



# Voyages in Writing

**Challenge Writers  
to Make Choices**

By Penny Kittle

## “Make voyages! Attempt them . . . there’s nothing else.”

— Tennessee Williams

**W**hat is a voyage? A launch into the unknown. You can plan ahead; you pack what you think you might need. You consider routes, dangers, backup plans. But you know you know nothing, really. Each voyage will unravel as it will. There’s no counting on the weather. Suitcases will fray, split, and heave their contents onto the floor of a train. The uncertain is certain. That’s what raises the pulse a little.

Today we begin a voyage in writing. The crew is uneasy. We have a compass and a few maps from folks who’ve traveled this way before, but there are many routes. Who has the courage, as Erica Jong says, to follow talent to the dark places where it leads? Few in the beginning. In fact, few in the end, I’ve noticed, if the captain doesn’t go first. “I want to write about so many things,” I tell my students. “I don’t know how to choose. There’s my father, and my friend Don Graves who died last fall, and there’s all I’m learning and thinking about reading.”

“That sounds boring,” Jake groans. “Think of something funny.”

“I’m not asking for your help choosing,” I say, “because you can’t help me with that. A writer needs to own his topic.” They’ve heard this before. When struggling to say what they mean about something important or capture an experience in rich, accurate detail, they’ll bleat, “Just tell me what to write! It’s so much easier if you give me a topic.” Yes, exactly. But that’s not a voyage, is it?

Ever been on a bus tour? A few weeks ago, I was riding into the Yucatan peninsula to visit Chichen Itza, home of Mayan ruins. We hurtled along past fields of blue agave, old men pedaling bicycles loaded with firewood, and even a town of tiny houses with chickens and barefooted children running across dirt floors. But there was no stopping. Our destination was planned, no time for detours. Today’s work in writing is a different kind of traveling.

I believe writers need experience with both. There are many guides written to navigate through forms like the essay, but I find it mind numbing to follow someone else’s plans. My students respond likewise. When I set the route, determine what they’ll need, and move toward a destination, they follow. We quickwrite ideas, try on voices, imitate structures, and learn things about the interplay of image and idea in essay that they might not find on their own. But this *following* is only one kind of learning. We all wonder what we might find by wandering.

So today I show them how to attempt a voyage.

“I’m trying on topics, so that you’ll see one writer’s process,” I tell them. “It’s the first step—imagining. I’m thinking of writing about my dad again,” I say as I sketch a few ideas on the board. “I think about us fishing, and I want to live those moments on the water again—the Sandy River in late November, the Wilson River at dawn, casting for steelhead near Bonneville Dam, or that summer day on the Deschutes River.” I quickly sketch these possible ideas with stick figures and a few words for each moment I’m considering. “My hesitation in writing this comes from the challenge of writing when I still miss him, because writing brings the loss back. It feels like memoir.”

I move to another space at the board. “Another topic is my friend Don Graves. I see moments on his deck sharing our writing midsum-

mer, or reading poetry with his wife Betty in the early evening,” I sketch these possibilities in boxes to represent scenes. “But I’m not sure who I’m writing this for or what I want it to be. I want to find the piece, then imagine its audience.”

I pause. “And this last topic feels serious and important because I’m trying to write for teachers. I think they’re a tough audience. I want to write well about all you are discovering about yourselves as readers.” I’ve sketched a student beside a pile of books. “I have a lot to say about this,” I add.

I stand back and survey the board.

I turn to the class. “This work in uncovering topics will be individual to you. The only limit is your creative mind. Spend some time listing, sketching, and imagining possibilities in your notebook today. Give yourself time to think about writing journeys you haven’t taken yet. What territory awaits your discovery?” I pick up my pen and open my notebook as I sit on my stool in the midst of the class. It’s important that I write beside them. Don Graves discovered that students are more engaged with their writing when the teacher is writing with them.

Teaching skills like the use of specific nouns and verbs to enliven writing is best done in the midst of composing something the writer is invested in. We can move writers from “What do I have to do to get this done?” to “How can I make this writing better?” Engagement in practicing skills that clarify meaning makes an imprint on thinking that lasts. It allows writers to own an understanding of the use of word choice to clarify, tighten, surprise, and delight the reader; especially that most important first reader: the writer.

I think it is in our nature as teachers to embrace voyages. After all, each year, a class is unpredictable, yet we charge forward with pencils sharpened, ready for anything. We need to teach writing with this same boldness. Swallow your fears. Let loose of the script. Show students how to trust a path that you can’t see yet, but know as a writer can lead you to discover what you didn’t know you could write. It emboldens you for the next piece of writing. And the one after. Let us give writers the challenge to make choices and then lead them through our own engagement with the unknown. There’s nothing else quite like it.

**Penny Kittle** is a Heinemann author and PD provider, a district-wide literacy coach, and a high school writing teacher. Her latest book is *Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing*, which won the 2009 James N. Britton Award from NCTE. She also coauthored two books with Donald H. Graves, including *Inside Writing*.

Penny’s next book, currently titled *Read with Me*, is in development now and informs this article.

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