



Every Kid a Writer

Strategies That Get
Everyone Writing

KELLY BOSWELL

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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*To the teachers, students, instructional coaches, and principals
at Centennial, Dorothy Moses, Liberty, Lincoln, Northridge,
Pioneer, Prairie Rose, and Sunrise Elementary Schools
in Bismarck, North Dakota.*



*"Day by day you have to give the work before you
all the best stuff you have, not saving up for later projects.*

If you give freely, there will always be more."

-Anne Lamott, author of Bird by Bird

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FOREWORD

by Harvey "Smokey" Daniels

You are about to spend nearly 200 pages with a sparkling and generous mind. I first met Kelly Boswell in 2012, when we were hired separately to consult in a rural school district, she with the elementary teachers and I with the secondary. I'd seen some of her earlier books, and we'd said hi at conferences, but we'd never worked together. Our first task was to plan and co-teach an opening workshop for all the town's K–12 teachers. We got on the phone and cooked something up before we hopped on different planes. The next morning, I did an opening segment and then handed it over to Kelly, as planned. She stood up and proceeded to wow the assembled educators. Have you ever had this thing happen where you are listening to someone talk, and you realize that every word coming out of their mouth is just, like, the Truth? That's the feeling I get now, hearing Kelly's voice again in these pages.

So, have you ever encountered any "reluctant" writers in your classes over the years? Well, of course you have—we all have! Some days our classrooms seem to be crammed with countless kids who are staring, dawdling, avoiding, postponing, sidestepping, malingering, or otherwise *not writing* when time is offered. Kelly calls this phenomenon "the shrug, the slump, and the sharpening of pencils."

But before we start to blame the kids for this reluctance, Kelly says, let's look at ourselves. Have *we* ever behaved like this when faced with a writing task? Well, no, not when we've written a grocery list. But wait. Writing a term paper for a graduate school class? Yikes, no, how can I get out of this! The point is that *every* would-be author, child or adult, is reluctant to write some of the time. Instead of bemoaning this simple reality, we need to get on with clearing a path for the fearful. Hence this book.

This guide is much like Kelly's live presentations. Her suggestions are clear, practical, and doable—bubbling with kid smartness and teacherly humor. Kelly has a straightforward formula for reducing students' writing reluctance and enhancing their confidence and fluency:

1. Use mentors and modeling to fuel engagement.
2. Create a safe and daily space for writing.
3. Expose writers to real readers.
4. Offer choice.
5. Maintain a healthy perspective on conventions.
6. Shape writing identity through assessment.

In each chapter, she offers lessons, classroom stories, kid dialogues, plans, models, and teacher moves. Also in every chapter, Kelly shows exactly how kids can meet all state and national standards when these five conditions guide instruction.

While there is a dedicated chapter on teacher modeling, this vital and oft-neglected theme runs powerfully through the whole book. As Kelly gently coaches us, “Modeling doesn’t require you to write perfectly. When you write in front of your kids, you’re not modeling perfection; you’re modeling process. You’re showing them how you think, plan, make decisions, cross things out, change your mind, revise, and persevere. You’re showing them how writers write.”

In Kelly’s chapter on the conventions of writing, there is a scene that especially charmed me, one of many graceful metaphors scattered through the book. Kelly is in her kitchen, trying to teach her two frisky sons how to bake.

I found myself tensing up when watching my sons crack eggs or measure (not so precisely) that cup of flour. As an adult who has been baking for a good number of years, I’ve grown to be fairly precise in my measuring and recipe following. Baking with my kids required me to relax a bit on the “rules of baking” so that we could enjoy the *process*. I came to realize that it wasn’t as important that they followed the recipe *exactly* or that they measured *correctly*. Give or take a little bit would be OK, as long as they would discover a love of baking or spending time in the kitchen creating something to be shared with others.

Don’t get me wrong. There were a few basic and non-negotiable principles that I knew I needed to teach them: Don’t eat raw eggs. Wash your hands before you begin. You can’t substitute

salt for sugar. There are standard units of measurement that we use when we bake. It's imperative that you add a half *teaspoon* of salt rather than a half *cup* of salt.

But if I wanted to help my boys grow into men who would know their way around a kitchen (and how to make a decent batch of chocolate chip cookies), I needed to hold these two goals in tension: teach them the basic rules of baking *and* help them enjoy the process of baking. If I focused too heavily on the rules and on baking *correctly*, my kids might learn how to bake, but it's unlikely that they would enjoy it and choose to continue baking.

Same with writing.

As someone who has been publishing with Heinemann since 1985, I am tremendously proud to welcome Kelly Boswell to our family of authors.

Now, reader, don't be reluctant. Come and cook in Kelly's kitchen!

Harvey "Smokey" Daniels

Santa Fe, New Mexico

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I have been fortunate and incredibly blessed to know and learn from Harvey “Smokey” Daniels. Smokey is a tireless advocate for excellence, a champion for all learners, and one of the smartest and most genuine people I know. He lives a joyfully curious life and invites all of us to do the same. I am humbled and so grateful that Smokey crafted the foreword for this book. It means the world to me.

I stand on the shoulders of so many researchers, authors, and teachers who have championed best practice in writing instruction while honoring and respecting children’s voices. Some of them I have never met, and some of them I cherish as dear friends. Each of them has shaped the way I teach writing and approach teaching. I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to Richard Allington, Carl Anderson, Lucy Calkins, Harvey “Smokey” Daniels, Peter Elbow, Ralph Fletcher, Kelly Gallagher, Matt Glover, Donald Graves, Mary Howard, Linda Hoyt, Penny Kittle, Joan Moser, Don Murray, Tom Newkirk, Regie Routman, Vicki Spandel, Tony Stead, and Katie Wood Ray.

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Finally, I could not have written this book without the tenacious love and steadfast support of my best friend and husband. Corwin, you are the gravitational pull that holds everything together.



The Shrug, the Slump, and the Sharpening of Pencils

The teaching of writing is enormously exciting only if we expect it to be, that is, only if we expect our students to write interesting essays, only if we read and listen carefully between the lines, only if we are honest with them and with ourselves.

—Lad Tobin, author and writing professor

If you've been teaching for any length of time, you've probably lived through a scene like this:

You wrap up your well-planned and fairly well-executed writing lesson, give some final words of wisdom, and send your students off to begin writing. Out of the corner of your eye, you notice a few kids walking briskly (OK, *running*) toward the bathroom passes hanging by the door, each of them hoping to be the first one to grab a pass and scoot right on out the door.

You turn your attention toward the remaining students, who have begun to settle in. A few are scrawling with furrowed brows, deep in thought. Yet you can't help but notice that some of them are . . . well . . . *dawdling*. A handful of kids have suddenly discovered that their pencils are in need of a good, long sharpening. One student has noticed a thread that has come loose on his sweatshirt and is slowly and meticulously wrapping the thread around his index finger.

If the picture I've painted sounds even vaguely familiar to you, rest assured that you are not alone. Many of us find ourselves surrounded by a few (or perhaps more than a few) students who shrug when asked about their writing. They slump in their chairs instead of jumping into writing with energy and vigor. They sharpen pencils or ask for the bathroom pass or decide it's a good time to organize and reorganize their desk. They groan when you announce that it's time to write, or they barrage you with questions along the lines of "How long does this have to be?" They start but rarely finish pieces of writing, or they write the bare minimum and then shout a hearty, *I'm done!*

From our perspective, it might look as though these students are looking for *any* excuse *not* to write. They might appear to be what we sometimes call "reluctant writers"—kids who know how to write but are unwilling to write or seem to have an aversion to writing.

This picture I've painted—these kids who seem disinterested and disengaged—can be incredibly disheartening, especially when you've invested precious time and energy thoughtfully planning a lesson or a unit or a writing experience that you thought would be engaging and powerful.

"What can we do?" we might wonder.

First, let's start by taking a closer look at one of these writers: *you*.

Reflect on Your Own Life as a Writer

Think back to a time when writing was painful or when you didn't want to write. Maybe that thesis paper in college. Or that biography you wrote in sixth grade. Or an email to a parent that you wrote last week. Have you captured the memory in your mind? In my work, when I've asked teachers to share these memories (and when I've shared these memories from my own writing life), I've noticed some similarities in our experiences. Do these also ring true for you?

- Time seemed to *slow way down*.
- You were easily distracted.
- Words were hard to come by and harder to get down.
- You just wanted to *be done*.
- You wanted to do the bare minimum that was required.
- You felt frustrated.

Now consider these questions:

- What were you writing?
- To whom were you writing?
- What were you thinking about as you wrote?

Next, think back to a time when you were really engaged and motivated and maybe even *enjoyed* the writing experience. When I've discussed these scenarios with teachers and when I've reflected on these experiences in my own life, I've also found some commonalities:

- Time flew by.
- Words flowed fairly easily.
- You loved the words you wrote (or you at least felt confident in them).
- You felt like you were in the zone or experiencing flow.

Consider these questions:

- What were you writing?
- To whom were you writing?
- What were you thinking about as you wrote?

Did you notice anything interesting? Might you, depending on your purpose, audience, and mindset, sometimes look quite a bit like the “reluctant writers” in your classroom?

Several months ago, I was sitting at the dinner table with my husband and two sons, ages twelve and ten. We munched on tacos, scolded the dog for

begging, and chatted about our day. After we listened to the latest about football practice, math homework, and recess, the conversation shifted to my day.

“I had a phone call with my editor,” I said. “I have got to get going on this book.”

My older son looked at me, surprised. “You’re writing another book?” he asked. “What’s this one about?”

“It’s about what teachers can do when they think kids don’t like to write or are doing whatever they can to avoid writing.”

He looked me square in the eye, smiled, and said, “Oh! It’s a book about *you!*”

Confession time. You’ll know that I’m supposed to be writing simply by looking inside my refrigerator. If my fridge is clean, organized, and sanitized, you can bet that I am supposed to be writing.

Writing deadlines have this mysterious and almost magical way of reminding me that I should probably change the sheets in the guest room, organize my sock drawer, make my yearly dentist appointment, or . . . clean the fridge.

This brings me to the first of a few truths I want to share with you before we jump into the book. These truths can help us shift our perspective a bit when it comes to kids who might seem reluctant.

Truth: *All Writers Are Reluctant*

Don Murray, the father of so much of the great thinking and work around writing and teaching writing, once wrote,

Even the most productive writers are expert dawdlers, doers of unnecessary errands, seekers of interruptions—trials to their wives or husbands, friends, associates, and themselves. They sharpen well-pointed pencils and go out to buy more blank paper, rearrange offices, wander through libraries and bookstores, chop wood, walk, drive, make unnecessary calls, nap, daydream, and try not “consciously” to think about what they are going to write so they can think subconsciously about it. (1978, 375–76)

All writers are reluctant.

OK, maybe not *all* writers are reluctant *all* of the time. But most writers I know have moments when they are less than enthused about writing—moments when they’d rather clean the fridge than try to put some sentences down on paper.

If we can embrace the fact that, at some point, all writers experience reluctance, it might help us approach those dawdlers in our classroom with a little bit of empathy and understanding rather than judgment.

Truth: *The Reasons for Reluctance Are Varied*

Curious about my own writing reluctance and habit of cleaning the fridge when I should be writing, I once jotted down a list of all the reasons I tend to avoid writing. (Confession: Writing this *list* seemed easier than doing the *actual* writing I had scheduled to do that day.)

Here are some of my reasons:

- 1. Self-doubt.** I worry that I don’t have anything worthwhile to say. I worry that my writing won’t sound writerly enough. I doubt that I can form a complete sentence and a valuable thought for another human being.
- 2. Fear.** Hot on the heels of self-doubt comes fear. Sometimes, when I sit down to write, I am overcome with it. Will I be judged for my writing? What if my grammar is way off? What if someone whom I respect disagrees with what I’ve written?
- 3. It’s hard.** Writing is hard work. It requires keen focus, deep concentration, and discipline. As one of my mentors put it, “Writing is simply this: discipline and struggle.”
- 4. It’s time-consuming.** Writing a chapter takes days—weeks even. Cleaning the fridge or changing the sheets takes twenty minutes, tops.
- 5. It’s never done, it’s just due.** I could fiddle with one piece of writing for the rest of my life and never really feel done. There’s always more I could say, revisions I could make, things I could clarify. There simply comes a time when the piece is due, and I let it go. Tasks like organizing my sock drawer or cleaning out a closet have a definite end.

What about you? If you think back to a time when you were less than enthused to write, what would be on your list? Maybe your list would have some of the same reasons I mentioned. Or maybe your list would be different. Maybe you weren't invested in the topic. Or maybe you weren't given any choice of topic, form, or length.

My point here is that each writer is unique. We all carry with us our own reasons for reluctance. The writers in our classrooms have their reasons, too. Perhaps we should *ask* them about their reasons. Their lists might give us insight into how to best help them.

Truth: *There Are Strategies That Support All Writers*

The strategies I share in this book are helpful for all kids because all kids are writers, and

- all writers experience reluctance from time to time.
- all writers benefit from exposure to the quality writing of other writers.
- all writers benefit from teachers who make their thinking transparent so that they can see how another writer gets an idea from their head to the paper.
- all writers benefit from a safe space and a daily time in which they can write.
- all writers benefit from opportunities to write for real readers outside of the classroom.
- all writers grow and develop and maybe even blossom when we give them choice, keep conventions in their proper place, and assess in ways that help them to shape a positive writing identity.

Truth: Kids Have Their Own Bag of Tricks

Over the years, I've tried a lot of different things when I've gotten stuck or felt reluctant about my writing. Here are some of my techniques:

- **Just start writing.** The hardest part is often just getting going. Once I start, I'm often pleasantly surprised to discover that this writing thing isn't so bad after all.
- **Look at mentor books or read mentor authors.** When I'm feeling stuck on how to structure something like an acknowledgments page (or . . . ahem . . . an opening chapter to a book), I look to see how others have structured one. I'm not closely examining *what* they are saying but rather *how* they are saying it or how they are structuring it.
- **Take a short walk.** There's something about fresh air, movement, and relative quiet that helps energize me and helps me refocus. (Bonus: My dog loves it.)
- **Talk to myself about my topic.** Personally, I find it oh so easy to talk and oh so hard to write sometimes. So, I walk around my house or around the block or around the neighborhood and simply talk about the topic I'm writing about. Sometimes I record my thoughts using the voice memo on my phone. Sometimes I simply talk to myself.
- **Talk to someone else.** I call a friend, or call my editor, or talk to my husband about where I'm stuck. Sometimes just talking about the challenge helps. Other times, talking about my topic gives me the actual words I need to reengage in the work.
- **Set a timer and write without stopping.** I use the timer on my stove rather than the timer on my phone. (Phones = distraction.) I set the timer for a chunk of time (maybe thirty minutes) and I write without stopping. I tell myself, "It's OK if the writing is bad. You can revise it. Just get something down."



I recently worked with writers in first grade, third grade, and fifth grade. In each classroom, I asked the students the same question: *What do you do when you get stuck as a writer?* I asked the kids to share their thinking with a partner and then listened as the room erupted with chatter.

As I listened in and jotted down what I heard on chart paper, I noticed that the responses were strikingly similar across grade levels (and strikingly similar to some of my own tricks).

Some kids said that they take a break. They get a drink, they take a walk around the classroom, or they sit and think. Others said that they talk to someone else about their topic. A few students said that they go to the classroom library and take a moment or two to read something that is written in the same genre in which they are writing.

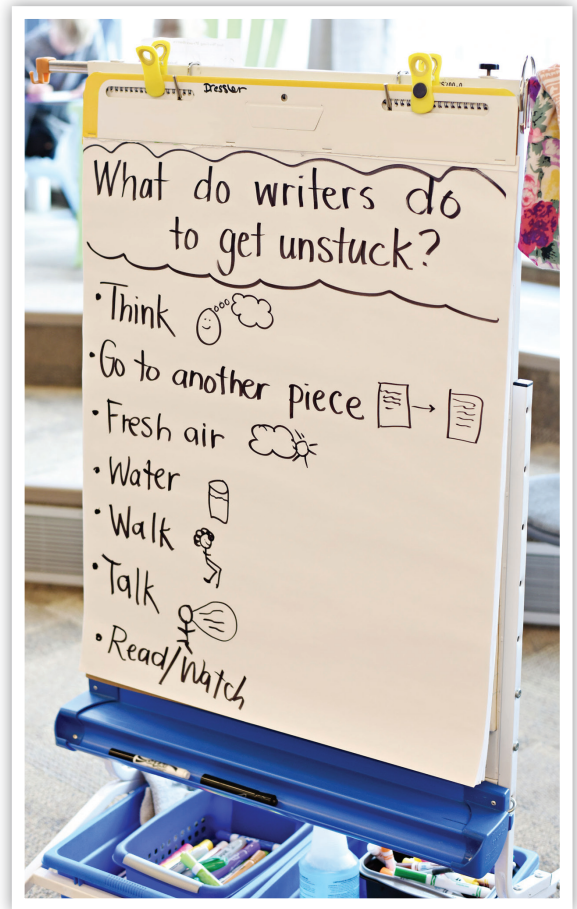
I encourage you to try this with your group of learners. Listen in and jot down what you hear. Just *talking* about this problem that all writers face from time to time is empowering. For me, it was helpful to read Don Murray's words about writers being dawdlers. It made me feel less shame about my own habits and more hopeful that I could find ways to help myself. This may be true for kids, too.

Truth: Students Mirror the Enthusiasm in Our Teaching

Recently, a group of teachers and I observed another teacher. We sat in her room for forty-five minutes and watched her teach a writing lesson, confer with individual students, and bring the kids back together at the end to reflect on the learning.

When the experience was over, one of the teachers who had observed the lesson exclaimed, "I'm ready to write! Just watching her made me want to write!"

The rest of us nodded. We had the same response. Throughout this teacher's lesson, we found ourselves smiling because *the teacher* was smiling. Two words kept coming to my mind as I watched her: *joyfully literate*. Throughout the whole experience, the teacher simply beamed. She was modeling for her students what it looked like to be a joyfully literate human being. You couldn't help but be drawn into the joy of writing because her whole demeanor invited you to do so.



I record the ideas that students share. We can continue to add ideas to the chart throughout the year.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we need to turn cartwheels or entertain as we teach. Simply *smiling* while we teach might help kids engage with writing in a more positive way.

It's hard to expect kids to engage in writing with joy, purpose, and energy if we aren't engaging with the teaching of writing with joy, purpose, and energy.

What We Can Do

When any of us is required to write without a strong sense of purpose, without a sense of ownership of a piece, or to an audience whom we do not connect with (or perhaps do not even have a clear conception of), we can feel reluctant. Could there be other factors at work when students are not showing enthusiasm about writing in our classrooms, factors that are beyond our control? Of course. However, we have at least some control over many of the factors involved and total control over some of them. This is good news; it means that we can help!

The chapters in this book lay out six practical ways to make shifts in your classroom and in your teaching to help students write with energy and enthusiasm:

1. Use mentors and modeling to fuel engagement.
2. Create a safe and daily space for writing.
3. Expose writers to real readers.
4. Offer choice.
5. Maintain a healthy perspective on conventions.
6. Shape writing identity through assessment.

In the following chapters, you'll notice some consistent features:

- **An invitation to reflect.** In each chapter, I'll invite you to pause and consider how the chapter's topic looks or how you might experience it in your own life as a writer.
- **A look inside the classroom.** Here, you'll see what this strategy looks like in real teachers' classrooms. You'll see photographs and samples of kids' work so that you can get a clear picture in your mind of what the strategy looks like in real life.

- **A reality check.** Standards are a reality for many of us in classrooms today. In this section, we'll turn our attention to how to the strategies and ideas in this work support state and national standards.
- **Practical ideas to put to use.** In every chapter, I'll share some small and powerful ways to try out the strategy in your own classroom. My hope is that you will see a few ideas you can try right away! We'll explore how you can use real-world examples, along with modeling your own thinking and writing, to help kids approach writing with enthusiasm. I'll also help you think about what the strategy might look like when you are working with students one-on-one.
- **Questions for reflection.** While the guidance in this book is based on experiences in many classrooms across the country, the most important classroom for you to consider in your reading is your own. At the end of each chapter, you'll find some questions to ponder when thinking about your own classroom.

So, let's get started!