

Leah Mermelstein

SELF-DIRECTED WRITERS

*The Third Essential Element
in the Writing Workshop*

Foreword by **Matt Glover**

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Matt Glover ix

Acknowledgments xii

- Chapter 1** The Essential Elements of a Writing Workshop 1
- *The Writing Workshop* 1
 - *Misconceptions About Self-Directed Learning* 7
 - *How This Book Can Help* 8
- Chapter 2** Self-Directed Writers: The Third Essential Element of a K–5 Writing Workshop 11
- *Self-Directed Learning Is Important in All Stages of Life* 12
 - *Qualities That Describe Self-Directed Writers* 13
 - *Benefits of Creating Self-Directed Learners* 25
 - *You Can Do This!* 27
- Chapter 3** Creating Physical Environments That Kids Can Easily Navigate 29
- *Vital Classroom Resources* 30
 - *Assess the Classroom Environment for Self-Directed Learning* 35
 - *Additional Tips* 39
- Chapter 4** Managing the Writing Workshop to Support Self-Directed Learning 43
- *Keep Kids Engaged by Establishing Consistent Celebrations* 43
 - *Be Proactive: Encourage Kids to Be Independent First and Interdependent Second* 44
 - *Be Quiet So That Kids Realize They Can Solve Their Own Problems* 45

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Be Mindful of Which Problems You Solve for Kids and When</i> 46 ■ <i>Be Flexible and Don't Forget the End Goal Is Self-Directed Writers</i> 48 ■ <i>Be Firm: Empower Kids to Become More Independent</i> 50 ■ <i>Reflect on and Revise Your Management</i> 51
Chapter 5	The Role of Scaffolded Instruction in Creating Self-Directed Writers 55
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What Does It Mean to Scaffold Students?</i> 56 ■ <i>How Can We Use the Writing Components to Scaffold Student Learning?</i> 57 ■ <i>Two Writing Components That Scaffold Student Learning</i> 58 ■ <i>Scaffolds Are an Important Part of the Self-Directed Learning Puzzle</i> 73
Chapter 6	Planning a Yearlong Curriculum That Emphasizes Self-Directed Learning 75
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Kindergarten Curriculum Planning Meeting</i> 76 ■ <i>The Fifth-Grade Curriculum Planning Meeting</i> 80 ■ <i>Plan for Success</i> 83
Chapter 7	Planning Units of Study That Create Self-Directed Learners 85
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Key Elements to Planning a Genre Unit of Study</i> 85 ■ <i>Take the Challenge</i> 99
Chapter 8	Designing Focus Lessons, Conferences, and Shares for Self-Directed Learning 101
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Focus Lessons That Help Kids Become More Self-Directed</i> 101 ■ <i>A Focus Lesson</i> 102 ■ <i>Conferences That Help Kids Become More Self-Directed</i> 108 ■ <i>Share Sessions That Help Kids Become More Self-Directed</i> 117 ■ <i>Students' Perspectives on Self-Directed Learning</i> 119

Appendix 123

Works Cited 135



FOREWORD

This book is important for many reasons, but for me the most important is that Leah decided to write it at all. Her decision to write this book came from a deep belief in the importance of guiding students to become self-directed decision makers. I frequently encounter educational environments where there is a disconnect between what adults say is important and what is actually happening in classrooms. Business and educational leaders call for college graduates to be innovative thinkers who are able to collaborate and solve problems creatively. But at the same time, more and more classrooms are falling into a one-size-fits-all model where all students receive the same teaching at the same time on the same day. Students are lost in a sea of standards and data. Leah attacks this disconnect by showing us how students can become self-directed, engaged decision makers while working in a context of standards.

Leah believes that teachers impact children's ability to be self-directed. Because she values the actions of teachers, she shares stories of teachers and of classrooms filled with self-directed learners—classrooms similar to Emily Callahan's fourth-grade class. Even though they have never met, Leah and Emily are kindred spirits because Emily's students embody the self-direction that Leah cares about so greatly. During a visit one morning, I saw Emily's students highly engaged in a variety of writing projects. Students were deep into a unit of study on how authors use engaging text structures. Students were able to choose not only their topics but also their genres as they learned to match audience, purpose, and genre. Here are just a few of the projects kids were working on:

- a sequel to an earlier story called “A Case of the Mondays”
- a story written as the diary of a person searching for Bigfoot

It's this process that enables students to continually make decisions about what to work on in their writing and how to work on it.

- a question-and-answer book about dolphins, developed from a survey of the student's classmates that asked them what they wanted to know about dolphins
- a heartfelt ABC text about a child's family
- a fantasy story with a repeated line structure

The rest of the class displayed a similarly wide range of topics and genres. As Leah says, “the benefit of this type of unit is that kids get to revisit previously taught genres, which deepens their understanding of them. Not only that, but they also discover which genres are their favorites and can spend more time writing and honing their skills in those genres” (5).

Writing like this doesn't happen by accident. I see similar lists of topics and genres whenever I'm in a classroom where students have high levels of authentic choice and self-reliance. It stems directly from the classroom environments and interactions between students and teachers throughout the year. Most importantly, it comes from teachers who, like Leah, value student self-direction.

Leah describes the process of children becoming self-directed like this: “It's this process that enables kids to become the bosses of their own learning. It's this process that teaches kids to use a wide variety of strategies to solve their own problems. It's this process that enables students to continually make decisions about what to work on in their writing and how to work on it. It's this process that keeps them engaged and producing high-quality work throughout the entire writing workshop” (8).

In these classrooms self-direction didn't occur at a special time of year or in a free-choice unit during the last two weeks of school. Nor was it something that occurred early in the year and was then forgotten. Instead this autonomous learning and writing was the result of a year-round effort made by the teachers. As Leah explains, “creating independent and self-directed writers is a yearlong project, not a September project” (10).

Leah shows you how self-direction is different from independence. Students, and adults, can work independently, but just being able to work on your own doesn't mean that you are productive. Not bothering the teacher might be a sign of independence, but it isn't necessarily a sign of working productively. Self-direction, on the other hand, means that students are taking action. They're setting a course for themselves. Self-direction is a much more valuable lifelong skill because it means two things. First, it means you have a direction. You are working toward a goal. You've charted a path and are working step-by-step to arrive where you want to be. Second, it means that you are making decisions. You aren't self-directed if someone else is deciding what you should do each day.

Just valuing self-direction isn't enough though. Students don't become self-directed because teachers get out of their way. Instead, they do so because their teachers take on an active, thoughtful role. Leah highlights specific classrooms and teachers that nurture self-direction. She gives you a glimpse into these classrooms, not only showing you what students are doing but also revealing the specific teaching moves that result in self-directed learners. These classrooms and teachers give us a vision for what's possible.

What makes this book truly special is that Leah takes the idea of self-direction a step further. She advocates for self-directed teachers as well. It's difficult to expect students to be self-directed if their teachers aren't. Leah shows the need for harmony between how students make decisions about their writing and how teachers make decisions about their teaching. Leah shows you how to make critical decisions that only a teacher who knows her individual students well can make. Programs, standards, and curriculum guides can't determine what an individual child needs on a specific day. Decisions about how to interact with a student are best made by a thoughtful, self-directed teacher.

In each chapter, Leah provides you with practical strategies for supporting self-directed writers during writing workshop. She describes environments and classroom routines that will help your students become self-reliant without you. She shows you how to plan curriculum and units of study that foster self-direction. And she illustrates how student-teacher interactions in focus lessons, conferences, and shares can reinforce self-direction each day.

In addition to practical strategies, Leah shares important concepts about teaching that apply to any content area. You'll learn about the importance of lingering longer. You'll be asked to consider the difference between "praise and being positive." You'll see the importance of "embracing uncertainty." Leah helps us envision writers who are confident, engaged risk takers who independently solve problems. They are excited, persistent, and resilient writers who are self-starters. They are resourceful writers who work toward important goals.

This book will spark a change in how teachers interact with their students each day. It will help parents think about how they want their children to think. And it will help educational leaders deeply consider what they value and how teachers can foster those same values. Classrooms that actively nurture self-directed writers should be *common* in schools, now more than ever.

Matt Glover



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this book on nurturing self-directed learners at a very fitting time in my life. Over the nine months it took me to complete the book, I learned firsthand about how important it is to be self-directed. I got the news that Heinemann accepted my book proposal on the same day that my pregnancy for my first child was confirmed. The goal was to finish the book by December 1st because I was due to give birth on December 31st. I knew that the next nine months of growing a book and a baby at the same time were going to be a busy but wonderful adventure. But I couldn't have imagined what else was in store for me.

People talk about how pregnancy should be a calm and serene time. This was not exactly the case for me. During those nine months while I was pregnant and writing this book, my father contracted a rare blood disorder. A few weeks later, I caught head lice and food poisoning during the same week. Shortly afterward, I attended my cousin's wedding, where the father of the groom (my uncle) passed out before dinner and was rushed to the hospital. And now I am writing these acknowledgments, pregnant, by flashlight on my iPad while stranded in my house because of Hurricane Sandy. Throughout all of that, I remained persistent in moving this book forward. I wrote this book during fifteen-minute breaks at work, in doctor's offices, at the hospital, as well as in between throwing up from food poisoning and pregnancy-induced nausea. I'm happy to finally slow down and take a moment to thank everyone who made this possible.

First, I would like to thank Matt Glover for writing the foreword to my book. Matt has always been one of my literacy heroes and I was lucky enough to work with him a few years ago. Our work together was seamless because our vision for what kids and teachers need is so similar.

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Leah Mermelstein

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Credits continued from page iv

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1

CHAPTER

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A WRITING WORKSHOP

It was early spring and I was visiting Donna Amato's first-grade classroom in the midst of her writing workshop. When I walked into Donna's classroom, she was busy conferring with her students, but regardless of that, the other kids were hard at work.

They were excited, engaged, and producing high-quality, very individualized writing pieces. If and when they encountered problems, they seemed to seamlessly solve them by checking charts, asking friends, referring to texts, or simply taking a moment to process a possible solution. At the end of this amazing writing workshop, when Donna gathered her kids for the share session, she said, "We're about to gather for a share. You all have an important decision to make and I want you to make the decision that is best for you. Some of you might feel it's a better use of your time to keep writing. If that's true, don't come to the share today. Others might feel as though a conversation might spark an idea or help you solve a problem. If that's true, join us at the share meeting today."

The kids who didn't come to the share continued writing. Nobody (really and truly, not one single student) made a bad decision or fooled around while Donna conducted the share session with only some of her students. Rather, the students who didn't come were deeply engaged in their writing. Donna didn't have a special class or perfect kids. She was a special teacher who made deliberate teaching decisions that enabled her to run her classroom in this manner.

■ The Writing Workshop

Before I dive into what made Donna Amato's writing workshop special, I want to first define what a writing workshop is and share its essential elements. I was fortunate enough to spend four years working at the Teachers College Reading

and Writing Project at Columbia University with Lucy Calkins. It was there that I deepened my understanding of writing workshop.

In a writing workshop, kids usually choose their own topics. In the K–2 classroom, kids typically store their writing in writing folders. They use paper with space for both a picture and words so that the paper they use looks very much like the books they read. Some teachers staple these pages into books before kids begin writing, while others have kids take single pages and then staple them together when they've completed a book. Once kids get comfortable, many teachers have both options available in their classrooms. In a 3–5 classroom, kids typically begin the writing process in their writer's notebooks. A writer's notebook is a place to plan, think, and prepare for a draft. Once students are ready to draft, they typically leave their notebooks and store their drafts in folders on loose-leaf paper or in booklets (very much like the K–2 students). Many teachers ask what I think of having students store their drafts in their notebooks rather than in folders. While I understand it feels more manageable to have everything in one place, when teachers do this kids tend to use their notebooks to collect drafts rather than to think, plan, and prepare.

Writing workshop begins with a *focus lesson*, or *minilesson*, that lasts between five and fifteen minutes. This is a time when you gather the whole class and teach the students something that will lift the level of what they are doing. The topics of the focus lessons might span from elements of a particular genre, to a craft technique, to conventions, or even to how to navigate a part of the writing process. I personally prefer the term focus lesson to minilesson because it reminds you that the instruction during this time is short not because it's unimportant, but because it is focused on just one strategy or skill. Typically, subsequent focus lessons don't jump quickly to new material. Instead, a teacher will watch her students interact with the content taught and, if needed, will stick with that content over a series of days to deepen their understanding as well as to address possible confusion or misunderstanding. Often, a teacher will stick with a teaching point by using a picture book or some other type of text to teach the concept. A text used to help students understand a craft technique is called a *mentor text*. A teacher might also try the skill or strategy out in her own writing by modeling both her thinking and how that thinking led to her final product. She might also use a piece of student writing to reinforce the skill or strategy.

After the focus lesson, there is a work time that typically lasts anywhere from thirty to forty-five minutes (although it might be shorter at the start of the year). During this time, the teacher is busy conferring either one-on-one with kids or

in small groups. Some wonderful resources for conferring with student writers are Carl Anderson's two books *How's It Going?* (2000) and *Assessing Writers* (2005) as well as his multimedia resource *Strategic Writing Conferences* (2009). The students who are not working with the teacher are writing independently. This independent portion of writing workshop is the focus of my book and typically one of the most challenging aspects of implementing a successful writing workshop because getting kids to work well independently is not always easy.

Finally, the writing workshop ends with a share, which is a time that should be both celebratory and instructional. My book *Don't Forget to Share* (2007) is a place to go if you want further information about this important element of writing workshop.

Element Number One: Daily Writing Time

A writing workshop is a daily period of writing instruction, which lasts for about forty-five minutes to an hour (although it might be shorter at the start of the year). If it's impossible for you to schedule a daily writing workshop, then at least try to schedule it three to four times a week. With less frequency than that, it's nearly impossible for kids to become engaged in the process because they are unable to count on a consistent time to work on their writing.

When teachers cannot schedule a daily writing workshop they often ask me if it's more beneficial to cluster the days together or scatter them throughout the week. Although there is no right or wrong answer to this, I personally would cluster the days together. When working on my own writing, it's always better if I have a few days in a row to write as I tend to get more engaged in the writing process. If I write on Monday and then don't write until Thursday or Friday, it takes me longer to get my mind back into my writing project.

Element Number Two: Long-Range and Ongoing Planning

Not only is it important to conduct a daily (or almost daily) writing workshop, but you also must plan for this time. One way you can do this is through long-range planning. Many teachers and districts plan for the long term by creating curriculum calendars (or curriculum maps). Curriculum calendars are essentially your plans for a year of writing instruction. They include the units of study that you plan on doing, the approximate amount of time each study will take, and the order in which you plan on doing them. Typically, a curriculum calendar includes a variety of different types of units. For example, some units are genre-based units. In a genre-based unit, kids continue to choose their own topics but write in a specific genre.

This type of unit is fantastic for teaching kids a new genre or going deeper into a genre they have studied in a previous year. What is problematic about this type of unit is that although kids still have choice in topic, they lose their choice in genre.

To balance this out, there should also be some units that are more focused on either parts of the writing process or particular conventions or craft techniques. In these units, kids are able to choose both their topics and the genres that they will write in. For example, a teacher or district might include a rereading unit of study on a curriculum calendar. During this unit, the teacher would teach focus lessons that would assist students in becoming more adept at rereading their writing. Students would be asked to try out these rereading lessons but would be able to try them in topics and genres of their choice. The benefit of this type of unit is that kids get to revisit previously taught genres, which deepens their understanding of them. Not only that, but they also discover which genres are their favorites and can spend more time writing and honing their skills in those genres. For all of these reasons, I find a balance between different types of units on a curriculum calendar particularly helpful.

It's also helpful to plan ahead for what some of the teaching inside of the individual units on a curriculum calendar might be. Many teachers do this by thinking through what some of the intended unit goals might be. They also decide which texts to use within the unit, as well as what some of the focus lessons might be. Some great resources for helping you with both curriculum calendars and unit planning are *Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum* (2003) and *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5* (2006), by Lucy Calkins and colleagues from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, and *Projecting Possibilities for Writers: The How, What, and Why of Designing Units of Study*, by Matt Glover and Mary Alice Berry (2012).

Many districts and states have also adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These standards are yet another helpful resource when doing long-range planning. It's tempting, especially with the buzz surrounding them, to plan by first looking at the CCSS and then creating curriculum calendars and unit plans based upon them. I don't think that is a good idea. I believe it's essential to start first with conversations about what your hopes, dreams, and expectations are for the kids you're working with in the area of writing. After having those conversations, create a curriculum calendar that reflects those beliefs. Only then would I bring the Common Core State Standards into the picture. Specifically, I would hold the standards alongside the already completed curriculum calendars and unit plans and make revisions where the skills and strategies included in the standards are not reflected in your current plans.

If you look at the Common Core State Standards as the final step rather than the first step, you are likely to create a plan that covers many of the CCSS without even realizing it. Doing this also enables you to have a deeper conversation about the CCSS because you are putting them into a context. Specifically, your prior teaching experiences, your conversations about your teaching, and your curriculum calendars will bring clarity to the standards and help you understand how the language in the Common Core document could play out in real-life classrooms! It's also important to keep in mind that the Common Core State Standards reflect the bare minimum of what you should accomplish in any one year. You want to exceed these standards. You have a much better chance of doing this if you start with your hopes, dreams, and expectations and then move to looking at how the CCSS connect to them.

Alongside this long-term planning, there should also be ongoing planning for your writing workshop. One of the districts I work with in Danbury, Connecticut helps teachers integrate both long-term and ongoing planning into their year. Teachers in this district do the long-term planning by beginning each school year with a curriculum calendar as well as a general outline for each of the units on their curriculum calendar. The district provides both of these to them. The district deliberately does not include a day-by-day sequence of what their focus lessons will be. It trusts that teachers will figure this out during their ongoing planning.

In their book *Projecting Possibilities for Writers*, Matt Glover and Mary Alice Berry (2012) make a good argument for why teachers shouldn't preplan a sequence of lessons, but rather should make those decisions as the Danbury teachers do, in the midst of teaching a unit. They say, "When you create a unit of study, it's tempting to think you know exactly what will happen on day five or day thirteen or eighteen of a unit of study. But, in reality you can't know what will happen on day thirteen until you and your students live the twelve days that come before it. In fact, the only way you can know what will happen on day thirteen is if you decide to ignore students for the first twelve days and teach by strictly adhering to a plan, blind to what is happening in your class each day" (2).

The educators I work with in Danbury understand and agree with this idea and plan accordingly. They know that they'll figure out the exact sequence of lessons by watching and listening to their kids. They might discover that in the midst of their unit, their students need further instruction on particular lessons, or perhaps they'll see a need for lessons that they hadn't originally planned for. Because they haven't confined themselves to a predetermined sequence of lessons, they can respond to

all of this. Long-term planning helps your teaching be more thoughtful and intentional, but your ongoing planning helps ensure that your day-by-day teaching is responsive to your students' strengths and needs.

Element Number Three: Self-Directed Learners

So far, I've outlined two essentials of writing workshop:

1. A daily or nearly daily period of writing workshop
2. Both long-range and ongoing planning

You may wonder, "Is this enough? Will all of my students be successful during writing workshop if I ensure that these two essential elements are in place?" These two essentials are not enough to produce the amazing results that Donna Amato achieved in my opening vignette. You may very well be conducting a daily writing workshop in your classroom now. You probably plan for this time on a regular basis, but if you are like the teachers that I work with, you might feel as though your writing workshop could be stronger. Perhaps some of your students finish early and ask the ever-popular question, "What should I do next?" Or some of your kids might periodically ask you for spelling help, a new writing idea, or a solution to a problem. The list goes on and on. It may be that some of your kids are able to work by themselves, but you wish that the quality of their work were stronger.

Donna's classroom stood out because during the independent phase of writing workshop, the kids were not coming to Donna for help. They were engaged, excited, and able to solve problems and continue doing high-quality work while Donna was busy working with other students. Achieving this self-reliance every day for every student was Donna's third essential of writing workshop. You might be tempted to use the word *independent* to describe Donna's kids because they certainly were working by themselves. In reality, her kids were doing something more rigorous than simply working on their own. Yes, they were independent, but they were also self-directed. This idea of being a self-directed writer is the focus of this book.

The third essential element of a writing workshop is the ability to create that dynamic process that you saw in Donna Amato's classroom. It's this process that enables kids to become the bosses of their own learning. It's this process that teaches kids to use a wide variety of strategies to solve their own problems. It's this process that enables students to continually make decisions about what to work on in their writing and how to work on it. It's this process that keeps them engaged and producing high-quality work throughout the entire writing workshop.

Accomplishing this goal for every kid in your classroom is exciting, but not easy. I can remember a time when I visited a first-grade classroom in Vermont. The teacher had asked me to do a revision lesson. Going into the lesson, I was worried that once the kids finished trying out what I was going to teach that day, they would either get off task or follow me around the room, asking me questions about what to do next. Sure enough, that is exactly what happened. Afterward, during our debriefing meeting, the teachers asked me for strategies on how to keep all of the kids engaged the entire time. At the time I didn't have the words to explain the solution, but I did know that the solution was much more involved than what we could possibly talk about in a half-hour debriefing period.

These days, it is still not uncommon for teachers to ask me to conduct a demonstration lesson that will get all of their kids working in this manner. I really do wish there were some magical lesson I could do to achieve this, but there isn't. Over the years, I've learned that creating self-directed writers takes a lot more than just one focus lesson or conversation. Donna and other teachers like her are able to accomplish this extraordinary feat because they view creating self-directed learners as essential to the success of their writing workshop, and this view drives every decision they make while planning and teaching.

■ Misconceptions About Self-Directed Learning

Many teachers have the misconception that if you conduct a daily writing workshop where kids choose their own topics and you teach them strategies for being independent, then you are guaranteed independent and engaged writers. Although this certainly helps, unfortunately, it's not that easy. I've worked with teachers who had ongoing and beautifully organized writing workshops in their classroom. Children in their classrooms chose their own topics, and they taught their kids many routines and procedures. Even so, these teachers still had kids who either were not able to work well on their own or weren't growing as writers. Having a writing workshop is not enough to get kids to be independent and certainly not enough to get kids to look and sound like Donna Amato's kids.

Some teachers mistakenly believe that September is the only time to work on creating independent and self-directed writers. It's simply not true. As a matter of fact, that's how teachers run into trouble. They work with their students on this goal in September with the highest of hopes, and then October arrives and they

are disappointed and frustrated because their students are unable to even work independently. Creating independent and self-directed writers is a yearlong project, not a September project.

Still another misconception is that our top students are the only ones capable of becoming self-directed learners. This couldn't be further from the truth! In Marnie Gleissner's first-grade classroom, she had done a lesson on how to use different tools around the room to help with spelling. A few minutes later, I watched Xavier, one of the more fragile students in the class, use his individual spelling list to find and then correctly spell the word was. What made this incident especially amazing was that Marnie hadn't spoken about that particular tool and Xavier had made the decision to do that on his own. My friend and colleague Lisa Burman once shared with me that in one of her most disadvantaged schools, the teachers have kids lead focus lessons (e.g., how to make a table of contents page or how to draw accurate diagrams). These are just two of many stories I know in which kids are incredibly self-directed. As you'll see throughout this book, all of our students can become more self-directed and it's important for us to pay attention to this skill with students at all levels. Very often, the ways that we teach our most fragile learners are counterproductive to creating self-directed learners. We must find ways to meet their needs as well as to help them become more self-directed.

■ How This Book Can Help

This book will help you create a classroom of kids who are able to work by themselves, who are excited and engaged, and who make decisions and solve problems on their own. This book will also help you become more self-directed. Hopefully, when you finish reading this book you'll be more comfortable working on your own without a curriculum plan that details every move that you'll make. Hopefully you'll feel more excited and engaged and more comfortable and equipped to make decisions and solve the inevitable problems that will arise in your classroom.

If you are new to writing workshop, you're going to want to read some of the texts that I suggested earlier in this chapter to get more information about the first two essential elements and then use this book at the same time as a resource for getting information about this third essential element. In that way, you'll be able to create a classroom filled with self-directed learners right from the start. If you are a more experienced writing workshop teacher, this book will be a great resource

to help you refine your teaching to ensure that all of your students become more self-directed.

This book highlights six important components that need to be in place if you want to create a classroom of self-directed learners. Each of these components is addressed in its own chapter.

- You must create a physical environment that is easy for a child to navigate. The environment must allow kids to find multiple ways to get feedback on their writing other than the teacher. (See Chapter 3.)
- You must manage your classroom and create rituals and routines that keep the goal of self-directed learners at the forefront (see Chapter 4).
- You must scaffold your instruction so that all students can find their way into this instruction and be successful with it (see Chapter 5).
- You need to deliberately plan a yearlong curriculum with a focus on getting kids to become more self-directed (see Chapter 6).
- You need to deliberately plan units of study with a focus on getting kids to be more self-directed (see Chapter 7).
- You need to carefully craft focus lessons, conferences, small-group work, and share sessions so they not only teach kids new content but also guide them in becoming more self-directed (see Chapter 8).

There are three features you will find across many chapters in this book. The first feature will include assessment for self-directed learning which will help you evaluate students' autonomous learning. The second, "Collaboration in Action," will bring you into the classrooms I've been lucky enough to work in. You'll see how my collaborations with the teachers enabled us to tackle some difficult issues as well to discover ways to bring more self-directed learning into the classroom. The final feature, "Language Angled Toward Self-Directed Learners," will provide you with words that you can use in your teaching to promote more independent learning.

Sadly, Donna Amato, the exceptional teacher in my opening vignette, has passed away. The world has lost not only an amazing person but also an unbelievably intuitive, brilliant teacher. A colleague said to me that to keep her memory going, we need to, now more than ever, keep an eye toward helping teachers create classrooms like hers. This book is my tribute to Donna Amato. I wrote it with the hopes that it would help teachers around the world create classrooms of self-directed learners just like those in Donna's classroom!



“Education is knowing where to go to find out what you need to know; and it’s knowing how to use the information you get.”

— WILLIAM FEATHER, AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER

3 CHAPTER

CREATING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT KIDS CAN EASILY NAVIGATE

It was early September and I was at South Street School in Danbury, Connecticut with a group of teachers. Our goal for that day was to study and discuss the classroom environments. Truthfully, I was not particularly excited. Although I am organized by nature, making things look pretty is not my forte. When I was a classroom teacher, I was always overwhelmed and intimidated by my colleagues’ perfectly polished and beautifully decorated rooms, and now as a literacy consultant, I felt unsure about what to say to the teachers about classroom environments. I knew there was more to it than just aesthetics, but I didn’t have the words to explain the bigger purposes, nor did I understand completely the power that classroom environments could have on student learning.

After spending just a few minutes in their classrooms, I began to understand. These teachers’ charts, their mentor texts, and their supplies were sometimes beautiful but sometimes a bit more clumsy (like mine were as a teacher). What stood out in all of the classrooms, however, was that the kids used the resources not only to keep themselves engaged during the independent portion of writing workshop but also to solve the inevitable problems that arose. This day spent studying classroom environments was one of my most productive of the year, because it got me to think about the role that classroom environments play in creating self-directed learners.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the different qualities that self-directed writers possess. In this chapter you’ll learn how the setup of your classroom can help kids become more resourceful, more independent, more persistent, more resilient, and

better able to self-regulate their learning. I begin by sharing some of the common resources you'll want to make available in your classroom. Next, I share some of the roadblocks you might face with these resources and some possible solutions. Finally, I share some classroom environment tips to keep in mind throughout the year.

■ Vital Classroom Resources

In order to have a successful classroom environment, you must give kids access to effective resources. In this chapter, I talk about four key resources:

1. Process and genre charts
2. Mentor texts
3. Writing centers
4. Student writing

You might be looking at this list and nodding, thinking, “Yes, of course. These resources are already an integral part of my classroom environment.” Many teachers already have these tools in their classrooms, but having them does not guarantee that kids will use them in productive ways. I have seen far too many well-intentioned teachers fill their classrooms with beautiful examples of these resources, yet they still have kids who don't use them or use them unsuccessfully. How do you structure and organize these resources so that kids are able to successfully use them to solve problems and make important decisions?

Charts Develop Resourcefulness, Independence, Persistence, Resiliency, and Self-Regulation

Two main categories of classroom charts can provide support for your kids during writing workshop: process and craft charts. Process charts help students figure out ways to navigate parts of the writing process. For example, a chart titled “What Can You Do When You Think You Are Finished?” is a process chart because it will hopefully help kids keep themselves engaged in the writing process even after they feel they are finished. A craft chart, on the other hand, shows students specific ways to craft a part of a writing piece. Craft charts are more focused on qualities of writing. For example, a chart titled “Ways to End Your Persuasive Letter” is a craft chart. This chart would give kids a few options of how they could conclude their persuasive letters. The hope is that each kid would use this chart to play around

with the ending of his or her own persuasive letter and ultimately figure out the ending that best matched that piece of writing without enlisting the help of the teacher or another student.

Simply having these process and craft charts available in your classroom is not enough. The next question is: How do you ensure that these charts are not just pretty decorations that your colleagues admire, but key resources for your kids? There are a few things you'll want to consider. First, you'll want to make sure that your chart gives kids some options but not too many. In my first few years of teaching I had a wonderful staff developer named Peter Sinclair. Once, when Peter was watching me create a chart with my kids, I had a moment of panic. I was nervous because the chart I was making had only a short list of options on it. Meanwhile, all of my colleagues had long, beautiful charts with many more options. Although their charts looked pretty, I found that my kids didn't use charts with lots of options. I thought that a chart with fewer options might be a more supportive resource for them. I was thrilled later when Peter complimented me on this decision. We spoke at great length about the importance of charts that kids would use versus charts that just looked pretty.

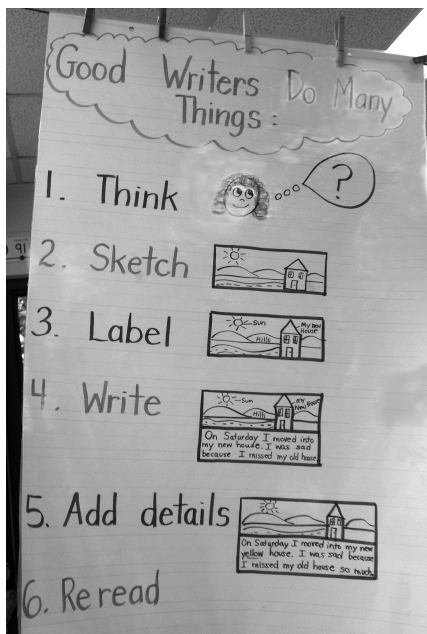
At times, too many options can be problematic. Imagine a chart with twenty options on it. Some kids will simply not use it because it can be overwhelming. Others might spend a good portion of their writing time unsuccessfully trying to use it. Ultimately, what you want are charts that kids can use seamlessly and quickly so that they can jump right back into their writing. The consequences of having too many options on a chart are more severe than kids simply being overwhelmed or not using the chart that day. In this situation, some are left feeling defeated and less likely to trust that the charts around the room will help them in the future. The feeling of being defeated leads to kids who aren't resilient, resourceful, or independent. In Chapter 2 I featured a chart from Marnie Gleissner's classroom titled "Writers Try Really Hard to Write Tricky Words By . . ." On this chart, Marnie gave the kids five options, all of which she had modeled. In this example, there were certainly some options, but not too many.

There are times when lots of options do work for kids. You'll see in Chapter 7 I recommend that during the immersion phase of a unit of study you create a brainstorm chart that has many options for kids. What makes so many options work in this instance is that the chart is created over a week and the kids are the ones who put all of the options on the chart. Ultimately, you'll know if kids need limited options or more options by watching their ability to independently use the charts in your classroom.

You'll also want to clearly name the craft techniques on your craft charts as yet another support system for your kids. Lorena Tesbir created a chart titled "How Can We Begin Our Informational Books?" Not only did she have three options for how to start informational books, but she also clearly named each of these options. For example, one of the beginnings was named a "false information beginning." The moment that Lorena named the beginnings on the chart it moved the craft technique from something one adult author used to something that authors of all ages can use. She also included a speech bubble that said, "Hmm, could I try that in my writing?" This speech bubble was yet another support system that encouraged kids to use the chart.

You'll also want to consider the use of pictures for kids of all ages. It's important to use pictures that aren't just decoration or visual interpretations of the words but rather reminders of previous learning experiences. For example, Figure 3.1 shows a chart titled "Good Writers Do Many Things." Next to each option is a picture that reminded kids of a previous learning experience. By putting a relevant picture next to the words, the teacher gave all students access to the chart.

FIGURE 3.1 ALL KIDS HAVE ACCESS TO THIS CHART BECAUSE THERE ARE BOTH PICTURES AND WORDS.



Finally, you'll want to clearly explain the purpose of each chart to your kids. If they understand the purpose, they'll be more likely to use the chart. For example, while making a chart titled "What Should You Do When You Think You're Done?" you might say something like: "Children, there will be lots of times across the year when you'll feel like you're finished writing but there will be more time left. It's important that you use your time well and figure out what you can do without having to ask me or even a friend. Here is a chart that I started that will give you some ideas. You'll decide how you use that time, but let's take a look at this chart together so we can talk about it and add more to it if we think we should."

Explaining the purpose of a tool helps kids become more resourceful. It also helps them self-regulate their learning. Neither the chart nor the explanation tells

kids exactly what to do. They'll need to use the resource to set their own goals and agendas for what to do. For more information on how to use charts effectively in the classroom, I highly recommend Marjorie Martinelli and Kristine Mraz's wonderful book *Smarter Charts, K–2: Optimizing an Instructional Staple to Create Independent Readers and Writers* (2012).

Mentor Texts Also Help Kids to Be Resourceful

There are many different types of mentor texts as well as many purposes for using them. Here I talk about mentor texts that will support your kids in the area of writing. Many teachers use mentor texts in their focus lessons or conferences, but fewer have them available as resources for kids to use independently. Other teachers do put them out, but kids don't use them very well. Both of these scenarios are unfortunate because just like a well-crafted chart can keep kids engaged in the writing process, so can a carefully placed mentor text. The question, then, is: How do you ensure that your kids use the mentor texts in your classroom as resources?

Imagine it's September. You want to include some mentor texts in your classroom for kids to use if they are having trouble coming up with topics. How can you do this in a way that really works? First, just as I suggested with charts, you should put out a limited amount of mentor texts—not too few, but not too many. Hopefully this will make the mentor texts more manageable to use. I might, for example, have a basket of five to seven books that the class has already read and/or talked about. I would clearly label this basket of books so that kids would know how these particular books might help them while writing. For example, there could be a basket of mentors labeled "Books to Go to When You're Unsure What to Write About." I might even include some sticky notes or index cards with some guiding questions as a further support system. For example, inside a nonfiction book about cats, I might include a sticky note (or index card) that says: "Does this book give you an idea of an animal that you know about or are interested in? That might be a good topic choice for you." This particular question would nudge kids to think about not just the topic of cats but the category of animals, which would open up a wider range of topic ideas.

Writing Centers Put Kids in Charge of Supplies

A writing center is an area in your classroom where kids can find the writing supplies they need. The goal of a writing center is to put the teacher out of the job of handing out supplies and put kids in the role of deciding what supplies and materials they need. I can remember being in one classroom where a teacher's writing center looked

beautiful . . . for about a day. On the first day, she had out every single cool supply and material: revision paper, stapler, fancy pens, date stamp—you name it, she had it out. Although for a moment it looked good, the kids didn't use the writing center well because they didn't know what was there or understand the purpose of the materials.

I suggest you put out only the supplies you have already introduced. Also, consider having two smaller writing centers rather than one big one. Kids can get their supplies more quickly and spend more time writing rather than waiting in one big line at the writing center. Finally, I recommend that kids gather as many of the supplies as possible before writing workshop even begins. As a writer, I have my most productive writing days when I begin the day by gathering the supplies I think I'll need. It doesn't mean that something doesn't pop up while writing and I have to pause and go get it. But by thinking this through beforehand, I have fewer interruptions from my writing.

To a K–2 group, I might say, “Writers, before we gather for our focus lesson, I want you to think about what supplies you'll need today. Jan and Bill will pass your folders out so you can see where you left off yesterday. Are you starting a new piece? Does that mean you need new pages for a book? How many do you think you'll need? Or do you just need a booklet? Do you have a sharpened pencil? A marker? A revision pen? Perhaps you need revision paper today? All of these are good questions to consider. You have two minutes to read over your writing, make a plan for what you'll do today, and get the supplies you need. Meet me on the rug once you've done this.”

To a grades 3–5 group, I might say, “Writers, before we gather for our focus lesson, I want you to think about what supplies you'll need today. Jan and Bill will pass out writer's notebooks and your rough draft folders. Are you working in your notebook? Are you drafting? If so, do you need more draft paper? Do you have a sharpened pencil? A revision pen? All of these are good questions to consider. You have two minutes to read over your writing, make a plan for what you'll do today, and get the supplies you need. Meet me on the rug once you've done this.”

Figure 3.2 lists essential supplies for your classroom writing center.

Student Writing Samples Develop Resourcefulness

Another resource that kids can use is their classmates' writing samples. There is something magical about kids looking at and referring to one another's writing. A craft technique can seem less daunting if kids see it used by a classmate rather than an adult published author. When I went to South Street School, one of the

FIGURE 3.2 WRITING CENTER SUPPLIES

Supplies That You Will Eventually Want in Your Writing Center to Help Kids Be More Self-Directed	
Pencils	“Boo boo tape” (cover-up tape) (K–2)
Revision pens	Editing pens
Blank pages to make a book with (K–2)	Date stamp
Ready-made booklets (K–2)	Different types of genre paper (K–2)
Rough draft paper (3–5)	Writing folders (K–2)
Different graphic organizers (3–5)	Writers’ notebooks (3–5)
Revision paper (K–2)	

things that struck me was how often kids used other students’ writing to help them. In these K–2 classrooms, writing was featured not on bulletin boards but at every table in plastic picture frames. The pieces that were displayed were not random; they were based on the focus lessons that week. The teachers used work by students who had tried what they’d taught. The writing samples were clearly labeled with the craft technique implemented, with the hopes that labeling them (and keeping them close by at writing tables) would make it easier for kids to use them as resources during the independent portion of writing workshop. If you are an upper-grade teacher and don’t have tables in your classroom, you certainly could feature the writing on a bulletin board or in some other fashion around the room. The trick is to place it somewhere easily accessible and to label it in a way that helps kids understand how they might use it as a resource.

■ Assess the Classroom Environment for Self-Directed Learning

In order to create a classroom that is conducive to self-directed learning, you’ll want to periodically assess the effectiveness of it. In Figure 3.3, I’ve included an assessment system that you can use to reflect upon and tweak your classroom environment. I suggest that you use this assessment both when kids are interacting with the materials and when they are not. That way, you can really dig in deep and examine each part carefully.

■ A Close-In Look at Classroom Charts

Walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom when there are no kids present and answer the following questions.

Are there process charts?

Are there craft charts?

Are there other charts (e.g., a word wall) that support kids?

How might these charts support kids in self-directed learning?

What are some potential issues you see with these charts? How could you solve them?

Now walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom while kids are in the midst of writing workshop and answer the following questions.

Are kids using the charts? If so, how?

How are these charts helping kids to be self-directed?

If they are not using the charts, what could you do to change that?

Are there other issues? How can you solve them?

■ A Close-In Look at the Writing Center

Walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom when there are no kids present and answer the following questions.

What types of materials are there?

How are the materials stored?

How might these materials support kids in self-directed learning?

Are there potential issues you see with the writing center? How would you solve them?

Now walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom while kids are in the midst of writing workshop and answer the following questions.

Are kids using the writing center? If so, how?

How is the writing center helping kids to be self-directed?

If kids aren't using the writing center, what could you do to change that?

Are there any other issues? How can you solve them?

■ A Close-In Look at Mentor Texts

Walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom when there are no kids present and answer the following questions.

Are there mentor texts available for kids to use? What kinds?

How are they organized and labeled?

How might this support self-directed learning?

What are the potential problems? How could you solve them?

Now walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom while kids are in the midst of writing workshop and answer the following questions.

Are the kids using the mentor texts? If so, how?

How are the mentor texts helping kids to be self-directed?

If kids aren't using the mentor texts, what could you do to change that?

Are there other issues? How can you solve them?

■ A Close-In Look at Student Writing

Walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom when there are no kids present and answer the following questions.

Is there student writing for kids to refer to?

How is it organized? Will it be easy for them to refer to during writing workshop?

How might this support self-directed learning?

Are there potential problems? How could you solve them?

Now walk through your classroom or your colleague's classroom while kids are in the midst of writing workshop and answer the following questions.

Are kids using student writing? If so, how?

How might this support self-directed learning?

If they are not using student writing, what could you do to change that?

Are there other issues? How could you solve them?

COLLABORATION IN ACTION: STUDYING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

I had the wonderful opportunity to study classroom environments with first- and second-grade teachers at King Street Elementary School in Danbury, Connecticut. We studied their classroom environments in mid-September and used the questions in Figure 3.3 to guide our conversations.

The first thing we realized is that there was no way we could or should have all of these things in place in September. This realization reminded us that it is a misconception that getting kids to be self-directed is only September work. The major work of creating a classroom environment that is conducive to self-directed writers starts in September but continues throughout the year.

In some classrooms we saw examples of kids using process charts. Interestingly, kids were using the process charts that the teachers had modeled during focus lessons; they were not using the ones that the teachers had made quickly and just briefly reminded the kids to use. We also noticed that there were a lot more process charts than craft charts. Because the start of the year is so much about teaching kids the process of writing workshop, it made sense, but we also knew that the time had come to start creating some craft charts that would potentially help them to improve their writing. We also knew that we had to revisit some of the process charts that weren't being used and model how to use them.

In terms of mentor texts, there were actually a few kids using their independent reading books as mentor texts, but the main reason they were using them was to copy words. Although we were happy to see them using these texts as a way to solve problems during writing workshop, we wanted them also to use the texts as a way to lift the quality of their writing. This gave us plenty of food for thought on future work to do around mentor texts. We knew we had to model how to use mentor texts as a way to get craft ideas. We also realized that not only did we have to put more writing up in the room, but we also wanted to use some of our instructional time to model how to use the writing around the room to improve kids' writing.

■ Additional Tips

Creating a classroom environment that is conducive for self-directed learning is not just a September project. I end this chapter with a few tips that you can use both in September and across the year to continue striving for the ideal classroom environment.

Don't Just Put the Resources Out—Model and Revise Them

Whether you are putting out a new mentor text, a new chart, new materials for the writing center, or a new piece of student work, you want to make sure that you linger for a bit on the new resource, modeling not only how you might use it, but also problems that might arise and how to solve those problems.

When I was a teacher and was introducing new resources to my kids, it sounded something like this: “So, kids, there is a new chart up about what to do when you think you are finished. Don’t forget to use it if you need it.” Because I felt rushed for time, I would just say something quickly about the resource and hope that the quick reminder would be enough. As you can probably guess, it was enough for a few of my kids, but for most it wasn’t anywhere close to what they needed in order to be able to use the tool well. Most needed me to linger on it. Following is an example from a teacher who did just that.

Lorena Tesbir created a chart with her students about what to do if they thought they were finished writing. The chart had three options:

1. Reread your writing and add or change parts. (revision)
2. Reread your writing and check the spelling and punctuation. (editing)
3. Start a new piece of writing.

Before she put the chart up in the classroom, she pretended like she was a second-grade student who was finished. She then modeled reading the chart and choosing an option that was best for her. On a different day, she modeled some difficulty that she had in choosing the right option and then showed them how she solved the problem. Only after she had done those types of lessons a few times did she display the chart in the classroom. She also explicitly told the kids it was their job to use the chart to help them decide what to do when they thought they were finished. Because Lorena lingered on the new chart, her kids understood what was on that chart and how to use it. In turn, it boosted their confidence. Also, because Lorena paid attention to the chart, the kids valued it more.

This kind of careful teaching into a tool often isn't enough. You'll also want to revisit classroom resources over time and get your kids talking about which resources are working or not working so that you can improve upon them. In *Opening Minds*, Peter Johnston says, "We should teach children how to think together because more problems of substance aren't amenable to solutions by individual minds, they need the force of multiple minds" (2012, 97). Conversations where children think together about the resources in the room will not only help you understand whether or not the tools are working but also help you figure out new solutions when things are not working as well as you would like.

Also, when starting a new chart with kids, tell them that while they are working, they will probably come up with some other options to add to the chart. For example, I was in a fourth-grade classroom and Megan Hoey, the classroom teacher, was doing a lesson on how a writer knows which part of his memoir is important. During the focus lesson, she talked about and charted two elements that might stand out in their pieces: an important character that changed or an important event. She told the kids that as they read their memoirs that day, they might find that one of these two options should be the focus of their pieces, but they might also discover that some other aspect of their memoirs was the most important. Sure enough, during the share two more ideas were added to the chart. One little boy said that his important part was a combination of an important person and an event, and a second boy said that his important part was a meaningful object. The chart became even more useful because the kids knew that they played an important role in making sure the chart included all of their ideas.

Ensure That Your Classroom Is Clutter-Free

I once was walking through classrooms with a group of educators. When we got to one particular classroom, everyone became excited. It certainly was a beautiful environment. There was an abundant amount of writing supplies. There were lots of beautiful charts with wise words of advice. Student work hung from every corner in the room. While everyone raved, I was quiet because even though the classroom was beautiful and filled with many resources, I wondered if kids were truly able to find what they needed and use it to solve problems on their own. I brought this concern up to both the group and the classroom teacher. Upon reflection, the classroom teacher realized that most of the kids didn't use the classroom environment as well as she would have liked them to. We wondered if having a less cluttered classroom might help.

Earlier in this chapter I spoke about visiting classrooms at South Street School. While visiting, I was struck by how minimalistic the classrooms were. The only materials out were the ones that the kids were presently using. Materials that would be used later in the year and the teachers' materials were stored away. The teachers also knew that the charts that were up then might be taken down at some point to avoid clutter. These resources would not disappear from the classroom but would be kept in a less visible place so that kids who still needed them could access them.

Move Charts from Grade to Grade

Not only was I struck by how uncluttered the classroom environments at South Street School were, but I was also floored (and a little confused) by how resourceful the kids were so early in the year. My visit took place during the second week of school and there already were quite a few charts up and kids were using them as if they had been in school forever. I later discovered that the kids had used these very same charts the year before. Marnie Schork, the wise principal of this school, asked all of her teachers to have some (not all) consistent charts across the grades. At the end of the year, the teachers could pass along their charts to the teachers in the next grade. Teachers were then able to start the year with these familiar charts.

Often when kids start a new school year, it looks as though they have forgotten everything they learned the year before. Many times all it takes is a visual reminder such as a chart to jolt their memory. The familiar charts allowed the teachers to hit the ground running at the start of the year. Not only that, but the kids also were more confident and excited because their year started with what they already knew.

The visit to South Street School gave me a renewed vigor and a deeper understanding of the importance of classroom environments; they are not just a decoration or a September task. Strong classroom environments catapult kids into becoming more self-directed writers.