

The Writing Teacher's Troubleshooting Guide



Nothing to write about

Exploring a topic

Finding a vision

Finding a focus

Developing a lead

Establishing a context

Wandering off on a tangent

Controlling details

Bringing closure

Resisting revision

Considering conventions

Lester L. Laminack and Reba M. Wadsworth

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We dedicate this book to

Zachary Seth Laminack *and*
Christina Wadsworth Bishop

Table of Contents



Acknowledgments	vii	9 Bringing Closure/Endings	79
Introduction	ix	10 Resisting Revision	91
1 Nothing to Write About	1	11 Gaining Control Over Conventions	103
2 Exploring a Topic	9	Glossary	113
3 Finding a Vision	17	• Mentor/Mentor Texts	113
4 Finding a Focus	25	• Revise/Revision	114
5 Developing a Lead	35	• Setting	114
6 Establishing a Context or Setting	51	• Transition	115
7 Wandering Off on a Tangent	63	• Voice	115
8 Controlling Details	71	Recommended Professional Resources	117
		References	123

Acknowledgments

The ideas for this guide bounced around in our minds long before the first words appeared on a computer screen. Each time one of us left a group of teachers we picked up the phone and called the other. Our conversations tended to drift toward recurring concerns of teachers of writing and how we responded to those concerns. Of course, during those conversations we could think of suggestions we could have offered, resources we should have recommended . . . could have . . . should have Then one afternoon we decided to begin keeping track of those recurring concerns and make note of how teachers addressed them. The result is in your hands. We are grateful to the numerous teachers who have nudged our thinking by trusting us enough to share their struggles, especially the literacy coaches and teachers of Cobb County, GA under the guidance of Dianna Denton, the teachers of The University School at East Tennessee

State University, the teachers of Francine Delaney New School for Children, and the teachers of Monroe County Schools, MS.

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Introduction

The Writing Teacher's Troubleshooting Guide is intended as an efficient reference designed to provide a handful of quick, easily implemented ideas for nudging growth when students pause on the cusp of development or rest on a plateau of safety. The format of this guide is loosely based on the "Troubleshooting Guide" found in VW Beetles during the 1970s. The appeal of this format is its clear, concise, and practical design.

The VW troubleshooting guide was organized in three columns and presented over a few pages of the owner's manual. The left column presented a situation owners may experience in the operation of the vehicle. The center column presented possible causes for that situation. And the right column offered possible solutions for the owner to try:

If your vehicle . . .	This may be happening because . . .	Try this . . .
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This clean, simple design appeals to us. It nudges us to consider the patterns of growth, pauses, and plateaus

developing writers experience along the way. The spare design compels us to think and to pare down our language to the bare essentials. It requires the practical.

By its very design a troubleshooting guide is intended to create ease of use, to build both the competence and confidence of the user. That is our goal in selecting this format. First we name an issue teachers have seen a writer struggle with (notice and name). Then, we pose a few possible reasons for that pause or plateau in the student's development as a writer (identify cause). And in the next column we offer a few possibilities for nudging growth (give the writer tools to move forward).

Teachers of writing have experiences that enable us to recognize patterns of growth and moments of struggle and confusion; pauses in development and idle periods where developing writers rely on what is safe. We know that a writer can grow if we recognize when and how to nudge, to demonstrate, to lead, or to stand back for a moment. This guide, then, draws on the experiences of teachers in identifying typical patterns of struggle, pause, and confusion among developing writers.

It is our intention to be as clear and concise as possible. We strive to be as practical and immediately applicable as we can. In addition to offering possible causes for the situation observed and some possible ways to nudge growth, we also include suggested mentor texts for some situations. These texts are not necessary to implement the suggestions. Rather, they are offered as yet another resource busy teachers may bring into the instructional cycle. We suggest these mentor texts be used in a variety of ways: to launch a study within the writing workshop, to demonstrate or provide an example of a writer's ways of working, to be paired with examples from the teacher or developing writers, as part of a minilesson with the whole class, to demonstrate on the spot when conferring with one writer, and as an example when working with a small group.

When using this guide please note we offer *possible* causes and *possible* solutions. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. We also recognize there is rarely (if ever) a “one-shot” fix for anything in writing and that when working with individuals you must consider many factors. Therefore, our suggestions are an attempt to lead the writer one step forward.

As in any troubleshooting guide, the suggestions are *possibilities* or *options* to try out. The intent here is to lead writing teachers toward thinking of development with a different lens that may lead to a clearer understanding of the developmental nature of language and literacy learning.

Teachers recognize that often you need to teach the same idea a dozen times in a dozen different ways before a child is able to incorporate it into his or her independent writing. Sometimes an instructional nudge may move the writer forward in one piece, yet may not hold across time, whereas in other instances, one exposure changes everything for the writer. So, we encourage you to view each instructional nudge as one more demonstration of what writers do when facing a struggle. Work alongside your students, and support their growing control and developing competence with repeated exposures layered over time. Note what you observe, what puzzles you, why you believe the snag has happened. Note what you try in an attempt to nudge the writer forward.

Each of the suggestions for nudging growth is intended to support an individual child; however, we suggest you consider the possibility that many of these

suggestions could also be used with small groups, and several will be appropriate as the focus of a minilesson during writing workshop. In fact, you will likely find these suggestions could be used in a spiraling fashion.

We think of spiraling in two ways. The first is to spiral the use of a strategy from an individual to a small group or the entire class. In this case you may see the situation with one child, take a suggested action, then monitor and begin noticing the same pause or plateau with others, a group, or the whole class. In these cases you may return to the same “if/then” situations several times. Each time you return to the situation you increase the potential in the writer, group, or class. Each time you work through the situation you help the writers to broaden their understandings and control as they move onward.

Spiraling may also mean that you use one of the suggestions and find it moves the writer forward in a particular unit of study. You may find that the writer does not carry over the suggestion to a new unit of study. We suggest that you then loop back to the if/then situation, employ the same or different suggestion to lift the writer again, spiraling upward (as we move through units of study and time) and outward (as the writer broadens

his or her understanding and begins to generalize that a single move can apply to more than one type of writing).

We are including several mentor texts that we have found useful in developing our insights as writers and teachers of writing. It is our hope that, as you plan and implement your writing workshop, these mentor texts will be a helpful resource. In addition, we have added a glossary of selected terms that are frequently tossed about in conversations about writing. It has been our experience that terms can quickly become part of the professional conversation. However, those terms may hold rather different meanings in different schools, or even across classrooms within the same school. We include the glossary with our meaning for the words we use. Our suggestion is that you take a look at the words you use in your teaching and your talking about teaching writing. Have some professional conversations with colleagues to define what is meant by the words we use as we teach. Otherwise it is possible that children will rise through the grades hearing common terms that mean one thing in second grade and something else in fourth. Pin down what you mean, and let definitions expand as children gain proficiency in the art and work of writing.

As teachers and writers, our insights and understandings continue to grow as we work in classrooms, attend workshops and conferences, and read professional literature. Over the years we have found a wealth of ideas and suggestions in the writing of others that have nudged our thinking. Therefore, we are including a list of professional books that have been especially helpful to growing our knowledge and deepening our insights. We group these titles to target specific issues and hope they provide an opportunity for more in-depth study leading to greater insight about your work.

We invite you to use this book as a troubleshooting guide. Read it once all the way through. Get a feel for what's inside and how it's organized. Then, keep it handy for those times when one of your developing writers has a temporary developmental pause or just an off morning.

All the best,
Lester and Reba

Nothing to Write About



1

Notice and Name: The writer is not writing and says she has nothing to write about.

When given the task to write, less experienced writers may immediately respond, “But I don’t know anything. . . . I don’t know what to write about. . . . What do you want me to write about?” Those words are all too familiar in classrooms everywhere. As a teacher it would be easy to fall prey to the fear and simply respond with a prompt or an assigned topic. While this may produce writing and appear to solve the dilemma, it doesn’t get at the root of the problem. In fact, it may make matters worse because it 1) erodes the potential of learning to value and trust one’s own experiences and thoughts as source material, 2) moves the writer even further from understanding the source of inspiration, 3) undermines the development of a habit of noticing and taking note with the intention of generating source material for future projects, and 4) weakens the association between the writer’s passions and experience with the act of writing.

To work consistently from a prompt could create writing in an emotional vacuum where what the writer produces has its origins in the heart and head of someone else.

The spark for writing is rarely something that can happen on demand, so it comes as no surprise that some students routinely respond with, “I don’t know what to write about.” Learning to attend to the world around you and to tune in to the potential in what you notice, like many other aspects of writing, must become habit. Writers often speak about where their ideas come from (family, comments overheard, situations observed, music heard, books read, experiences). A common thread running through those comments is the writer’s attentive nature. Writers are an attentive lot who tune in to the potential of their noticing. As a writer I (Lester) keep a notebook and jot down ideas that flash through my mind, capturing only enough of the idea to ignite the memory and launch future writing. It is the potential I am trying to capture here. The act of writing it down tickles my brain and causes me to think around the edges of that potential topic. At odd moments I will have some insight, or an image will drift through my mind, and I turn to my notebook to capture those fleeting thoughts. Over time, if these bits begin to coalesce, I move out of the notebook and attempt to draft.

My point here is this: “I don’t know what to write about” may be the truth for many student writers if we are expecting students to come up with a topic on the spot just because we have announced an assignment.

A springboard experience (trigger event, seed idea, or source idea) sets the mind in motion and generates a cascade of thoughts and details that may find their way into the writing. Or at the very least it becomes the spark that ignites the connections and questions that later drive the writing. These moments are perfect material for writers to capture in a notebook because they can come from almost anywhere. Consider the potential in typical school-day experiences: During a morning read-aloud writers listen with notebooks open and make note of connections that spark memories or generate questions and curiosity. On the way to the playground a group of kids stop to watch a line of ants marching single file with crumbs from a dropped cookie. Questions shower like raindrops. Conjecture clouds the air. Conversations spark throughout the play. Later, in the lunchroom, a few peas slide off a tray and land on the floor. Moments later someone steps on those peas and slides into the person in front of him. A chain of disaster ensues. It becomes the topic of talk for a week. Back in the classroom a discussion erupts

following a read-aloud of an Underground Railroad story connected to a social studies lesson. Comments ping around the room like hailstones, and questions bounce about. Ordinary life experience in a school is rich with potential ideas for gathering material. The attentive mind of a writer zeroes in on all that potential. And if student writers are taught to attend to this, the habit will spill over into life outside of school.

The key here is to note those events that capture our attention. Especially important are those ideas that prompt us to think, to question, to feel, to laugh, to share, to react, to take a stand—in short, those ideas that nudge us forward. Stories and poems, narratives and accounts, essays and letters and memoirs, opinion pieces, how-to and all-about texts, ABC books, and concept books are waiting to sprout from those seeds. But first they must be gathered, planted in our notebooks, then nurtured and cultivated with thought, talk, play, reading, writing, and more writing.

Identify Cause

The writer lacks experience noticing and assigning significance to ideas sparked by the world around her.



Give the Writer Tools to Move Forward

- Select a book that is likely to spark several connections. Read the book aloud with the student, and note the connections that may lead to a story, evoke an opinion, or elicit a response.

Mentor text:

Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street by Roni Schotter

- Lead an idea walk with notebooks. Gather your students with their notebooks. Give them a focus (such as signs of the arrival of fall) to notice and make note of. Their noticings may be sketches, lists, words, phrases, first lines, smells, memories, or connections/associations. Pause along the walk to share what you have collected, and invite others to do the same. Speak of the potential of what you have noted.

Mentor texts:

Leaf Man by Lois Ehlert

The Dandelion Seed by Joseph P. Anthony

I Love the Rain by Margaret Park Bridges

- Listen to conversations. Show an entry in your own notebook that was prompted by an overheard conversation.

- Listen to music, and read the liner notes. List your favorite line, and add your comments, thoughts, connections, and so on. Make a list of ideas prompted by the song.

- Listen to TV/radio news or scan news magazines, and note what captures your attention. Note your thoughts, feelings, reactions, questions, differences of opinion, and so on.

- Sort through a collection of photographs, and make notes about the place, why you were there, who is in the picture, what is important to remember, and what the story is.

Identify Cause

The writer has little confidence in the worthiness of his ideas or is dependent on others for topic selection.



Give the Writer Tools to Move Forward

- Watch and listen to the student throughout the day, pointing out to him each of the things he says or does that could spark writing. Examples might include comments about favorite things, opinions shared, hopes and aspirations, connections with a read-aloud, moments when he has a spontaneous story to share, differences of opinion, questions that arise in science or social studies lessons, and concerns voiced over issues in the classroom, school, or community.
- Recall an event the student has shared. Retell a portion of that event, and pause to question him about details, the sequence, and why it was significant for him. Invite him to continue the telling to you. Make note of details on a sticky note, and hand it to him. Lead him to recognize the potential that lies in that list.
- Interview him for details about moments when he felt proud of himself, times when he was disappointed in others, or events that left him unable to stop laughing. Make note of details that may spark a story in his mind. Find out what makes him angry, what he is passionate about, and so on.

Mentor texts:

The Roller Coaster Kid by Mary Ann Rodman
First Grade Stinks! by Mary Ann Rodman

Identify Cause

The writer does not recognize her own emotions as a source of ideas for writing.



Give the Writer Tools to Move Forward

- Make lists in your notebook (for example: what frightens you, what makes you laugh, what makes you worry, what makes you sad, what gets you excited). When you need a topic, think about something from your list, and tell why or write about a time when . . .

Mentor texts:

Rabbit Ears by Amber Stewart
Trevor's Wiggly-Wobbly Tooth by Lester L. Laminack

- Make an entry in your notebook to tell what you are feeling when you are flooded with emotion, such as after a great game on the playground, following a disappointment, when anticipating the visit of a grandparent or cousin from out of town, when you are thinking about a party, or the day before a visit to your dentist.

- Attach artifacts into your notebook (post cards, tickets, advertisements, news clips, photos or illustrations from magazines or newspapers, short essays), and add captions to note your thoughts, reactions, feelings, connections, questions, or arguments related to each.

Mentor texts:

My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother by Patricia Polacco
Dad, Jackie, and Me by Myron Uhlberg

- Consider personal collections or “treasures.” Select one or more of them to describe; tell where it came from or how you acquired it and how you feel when you think of it or see it.

Mentor texts:

Treasures of the Heart by Alice Ann Miller
The Memory String by Eve Bunting

Identify Cause

The writer does not recognize that the people in his life can be a source of ideas for writing.



Give the Writer Tools to Move Forward

- Make a list of people you know really well (parents, siblings, extended family, neighbors, and friends). Leave a little space between each name on the list, and make notes about each person. To get you started, choose one and think about why that person is important to you, things you enjoy doing with the person, what makes you think of this person (e.g., smells, a color, a song, food), something this person always says, or a good memory shared with that person.

Mentor texts:

Saturdays and Teacakes by Lester L. Laminack
Song and Dance Man by Karen Ackerman

- Paste photos in your writer's notebook, and make notes telling where you are, who is with you, and what you were thinking when you were there. Focus on the people in the photos, and write down your memories with those people.

- Make notes and lists about a visit with grandparents, friends, or neighbors. Think about the people at a birthday party or other celebration you have attended. Is there one who stands out in your memory? Why? Make notes about what you can remember.

Mentor texts:

Mr. George Baker by Amy Hest
Bigmama's by Donald Crews

- Write or sketch a scene from a visit with a relative during a holiday or celebration such as birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, or vacations.

Mentor texts:

The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant
Grandma's Records by Eric Velasquez

Identify Cause

The writer does not recognize that significant places in her life can be a source of ideas.



Give the Writer Tools to Move Forward

- Make a list of places you have enjoyed visiting (amusement park, hiking trail, seashore, museum, aquarium, favorite store, bakery, campground, lake, grandparent's home, and so on). Make notes of what you recall—waiting in line, anticipations, smells, sounds, fears, worries, or excitement.

Mentor texts:

Bigmama's by Donald Crews

Roller Coaster by Marla Frazee

Picnic in October by Eve Bunting

- Make lists in your notebook of places you've been, places you'd love to go, or places you want to know more about. For each place listed, write whatever comes to mind.

Mentor text:

Tulip Sees America by Cynthia Rylant