CRAFT and PROCESS Studies

Units That Provide Writers with Choice of Genre

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Dedication

To my niece Kate,
and all new teachers who create caring schools

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Online Resource and Video Contents

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

Increasing Engagement Through Choice of Genre

Early in the school year I often teach a lesson in third to sixth grades on how to find and create independent writing projects. I start the lesson by asking students to share their favorite writing topics and genres, and then I model my thinking about the same topic across different genres. I might show them my own list of favorite topics and then explain how I could write about basketball by writing an informational article about the game, by writing basketball poetry, by writing a fictional story related to basketball, by writing a how-to article on shooting a free throw, or by writing the depressing true story about the time my son beat me in basketball for the first time. The lesson has a fairly predictable rhythm to it, from the audible gasps and excitement when I tell students they are able to write anything they want to the list of predictable topics, with video games always near the top.

Take a look at Video 1.1: Children React to Being Told They Can Choose Their Genre in the Online Resources to see what I mean.

Video 1.1

Children React to Being Told They Can Choose Their Genre

You can see a video of the same lesson with a different group of students in the Online Resources (Video 7.1: Launching Independent Projects [Fourth Grade]).

However, a few years ago when I was teaching this lesson in a typical fourth-grade class, the students' responses were anything but typical. Very quickly we had generated a pretty predictable list of favorite topics: video games at the top, followed by sports, animals, and so on. When I asked them what kinds of genres they liked to write, I was expecting the usual, with fantasy/fiction followed by a few other genres they'd studied. But this class was different.

First, Marcus said, "I like to write parodies."

Me: Really? What do you mean by parodies?

Marcus: I like to take other people's stories and make up my own funny version.

Me: How do you know the word *parody*?

Marcus: My mom taught it to me.

Me: Do you write parodies at school or at home?

Marcus: Oh, only at home.

Next, Sha'naya said, "I like to write sequels." She went on to explain how she takes characters she knows from movies and makes up what happens next (essentially fan fiction).

"Do you do this at school or at home?" I asked.

"Only at home," she said.

Elizabeth offered, "I like to write songs." This one didn't surprise me—this lesson often reveals at least a couple of songwriters.

Next, Jackson said, "I like to write TV shows." He went on to explain that he loves the TV show *Phineas and Ferb*. He records it, and then when he re-watches it, he pauses it and writes down everything the characters say. *He's transcribing entire episodes of* Phineas and Ferb *and then writing his own original episodes.*

Some of the Independent Writing Projects Students Created That Day

- a personal narrative about playing football
- an essay about why it's not good to have your birthday on Valentine's Day

- a feature article about yellow-bellied sea snakes
- a cookbook for make-believe candy
- a how-to article about how to draw the character Scrat from the Ice Age movies

There were twenty teachers in the room watching this discussion take place. When we debriefed afterwards, the classroom teacher was surprised—she didn't know about her students' writing lives outside school. She said many of the students who spoke up weren't the most confident writers in the classroom, continuing, "The child I was most surprised by was the *Phineas and Ferb* guy. He's the most reluctant writer I've had in twenty-three years of teaching. He hates writing." Kind of an interesting statement about a child who is spending hours a day writing, on his own time! He actually *loves* writing. It's just that his energy for writing is linked to a particular genre. In each of these cases, certain genres affected children's writing energy. In other words, the children's high level of writing engagement was linked directly to a genre that excited them.

In each of these cases, children were on their own to figure out how to capitalize on this energy source. These writing projects lived outside of school, representing what Laura Robb calls "secret writing lives" (Robb 2010). But why should the writing that children invest the most energy in be secret? Children's passions and interests need to be a part of their writing identities at school as well. We tend to be more comfortable making a place for student passion and interest with topic choice, but less so (or not at all) with genre choice. This is a missed opportunity.

If we believe that choice of genre affects engagement, then we must include studies in which students choose their genre. It is crucial that we as teachers align our actions with our beliefs. It's not enough to say that we believe that choice of genre positively affects engagement. If we truly believe this, then we must align our actions by including in each year some units of study that allow for and support choice of genre. And the good news is, this is very possible.

For many children, a *type* of writing is often more enticing than a particular topic. Children who are drawn to fantasy might be attracted to the freedom to create worlds and empower characters with magic. Students who love writing video game guides might be drawn to a genre where they can display a knowledge that has a high level of currency with their peers. Children who write comics might be looking for an avenue to make their friends laugh. In these cases, choosing the topic is often secondary to choosing a genre that feeds a need that isn't being met by other genres.

I've experienced this firsthand as a parent. I have a daughter for whom writing was difficult, and for a long time she was a reluctant writer. She went instantly from low-energy writer to high-energy writer when she had choice of genre. For a while it was songs. When she was twelve she wanted to be Taylor Swift and had

Video 1.2

Fifth Graders Talk About Genre Choices

In Video 1.2: Fifth Graders Talk About Genre Choices, you can hear fifth graders talking about the wide range of genres they're writing, including science fiction, realistic fiction, nonfiction, biographical sketches, memoir, poetry, mystery/horror, and graphic novels.

a notebook packed with dreadfully emotional, angst-ridden, teenage songs she had written. Then it was on to movie scripts. She had never had a unit of study on movie scripts, but she somehow figured out what they looked like and started writing a script of a movie she was filming with her friends. Her engagement in writing was *intrinsically linked* with having choice of genre and an authentic purpose.

The Importance of Working Within a Unit of Study

In writing workshop, teaching tends to be organized into units of study that last three to six weeks. We organize our teaching this way so that we can work logically toward meaningful goals, responding directly to what we see students doing each day.

The word *unit* implies that we have goals we are working toward. But the word *study* is just as important. In a unit we are actively engaged in study, or inquiry into how authors create things. While genre study is important, it isn't the only type of study. Units can be organized around any big idea in writing that is worthy of study. A unit could be focused on a *process* authors use, an area of *craft*, or a *genre*.

Unfortunately, increasingly I'm in schools where students never have an opportunity to pursue writing in genres of their choice. A few years ago, I was working in a school district in Ohio that wanted to examine its children's writing experiences from kindergarten through sixth grade. We tracked writing units from K to 6 on a grid so we could see them at a glance. (See Appendix A in the Online Resources for two documents: A1 Unit Data Sample Matrix and A2 Unit Data Blank Matrix.) The first thing we noticed as we studied the grid was that every unit of study, from the first day of kindergarten until the last day of sixth grade, was a genre study. This meant that students would go through seven years of school and over fifty units of study without once having the opportunity to choose their own genre. And in this school this also meant that they would never write fiction, since every story-writing unit was a personal narrative unit.

As I work in schools across the United States and in international schools, I find this increasingly to be the norm. In my experience, this trend coincided with the

adoption of new writing standards. Most standards ask students to write different types of texts, but not specific genres. For example, Common Core asks students each year to write in three text types: narrative, informational, and opinion/argument writing. Published programs often responded to these standards by creating units of study that are limited to genres that fit neatly within these text types.

When children have choice of genre, most of the genres they choose on their own *do* align with text types valued by standards. They sometimes choose genres that don't necessarily fit neatly into a text type—but that *do* increase engagement, which is a baseline requirement for a successful and joyful writing life. To be clear, I'm not taking an anti-genre stance. I love genre study, especially studying genres that engage students. Genre study has significant benefits; the most important benefit is that students' understanding about a particular genre—and about writing in general—grows when they study a specific genre in depth over an extended period of time, within the context of a unit of study.

I am also simply pro *study*. The thinking children do when they are studying an idea is very different from the thinking they do when they are simply given information. On the first day of a memoir study, there is a difference between saying, "Here are the two defining characteristics of memoir," and, "Here is a stack of memoirs—let's see what you notice about how they work." In order to think deeply, children need time to deeply study both authors' process and authors' craft. I feel "free-choice" units that are not guided by a particular idea about writing are not very effective. I believe it's important for teachers and students to know what in particular they are studying, whether it is process, craft, or study.

So, that said, this book is not about units of study that turn children loose without support. *This book's biggest goal is to make a compelling case for the belief that choice of genre affects engagement for all writers and to offer support as you act on this belief by including in your year some writing units of study that allow for this choice.*

Many fourth graders I've interviewed, given the choice, would choose some kind of fiction/fantasy writing. But, when I look at schools' units of study in the intermediate grades (and I look at a lot of them), I see that the most underrepresented unit is fantasy. I don't mean that all fourth grades need to include a fantasy-writing unit (although that would be nice); rather, I mean that students must have some opportunities across the year to write in their favorite genres, whatever those might be. It's a hard sell to tell any child at the beginning of the year, "Sorry, I know you really want to write fantasy [or whatever the child's favorite genre is], but we don't study that this year. Hang in there for a whole year and maybe you'll get to write it next year." When my friend Sara's daughter Hanna was in *second grade*, she excitedly told Sara that she would get to write fantasy at the end of *third grade*. Over a year away. And Hanna is a child who loves writing, who writes fantasy and graphic short stories at home. What happens to the children who are less confident, low-energy

writers? While this practice is merely unsupportive of Hanna as a writer, it's actually harmful for those who need choice the most.

Choice of genre increases engagement for all writers, but especially low-productivity writers. Teachers often ask me about students who "don't write very much each day" or "don't produce much unless I'm right there with them." The first question I always ask is, "Are they engaged when they have choice of genre, choice of topic, and an authentic purpose?" If a child isn't engaged when these three conditions are in place, then there may be other issues at play (not feeling comfortable with spelling or drawing approximations, being off task throughout the day, etc.). But many students whom we might initially categorize as "low productivity" will dig right in to writing work when they are able to choose what they are making.

Of course, our job as teachers is not only to offer our students opportunities to choose but also to support them as they learn to find their way to both a genre and a topic that engages them. We need to teach them strategies for making *meaningful* choices. I believe that choice is the doorway into meaning. In order to write about ideas that are personally meaningful, students need the opportunity to make significant choices.

Engagement is a prerequisite for a meaningful writing life, which is why the idea of engagement forms the backbone of this chapter on why choice of genre is important. We can, however, make even more of a case for offering units that allow for choice. Here are six additional reasons—all intrinsically linked with engagement—why choice of genre is crucial for all children.

Units where students choose their genre . . .

- promote authentic purposes and audiences for writing;
- help children better understand the concept of genre;
- accelerate and deepen student learning in the area of study;
- strengthen student writing identity;
- allow students to align genre, topic, audience, and purpose;
- provide teachers with crucial information and understandings about their students as writers.

Reasons for Choice of Genre

1. Choice of genre promotes authentic purposes and audiences for writing.

The opportunity to choose can lead students to discover new, authentic purposes for writing. Interestingly, I've observed that when students are offered the choice, they don't choose *only* their favorite genres. They choose a variety of genres, for a variety

of reasons. A few years ago in Kansas City, I was teaching a demonstration lesson in a fourth-grade class that was doing the Finding and Developing Independent Projects unit. I started the minilesson by asking students why they had chosen their genres, assuming we'd hear about their favorite genres and why they chose them. But, as usually happens when I assume too much, the students surprised me. They said:

- "I decided to write a feature article about tornados because I'm scared of tornados and I thought if I learned and wrote about them, I would understand them better and not be so scared."
- "I chose to write a how-to article because my friend said they're really fun to write, so I thought I'd try it out."
- "I chose a fantasy story because I've never written one and I wanted to try something I've never written before."
- "I decided to write a persuasive letter to my parents because I really want a phone."
- "I decided to write poetry because I'm not very good at it and I thought it would be easier to get better at it when we weren't studying it."

That last reason really struck me, so I asked the child to explain. They said, "It's easier to learn something when there isn't the pressure of doing it really well and you are more free to play around with it." That could be a reason all on its own for genre choice: it's easier to learn something when the pressure is low and engagement is high.

In a video earlier in this chapter, we saw a fifth-grade class talk about the variety of genres they liked to write in. In Video 1.3: Fifth Graders Share Reasons for Genre Choice, the same class explains the *reasons* behind their genre choices.

- "I've never written in that genre before. I wanted to do it, but I just didn't think I was smart enough to do it."
- "It's kind of my favorite genre."
- "We have a board in the back of the room with all the different genres, so I looked and chose one."
- "I just watched a really scary movie and wanted to write a scary book."

Video 1.3

Fifth Graders Share Reasons for Genre Choices

Their responses underscore the idea that authors choose genres for a variety of reasons. When genres are always assigned, students won't have experience in choosing genres to match an audience and purpose. If never given the choice, children may not even *know* which genres they prefer. If they've only been exposed to writing a narrow range of genres and they don't find those assigned genres engaging, they may be turned off toward writing in general before they ever find the type of writing that engages them. They may not know if they like to write fiction or poetry unless they have had a chance to give it a try in a low-pressure setting. This is particularly important for low-productivity writers, who especially need genres (and topics) they find engaging. Finding genres they are interested in helps children form writing identities in the early grades and can transform low-energy writers to high-energy writers in the upper grades.

One of our primary goals is for children to be self-directed writers who have the ability to follow their own intentions. We want children to be engaged for reasons beyond the fact that they are required to write. We want them to choose projects because they want to entertain their friends or share what they know about a topic or convince someone to do something. Without the ability and opportunity to find authentic writing projects, it will be more difficult for them to become truly self-directed.

Often in writing conferences I ask children a question that I first heard Shelley Harwayne ask in a workshop years ago: "Where will this writing be two weeks from now?" Basically, she meant, Whom are you going to give this to when you are finished? I recently asked a second grader whom he was going to give his informational soccer book to when he was done. After a long pause he said, "Umm . . . my mom?" I asked if his mom liked soccer and he said, "No, she hates soccer." He wasn't really writing for his mom; she was just the first person who popped in his head.

Video 1.4

Roman's Conference: Audience and Purpose

While we need to teach students how to determine an audience in craft studies, process studies, and genre studies, when children have choice of genre it is easier for them to find an actual person to write for.

In Video 1.4: Roman's Conference: Audience and Purpose, Roman thinks about audience and purpose for his superhero writing. He doesn't initially consider the fact that perhaps someone in his class will want to read it—until his friends help him out by sharing their enthusiasm!

Being thoughtful about audience is an authentic part of the writing process for

published authors, too. In an NCTE presentation from 2018, Ralph Fletcher talked about the process he used to determine a genre for writing to accompany a series of photographs he took of elephants bathing in a river. After reflecting on all the genres he might choose (photo essay, feature article, literary nonfiction), he decided to write a picture book for children, based in part on his reflections on the bath-time routine of his grandchildren. Writing is about making decisions. It is difficult to learn how to make decisions if one of the most important decisions (choosing your genre) is always made by someone else.

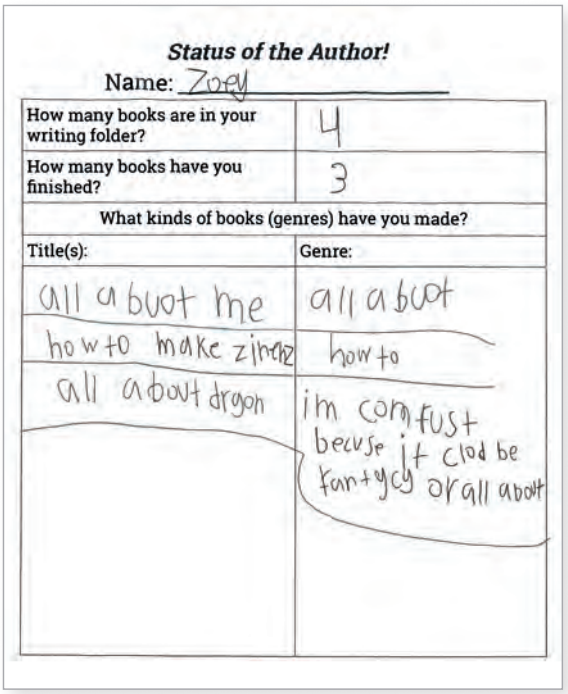
2. Choice of genre helps children better understand the concept of genre.

Simply asking the question "What are you making?" in the context of writing workshop creates the expectation both that children will be making *something*, in a genre of their choice, and that they will know some things about that genre. It requires students to be articulate about genre, especially if we ask them to explain what the genre they've chosen *is* rather than just naming it.

Many teachers include a genre overview study early in their year. One of the goals for the Genre Overview Study described in Chapter 13 is for students to be able to answer the question "What type of book are you writing?" (K–2) or "What type of writing are you working on?" Asking this question automatically communicates the idea that all genres are valued and can be valid choices. Early in this study, many children respond by naming their topic, not their genre. This isn't a surprising response when students have never heard the question—which wouldn't be asked except in the context of a unit that is organized around an idea other than genre. If you were in a realistic fiction unit, you wouldn't ask students to articulate their genre since everyone would be writing realistic fiction.

The question "What are you making?" by nature illuminates children's understanding of genre, which often is not black or white. Katie Wood Ray often talks about the gray area of genre: sometimes a piece of writing has characteristics from several genres, and sometimes you need a lot of words to describe what you're writing, to give the full picture. While it's helpful for students to be able to name their genre, I believe it's more important that they are able to describe what they're making in a way that shows a real understanding of the genre they're writing in. For example, I'm thrilled when a child says, "I'm making a story that didn't happen, but it *could* happen," to describe realistic fiction. That's very different from when a child says, "I'm writing realistic fiction," but they can't clearly state what that is.

Second-grade teacher Emily Callahan often starts the year with the unit We Are Authors and We Make Books. Early in this unit, students are exposed to various genres, and Emily helps children consider what genre they're writing. Each child uses a "Status of the Author" page where they keep track of their titles and genres.



Status of the Author!

Name: Zoey

How many books are in your writing folder?	4
How many books have you finished?	3
What kinds of books (genres) have you made?	
Title(s):	Genre:
all about me	all about
how to make zines	how to
all about dragon	im comfust becuse it clod be fantycy or all about

Figure 1.1 Zoey's "Status of the Author" Page

Video 1.5

Evie's Intentions

The third entry in Zoey's "Status of the Author" page (Figure 1.1) shows a lot about her understanding of genre. For the genre of her *All About Dragons* book she wrote, "I'm confused because it could be fantasy or all-about." Zoey's grappling with the fact that she's teaching people about a topic that doesn't physically exist in the world, which makes her think it might be fantasy, even though her book is an informational book.

More significant than the correctness of her answer is the very idea that she is thinking about genre in this way. If she was in a fantasy study or an informational study, this deeper thinking wouldn't occur. It's only when she's in a unit where she has choice of genre that she has to consider and describe what she's creating.

Second-grader Evie is also thinking deeply about her genre: she's writing in multiple genres at once. In Video 1.5: Evie's Intentions, you can see Evie explain her plan for her book about her dog, Zoe. Her piece will be built around stories about Zoe, but will include poems about Zoe between each story. When you look at her table of contents (Figure 1.2), you'll see that she's also planning to include some fun facts, so there's an element of informational writing as well. Not only is it unlikely that Evie would have created this multigenre writing in a genre study, but she wouldn't have had the opportunity to pull together what she knows about various genres into a personally meaningful piece of writing. Even if they don't realize it, when students choose their own genre they need to

- consider what genres are available;
- choose a genre that matches their purpose;

- think about the characteristics of the genre (even if they have never formally studied it);
- think ahead or plan their writing in a way that matches their genre;
- try out features and techniques found in the genre.

These are, of course, skills students need in any unit of study. When students engage in this kind of thinking, their understanding of genre strengthens. This deep thinking will also help them when they are studying a particular genre in the context of a genre study. If learning to write in specific genres is such a significant goal that it influences standards and the units of study schools include in a year, then we'd do well to support students' understanding of the concept of genre by allowing them to choose their own genre at various points in the year.

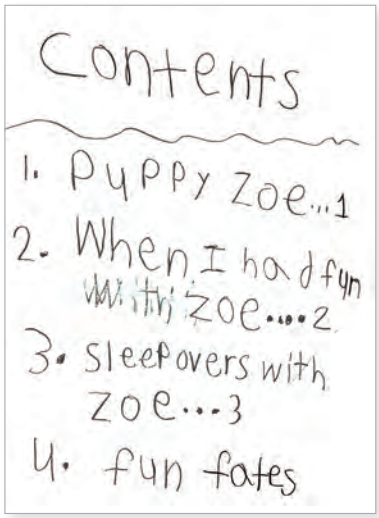


Figure 1.2 Evie's Table of Contents

3. Focusing a unit on a concept other than a genre accelerates and deepens student learning in that area of study.

Engagement alone isn't enough. Students should be engaged in meaningful and valuable experiences. We need to leverage student engagement *to increase student learning.*

The second part of this book is built around specific units based on topics other than genre (craft studies and process studies). The ideas and skills these units are organized around benefit students' writing in any genre. For example, the learning that occurs within an illustration study helps primary students think in greater detail, resulting in more detailed writing across *any* unit of study. The learning that occurs within a unit on crafting with punctuation affects units focused on genres as well. The learning in a unit on reading like a writer will influence students' ability to notice what authors craft and try it in their own writing. All of this is to say, what we teach within units doesn't occur in a vacuum—the goal is for students to internalize new skills that they can use in any writing context.

I'm not much of a camper, but every year during my family's summer vacation in northern Michigan I'm in charge of starting campfires. I *could* carefully construct a small tepee out of kindling around some dried grass, light the grass, and then carefully add larger sticks as the fire grows. However, my regular routine is to throw down some old logs and then douse them with enough lighter fluid that I have to warn everyone to stand back when I throw in a match. My Eagle Scout brother looks on disapprovingly, but the lighter fluid is the perfect accelerant to quickly transform soggy logs to a blaze for making s'mores.

Units focused on ideas other than genre act in the same way as the lighter fluid. They speed up growth in that particular area (without the singed eyebrows). And when we do that earlier in the year, we reap the benefits throughout the rest of the year and beyond. For example, one way to support students' ability to talk about their writing would be to include a peer conferring goal and a couple of minilessons in every unit of study. But another way to get at this goal is to include a unit about having better peer conferences (Ray and Cleveland 2004; Ray 2006), in which students write in the genres of their choice and the unit goals focus around talking about writing. During this unit, students get so much practice that they become substantially better at talking about their writing, in a much shorter period of time. By focusing on one concept (having better peer conferences), students accelerate their learning in that area as they are asked to think about it more deeply during a concentrated period of time. In addition, since students make progress more quickly in the area being studied, they will use that skill at a higher level throughout the year and be even more skilled by the end of the year.

This acceleration occurs in any concept studied in depth. When students are in any craft or process study, focusing conversations on the goals of the study also allows them to see how the crafting techniques and processes they are studying occur in multiple genres. This deepens their understanding of the craft or process and also allows them to use it more effectively during a genre study. We obviously can't focus an entire unit on every craft or process skill, but we can continue to integrate and include a variety of relevant skills in every unit. But including a craft or process study accelerates learning in a particular area in ways that enhance student learning across the year.

4. Units of study in which students can choose their genres strengthen student writing identity.

Recently I was teaching a lesson on finding independent writing projects in a third-grade class in Kansas City. Toward the end of the lesson, I told students they could write anything they wanted. Right away, a boy in the back who hadn't said anything during the lesson quietly asked if he could work on his stories. He went and got a plastic grocery bag from his backpack. Inside was a series of comics—graphic short stories—he had been working on at home. He had them in his backpack because he split time between his mom's home and his dad's home and he wanted to make sure he could always work on them. His writing life was that important to him.

His class wasn't studying graphic short stories, and his teacher hadn't yet learned about the ones he was writing. This opportunity to choose his genre made it possible for his writing identity to be nurtured at school. Fortunately, this boy is in a class with a teacher who values and supports choice of genre and topic. Not only did the teacher honor his writing in the classroom, but the other students now

knew that he was working on these books. His writing life became part of his identity as a student, not just as a writer.

Teachers tend to know at least a bit about students' writing lives outside of school, but I wonder, how much are we missing? For every student who will tell anyone who will listen about their stories, how many children are creating pieces of writing that we know nothing about? By including units of study that allow students to choose genres and topics and create anything they want, teachers create an equitable way for all students to enter into the world of writing. *All* students deserve to have their interests and passions heard and valued, and choice of genre should certainly be a possibility not only for certain students but for all students.

Some teachers make sure their students have independent projects, or "backup work" (Ray 2006, 154–56), in their writing folders—writing that they can work on when they have time. Unfortunately, the students who tend to have the most time to work on these meaningful projects are the students who are especially productive writers. The students for whom writing is more difficult or who simply work more slowly will have few, if any, opportunities to work on their independent projects, even though these are also the students who would benefit most from deeper engagement. Units that allow for choice of genre give all students the opportunity to have their writing identities honored and valued.

When students are encouraged to choose what they are making in writing workshop, we are in essence giving them permission to bring their whole selves into the classroom. In a fifth-grade class where students were beginning a unit on finding independent writing projects, I let the children know they could work on any project they wanted. Immediately, Eden and Mia asked if they could work on their story series. They retrieved a shoebox full of books they'd made while the rest of the class knowingly waited to see my reaction. Mia and Eden explained that after reading the book *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt, they had decided to write their own book, *The Day the Undies Quit*. That led to an ongoing series, including, among many others, *The Day the Undies Regretted Quitting* and *The Day the Undies Were Stolen by the Wicked Wedgie Woman.* They were excited to tell me all about these books as well as their plans for future titles. You can see some of the covers in Figure 1.3.

We want *all* students to have authentic writing lives and to be supported as they write about topics of passion and interest. We don't want the highest-energy writing to be separated from writing workshop. Whether it's songs, TV shows, comics, or a series of stories, we should value what children want to create.

5. Choice of genre allows students to align genre, topic, audience, and purpose.

Decision-making is at the heart of any authentic writing. Authors decide whom they are writing for, why they are writing, what topic they are going to write about, and what genre pulls them all together. It's not enough to choose only topic or choose

Figure 1.3 Covers for Mia and Eden's Undies Series

only audience. Students need at least some opportunities in school to figure out how all four ideas work in concert to create effective pieces of writing.

I started a conference with fifth-grader Jeremy recently with the question "Whom are you writing this for?" thinking I might teach him how to determine an audience. I quickly discovered he was far ahead of me when he responded, "I'm writing a story about the time I adopted my cat. When I'm finished, I'm going to make copies and give it to the people at the cat shelter so they can give it out and maybe other people will adopt a cat." Interestingly, Jeremy's class at that time was working on the unit How to Make Paragraphing Decisions. But, in addition to thinking about paragraphing decisions, Jeremy also

- thought about an authentic reason for writing;
- chose a topic that was personally meaningful to him;
- considered an audience that he cared about;
- decided on a genre that would meet his purpose and resonate with his audience; he considered writing an essay about why people should adopt cats but decided a story would be more personal.

Jeremy could have written about adopting his cat during a memoir study, but his thinking would have been different. Since the genre (memoir) would have been assigned, he wouldn't have had to think about genre possibilities at all. But since he had the opportunity to choose his genre, he could think about all the genre possibilities and decide which genre would be most effective.

Writers make things. Sometimes they write in response to an outside assignment, and other times they initiate a project on their own. In either situation writers benefit from having the opportunity to make choices about every aspect of their writing and to see how those aspects work together.

6. Students' choice of genre provides teachers with crucial information and understandings about their students as writers.

By the end of the first month of school, I want to have a pretty thorough understanding of each of my students as writers. I want to know their favorite topics. I want to know what techniques they use, overuse, and underuse. And I want to know what their favorite genre is. I want to know who the fantasy writers are. Which students write songs. I want to know that Marcus loves writing true stories about his family and that Jacqui loves writing comics. When I know my children deeply, I can better understand how to support their growth.

Second-grade teacher Julie Shisler shared with me her student Audrey's piece on the Great Depression from the first unit of the year (Figure 1.4). The Great

Depression is not your typical second-grade topic! So how did this piece come to be? Audrey and her mom had been reading the American Girl books about Kit, which are set in the Great Depression. I wish I could write like Audrey when I was eight. Think about how much we learn about Audrey from this piece of writing. We have an insight into how she takes complex topics and makes sense of them. We can see what she knows about word choice and structure and endings. We know how she can convey her feelings about a topic. And we know that she enjoys informational writing and teaching others about a topic she cares about.

What's even more significant is what her teacher, Julie, said: if Audrey had been in her classroom the year before, this book wouldn't have existed. In previous years she always started with a unit on personal narrative. This topic wouldn't have surfaced in a personal narrative unit—and it probably wouldn't have come out later in the year in an informational writing unit, either, because even though students would have had some choice of topic, the strategies used for helping students find topics wouldn't have led her to write about *this* topic. Julie is now committed to starting each year with units that allow for genre choice.

I frequently meet children whose disposition toward writing has changed because they had opportunities to choose their own genres. Starting the year with choice of genre can also give us important information about our new class of writers. I was talking about this in a workshop in Indiana recently when teacher Karna Chier said, "At the beginning of the year, I want to understand what my children know about the craft of writing. I want to see what their word choice is like, how they organize their writing, and how they structure sentences. Starting with choice of genre helps me see what my students know." She's right: we learn more about what a student can do in the context of their best writing. A less energizing genre can prompt less engaged and thoughtful writing, and might give us the impression that the child knows less than they do. We want to see what a child can do on their own, right from the start.

Recently I was talking with author Peter Johnston about student engagement. I asked him about the connection between choice and student engagement, whether in reading or writing. His response was "Well, what else is there?" Peter went on to explain that while there are numerous factors that affect engagement, choice is at the top of the list, and that we have to understand the role choice has in fostering true engagement. My hope is that as you think about writing and student engagement, you feel the same way. What else is there?

Figure 1.4 Audrey's Book About the Great Depression

- Showing her how to notice a published author's crafting techniques supports her as a writer. The type of writing she'll come in most contact with during the year is published text. She'll thus have the opportunity to learn from a greater number of published authors than student or teacher mentors. Each type of mentor provides different benefits, however, so I want her to be able to learn from all three.
- Finally, just having the ability to notice an author's craft doesn't affect a student's writing unless the student tries out some of those techniques in their own writing. On this day I just wanted Amari to notice, but she went farther and applied her "noticings" to her writing.

For More on This Unit

- *About the Authors: Writing Workshop with Our Youngest Writers* by Katie Wood Ray and Lisa B. Cleaveland
- *Engaging Young Writers, Preschool–Grade 1* by Matt Glover
- *Independent Writing: One Teacher—Thirty-Two Needs, Topics, and Plans* by M. Colleen Cruz
- *Mentor Authors, Mentor Texts: Short Texts, Craft Notes, and Practical Classroom Use* by Ralph Fletcher
- *What a Writer Needs*, 2nd ed., by Ralph Fletcher
- *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom* by Katie Wood Ray

Chapter 6

Using Strategies to Find Topics

or

How Writers Find Topics

or

Beyond Brainstorming: Finding Meaningful Topics

Children often think authors magically come up with writing topics. As you'll see in the beginning of Video 6.1: Minilesson on How Authors Find Topics (Kindergarten), when I ask students how they find ideas, they give very general answers like "I just think of a topic" and "I think about different things." These kinds of answers are also typical for older students, who sometimes think topics are supposed to just pop into their head and often get frustrated when they don't. In this video clip, I teach the strategy "Think about things you really like/love" to help students make the process of finding a topic more visible. I show them how published authors use this strategy, and the students tell me that an author they met, Troy Cummings, also writes about things he loves. I demonstrate using that same strategy, and then the children go off to try it out. Emphasizing the fact that all of us (published authors, students, and myself) use the same strategy nurtures children's identities as authors. After a unit's worth of lessons like this one, students will have a bank of strategies they can use throughout the year, in any genre they choose to write in.

Rationale for the Study

In this unit you'll teach students strategies for finding meaningful topics that will increase their writing engagement. When I encounter a child who isn't writing very much during writing workshop, the first two questions I ask myself are

- Does this child have a meaningful topic and genre?
- Does this child have an authentic audience and purpose?

Video 6.1

Minilesson on How Authors Find Topics

We know choice of genre affects engagement. In addition, children will write with more energy when they are writing *for* someone—when they know their writing will actually go out into the world. Students will also write with more energy when they have a meaningful topic they truly care about. The only way to get to meaningful topics is through choice. Choice is the doorway into meaning-making. If we give everyone the same topic or prompt, *someone* will have less energy for it, no matter

what the topic is. In order to find a topic they care about, children must be able to choose it themselves.

However, just because a child has choice of topic doesn't automatically mean they will find a *meaningful* topic. It is our responsibility to teach them strategies for finding topics that matter to them. It's important to note that teaching these kinds of strategies is different from brainstorming topics. When a class brainstorms a list of topics for a unit, generally about 75 percent of the class contributes to the list. Those students already *had* topics in mind. The other 25 percent of the class is looking around at everyone naming topics and is thinking, "How is everyone doing that?" And more often than not, those students end up not liking anything that ends up on the list.

When a child has trouble deciding what to write about, our responsibility is to teach them strategies for finding topics so that from that point forward they will be able to find topics on their own.

You might choose this study if . . .

- *A large number of your students are having a hard time finding meaningful topics.*
- *You want to help all students find better, more meaningful topics (even the children who already have topics).*
- *You want to increase engagement in writing.*

Grade Range

K–6. Students in any grade K–6 could need support in finding meaningful topics.

Time of Year

This unit often makes sense early in the year so students can use strategies for finding topics throughout the year. However, sometimes students start the year with lots of topic ideas and then energy lags. In that case, teachers might place this unit midyear to boost energy for writing by finding more personally engaging topics.

Student Learning and the Writing Celebration

Since this unit's goal is for students to independently use strategies to find topics, we will want to highlight this process during the celebration. In addition to sharing their writing, students also share the strategy they used to find their topic. This will sound more sophisticated as students get older. A kindergartner might say, "I was thinking about something I like," while a fifth grader might say, "I got the idea by going back through entries in my writer's notebook." During the

During the celebration, we want to be careful not to take away from the main goal of sharing and celebrating students' writing. Connecting their writing to the unit goals is important but should be subsidiary to students' sharing.

celebration, students might also look at all the strategies students used and figure out which strategies people used most often.

Key Unit Question

What strategy did you use to find your topic?

By asking this question, you are helping students bring to consciousness the strategy they used even if they weren't aware of it as they decided. Being aware of what they did will help them do it more consistently and intentionally in the future.

Gathering Published Mentor Texts

The published texts for this unit could be any piece of writing where the strategy the author used for finding topics is visible. For the younger grades, the author notes at the back of picture books often have information about where the author got the idea. The author note in *Dogs* by Emily Gravett mentions that she has a pet saluki. You might use this book to teach the strategy "Sometimes authors write about something they love."

And in the author's note for *Jabari Jumps*, Gaia Cornwall talks about how she loved to swim when she was little, which reveals the strategy "Sometimes authors get writing ideas when they think about things they like to do." This could, of course, lead to a fiction story or an informational piece of writing, not just a personal narrative. If you get in the habit of reading authors' notes, you will discover lots of strategies authors use.

There are other times when we as teachers can't find direct evidence for why an author chose a topic, but we can make an educated guess. *Frogs* by Gail Gibbons doesn't give us any information about how Gail found the topic. But we could easily say to students, "Gail knows a lot about frogs, so she decided to make a book about something she knows a lot about."

In upper grades we can also use picture books, but in addition we can pull from a variety of different types of writing. We can use strategies like "Authors write about things they know a lot about" whether it is a book, an article, an essay, or some other genre.

We can also use video clips of authors talking about how they find topics (visit www.authortoauthor.org). Another option is to invite a few of last year's students back to our class to talk about how they find topics.

What Might I Teach?

Primary Goal

Students will use strategies throughout the year to find meaningful topics.

Possible Teaching Points

Setting the Stage

In this unit, rather than an immersion phase, you might just have one entire writing workshop focused on the idea of finding topics. You might share your own difficulties in finding topics. You might ask students to talk about times they had a hard time finding topics. Starting this way will help all students, but especially the students who have the hardest time finding topics. On this first day, you could also have students look at a wide range of texts and read authors' notes to find evidence of how the authors found their topics.

Finding Strategies

Much of the teaching in this unit is about strategies for finding topics. One way to think of this is "How could we get the child to talk to themselves (or think about) something that will lead to a writing topic?"

Whenever I have a conversation with a child outside writing workshop, I can't help but think about all the writing ideas that could be sparked by what they're saying. Have you ever heard the expression "If you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail"? Well, I'm that way with topics. A child starts talking about basketball, and I'm thinking, "Have you ever written about basketball?" I have to decide, given the context of the conversation, whether it makes sense to actually say it out loud!

A strategy like "Think about someone who is special to you" doesn't mean the child has to write about someone who is special to them. We aren't using strategies as prompts. But if they *think* about someone who is special to them, that could lead them to all sorts of specific topics. We can model this process ourselves by showing them a piece of our own writing and tracing backwards to where we found the idea and how it led to the topic. For example, in Video 6.1, I model thinking about something I love (my daughter), which reminds me of something I do with my daughter (build with Legos), which leads me to write about the time we built a Lego house and it fell off the table. Older students can do this in a writer's notebook, where they use a strategy to start a bit of stream of consciousness writing to see where it takes them.

Here are some strategies for finding topics you might teach. Some of these strategies are from *About the Authors* by Katie Wood Ray and Lisa Cleaveland (2004).

- Think about something you know about.
- Think about someone special to you.
- Think about someone you know.
- Think about places you've been.
- Think about places you go all the time.
- Think about things you do frequently.
- Think about things you love/like.
- Think about things you're curious about.
- Think about things that have happened to you.
- Think about a time you had a big feeling (really happy, really sad, etc.).
- Think about special memories.
- Think about things you like to do with your friends or family.
- Think about things you know how to do.
- Think about things you care a lot about.

Finding Topics in Your Writer's Notebook (Grades 3–6)

In the upper grades, students might have a writer's notebook where they write multiple short entries each week. These entries can be an excellent source for finding topics. If a child looks back through their notebook and finds multiple skateboarding entries and lists of skateboard tricks, then skateboarding might be a good topic. When children have a favorite topic, or "writing territory," as Carl Anderson (2008) describes topics we tend to write a lot about, they can use that broad topic to find numerous specific topics: skateboarding in general could lead to specifics like an article about how to do a back ollie, a fictional story about a skateboarder, or an essay about why you should be able to skateboard to school.

In their notebook, students could create a web with the broad topics in the middle (skateboarding) and subtopics branching out (skateboard tricks).

A writer's notebook might also include a list of topics or a heart map (Heard 2016) that the child can come back to over and over again to find topics.

General Lessons Related to Topic

You may want to have some lessons that go beyond strategies for finding topics, including

- How to broaden your topic to make it easier to write about
- How to narrow your topic
- When to abandon a topic
- How to tell if you know/remember enough about your topic
- How to keep your audience in mind (for example, by including things you think are obvious that your reader, who doesn't know about your topic, might not know)
- How to keep a list of topics you might write about
- How to use the photos on your writing folder or writer's notebook to generate conversation and find topics

Remember, in a unit like this you could still have some conventions minilessons, or process lessons on planning or revision. All the minilessons don't have to be about finding topics. Most will be, but not all.

Conferring

What to Carry with You

You'll want to bring your own writing, published texts, and student writing. In addition to a range of genres, you will want to include texts that reveal a range of strategies authors used for finding topics. You might have nine pieces of writing that represent nine different strategies for finding a topic.

In the primary grades, you will also want to have an empty pre-stapled book with you that you can use when you are modeling how you are thinking about a topic as you start a new book. In the upper grades, you will need your own writer's notebook to show how you use it to find topics.

What to Think About While Conferring

Keeping your unit goals in mind, you will first want to find out if the child has a topic. If the child does not, then that's certainly what you will teach into. But most of your students will have a topic when you sit down at the conference. Simply having a topic, however, doesn't mean that it will be particularly meaningful or engaging. You might help a student in this situation find a more engaging topic. If the student decides to pursue this new idea, then they can choose to save their current piece of writing for later or abandon it.

When a child does have a meaningful topic, you might ask how they found it, so that they are conscious of the strategy they used to arrive at it. You might also teach into how to narrow or broaden their topic.

If the child seems pretty solid on finding topics, then you could teach them something that would help in any type of writing. This unit might be a good time to ask some questions that usually lead to a teaching point, like

- Whom are you writing this for? Who is your audience? (This question often yields a teaching point since many children don't have an authentic audience in mind.)
- Why did you choose this genre?
- What are you working on as a writer?
- What are you trying to get better at?
- What are your goals as a writer? What are your goals for this piece of writing?
- What have you done well in this piece of writing?

For me, the hardest time to help a child find a topic is during a writing conference. I know that the clock is ticking, which leads to a less natural, interview-like conversation where I feel like I'm just asking questions and trying to pry a topic out of the child. Instead, the best time for me to help a child find a topic is when we're not trying—we're just talking on the way to the lunch room or when the child comes in to start the day. Any time I am talking with a child, topics will pop up naturally, and tucking a "Hey, you could write about this!" into the conversation is invaluable.

For More on This Unit

- *About the Authors: Writing Workshop with Our Youngest Writers* by Katie Wood Ray and Lisa B. Cleaveland
- *Engaging Young Writers, Preschool–Grade 1* by Matt Glover
- *Heart Maps: Helping Students Create and Craft Authentic Writing* by Georgia Heard
- *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations That Move Young Writers Forward* by Carl Anderson