



STARTING THE WRITING WORKSHOP



GETTING READY

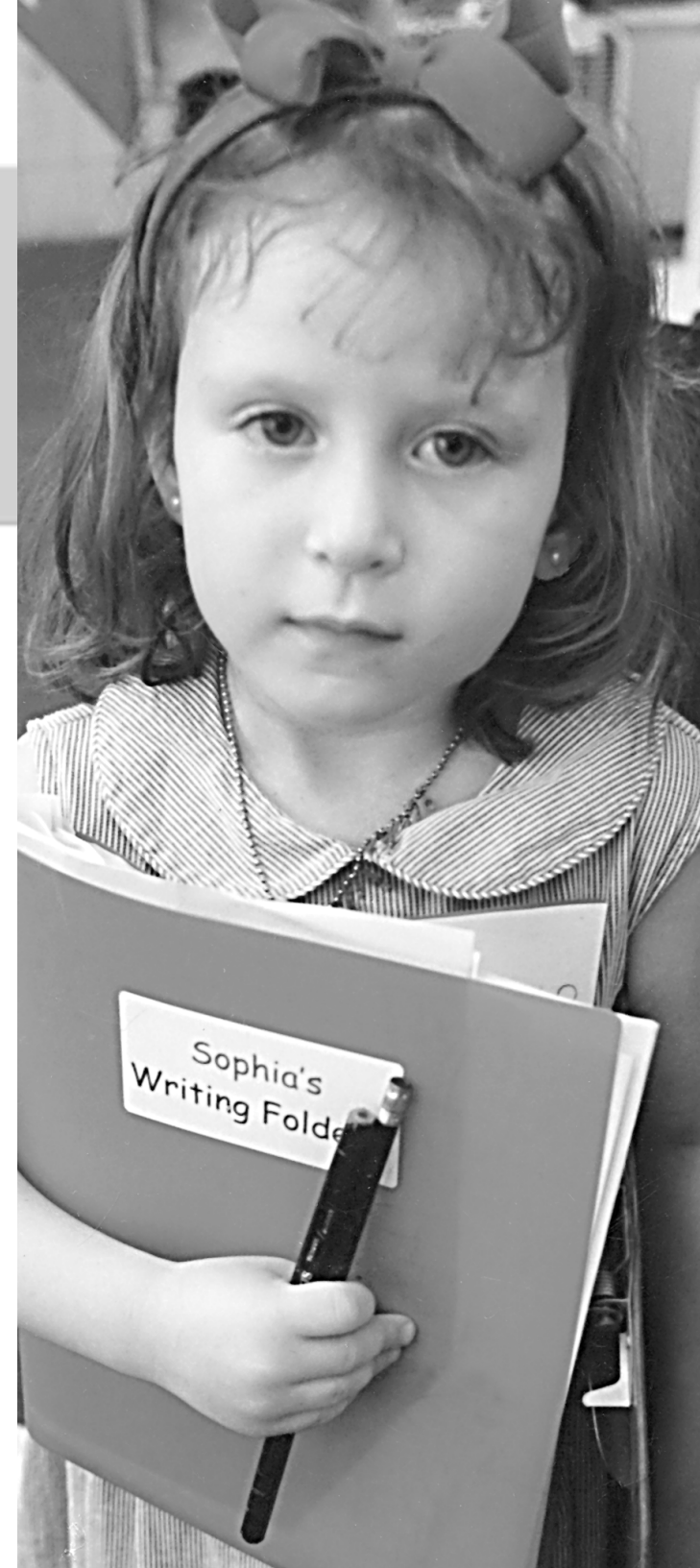
- ▶ Desks clustered to support the conversations
- ▶ Plans for your own short piece of writing, both important to you and true
- ▶ Chart paper, marker
- ▶ Stationery, an envelope, and some other kinds of texts (such as the words of a known song on chart paper)
- ▶ Paper for each child—for kindergartners, blank pages; for first graders, a space for drawing and a line or two for writing
- ▶ Marker or another writing utensil for each child, for after the minilesson
- ▶ Two-pocket folder for each child to store work in
- ▶ Way to take notes on your conferences—a notebook with a page for each child, in alphabetical order, might be helpful
- ▶ See CD-ROM for resources

TO LAUNCH THIS UNIT AND THE YEARLONG WRITING WORKSHOP, we will demonstrate writing. Our goal is to offer children the opportunity to bring their lives to school and to put their lives on the page. At first, we're especially cultivating rich conversations, lots of storytelling, and detailed drawings. We definitely don't want children to limit what they say and think because of a concern for spelling or penmanship. We want to teach all children that the writing workshop is an opportunity to make and convey meaning.

We'll start by demonstrating the whole act of writing and by inviting children to do likewise. We don't begin by breaking the process of writing down and asking children to do just one small part of that process. We believe it helps learners to have an image of the whole thing they'll be trying to do, even though it can feel ambitious to show them the whole thing and say, "Get started doing this." We know all children won't be able to do all of what we do on this, the first day of the writing workshop, but we want to give them the whole picture of what writers do.

By giving children a wide-open invitation into the whole act of writing, we also give ourselves a chance to see how much they can do without prejudging that they are ready only for one small step. Later we will slow down and show them aspects of the writing process that we trust will be especially accessible to them.

In this session, we will model the process of choosing a topic, sketching it, and then writing a tiny bit about it.





THE MINILESSON

Connection

Explain that every day children will work in a writing workshop and that the workshop will always begin with a meeting. Tell the children they are going to become writers.

"Writers, today we are starting something very exciting in our classroom called writing workshop. Every day at the start of writing workshop we will gather right here for a little meeting. We gather here because this is the most special place in the room." Leah gestured to all the beautiful books on the library shelves surrounding them. "We're wrapped in books. Every one of those books was written by an author, and this year you will all be authors too."

"We are going to write books like these," Leah held up a book, "and we will write songs like the ones we have been singing in our class," she gestured toward the words of a song, "and we will write letters." Leah held up stationery and an envelope.

"Today we are all going to be authors, and I will show you what authors do." Leah said this with a happy smile and an excited, confident tone.



Your confidence and enthusiasm will carry most of your children along. No matter how tentative and insecure you may feel, role-play your way into being confident of yourself and your children because they will hitch a ride on your enthusiasm.

The "visual aids" help more than you may realize—but only if you have the stuff on hand.

It's scary to begin. But across the nation, thousands of teachers bravely send children off to draw and write, and, lo and behold, the miracle happens. Children draw squiggles and turtles and tall buildings, they make writing-like graphics or alphabet letters that float across the page, and some record long stories. No matter what they do, children put themselves onto the page.

Teaching

Show children how you go about choosing a topic you know and care about.

"Watch what I do when I write." Taking hold of a marker pen, Leah cocked her head, pretending to search her memories.

"Hmmm. What should I write about?" Pausing, she said, in an unenthusiastic voice, "I could write about rainbows. . . ." Shaking her head as if to dismiss that very bad idea, she said, "But you know what, I never did anything with a rainbow! I want to write about what I do and what I know. Hmmm."

"I know! I go running every morning, and funny things happen to me when I'm running. I can tell about what happened one day on my jog."

Show children that you begin by thinking about your subject, and then you sketch it from the image in your mind.

Leah looked at the marker pen in her hand. "Let me draw my story. Hmmm." Again Leah looked up pensively, she was remembering one time when she was running. Then Leah started to make a quick sketch. As she drew, she said, "Yesterday I ran across the Brooklyn Bridge. I splashed in a puddle and got mud all over my legs, so I am drawing about that time."

Leah made a drawing of the bridge, puddle, mud, and herself. While still intent on the quick sketching, she said, "Now I'll write my words."

Next, show children that you say the whole idea that you'll write, then you separate one word, or one part of a word, and then record it.

Looking at the picture, Leah said, "That's me so I'll write *me*." Then she said, "*Me, me, /m/*" and wrote an *m*. She repeated, "*me, me*" and completed the spelling.

"That's the bridge so I'll write *bridge*." Then Leah said, "*Bridge, bridge*, it starts like this," and she wrote a *b* beside the bridge in her picture.

Notice how Leah thinks aloud, highlighting the kind of thinking that she hopes her students will do.

Some children will be apt to select topics they can draw—like rainbows—so Leah anticipates and tries to avoid a predictable problem.

You won't want to use Leah's topic. Find one from your life. A story about a day when your dog ran away would be better than a story about your trip abroad since the latter would be broad and removed from most students' experiences. You'll work with the story you choose again in later minilessons. It should be about an ordinary and small event, chronologically ordered, bare-bones, and brief.

Notice that Leah chooses a story that is short enough to tell, draw, and write in just a couple of minutes.

Leah knows many of her children may not know enough about graphophonics, the way letters and sounds work, to be able to do as she does, but she doesn't withhold from them the fact that writers draw and then write. She wants all her children to do the same, and she expects them to write as best they can. She knows some will end up making letter-like squiggles, but this doesn't stop her from modeling how a writer listens to a word and records the sounds.

Then turning to the line under the drawing, Leah began to write her story. "I ran on the bridge," she said, then repeated, / and wrote it. This continued until she'd quickly written, "I ran on the bridge. I got muddy."

Tell children what you hope they saw you doing as you wrote and drew.

Turning now to talk to the children, Leah said, "Did you see what I just did? Did you notice that I first thought about something I did—running—and got it in my head? (At first I thought I could write about rainbows, but then I realized I never did anything with rainbows!) Did you notice how I thought about the times when I run in the morning, and I smiled because I love to run, and I remembered one recent time when I was running?"

Explain to the students that what you've demonstrated is what they will now do.

"I'm telling you about this because today (and every day) you can do the very same thing. You can think about things from *your* life, and you can write about them. I wrote about how I splashed in a puddle when I was running and you are probably not going to write about *that*, but you will think of something you do, something that has happened in your life recently. It could be something small, like maybe today when you were getting ready for school you lost your shoe. Or maybe your baby brother likes you to pretend you are a horse. Or maybe your baby sister spit up on you. Or you watched a driller blasting up chunks of pavement. Or your mother forgot to put the jelly on your peanut

This is sort of story Leah and I would use with New York City kindergarten, as well as first-grade, children. If you are concerned that this model is well beyond what your own kindergarten children can possibly do, continue to tell the rich story you tell, but—if you'd feel better doing so—write only labels and not sentences.

You are demonstrating the whole process of writing, but each child will attend to only the parts of this demonstration that he or she can use. Some children will take in only the fact that you drew something and made little marks called "writing" here and there. Only some will pay attention to the print at the bottom of the page. If you break this into steps and do a lot of explaining, your minilesson will become too ponderous to be effective, and it will cease being a model. Trust in the power of demonstration.

Notice that Leah asks rhetorical questions and answers them herself. She does not invite the children to answer at this point because she wants to keep her lesson short and focused. She will encourage children to participate in the next section of the minilesson.

Notice that Leah suggests two or three possible topics, each a very ordinary everyday occurrence. With all these examples in the air, it is less likely every child will decide on a running story!

Early in the passage above, Leah says a phrase that you will want to borrow verbatim. "I'm telling you this because today and every day you can do the very same thing." This can become like a mantra in your classroom for this minilesson and for the rest of your minilessons to come.

butter and jelly sandwich. If your life holds adventures like these, you definitely have stories to tell. These are all wonderful topics for writing. You can write about any little thing that happens in your life.”

Active Engagement

Ask children to think of a topic they'll write about and to tell someone that topic.

“Can you close your eyes right now and think of something from your life that you could draw and write about?” After a moment's pause, Leah said, “Would you open your eyes and tell someone what you might write about today?” For a few moments, the room echoed with chatter.

Link

Ask children to begin writing on their own.

“Wow!” Leah said over the din as a way to say, “May I have your attention? May I have your eyes up here?” she whispered, as always waiting until the children seemed ready to listen.

“Writers, when I call on you, would you come up and get your writing paper and your writer's marker, and then you can go back to your desk and get started doing what writers do. I'll come around to admire the good work you are doing.”

Eventually you'll have children in partnerships and you'll be able to say, “Tell your partner,” but like many structures, you haven't set up partnerships yet. For now you just say, “Tell someone what you might write about,” and you know that if your children have never experienced this ritual, some will sit there gaping, unclear why the room has erupted with noise. Crouch low and talk to a child or two, and get them talking to each other. Before long children will know what's expected and use this time well.

After two minutes, you will need a signal to help them get quiet again. The transitions will get easier as children become more accustomed to this structure.

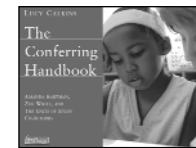
For now, to minimize chaos, Leah doles out the materials and keeps them very simple—one page, one marker. She will dole out the materials for the first few days of writing workshop.



TIME TO CONFER

Today, your children will probably be able to write for twenty-five or thirty minutes. During that time, you'll want to conduct brief and, most important, warmly supportive conferences with six or seven writers. Plan to move all over the room. You'll probably want to carry a tiny chair with you so you can slip in alongside writers, sitting at eye level with them.

- ▶ Begin by asking the writer, "What have you been working on?" and "Will you read it to me?" Do this even if the "story" appears to be a scribble. If the writer can't recall, shift and ask, "What do you want to put down on paper?" or "What would you like your writing to say?"
- ▶ As soon as you hear the writer's message, whether it was written or not, respond with interest to the content. For now, your writing conference will sound very much like the conversation you have at the start of the day, when children come to you with their news and treasures. The only difference is that after showing interest, you'll also say, "You should put that on the page!" For now, it doesn't matter if the child draws or writes the content.
- ▶ You can find a model for the conference you'll have today by looking in *The Conferring Handbook* (see first conference at right). Try to notice the rhythm, the flow of that conference, and to let your conference follow similar patterns. It will help you and your children if you move to more ambitious conferences only after becoming accustomed to the components of conferring you see in Zoë's work with Bryanna. Notice especially the way Zoë tries to teach this child about what writers often do.



This conference in *The Conferring Handbook* may be especially helpful today:

- ▶ "What's the Story in This Picture?"

Also, if you have *Conferring with Primary Writers*, you may want to refer to the conferences in part one.





AFTER-THE-WORKSHOP SHARE

End the children's work time, ask them to put their work away, and gather them to share their work.

"Writers, will you put your writing into the folder that I've just put next to you? That is your writing folder." Leah held a folder and a piece of writing up to illustrate. "Then will you join us, folders in hand, on the rug? *Every day* after you have time to write, you'll put your writing in your folder," Leah demonstrated as she spoke, "and every day you'll come join us on the rug."

Ask children to share their work by holding it up for the world to see.

"How many of you put something on the page?" Leah asked. "Great! When I point to you, hold your writing up high so we can all admire it." Leah next acted like a conductor, with children proudly hoisting pictures and writing overhead.

Point out what you hope they will do in their writing—include details, depict a small, important moment, write words, and do more you admire.

"Writers, would you all admire what Liam did. Liam, show the class your work [Fig. I-1]. Do you see that Liam put details in his picture! He has himself," Leah pointed to herself, "and a flower because he was in a garden, and a sun." Leah pointed to the sun. "Liam told me his story and it goes, 'One day I went to the park with my Dad. We saw flowers. It was sunny.' Liam—are you going to add your dad? Because I don't see him on the page." Liam nodded.

Our workshops are brief during the first week. It won't be long before we ask for the class's attention. Just before we do this, we will pass out two-pocket folders, one to each child.

The folders are a way to set children up to work on pieces for more than one day, and to not necessarily progress in sync with each other, starting and stopping work on particular pieces at the same time. In later sessions, we'll encourage children to work on pieces for more than one day and we'll remind them to store their work in folders.

On this day, the share session will need to feel especially celebratory to set the tone for the year of writing workshop.

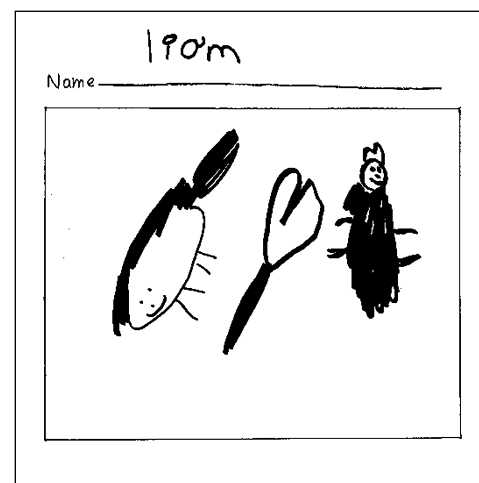


Fig. I-1 Liam

"Writers, would you admire Mikey's work too—Mikey, hold your story up [Fig. I-2]. Mikey has written some words (do you see them?) and they say, 'Me (and my) Mom (were) fixing . . . ' and soon he's going to tell us what they were fixing. The lines in the story are rain because Mikey and his Mom were sitting under the trees (see that in the picture?) and it started to rain!"

"Mathew did something very special [Fig. I-3]. He made his brother (see, it says *B* for brother) and he decided to make his brother talking. Have you ever seen in comic books, how they have speech bubbles and each bubble contains the words someone says? That's just what Matt did. His brother is saying, 'Want to go to the beach?' and I bet tomorrow, Matt will tell us what his brother answers."

"Emma wrote a story that has two pages. She put a picture of a Mommy duck here, and a baby duck, and wrote words that went with the pictures. She wrote this." [Fig. I-4]

"I can't wait to learn what happens next, can you?"

End the writing workshop time with an exclamation of excitement for the writing to come and the start the children have made.

"Wow, look at all you've done! I'm so excited and interested to see what you all will choose to write about next!"

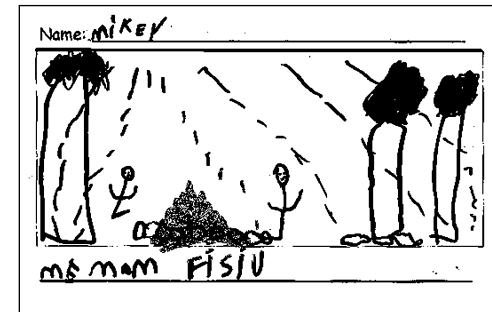
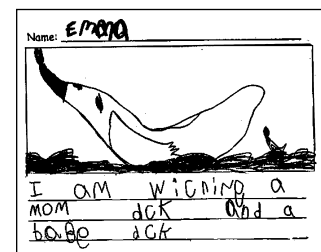


Fig. I-2 Mikey
Me and my mom were fixing...



Fig. I-3 Mathew



I am watching a
mom duck and a
baby duck.

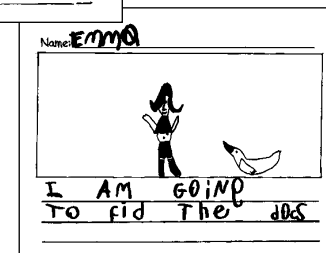


Fig. I-4 Emma
I am going to feed the ducks.



IF CHILDREN NEED MORE TIME

We call each component in this book a session, not a day, because we know that fairly often you'll devote two days to one session. There are lots of ways you could devise a second minilesson to reinforce today's points.

- Instead of demonstrating your own writing process, you could demonstrate how a child in the class wrote. For example, you could say, "Jonathan started like this. He thought, 'Hmm. What should I write about?'" You can add in the story of his thinking. "He thought, 'I could write about battles, but I've never really been in one.'" After a few minutes of reenacting what Jonathan did the day before, get all the writers to imagine what they'll write about that day. "Writers, put on your thinking caps. What will you draw and write today?" Allow for a moment of silence. It is important for children to approach the page with a topic in mind rather than drawing whatever they can draw and then improvising a written text to accompany the art.
- Your minilesson might start, "Writers, I noticed yesterday that some of you sat down and thought, 'Hmmm—what can I *draw*?'" and pretty soon you had a paper with flowers and rainbows. Today I want to teach you something. Writers don't start by drawing, we start *by thinking*. We *remember* things we've done. Watch. 'Hmm. I think I'll write about my sister's birthday party. I remember she had a huge cake. Let's see, I can remember the cake—it was flat. . . .'" Now you'd shift out of the role and list aloud the process: "Think first, picture it, then put it on the page. Right now, writers, will you think of something that happened to you, that you know about. Do you have the idea? Now picture it. Put a quiet 'thumbs up' if you are ready."

ASSESSMENT

The writing workshop provides us with an amazing window into our children's understandings of written language. After even just one day in the writing workshop, we can bring our children's writing home and pore over it. Each piece of writing helps us develop a theory of the writer and his or her knowledge of literacy.

Margay, for example, relies on a few high-frequency words [Fig. I-5]. I will be interested to see if this is a pattern. I'm interested that she has fearlessly tackled words such as *read*, *draw*, and *spell*, representing each sound (including the vowels) with a letter. She seems able to invent spellings but may be hesitant to do so. I notice that her text is brief for someone with her skills. What would her writing have been like if she did it on lined paper? I plan to nudge her to write more.

When Ryan colored in his whole picture space [Fig. I-6], was he trying to represent nighttime? On the lines, he copied the alphabet. I wonder what he thinks he has done. I long to ask, "What's your writing about?" or "Will you read me your writing?" and to learn whether he believes his print carries meaning.

I plan to suggest we write something together and then elicit some content from him. Then I'll ask him to write the first word and I'll learn more about this mystery.

Sebastian's drawing seems to contain a whole drama [Fig. I-7]. I don't know if this is one guy who's gotten into lots of predicaments or if it's a flock of guys. I wonder what Sebastian will do when I ask, "Will you read me your writing?" I wonder if he thinks he has written a story, or if he regards this as only the illustration and plans to write a text.

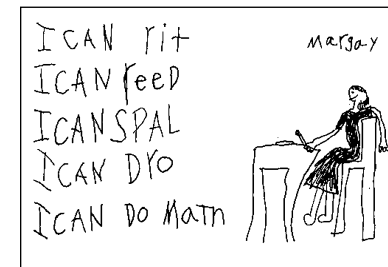


Fig. I-5 Margay
I can write.
I can read.
I can spell.
I can draw.
I can do math.

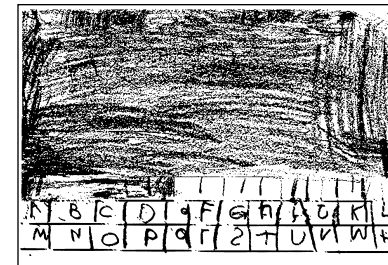


Fig. I-6 Ryan

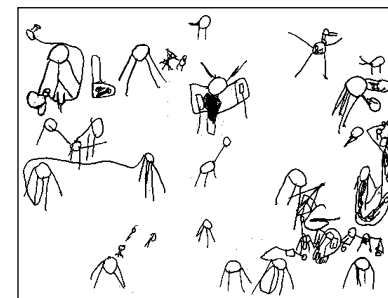


Fig. I-7 Sebastian