

## We as Writers: Creating a Creative Writers Community

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### Introduction

As part of the Delaware Teacher Institute, this writing curriculum unit is written in the seminar Writing About Ourselves and Others during the school year 2019-2020. The main purpose of the unit is to help elementary school teachers and in particular, Elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, to have at their fingertips some practical activities to use with students from grades K-2 to help them get motivated to write, see the importance of writing and to help them discover the writer within themselves. Children learn to write by writing and living with the sense of “I am one who writes.”<sup>1</sup> Writing well requires an act of confidence. Lucy Calkins pointed out in her book *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 1986, that if we are not scared of children’s mistakes, if we give them plenty of opportunity for writing and make it personal and interpersonal and if their classrooms provide rich literate environments, then children will learn quickly.<sup>2</sup> We teachers can help our students like writing by providing many functional reasons for writing. Teachers should also provide time, materials, structure and to make a writing place comfortable by setting up the things that help students write such as word walls, picture dictionaries, a variety of writing tools like different size pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers, pens and objects that encourage like positive posters and favorite toys and plush animals. Calkins also suggests teacher-student conferences at the heart of teaching writing, listen to young writers, help them listen to each other and respond to their texts.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that we teachers should bring an enthusiasm for writing that will be contagious to our students. That is, we need to model a positive attitude towards writing so our students can see that and imitate it too.

Learning a second language and becoming literate in it requires the students to go through the four domains of language acquisition: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. These domains develop in that order, having writing as the last domain to develop and master. It takes time and patience to develop this last domain of writing. I have noticed that students have an apprehension to writing and often do not know where to begin and are not motivated to start. Part of this apprehension is due to the fact that students are afraid to write because they do not want to make mistakes, especially spelling mistakes, but another reason why they are hesitant to write is because they do not know what to write about and do not know how to start their writing. In the early grades of kindergarten through second grade, students often take a long time to write and seem to struggle with putting their thoughts on paper. Yet, they have this innate feeling of wanting to write as a means of expressing themselves to others and themselves. To write

or not to write seems the question that young writers ask themselves. I am proposing a unit that will help students see themselves as writers.

In my opinion, we as teachers can shine some light or guidance on young writers. We can demonstrate that writing using a nonfiction model like a personal narrative is very valuable and powerful because it can show others our truths and rich life experiences that make us who we are. These unique experiences set us apart from each other and make us humans and owners of our existence. We as unique creatures cannot experience the same things, feel the same things or think the same thoughts about life. Helping children acquire a love of writing, helping them see themselves as authors and helping them develop as creative writers were my main reasons to have chosen to write this writing curriculum unit.

Steve Graham from Arizona State University states that the primary goals of writing are to communicate, to persuade, to inform, to learn to reflect about yourself, and also to entertain others. What really makes writing motivating for young children is sharing it and being successful with it. He adds that the ultimate goal of writing is to share your ideas with others. Furthermore, helping students discover they all have stories to share with others and to know about themselves and others is at the heart of this curriculum unit. Ruth Culham in her book *The Writing Thief* encourages us to be a writing thieves and steal from other good writers what good things they do with their writing to help our students and ourselves become better writers. Similarly, I would like to encourage other teachers to be activity thieves and steal ideas from each other and put them into action in our classrooms. We teachers can share our ideas with each other to help our students awaken and discover the wonderful writers within themselves. This unit will help students become authors who share their work with others. The final project will be for students to choose their best writing piece out of six writing pieces and put together a class book title: We as Writers.

As an ESL teacher, I have observed that students often possess a negative attitude towards writing, and they are unmotivated to write. Their body language and facial expressions when they know they have to write are, “Oh no, do I have to?”. “How much do I have to write?” is another question I have heard students ask. Moreover, students are afraid or frustrated to make spelling mistakes and often ask me, “How do you spell \_\_\_\_”. I have also noticed that students have some difficulty coming up with a topic to write about when given the freedom to do so, as opposed to having a topic provided for them or a structure that does not really let their creativity shine, such as when telling the students to write a summary about what happened in a story. My question is, “How do I motivate my students to write?”. According to the British Council of Teaching English, motivation is a goal-directed behavior. It is also a critical force which determines if a learner will embark on a task at all, how much energy he puts in it and how long he perseveres. I found that motivation has many parts. They include an individual’s drive, a need for achievement and success, curiosity and a desire for stimulation and new experiences. It is

influenced by internal and external factors that can start, sustain, intensify or discourage that goal-directed behavior. I believe we as teachers can have an important influence on the external factors by setting up a learning environment where children feel safe to be themselves and feel encouraged to do their best, knowing trust is present. Establishing a community of writers who write clearly and, therefore, think clearly is a goal worth aiming for.

So, who are my students and where do I teach?

### **Demographics**

I teach at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School in Newark, Delaware. Thurgood Marshall Elementary is part of the Christina School District in New Castle County, Delaware. Marshall is the biggest elementary school in the district. It has 864 students and it keeps growing. It is a K-5<sup>th</sup> grade suburban school in a quiet neighborhood bordering Bear, Delaware. There are many apartment homes and townhomes surrounding the school, and most students come from the neighborhood. Marshall's student population is composed of 34% black, 31% white, 21% Asian, 8% Hispanic and about 6% two or more races. The student population is 21% low income, 49% female and 51% male. Out of the whole student population, there are 115 ESL students who come from a variety of countries such as Mexico, China, Russia, Pakistan, Korea, Latin America, Kenya and India and speak a variety of languages including Spanish, Swahili, Russian, Mandarin, Korean, Hindi and many others. The highest population of ESL students at Marshall come from India but with different languages such as Tamil, Hindi and Telugu among others. These students who come from India have the great advantage of already having a good base of English since their parents speak English. Although their basic interpersonal communication skills or BICS are very well developed by the time they enter elementary school, their cognitive academic language proficiency or CALP is not fully developed, and it is this proficiency that is needed in the art of writing. I work with 65 ESL students in grades K-2. The majority of my students come from India. I do currently also have two newcomers, one from China and one from Mexico.

### **Research and Rationale**

Writing is foremost a means of expression and communication. It is an essential skill that students need now and in their adult lives. Teachers can find a lot of what students know through their writing. Teachers of writing must be like a listener and a coach, a cheerleader for their students and a writing classroom should be a learning community where everyone is both teacher and a student.<sup>4</sup> The environment in the classroom in order to be creative must be predictable and consistent and this is where the idea of the writing workshop comes from. Lucy Calkins has done a fantastic job of setting the writing workshop to create the structure and consistency necessary for young writers to bloom.

To help students improve their CALP, I work with them with academic vocabulary, grammar, high frequency words and other writing conventions like capitalization and punctuation. All ESL students have to take a state test in March that is called ACCESS. The students are tested in all four language domains of listening, reading, speaking and writing. While most students pass two or more of the listening, speaking and reading sections, the writing section is the one they score the lowest in. One of my goals as an ESL teacher is to help my students improve their writing scores, so every year I try to learn and add something new in my writing lessons. Being a candidate in the Delaware Teacher Institute and choosing the seminar about writing has helped me discover that the mode of personal narrative is the one that best taps into the children's innate desire to write, because it is personal. We as humans want to be heard and want to share personally and interpersonally our stories, our lives, ourselves.

Graham and Perin (2007) stated, for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, writing is not an option for young people; it is a necessity. People need to have both good reading comprehension skills and writing skills to help them have success in their lives and future jobs. Making students aware of the importance of writing in our lives is also a motivator in producing quality work as well as writing with a purpose. Authentic writing opportunities encourage children to pay attention to their strengths and their interests as well as their areas that need improvement. Students should be shown real purposes of writing in our society such as when a person needs to write a job application, create a resume, express feelings, get into college or earn a living. Furthermore, reading and writing not only show academic success, but are also requirements for participation in the global economy and in society (Graham and Perin, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

Writing is a form of expressing ourselves, and when students write about themselves they know the subject very well because it is about their lives, therefore making it more important and meaningful to them. This all helps writers understand themselves and others and as Marya Schechtman calls it the "characterization question" which includes the question about the experiences, actions and characteristics that make up someone's self- understanding and personal identity.<sup>6</sup> It is made from what we put in our personal narrative.

By the end of the unit, the children will make a class book. We as teachers need to help our students see that their goal of becoming a writer is worthwhile and meaningful to them. We need to encourage our students to share their opinions and to let their voices be heard through their writing. As we help children discover that there are different forms of writing like the modes: narrative, informative and persuasive, and that we live in a society where writing is everywhere such as in signs, labels, articles, books, magazines, stores, games, etc., we will give children the awareness that they too are writers and members of society and that writing is important to people because it is a way of thinking, and it is part of life. Anne Morrow Lindbergh says "I must write at all costs. For writing is more than living, it is being conscious of living."<sup>7</sup>

If children are to write about themselves, the question we as teachers should ask them is, "What are the things you care about and what are the things you know about?" In addition, we need to help students discover that their lives are worth writing about, to find out what their unique life moments are and for the students to conclude that yes, their lives are indeed something to write about. Writers have the very important job of creating in the reader's minds pictures of what it is being written about. To aid with this, children should be encouraged to use as many details and descriptions as possible.

Writing about a personal narrative helps us to look carefully at a single moment in our lives and making that moment special. The activities in this unit will aid with this. Using a lot of details will help readers feel what we have felt and visualize what we saw during the special moment. Children should be able to self-assess their own writing to help them grow as writers. In the teacher text book *Explorations in Nonfiction Writing* there are great questions that will help students ask themselves when they are writing their personal narrative piece, such as: Is this writing something that I have experienced? Does my writing help the reader create a mental picture of my special moment? Did I use the word *I* in my writing? and Did I use action words? Personal narratives come in different forms. They could be a retell, an explanation, a memoir, a personal story, an autobiography, a diagram, an illustration, a postcard, a poem a letter, a news report or even a poster. Children, writing and creativity go hand in hand and in this unit there are activities that will help students use their creativity. It could be a craft a student has made such as a self-portrait, a puppet or even a special character like Forky from Toy Story 4 as described in one of the unit's activities. To make writing more meaningful to children, the focus should not be on spelling, grammar, or grades but, it should encourage students to write about their own experiences, their interests, needs, dreams, and goals, and this in turn will help children appreciate and like writing.

When I see my students engaged in writing it is because they are writing about themselves, have enough background knowledge, have useful vocabulary and have a variety of writing tools to choose from such as length and thickness of pencils. I have to also make writing an enjoyable experience and model a positive attitude towards writing. I have found this to be very true in my teaching. Students should not be corrected for spelling or other mechanics that will diminish student motivation to write. The greatest problem comes when a poor speller concludes that being a poor speller is the same as being a poor writer. Hence, when my students seem too caught up in knowing the correct spelling as they are writing, I remind them to do their best and not worry about their spelling.

Since children want to share what they wrote, there should be opportunities to share with others what they wrote about. I have seen some teachers do Author's Chair where the writer sits and reads what he/she wrote. In my classroom, we do this author celebration by students sitting in a circle and reading what they write. A round of

applause is given after each child reads what he/she wrote. This creates a sense of pride and appreciation in each reader, and I noticed that they are smiling and feeling good about themselves after they read what they wrote.

Once I had a second grade student who was so motivated to keep on writing even outside school, that she wrote a story in her journal every day. She would bring it to me and was delighted when I would respond and write something in her journal while providing compliments and feedback. Sometimes she would want me to read her journal right away, which sometimes was not possible, and then she would ask me, “Miss Ruiz-Arthur, did you read my story? Did you like it?” She was eager for her story to be shared, to be heard and this is what all writers and all human beings want: to be heard, to be recognized, to be known and to be valued.

### **Content and Learning Objectives**

This writing unit is made for students in grades kindergarten to second grade but can also be used with older grades. At the core of the unit are the following essential questions: What makes us writers? Why is writing about ourselves and others important? How can we make writing time fun and creative?

Students will understand that a narrative writing can be a creative form of self-expression using a variety of media. Students will identify the first person point of view writing and will be introduced to what I call sparkly words or more descriptive words, to make their writing interesting with lots of details. Students will also use and explore a variety of media in their prewriting activities to encourage them to write. At the end of each activity, students will share their writing with others. Finally, students will choose their best writing piece to be included in the final project of a class book titled: We as Writers. Students will read what they wrote to the class. That is the main goal of writing: to share our writing with others.

### **Strategies**

#### **Visual Supports**

As an ESL teacher, I am well aware that English language learners need a lot of support. English development occurs over many years and it depends on many factors like age, maturation, classroom experiences, motivation and attitudes as is stated in the WIDA standards. Throughout my teaching experience, I have noticed that with my English language learners the more senses they use, the more meaning they will acquire. One of the most valuable strategies to use with them is using *visual supports* which include real life objects (realia), manipulatives, pictures and photographs, illustrations and drawings, models and figures, physical activities, videos and films, and other multimodal elements like animated graphics and video clips because, after all, today’s children have digital

lives. I have noticed that the digital generation of twenty first century students do very well when technology is included in our lessons. Perhaps that is why today students seem to focus better when I show them a video or something in the computer. The 21st century kids are indeed a digital generation. In this unit I will use children's drawings, creations, realia and a physical activity they will make to help them with their writing and will show them a video clip of a character from *Toy Story 4*, "Forky", they will make as a prewriting activity.

### Mentor Texts

Another strategy in this unit is the use of teaching writing through *mentor texts*. Mentor texts are a wonderful way to teach writing because we can use a variety of genres and styles to show what good writers do. We choose the best models to help our students. I believe that mentor texts are more valuable than worksheets or graphic organizers because we are using quality authors' work to capture our students' attention and enhance their learning. Through using mentor texts, we can demonstrate effective beginnings and endings, the structure of a piece of writing, word choices and all other amazing examples of what good writing looks like.

Ruth Culham says that mentor texts are like the glue that unites reading and writing. Students can study how the text is made and how it communicates. A mentor text can come in a variety of forms like a book, a print or a digital read. Culham adds that if teachers use reading to teach writing the English language learners will benefit by becoming stronger readers and writers. Moreover, students will see what good writing looks like and how the author communicates what he or she knows and understands to be true, doing this with confidence and authenticity because it is true for the writer as well as a great example for the beginner writer. A teacher, however, has to have an intuition or skill to know what to look for in a mentor text that can help students. According to author and researcher Ray (1999), "The bottom line for why I select a text is that I see something in how that text is written which would be useful for my students to also see. I see something about the text that holds potential for my students' learning. I am looking for texts that have something in them or about them that can add to my students' knowledge base of how to write well."<sup>8</sup> I have chosen this strategy of using mentor texts to teach writing precisely for this reason. It was a delight when I found the book *The Writing Thief* by Ruth Culham because she gives a variety of mentor texts to choose from divided by the type of writing mode: narrative, informational and argumentative and by the six writing traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions and presentation. It has examples of mentor texts and tells if it is a picture book, chapter book or an electronic text. She also includes a brief description of what the text is about and some ideas about how to use it. This is fantastic, and it saves time. When using mentor texts to teach students writing, we can teach our students to steal only from the best and be inspired to write their own unique pieces. T.S. Eliot said, "Mediocre writers borrow. Great writers steal." It reminds me of why reinvent the wheel if it has

already been invented. Mentor texts help students find their voices and develop their craft.

### Pre-Writing

A third strategy is the use of *pre-writing activities*. The importance of pre-writing activities, or as I have discovered, research referred to as writing stimuli, is beneficial for young writers, and a teacher should offer the students the freedom to choose from a variety of stimuli, because not all students are going to respond to a certain stimulus. That is why the writing stimuli should be something that a student makes, creates or brings from home to use in his/her writing as unique. Providing students with background information and experience before beginning to write “primes” the brain to anticipate ideas or features that will be coming. This is where prewriting activities become vital for priming the brain. One example of priming is reading a fun related story or a mentor text. Priming is also using a prop to introduce writing. Another technique that is recommended as a writing stimuli is to help the young writer with imagery and help them use more descriptive words so as to create in the readers’ mind a movie about the writer’s life. Thus, it is important that teachers help writers by asking them questions about how places, things, characters and other stimuli such as pictures, objects and creations in the children’s writing look, feel, sound, smell and taste. The more senses the children use in their writing, the more alive their writing becomes to the readers. I have experienced that when I read books in which the author describes with lots of details, I am more engaged in the story. The story is more interesting to read. This makes more sense to the writer when he/she is shown models of good writing that include these things. Hence, when a teacher is evaluating student writing, positive feedback and corrective feedback about certain items in the student’s writing are very valuable to the young writer, and this also motivates the young writer to continue to write.

### Positive Feedback

A final strategy is to *provide positive feedback*. When a teacher is evaluating student writing, positive feedback and corrective feedback about certain items in the student’s writing are very valuable to the young writer, and this also motivates the young writer to continue to write. Students can also give each other positive feedback as they share their work with others and learn from each other what makes their writing special.

Using these strategies before the activities is highly recommended. These strategies will prepare the students for the activities. There are six activities in this unit that can be done in about six to eight weeks. Each activity will take at least two or three lessons. In my case, for example, they will take three or more days since I only see my groups twice a week and the lessons are thirty minutes long. The six activities are designed to be motivators to help students want to write because writing is made real to them and they will write about their own experiences and what is essential to them.



## Activities

### Self-Portrait Collage

Students will first listen to the mentor text *New Shoes* by Chris Raschka and notice how to a child a pair of new shoes is very important, something that would be worth writing about. In this activity students are given a blank outline of a face and neck. Students think about what is important to them and what are their favorites such as food, sports, toys, hobbies, colors, places to visit, holidays, animals, family among other things. Students can only use images only, no words the first day the activity is given. The next day, having their self-portraits done and in front of them, they can begin to write their story. This activity can even be used with newcomer English language learners because most of them will draw their favorite things. The teacher will display all self-portraits in the hallway creating a collage or quilt. The teacher can make an outline of the face and neck where students will draw what is important to them so that there is a common size.

### Heart Map

Following reading the mentor text, *Rocket Writes a Story* by Tad Hills, the students in this activity will write about personal things they choose. Students get a paper heart divided into several sections. In each section children draw or write something special in their lives, something that is meaningful or something they care about. They are allowed to write labels or words in the sections. The following day, students use their heart map to choose only one section of their heart map to write about, one special moment to focus on and use as many details as they can to make the reader re-live that moment, to see, feel and experience what the writer is writing about. The teacher can draw a big heart and divide it into several sections where the students can show their favorite things. I learned this activity at a teacher workshop in Texas and I am excited to be able to try it with my students.

### Bringing a Cultural Object from Home

As English language learners, it is very important to have a strong cultural identity and feel good about where they come from, and feel proud of their family culture. Cultural diversity is valued in my classroom, and students are encouraged to talk about their country, their traditions, and their culture. This activity will focus on cultural awareness, because children will learn to respect and appreciate each other's cultures. Students will bring, with parents' permission, an object that depicts their culture (a photograph of the object is also acceptable in case the student cannot bring the real object to school.) They will first show and tell about it to the class and then they will write about it and why it is important to them.

## Making a Puppet

After listening to the mentor text *Jangles: A Big Fish Story* by David Shannon, students will make their own fish puppet. They will be encouraged to write about their own puppet focusing on one topic in this case their own fish and writing about this character with as many details as possible. Students can bring this character to life by using the first person narrative mode such as the author David Shannon does in this mentor text, “I am more than a fish. I am a storyteller, and a story.”

## Making their own “Forky”

I try to notice what my students are into and what movies are out there that capture students’ interests. This summer when I watched *Toy Story 4*, I liked the new character Forky and thought it would be fun for my students to make their own Forky and write about him. So in this activity a small video clip is shown from the movie *Toy Story 4* to introduce Forky. Then students are given similar materials to make their own Forky. The interesting part will be when the students write about their own Forky as if Forky were themselves. In this way it will be an activity about writing about oneself and then getting to know others after listening to each other’s stories.

## Hamburger Paragraph

Young writers need some guidance into the mechanics of writing a paragraph. In this fun activity, students will make a gummi hamburger, the top of bun is the introduction or opening sentence like I like to call it, the middle of the burger are the detail sentences and the bottom of bun is the conclusion or what I refer to as the closing sentence. Students eat each part after they complete that part of the writing. This paragraph hamburger activity was designed as a writing organizer by Reading Rockets, but to make it more fun and real, the edible hamburger version is used. Some teachers at my school have done it and said that the gummi hamburger patties can be purchased at Oriental Trading Company.

## Final Project

Students choose their favorite writing sample to include in a class book titled: *We as Writers*. They will read their piece to the class and other guests. Everyone will cheer and congratulate each other for being authors who share their work. There will be a deep sense of accomplishment that is felt when writers can communicate what they care about through the written word. Families will be invited also to be an audience for the fantastic young authors. A creative community of writers has emerged!

## Resources

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 47

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 159

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>5</sup> Culham, *The Writing Thief*, 10

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<sup>6</sup> Lindemann, *Damaged Identities*, 72

<sup>7</sup> Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 3

<sup>8</sup> Culham, *The Writing Thief*, 188

## **Appendix**

Since this unit focuses on narrative writing, I found the Common Core State Standards in grades K-2 that will best be addressed in this unit. I have chosen the standards for each of the grade levels this unit is written for. In Grade K (*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.3*) *Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.* This is the standard that the kindergarten students will be using the most in this unit. In the six activities in this unit, this standard covered since they all deal with narratives the children will write about.

For Grade 1 (*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3*) *Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.* This standard best addresses what first graders will be using in this unit and all six activities in this unit address this standard.

For Grade 2 (*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.3*) *Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.* This is the standard that second graders will be using in this unit and all six activities cover this standard.