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# The Volunteer in the Writing Workshop



ARTICLE BY **DEBORAH A. SOIFER**

## WHY VOLUNTEER

There's no question you can make a difference!

When a parent helps out in the classroom, everyone wins—students, teacher, and volunteer. The presence of parent volunteers enriches each child's educational experience; children receive more individual attention and benefit from the unique reactions, personality, and experiences of another adult in the classroom. Once you start to volunteer, you'll be amazed (and delighted) at how the children anticipate your arrival each week and really count on your help. You will quickly become indispensable.

It's easy to see why teachers value their volunteers; an extra pair of hands, ears, and eyes are invaluable in a busy classroom. Beyond this obvious benefit, the presence of parent volunteers helps teachers think positively about parents and increases their willingness to involve parents in meaningful ways. It encourages teamwork between parents and teachers!

For parents, the benefits of volunteering are plentiful, particularly in the primary grades. Spending a few hours each week in your child's classroom really eases the pangs of separation felt when your "baby" goes off to school. By becoming familiar with your child's school environment and activities, the daily "How was school today?" conversation becomes much more productive! It's so much easier for a child to respond to "Tell me how you ended the story you were drafting" than "What did you do in school?" Importantly, if you have some

first hand knowledge of your child's curriculum, you can extend and enrich school learning by incorporating similar or complementary activities at home. Your volunteerism bridges the gap between home and school.

Volunteering can be contagious, too. Studies have shown that when some parents are actively and meaningfully involved in a volunteer program, the number of new volunteers grows dramatically.

But why is the Writing Workshop a particularly important place for parents to get involved? Again, there are many reasons. In Writing Process Workshops, writing is not seen as an isolated subject, or one of the "three R's." Rather, it is understood as a life skill; a problem-solving technique that children (and adults) will need to use in nearly all situations throughout their lives. Becoming a good writer cannot be separated from the growth of a child in other areas of development. Therefore, to help in the Writing Workshop not only allows you to contribute significantly to a child's education, it affords you a window on her development as a reader, thinker, artist, writer—in short, as a learner. It is a precious view. As Mary Ellen Giacobbe, a first grade teacher from New Hampshire comments, "The best way to help parents help their children is to help with the writing program during the school day." What better recommendation could there be?

## INTRODUCTION

The information that follows will



familiarize you with what goes on in the Writing Workshop, first by simply explaining the ideas and beliefs behind the Writing Process itself, and then by presenting the five steps or stages of the Writing Process. Next, I've tried to anticipate some questions you might have when you observe the Writing Workshop for the first time. The guide for helping in the Workshop itself follows, with both general guidelines and specific suggestions...I hope what I have to offer here will be helpful, but I must emphasize that the Writing Process and Workshop are not set in concrete! Each teacher adapts the process as she sees fit and according to her personal teaching style. I urge you to communicate first and often with your classroom teacher, so that her expectations, standards, and procedures are clearly understood. This can only further your success as a new volunteer, and make your time in the classroom precious for teacher, children, and yourself. Good luck!

## THE WRITING PROCESS

Your child is involved in a program of writing instruction called "The Writing Process." As you may have already noticed from visiting your child's classroom, attending parent-teacher conferences, or reviewing papers brought home, she is learning writing in a way quite different from the way most of us were taught. Let's look at some of those differences:

The "traditional" approach to writing, often called "creative writing," put an emphasis on the finished product—the story, poem, or research paper—and not on what children do when they write. The topic and form were usually assigned by the teacher and not chosen by the student (e.g., "Today, class, we will write Halloween poems, and each line will begin with a letter from the word *Ghost*."). Students were told what to write, and though they practiced writ-

ing, they didn't really learn *how* to write. Students generally worked individually, writing for the teacher, who assessed the finished product and gave it a grade.

More recently, researchers and teachers who have worked with children and observed them writing, have developed a different philosophy and method for teaching writing, called "The Writing Process." This approach focuses more on the *process* of writing than on the finished product. Unlike the traditional approach, children generally choose their own topics, drawing from their own experiences, interests, and needs. In this way, they assume ownership of their writing, and realize that their lives are worth writing about. The teacher moves from her role of assigning and assessing, to observing, teaching, and guiding the children throughout the writing process, helping them discover what they know and extending that knowledge. The students no longer write for the teacher and for the grade, but write for real—for a real audience and a real purpose. For instance, if the class is learning about letter writing, each child might choose a real person to whom they'll write, and each will send that letter when it's written.

The philosophy behind The Writing Process is simple; we all enjoy, work hard, and excel at those things which mean something to us. By giving ownership and responsibility to children for their writing and by giving them frequent opportunities to choose what and how they will write, the act of writing becomes meaningful work for them. Also, by focusing on the process of writing, we acknowledge and allow time for exploring, learning, and sharing in the act of writing.

In addition to being a theory of learning and teaching, the Writing Process is a concrete method for learning how to write. It is used not only by young students, but by writers of all forms of com-



munication; it will become a life-long skill for your child!

Most classrooms using the Process follow a five-stage plan. Since this is the core of the program, the children quickly learn what the five steps are. You might see them posted in the classroom or stapled on your child's writing folder. The five steps of the Writing Process are these:

#### *1. Prewriting or Rehearsal*

Before the actual writing of a composition on paper, the writer has several tasks. She has to decide on a topic, think about the purpose of her writing (to express creativity, convey information, express personal opinions, etc.), decide on a form or genre (poem, personal narrative, fiction, cartoon, etc.), and identify an audience. To accomplish these tasks, a student might engage in a wide variety of activities: drawing, reading to discover how other authors use the same form or write about a similar topic, talking with classmates or the teacher, "brainstorming" (quickly listing words and phrases one associates with a topic), or many other activities that will ready the child for the next step.

#### *2. Drafting*

Once a child has a good idea of her topic, purpose, genre, and audience, she will begin drafting. This is the time for her to pour out ideas on paper, paying little attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation and neatness. This is a rough draft! As a child writes, she may leave lots of room on the page for making changes, additions, and deletions later on. As the composition takes shape, she may find she wants to alter previous decisions about form, topic, or audience. That's fine because nothing is written in stone in the Writing Workshop!

#### *3. Revision*

Once a rough draft has been written, the writer begins to refine her ideas, often by adding on or expanding, delet-

ing words or paragraphs, or rearranging sections. Revision does *not* mean correcting spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The time for that will come.

Revision is more substantive.

The student revises through a variety of activities as well: by stepping out of her writer's shoes and rereading the draft—especially aloud, by sharing the draft with a classmate or a group of peers, or by conferencing with a teacher or volunteer. If she chooses, she can then revise the draft on the basis of these various kinds of feedback.

#### *4. Editing*

Once the revision process is complete, sometimes after several journeys from drafting to revision and back again, the child is ready to edit, or prepare her piece for its final form. Now the focus shifts from content to mechanics, as the child reads to find spelling, grammatical, and mechanical errors. The goal is to make the writing "readable!" As she proofreads her piece, circling or underlining errors and misspellings, she is learning about punctuation, capitalization, and other mechanics of writing in a meaningful, practical context; this kind of learning sticks!

#### *5. Publishing/Sharing*

When the editing is done to the writer's satisfaction, the piece is "published," that is, put into its final, public form. This may involve copying the piece in best handwriting on white paper, word processing on a computer, stapling, adding illustrations, making a cover, binding, and the like. In addition, the child can bring the composition to life by sharing it aloud with an audience: often with her classmates, with parents at an author's tea, or with another class. All of these occasions serve to celebrate the child's process and product, and reinforce her budding identity as an author.

Now that you know what the five steps



of the Writing Process are, let me qualify this neat and tidy system in a few ways.

First, it is important to understand, and you will probably view this in the classroom, that the five steps are not necessarily meant to be followed in a straight, linear progression. There is a great deal of circling back and overlapping, particularly between rehearsal, drafting, and revision. Likewise, in older students, you might observe them self-editing as they revise or even draft. Most students should and will engage in all five activities as they move from start to completion, but as they are individuals, so their writing processes will differ.

Second, the process is tempered by the age and developmental level of each child. For example, young writers (kindergarten or first grade) may use drawing as rehearsal, and their revision may consist largely of additions to the story. For second graders, talking seems to be the ideal way to rehearse for writing. Third graders often spend a disproportionate amount of time on editing because of their overwhelming concern with correctness. In the upper elementary grades we can see children internalizing the act of revision so that the lines between rehearsal, drafting, and revision are blurred, as their process becomes more sophisticated.

So you can see that with variation due to age, ability, and individuality, it's helpful to understand the Writing Process as a set of five tasks, rather than steps, as you prepare to help out in the Writing Workshop.

When people enter a writing workshop class or read a child's story written through The Writing Process for the first time, they have a lot of questions. I've tried to address some of the most central ones here.

*1. Children are all over the room! Many are talking in small groups or with another child, and some are reading,*

*others drawing; why aren't they all sitting at their desks, quietly writing?*

After our own experiences in school, it is indeed unsettling to walk in on such a chaotic-looking scene for the first time. But if you think back to the five steps, many things will make sense. First, remember, each student has her own "style" of writing process. Jenny may be reading as rehearsal for a report on dogs; Tyler's drawing of an airplane may be part of his rehearsal for his personal narrative on a family trip to Ohio. If Patrick has finished his rough draft of a poem about trees, he may be getting feedback for revision by reading it to a small group of classmates. Cody, circling words on his draft of a spy story, with a dictionary close by, is editing his piece, looking for misspellings and mechanical errors. Get the picture? If the teacher has established the rules and structure of the Writing Workshop in a clear and simple way and has made sure that each child has understood what is expected of him during that time, then writing time will indeed be a "workshop," and you will quickly notice that the children are engaged in purposeful and varied activity. Teachers have written about the "hum" of a successful Writing Workshop, and it's true; it's not silent, but it *is* the sound of real writers at work.

*2. I'm shocked at all the misspelled words in students' drafts. Sometimes words are even left misspelled in their final copy. Shouldn't they know how to spell a word before they use it?*

The misspelled words you will see, especially in young children's writing, is what we call *invented spelling*. It is a child's own way of spelling, which she uses before knowing all the rules we use to spell, even before she can read. The greatest advantage of invented spelling is that it removes obstacles to writing for our young writers. They feel more independent because they don't have to



consult a dictionary or teacher for each word they don't know how to correctly spell. In addition, during the drafting step, they can write freely, with no interruptions or worries about correctness. As a result, their writing is more powerful and fluent. Invented spelling encourages a child to take control of and responsibility for his writing, and encourages risk-taking. Some parents worry that if children are allowed to use invented spelling, it will interfere with their learning to spell correctly later on, but research proves that this isn't so. Teacher and researcher Susan Sowers says, "To encourage invented spelling is not to imply that spelling does not matter. But rather than demanding perfection of beginning spellers, the teacher can build on their emerging competence." Can you imagine if we required a toddler to pronounce each word correctly before we allowed him to speak? Or if we didn't allow a child to play basketball before she had perfected her lay-up shot? Really, it's much the same with writing. The purpose in writing is to write, and the best thing we can do to serve that purpose is to encourage a child to write freely, without fear or restrictions.

*3. I notice many children spending a lot of time drawing instead of writing. Aren't they wasting time?*

Particularly in the primary grades, drawing can be an essential part of the writing process. We must remember that drawing is thinking; that it is, like writing, a method of problem-solving and requires many of the same processes as does writing—planning, portraying emotions, focusing and expanding an idea. Often a child can draw a story in picture, and then begin to write as she explains the picture to a peer or adult, or tells the story aloud as she draws. Drawing as a form of rehearsal also works well for the child who has trouble expressing his

feelings in writing. Children use drawing as a means of self-expression long before they begin to write, and need not discard that special means once they begin to write.

## **YOUR ROLE IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

At the heart of the Workshop is the conference. Because the Writing Process is individualized, and each child moves at his own pace, the teacher's role becomes largely one of checking in with each child at various points of the process, listening and gently guiding him in his work. For the most part, the teacher relegates her role of "teaching" in front of the blackboard, to become a listener, learner, and guide.

With this individualized program, the teacher in your classroom will most likely need you to hold conferences with students as well. As you can see, each conference with each child will be very different, but don't panic! There are some simple, general suggestions to help you conduct effective conferences from the start.

### *1. Be a person!*

Writer/teacher Lucy Calkins knows that when we first learn to conference, we usually worry so much about asking the right questions, we forget to listen. She suggests that our first job in the conference is to be a person, and just listen! Listen and enjoy, react, and respond. Sit back and delight in the story each child will share with you.

### *2. Your actions speak!*

As you begin to adopt your position as listener rather than teacher/parent, you can convey this attitude to the children in a variety of simple ways, demonstrating that they are responsible for their work. Here are some things to do or to avoid when you conference.

(a) Try to stay at eye-level with the child; this promotes good eye-contact,



quiet conversation and is much less intimidating than a towering adult!

(b) Let the child hold his work and read it to you. This enables him to "change hats" from writer to critic and get some distance on his work. You'll be amazed how much revision or editing this will spark before you've even opened your mouth.

(c) No pencils, please! Again, let the child be responsible for making any marks on his paper; let him own it. Sit on your hands, if need be.

(d) Look at the writer. Remember, we are helping the writer, not the writing. Looking at the child while she reads will let you hear it without being distracted by the rough nature of the draft.

### 3. *What do I say?*

Naturally, what you *do* say to a child during the writing conference can make a big difference.

The hardest thing is not to give suggestions based on what *you* would like to see the piece of writing become. Instead, allow the child to teach you about her writing process, so you can gently help her extend her skills and take the risks necessary to try new things. Sometimes, opening the conference with a simple, "How's it going?" "How can I help you?" or "How do you feel about your draft?" will prompt a child to show you just what she needs help with.

Any questions you ask should help the student to look critically at her work, to "interact" with the text. If you can ask broad questions, the child can choose what's important. Asking "What's the main thing?" can easily prompt a child to focus a wandering story or report.

Toward the end of a conference, you might ask the child, "What will you do next?" to help her look ahead and define her task when she returns to her desk.

Most importantly, always celebrate something about the child's work before

the conference concludes. This helps to reinforce the identity as an author each child is forming and builds confidence in her writing abilities. And, it just plain feels good to be praised!

As you can see, your role in a writing conference is not to instruct and correct, but to ask questions that will encourage the child to reflect upon her own writing, discover and develop her own process, and ultimately become her own best critic. Think of yourself as a coach, working with a team of young athletes. The coach observes his players, noting their strengths and weaknesses, involving himself with the process, with how the game is played. He offers encouragement to extend their strengths, and strategies to strengthen their weaknesses. But the power and responsibility for improvement ultimately resides within each player. As Lucy Calkins remarks, our job in the writing conference is to put ourselves out of a job!

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF CONFERENCES

Each child who comes to you for a conference will be at a different stage in her writing process. While any conference can be started and ended with the kind of open-ended questions suggested above, you might consider the following strategies as well.

### 1. *Prewriting or Rehearsal Conferences*

If a student is still gathering ideas for his work, you might suggest brainstorming on a topic. Then become the scribe, quickly writing down the child's words and phrases that come to mind as he thinks about the topic. Or you might encourage the child to make a cluster or web on a particular topic, if he is familiar with the strategy himself. Webbing or clustering allows ideas to surface by associating one idea with another. And the finished web can often serve as a basis for the organizational structure of



the text. It might be helpful to ask the classroom teacher to show you some webs.

If the children keep journals, you might suggest they browse through their journals for an event they might want to explore further in writing. Particularly at this young age, children's own life experiences will often be the inspiration for much of their writing.

## *2) Draft and Revision Conferences*

At this point of the process, the best thing you can do is listen, and allow the student the opportunity to step back and become a critic as he reads his text aloud. After you listen and compliment the child, noting specifically what you liked about the piece, you might ask questions about places where the meaning is not clear to you, or voice other questions based on your own reactions as a reader. Remember, it is not helpful to say, "That was good!"

During this stage, the child can benefit from a "content conference," to help him focus on his subject, which sometimes needs to be more narrowly defined, but also amplified with details. To encourage a child to add details to bring a story alive, you might reiterate a line from the story and ask a question: for example, "You got a doll for your birthday? How did you feel when you unwrapped that big box?" or "You made the winning goal? Tell me about it." These kinds of questions will prompt a child to reflect and write about the significant details of an experience and write powerful stories.

If a child is having trouble narrowing or clearly defining his subject, you might ask, "In all you've said, what is the most important point?" If the child can express this, he might be surprised to find the most important point hidden by too many incidental details, and revise accordingly. Research has shown that

when a child is encouraged to limit his topic, his writing dramatically improves.

## *3. Editing Conferences*

When a child is satisfied with his draft and has finished all revisions, the time has come to focus on polishing the piece for publication through editing. During this stage, it is extremely hard for many volunteers to keep their hands off of students' papers. We still must let the child own his piece, mechanical errors and all.

How much correction of spelling, punctuation, format, and other mechanics is expected is very much a matter of the teacher's own expectations. It's essential to communicate with her to establish guidelines before you help with editing. Sometimes students will have an "editing checklist" in their writing folder or posted in the classroom that will let all concerned know what is expected.

There are some general guidelines you can follow during the editing stage. One strategy is to ask the child to first circle or underline all spelling and punctuation errors she notices. Often a child can self-correct a lot of errors just by engaging in this process. She might then try spelling the word again, consult a dictionary or spell-check, according to classroom procedure.

If you notice a mechanical error made consistently throughout a child's text, it is far less taxing and more beneficial to review the rule ("Proper names always begin with a capital letter") and then ask her to apply it in her text, than to point out 17 places where she forgot to capitalize.

And, as in all kinds of conferences, begin and end by celebrating what the child can do ("Look! You've begun each sentence with a capital letter!").

If the child feels good about the piece at this point, and feels that she has done her best, then she is ready to publish.



#### 4. Publishing Conferences

Teachers find volunteers to be of enormous help at the publishing stage, where an extra pair of ears or hands is so essential. And particularly for the volunteer new to the Writing Workshop, beginning at this stage may be less intimidating than conferencing right away.

Students publish their works by a variety of methods that vary according to teacher style and availability of materials. In some classrooms students are responsible for writing a "final copy" in their best penmanship. But often, particularly with young children, the child will dictate the story to an adult who hand prints, types, or word processes the text. Don't underestimate the importance of this part of the process! As you listen, you are the audience and can afford the child an opportunity to be the author and enjoy praise for her work. It is a pleasing and meaningful way to conclude the process for all involved.

### BEYOND THE WORKSHOP

It's hard not to get caught up in the excitement of what goes on in a Writing Workshop. You will find that you come away from your volunteer time having learned so much, and eager to learn and do more. Here are a few ways you might extend your interest and enrich your abilities to help.

#### 1. Be a writer yourself.

If you don't already write regularly, you might participate in the same writing activities the students are engaged in. It will certainly help you to understand their struggles, and they will love to hear about your problems and strategies, too. Join their community of writers!

#### 2. Keep a journal.

After you spend your allotted time in the workshop, reflect the same day on

your experience by writing informally in a journal. It will help you to step back and become your own critic, see patterns in your interactions, and allow you time to celebrate the work you are doing.

#### 3. Talk with others.

If several parents are working in Writing Workshops in the school, informal meetings to share experiences, offer support, and learn together would only be beneficial for all involved.

#### 4. Extend The Writing Process into the home.

As you become comfortable with the process, you'll find it much easier and more rewarding to help your child with writing homework of all kinds. Encourage writing in all forms at home, too! Letters, notes, shopping lists, and diaries help your child to see that writing is a life-skill. And, naturally, reading what others have written serves to reinforce this as well. Most of all, enjoy and celebrate each other's writing!

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