was following
me home. So naturally I ran
like crazy. He ran up and
grabbed me so I poked him
in the throat then in the
heart. He coughed up blood
and I ran. I knew he
was probably homeless but
he grabbed me and I didn't
know who he was. Just
thought you should know.

FAQ's

What about kids who don't have topics to write about or aren't able to draft fluently?

When kids join writing circles, they need to be ready with a list of topics that they want to write about and feel comfortable drafting. In other words, we need to spend time in advance helping kids identify good topics and demonstrating and giving kids practice in quick extended drafting. There are, to borrow Stephanie Harvey's phrase, many "strategies that work." Chapter 3 includes suggestions for getting kids ready to write.

How many kids make a circle?

Writing circles usually number between three and six kids. As with literature circles, we want to form small, functional groups—not so large that sharing and response will become rushed, and not so small that the group will find it hard to function if one of the kids is absent. Circles of four or five kids are common. This ensures a variety of kinds of writing and points of view. Each circle doesn't have to have the same number of kids.

How often are writing circles scheduled? Once a week over the entire term? Every day for three or four weeks, or for a few months alternating with writing workshop?

Writing circles are scheduled so kids can count on them. A recurrent, consistent, dependable schedule allows kids to plan their writing. If you've scheduled writing circles for every Tuesday and Thursday and you miss a Tuesday, be prepared for some disappointed kids. Such disappointment is not the best way to measure success, but it indicates how a recurrent, predictable schedule helps to motivate kids. We want kids to look forward to writing circles, and consistent scheduling (in terms of day and time) helps make that happen.

At the primary level, teachers often divide writing circle sessions into writing time and sharing time. At the end of sharing time, kids come to consensus about their new writing topic and write a brief reflection. For example:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10:15–10:30 Write	10:15–10:30 Write	10:15–10:30 Write	10:15–10:30 Write	10:15–10:30 Write
10:30–11:00 Circles Meet	10:30–11:00 Circles Meet	10:30–11:00 Circles Meet	10:30–11:00 Circles Meet	10:30–11:00 Circles Meet

In self-contained classrooms, writing circles often alternate with writing workshop:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10:15–11:00 Circles Meet	10:15–11:00 Writing Workshop	10:15–11:00 Circles Meet	10:15–11:00 Writing Workshop	10:15–11:00 Circles Meet

Time gets tight in middle schools, where language arts are often assigned a double-period block:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English
9:00–9:45 Circles Meet	9:00–9:45 Write	9:00–9:45 Circles Meet	9:00–9:45 Write	9:00–9:45 Circles Meet

Time constraints are even tighter in high school:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 English	8:15–9:00 Writing Circle

In order for a once-a-week writing circle like this to work, prior class time would need to be set aside for training—consecutive days spent modeling the process, helping kids generate writing topic lists, and generally becoming familiar with the writing circle structure and expectations.

How about the timing of the writing circle itself?

In order to complete the various writing circle activities—sharing, responding, selecting a new topic, and reflecting—kids need to have a clear sense of how much time is available for what. Generally, writing circles take between thirty-five and forty-five minutes (sometimes less in the early primary grades), depending on the way kids respond to one another’s writing, how much time is allotted for new topic selection, and whether or not kids start a new draft immediately. A typical period might look like this:

- Whole-class writing circle minilesson (5 minutes)
- Kids sharing and responding to writing (15–20 minutes)
- New topic selection (5 minutes)
- Whole-class sharing (5–10 minutes)
- Writing circle notebook reflection (3–5 minutes)
- Writing time (if available)

Something that takes one group ten minutes can take another group thirteen minutes and still another group fifteen minutes. Keeping kids who are essentially “finished” on task while others are still working is one of the major challenges of group work. This isn’t much of a problem in writing circles, however. A circle that finishes choosing a new topic early and has some time before the announced whole class sharing, for example, can either start their new writing or discuss ideas for how to write about the new topic. Discussing their thinking about the new topic invariably gives kids additional ideas and generates enthusiasm.

I’ll admit it. I’m uncomfortable with all the uncorrected drafts.

It’s important to keep in mind (and to remind kids) that they will be choosing a kernel from their drafts to develop, revise, edit, and polish through the publishing circle. Ironically, kids often tend to take the writing they share with their peers more seriously than the writing they produce for the teacher. Writing circles give kids a structure that allows them to relax and explore their writing in a supportive, collaborative environment. From these many drafts emerges the kind of writing kids *want* to inhabit and make better. The series of drafts ultimately motivates kids to take their writing to the next level. And because the drafting also connects many kids with the realities of writing voice and audience, it helps make them stronger writers. As Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde observe in *Best Practice: New Standards for*

Teaching and Learning in America's Schools, “the best language-learning occurs when students attempt actual communication and then see how real listeners/readers react” (1999, 59).

How do I assess my students' work in writing circles?

There are a number of choices for assessing kids' work and giving them credit for writing circles (see Chapter 11). For this assessment to be fruitful, kids need to keep a writing circle notebook. The notebook can be a folder, a binder, or a stapled or bound booklet. The important thing is to provide a way for kids to keep track of their writing circle process—drafts, topics, response strategies, daily reflections, whether they were first writer or timekeeper. Standardized “thinking back” reflection sheets can be collected, quickly reviewed, and returned to kids, who then need to secure these sheets in their notebook. The writing circle notebook makes it possible for kids to review what they have accomplished and document their “good faith” effort.

Yes, “good faith” effort. It makes a lot of sense to reward effort in learning when the effort *is* the learning. The process of writing circles leads to better writing, and it is appropriate and just to award credit for full participation. Kids are basically engaged in writing circle work or they aren't, and it's their responsibility to show sufficient work in their writing circle notebook to make the case for such good faith effort. If necessary, effort easily translates into a grade. If kids complete the writing circle assignments they get a B; if they've done a good job they get an A; if their efforts have been less than good, the grade is lowered proportionately. (“Good faith” effort is more fully explained in Chapter 11.)

How much time should students be given to write?

Some teachers set a minimum requirement—ten minutes per draft, for example—that becomes longer in the higher grades. In classrooms where kids create their circle drafts during writing workshop, the amount of time spent on them is substantially longer. In general, though, this consideration has more to do with taking the time necessary to explore the agreed-on topic. Drafts usually become longer and more fully developed with more practice writing and hearing writing read aloud. Some kids can get stuck in writing drafts too brief to explore or really begin to develop their writing idea. Through modeling and minilessons we talk and demonstrate what it

means to draft enough to discover meaning as opposed to writing so little as to shut the door on discovery. Basically, the audience expectations established by the writing circle structure preclude the “amount of student writing” issue. When kids see that they are writing for one another and listen to and enjoy the longer, more thoughtful drafts of their peers, they invariably put more time and thought into their work.

How do you form groups? How do you keep track of what each circle is doing? Does the teacher join a circle? How do kids reach a consensus? What do kids write? What about genres? When

The more answers, the more questions: teaching and learning as inquiry. Not to worry. The practice of writing circles itself clarifies these questions and provides a series of answers. Teachers find their own answers when they believe the process benefits kids. Teachers who believe in something find ways to make it work. Answers often present themselves once writing circles are underway—are revealed in the process. In his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot writes, “Oh, do not ask what is it?/Let us go and make our visit.”

In the chapters ahead are strategies to motivate kids to write and discover topics that interest them; minilessons on management and writing craft; activities to build community and a spirit of collaboration; writing circle schedules; publication role sheets; discussions of the writing circle notebook and how writing circles become publishing circles; constructive friendly ways for kids to respond to one another’s writing; ways of sharing and celebrating writing as a whole class; and assessment suggestions.

But first, ready for day one?