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The Nuts and Bolts of Teaching First-Grade Writing through a Journal Workshop

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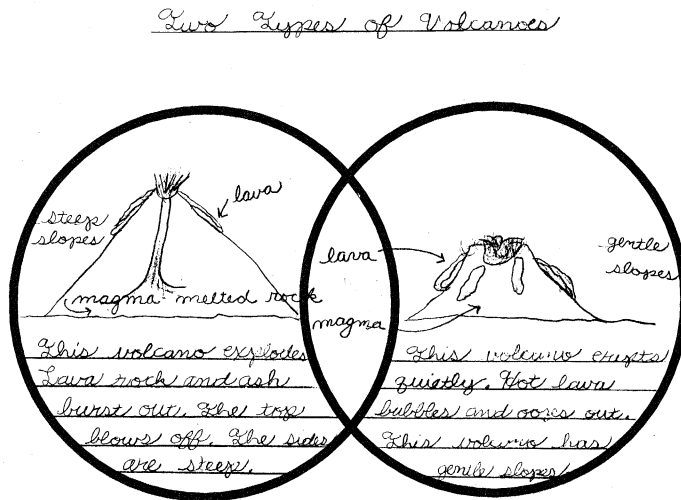
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**Figure 5**  
Graphic organizer for "Volcanoes"



the "what to do" but rather the "how to do it"—which is teaching at its finest.

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## The nuts and bolts of teaching first-grade writing through a journal workshop

Lyn Wagner  
Jennifer Grogan Nott  
Ann T. Agnew

Dear Aunt Jenny,

I've just signed my first contract to teach! I'll be working with first graders. I'm excited, but also scared. At college, I had practicum experiences at several grade levels, but I student taught in fourth grade. I know I want to use process writing, but I'm not sure how to do that at first-grade level.

I know you have used process writing in your first-grade classroom for several years. I hope you'll share some words of wisdom with an eager but unsure beginner.

Love, Amy

Dear Amy,

I'm so pleased that you are about to launch your teaching career. You are just the kind of inquiring person our profession needs! Indeed, first graders can participate in a process writing program. Perhaps the most useful way for me to explain how I implement process writing is to describe in detail how I conduct a daily writing workshop as my first graders participate in my journal writing program. Under separate cover, I am sending you a "nuts and bolts" description of my journal writing workshop. I'm excited to see what you will do with it!

Love, Aunt Jenny

This article is the result of a collaboration of three experienced teachers. We came together as teachers and students in graduate courses in the pursuit of improved teaching. We chose to write this article in the voice of one teacher for clarity. The journal-writing workshop described was successfully implemented in a first-grade classroom, in which the children became an enthusiastic and effective community of writers.

The timeframe for the daily journal-writing workshop appears in Figure 1. The structure of the workshop is based on the work of Donald Graves (1983) and Lucy Calkins (1986).

**Figure 1**  
**Daily schedule for first-grade journal-writing workshop**

Typical time allotted	Activity	What the teacher does	What the children do
5–15 minutes	Minilesson	I give direct instruction about workshop procedures, writing strategies and skills, and writer's craft (see Figure 2 for a categorized list of specific minilesson topics). I sometimes use my own writing to demonstrate specific points.	Children interact with me during direct instruction, modeling, discussion, and practice of the specific element that I present.
5 minutes	Group rehearsal for writing	I lead the class in brainstorming possible topics for writing, and I add the ideas to the class topics list. The written list helps jog children's thinking as they plan their writing. It simultaneously provides spelling for some difficult words.	Children offer ideas for topics that class members might choose to write about, sometimes adding a few details that might be included in the writing.
10 minutes	Individual rehearsal for writing	I model rehearsal by drawing about my own selected topic for a minute or two, then I circulate among the children. I ask questions or make comments to help children extend or clarify their drawings and their thinking as they plan their writing.	Each child draws an illustration about the new or ongoing topic he or she has selected to write about. Children may talk with peers or with me about their topics or drawings.
15–45 minutes	Individual writing and informal peer discussion about writing.	I write for a few minutes, then circulate among children to answer questions and give support.	Children write about their new or ongoing topics. Some children may do some revision of previous writing. They may talk to one another about their writing, as needed.
5–15 minutes	Sharing of writing by one fifth of the students.	I invite one fifth of the children to share their writing each day, according to my predetermined schedule. About once a week, I also share a piece of my writing. I often model how to make specific positive comments about a child's writing, how to ask questions to clarify or extend the child's ideas, and how to make specific suggestions. I make brief notes about each child's writing to use later during teacher-child writing conferences.	Children who are scheduled to share that day bring what they want to share. All class members listen to each child read his or her writing, then the class members offer positive comments, ask questions, and make specific suggestions to the author.

(Note: The sharing time is followed by individual teacher conferences with the children who shared their writing. These conferences begin after the class has settled into independent activities related to thematic study.)

### Minilessons

My journal-writing workshop program begins with a minilesson each day. Most of my direct writing instruction takes place during these brief sessions, which may last up to 15 minutes. Broadly speaking, my minilessons fall into the three categories suggested by

Au, Carroll, and Scheu (1997): procedural, strategies and skills, and writer's craft. A list of my minilessons in each category appears in Figure 2. Early in the school year, procedural minilessons predominate as I explain and demonstrate behaviors for participating in writing and sharing time.

Strategies and skills make up the largest category of minilessons. These

sessions focus on writing conventions (syntax, inflections, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling). Many opportunities for connecting reading decoding skills with writing occur during these sessions. Early on, I encourage children to practice their phonemic segmentation skills as they pronounce words slowly to hear the phonemes in the words and to associate them with

**Figure 2**  
**Minilesson topics**

Procedural	Strategies and skills	Writer's craft
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to sit in a group</li> <li>• listening rules: hands still; feet still; eyes on speaker</li> <li>• taking turns</li> <li>• how to read the share chart</li> <li>• skipping lines on your paper</li> <li>• drawing the picture before writing</li> <li>• writing about your picture</li> <li>• using one-finger spaces between words</li> <li>• looking around the room to find the word you need</li> <li>• using a soft voice when the music is playing</li> <li>• how to hold your paper to share your picture</li> <li>• how to speak clearly for the audience</li> <li>• how to praise a writer's work</li> <li>• how to ask good questions</li> <li>• how to make suggestions to a writer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• writing complete sentences</li> <li>• writing sentences that ask a question</li> <li>• capitalization: the word <i>I</i>; beginning of a sentence; people's names; places; months of the year; days of the week</li> <li>• using end punctuation: period; question mark; exclamation point</li> <li>• using commas in a series</li> <li>• using quotation marks, apostrophes, and contractions</li> <li>• using possessive nouns</li> <li>• plurals: adding <i>s</i> or <i>es</i></li> <li>• adding <i>ing</i></li> <li>• doubling the final consonant when adding <i>ing</i></li> <li>• adding <i>ed</i> for past tense</li> <li>• pronoun usage: <i>I/me</i>; <i>he/ him</i>; <i>she/her</i>; <i>we/us</i>; <i>they/them</i></li> <li>• verb usage: <i>is/are</i>; <i>was/ were</i>; <i>see/saw</i>; <i>go/went</i></li> <li>• spelling high-frequency words correctly</li> <li>• "stretching" a word to hear the sounds</li> <li>• spelling and phonics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>initial and final consonants</li> <li>digraphs: <i>ch, sh, th, wh</i></li> <li><i>r</i>-blends: <i>br, cr, dr, fr, gr, pr, tr</i></li> <li><i>l</i>-blends: <i>bl, cl, fl, pl, sl</i></li> <li>short vowels</li> <li>long vowels: silent <i>e</i>; <i>a: ai, ay</i>; <i>e: ee, ea</i>; <i>i: y</i>; <i>o: oa, ow</i>; <i>u: ew</i></li> <li><i>r</i>-controlled vowels: <i>ar, er, ir, or, ur</i></li> <li>vowel variants: <i>ow/ou</i>; <i>aw/au</i>; <i>oi/oy</i>; <i>oo/ou</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brainstorming ideas for writing</li> <li>• making a personal topics list</li> <li>• choosing a topic</li> <li>• illustrations: taking a "snapshot" of an event; drawing all the details of your "snapshot"; showing some action; putting people in the drawing; when drawing animals pretend you are using clay; when drawing people make them "real," not stick figures; drawing a person's eyes at the center of the oval, not higher; drawing people with bent elbows and knees to show action; using overlapping to show placement of objects</li> <li>• writing a topic sentence</li> <li>• writing support sentences</li> <li>• maintaining focus</li> <li>• using time sequence to organize</li> <li>• using a caret to add information to a sentence</li> <li>• "lassoing" a sentence and moving its location</li> <li>• using a wavy line to delete information</li> <li>• proofreading for one purpose at a time</li> </ul>

letters. Using spelling inventions for words children can pronounce gives them a strategy to use to represent any word they wish to include in their writing.

The third category of minilessons, writer's craft, deals with aspects that contribute to the effectiveness of a piece of writing. These elements include focus—staying on topic and excluding unrelated information; organization of ideas; and support—the inclusion of details or other means of elaboration. Even beginning writers can make decisions that affect the clarity and power of their message when they are aware of these elements.

I also include minilessons on illustration in this group as a means of rehearsal for writing as well as for its contribution to the final product. Drawing people engaged in action and showing details in the environment helps children elaborate in their writing.

When to teach a given minilesson depends upon what I observe the children doing as they write. If I believe several children could profit from a given minilesson, it is time to teach it to the class. I repeat the content of most minilessons several times throughout the year, so if a child does not pick up on what is taught initially, there will be other opportunities to learn. Further, children

learn a great deal from one another. I frequently observe children using writing terminology and applying strategies that I previously introduced in minilessons as they talk with one another about their writing. For example, I heard the following exchange between VaShawn and Sam (all students' names are pseudonyms):

VaShawn: How do you spell *Mikey* [friend's name]?

Sam: Say it slow so you can hear in the middle. Stretch it out.

VaShawn: /m/—/ī/—/k/—/ē/

Sam: Now you hear all the sounds. Now you can write it.

VaShawn: Good, so I can tell about Mikey; you know, details.

After the day's minilesson, I invite volunteers to share what they will draw and write about in their journals. Several children usually are eager to contribute. I add these new ideas to the class topics chart, which displays a cumulative record of possible writing topics. Listening to the sharing of ideas and consulting the charts are especially helpful to students who experience difficulty selecting a topic.

### Illustration for rehearsal

Even though most of the children at this point have identified new topics they probably will write about, or have decided to continue writing pieces begun previously, I have found that they are not yet ready to "dive in" and write. They need to explore their ideas further, to get a feel for where they may go with their topics. Talking about their topics with peers provides good rehearsal, but children can easily get off task.

In my experience, one effective way to provide meaningful rehearsal before writing is to have a 10-minute illustration time before the real writing period begins. I use a kitchen timer set for 10 minutes, and the children know that they should be ready to begin their writing by the time the bell rings. They may start writing sooner if they are ready. The children often talk about their drawings while they draw, sometimes with peers, or to themselves. In either case, it is productive because many times the talk leads to inclusion of details in their drawings about which they will later write. All of the children use a special type of paper for their journal entries: The upper half of the sheet has a large block of space for an illustration. Each child's drawings and writing are eventually collected in individual decorated journal folders.

### Time to write

When the timer bell sounds, the children begin to write their entries on the lines provided below the spaces where they drew their illustrations. As the children settle into their composing, I turn on a CD of classical background music. Then I circulate among the children to

answer questions and to provide additional support to children who find writing difficult. All children are expected to write during this time, but I also allow quiet on-task talk between class members as needed. This helps to develop the notion that the class is a community of writers.

At the beginning of the year, the time for writing may be about 15 minutes. Later, as the children develop their writing fluency, the time may extend to 45 minutes. Students also reread and adjust their writing more as the year progresses and as minilessons about revising and editing are taught and applied. The workshop structure becomes more flexible as children become more proficient writers. Some children may extend work on one piece over several days; others may write multiple pieces in a single day.

### Sharing

Sharing follows the writing time. About one fifth of the class shares a piece each day. That enables me to confer one-on-one with each child each week. During sharing time, the entire class gathers to listen as each child scheduled to share that day reads his or her journal entry aloud. After each child

reads, the group gives positive comments, asks questions, and makes suggestions for improving the journal entry. As this is occurring, I make brief notes about anything I hear that I want to cover in the conference with the child that will follow.

After all the children scheduled to share have done so, the children return to their tables for independent work that was introduced earlier in the day. These independent activities are related to the current thematic study. After the class settles into this work, I begin the individual conferences.

### Conferences

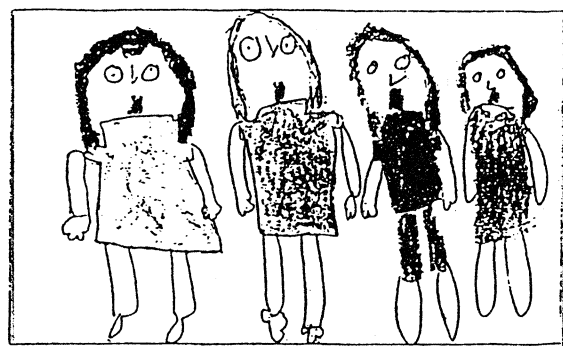
Each conference lasts no more than 5 minutes. The child orally rereads the journal entry that was just shared with the class. We consider the questions and suggestions given by the class, and the child decides whether to make any changes. If the child wants to revise, the changes are made during the conference. For example, in a conference with Mary, she began by orally rereading the entry she had read to the group.

Mary: This is me and my friends and we are playing house.  
Me: Remember the questions the class asked about your friends' names,

**Figure 3**  
**Conference notes for Mary**

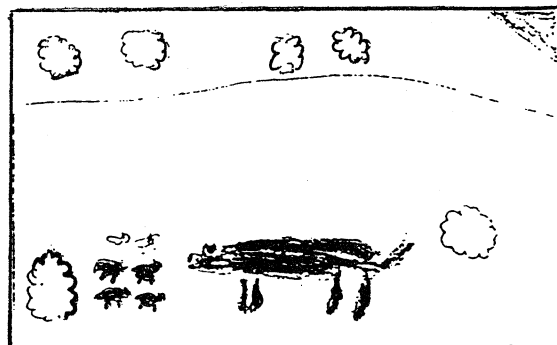
Date	Child's topic	Instruction given during the conference	Comments
8/25	my friends	using end punctuation (period) (Note: I record the topic of the direct instruction that I give based on a particular element in the child's writing.)	watch for run-on sentences (Note: I often use a key word or phrase to indicate to myself what I want to be sure to watch for during the next conference with the child. At other times, I note milestones in the child's writing, as in the entry of 9/9, below.)
9/2	my friends again	spelling <i>and</i>	still run-on
9/9	playing house	beginning sentence with capital letter	First time she chose to add a sentence!

Figure 4  
Samples of Mary's writing



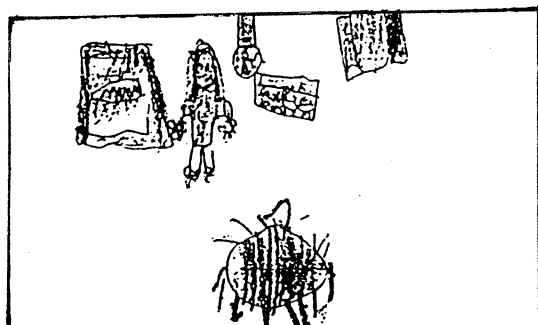
THIS IS MY ADN MY FMS  
ADN WR PAYN HWS.  
and we are playing hease.  
friends

August



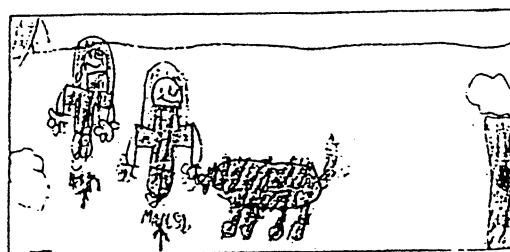
THIS IS MY BOG AND Ce HDA  
Pies AND Ce IS TIN TO Te  
DUM TO WORE.  
puppies she trying teach  
them walk

October



I AM WOCHING the Wother dog.  
it's Note. TILRe the Wother dog.  
it is est MY WOTHER dog.  
it's MISS. NOTTS WOTHER dog.  
I GAVD it 8 CLOFESIR. He eue  
LLa OF the PESTE. Ms. BOE les  
he WOCHES her WOTHER dog.  
ON the HOLE week.

February



I AM plubing with KIM. KIM  
KNOW OVER TOMY HALLS. We WRE plub  
ing with MY dog. We played tech  
MY dog belongs to MY dad. MY dog  
is hagnig her TUGG out OF her POUIN  
KIM and I afed. MY dog barked  
it WAS FUN. I liked playing  
with KIM.

April

whether dolls were used, and where you were playing? Do you want to answer any of those questions in your entry?

Mary: I think I'll tell who I was playing with.

Me: Where do you want to put their names?

Mary: At the end. I'll write, "My friends are Marissa and Kim."

Me: What kind of letter should you use when you start your new sentence?

As you can see, I use the conference to give direct instruction about one specific item in the child's writing. In the case of Mary, I called attention to the use of a capital for the first letter of the word at the beginning of a sentence

because this was something she had not regularly incorporated into her writing. I keep a record of what was covered during the conference in a three-ring binder that has a separate page for each child (see Figure 3).

The journal entry that has been through this process is then placed in an assessment portfolio that contains that child's completed work. This portfolio provides an ongoing record of the child's growth as a writer. If the piece will be published, it will be recopied with the revisions incorporated into the final draft. Journal entries that do not go through this sharing and conference process are kept in the child's separate journal folder. These pieces are sent home periodically.

### Assessment

I use the assessment portfolios to evaluate the children's progress and to share with parents. The weekly writing samples give tangible, and often dramatic, evidence of what the children can actually do. They also document each child's growing control of writing mechanics and craft over time. For example, in writing samples from Mary's assessment portfolio (see Figure 4), I see growth over time in several areas:

- The February and April samples show increasing development of topic as Mary learned to add detail by anticipating questions classmates might ask.
- Invented spellings developed from mainly phonetic-based in August to transitional representations in April.
- The February and April samples show growing understanding of the use of capital letters to start sentences, lowercase letters in the rest of the words, and periods to end sentences.

Another way I use these portfolios is to decide on the direct instruction I'll provide in conferences and in group minilessons. After school on the day before the weekly journal sharing for each child, I review the samples in the child's portfolio, especially the ones from the last few weeks. I look for evidence of skills the child has mastered, for elements that the child appears to be developing, and for areas that seem to be beyond the child's current reach. During the conference, I focus on an area that appears to be within the child's

reach with my assistance (Wagner & Brock, 1996). This is a new or extended skill or element for which the child has demonstrated the necessary prior knowledge in his or her writing, such as Mary's growing understanding of when to use capital letters.

### Other writing opportunities

A thematic study time block following the journal-writing workshop offers additional writing activities. All subject areas are integrated into the thematic block, which is gradually expanded to about 2 hours. Themes usually last about 3 weeks. This time block eventually offers a number of opportunities for additional reading and writing. Students learn to respond in their literature logs to the books I read aloud as part of the thematic study. They also write in their learning logs about the concepts studied and activities completed.

### Benefits of a journal workshop

For both beginning and experienced teachers, I believe a journal-writing workshop has several advantages:

- It provides a predictable daily structure for both the teacher and the children.
- The daily minilessons ensure time for direct instruction on specific reading and writing skills within a context that is meaningful to children.
- The special attention given to rehearsal for writing by means of oral sharing and illustrating reduces the amount of time some children may spend staring at blank pages.
- The time provided for writing grows as the children's ability to write develops.
- Children have time to apply what has been taught in minilessons to their own writing.
- Regularly scheduled sharing helps children write with a specific audience in mind and reinforces the sense of a community of writers.
- The conference component, which ensures individualized instruction, is not overwhelming, because meeting with each child on a one-to-one basis is spread over a week's time.
- Record keeping is not excessively burdensome because it is systematic

and is accomplished during the daily workshop routine. It is not an added task to be done later.

Dear Amy,

By now I hope you've read the "nuts and bolts" description that I sent you about my journal-writing workshop. The procedures are manageable. Further, they connect to research about the writing process, how children grow as writers, best practice, and developmentally appropriate instruction. I hope that you will be able to connect theory to practice by implementing your version of a journal-writing workshop in your own first-grade classroom.

Love, Aunt Jenny

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## Linking literacy and moral education in the primary classroom

Vickie E. Lake

How can teachers create discussions through their literacy curricula that will develop children's understandings of moral elements—responsibility, friendship, fairness, empathy, or hope? In what ways can teachers combine language and literacy