Writing Workshop:
How it Works in the Middle School

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ABSTRACT — Writing workshop is a rigorous learning environment where students work hard to become writers. This article presents one teacher's classroom strategies for implementing a writing workshop in the middle school setting. In her classroom, increased student engagement and a positive classroom environment has an impact on both student attitude toward writing and their ability to write. Teachers can utilize these clearly described instructional strategies to develop a writing workshop for their adolescent writers.

Writing Workshop: How it Works in the Middle School

When most middle school students hear the word *writing*, they cringe. The word to them is like a death sentence. One might ask at what point did writing become so repulsive to young adolescents? Whether they are willing to admit it or not, writing is used on a daily basis as a form of communication and is therefore essential to student learning. As Graham and Perin (2007) observe:

> Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Yet every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers. (p.3)

As an educator, it is our responsibility to prepare students for college and career readiness. It is obvious that writing plays a critical part in this preparation. It is important that our students see themselves as writers and learn to write through actual writing practice (Sipe & Rosewarne, 2006).

According to *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007), there are 11 elements of writing instruction that have been found to be effective with adolescent learners. One of those elements is a writing process approach that interweaves a number of writing instructional strategies. As they state:

> Teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions has shown a dramatic effect on the quality of students' writing. Strategy instruction involves explicitly and systematically teaching steps necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing text. The ultimate goal is to teach students to use these strategies independently. (p.15)

In other words, writing is a process that requires careful thinking, which means an idea goes through a series of changes before the product is finished. By using a writing process

approach, students are guaranteed to take the necessary steps to improve their writing. The writing process provides a focused guide to becoming a better writer. The only thing better than a classroom that promotes the writing process is a classroom that utilizes the process as part of a much bigger picture.

Going beyond the writing process, writing workshop refers to a model of instruction in which the teacher and students work together to establish a community of writers (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). In this model, the instructional time includes mini-lessons, independent writing time with teacher conferencing, and share time (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994). The teacher generally launches the workshop through a brief (ten- to fifteen-minute) teacher-led mini-lesson using examples from mentor texts, the teacher's own work, and student work. Students are provided extended time, in class, to compose and/or revise in a recursive manner (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994).

But how do middle school students rediscover a passion for writing? By utilizing a writing workshop structure, my students became more engaged and invested in their learning. Writing no longer becomes a sentence for life, it becomes a passion. In my classroom, I utilize a classroom arrangement in which my students are expected to work together to plan, draft, revise and edit their compositions in a true workshop environment. My classroom looks different from my peers' classrooms. Desks have been replaced with tables and chairs. Students are seated in groups of four and are expected to actually 'produce' while they are in my classroom. A writing workshop creates a welcoming and comfortable environment where students feel free to ask questions and receive feedback from both the teacher and their peers. In my classroom, the students are grouped by tables to ensure a workshop friendly environment. The students will often use the peers at their table to ask questions and receive additional help. Since they are on task and not just socializing, this type of interaction promotes teaching and learning amongst the individual students. This atmosphere allows all the students the opportunity to be active participants in class. Because of this supportive environment, my students are more confident writers willing to share their work and receive feedback from others. This enables the students to have ownership of the writing process and to feel empowered as authors themselves.

What Works for Me

The basic components of Writing Workshop are a brief mini-lesson based on student writing needs, an extended time for students to write on topics of their choosing and for the teacher to do individual student conferences, and a time for students to share their writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). At the middle school level in my school district, reading and writing are split

into two separate class periods. Fortunately this means that I get to dedicate an entire 50 minute class period to just writing. I realize this may seem like a luxury to most; however, the writing workshop can be implemented in an English classroom that does not have separate class periods for both reading and writing. The essential components of a workshop can be carried out the same in both settings, with attention to providing dedicated time to writing. So whether or not you just teach writing, this will work.

Here is how it works in my classroom: The students start by 'writing into the day' with a Jump Start. The Jump Start prompt is connected in some way to the lesson I plan to teach for the day. During the first fifteen minutes of class, the students are expected to write continuously for that amount of time. This allows the students to build up their stamina for writing for prolonged periods of time. The Jump Start also prepares students for the type of 'on demand writing' expected from state testing. After students have time to write, I select a few students to share their writing with the class.

From there, I begin a mini-lesson on a specific writing skill or craft for the students to utilize with their work. Unlike typical middle school classrooms, mini-lessons provide short focused lessons on a particular craft or skill instead of being a lecture. Since the lessons are short and focused, the majority of my class time is spent giving the students time to write rather than the majority of class being spent with me talking.

After the mini lesson, students spend time writing while I conference on an individual basis. During independent writing time, the students are working through the writing process towards a specific goal or product. In my workshop environment, students are given choices on the products they produce rather than receiving a specific assignment. Students are often working on multiple pieces at one time. Since the majority of class time in the writing workshop is dedicated to independent writing, there is no reason for a writing assignment to be worked on at home. According to ReadWriteThink.org:

> Studies show that students who learn the writing process score better on state writing tests than those who receive only specific instruction in the skills assessed on the test. This type of authentic writing produces lifelong learners and allows students to apply their writing skills to all subjects. (IRA/NCTE 2014)

Each and every minute in the workshop adds up, and if a student is not using every minute to work on writing, then the deadline will be hard to reach. The majority of my class time is dedicated to independent writing. In a workshop environment, students are often working on several pieces at once, which is why it is imperative that they utilize their class time wisely. Every minute counts in there. This is one of the reasons assignments are NOT allowed to be worked on at home. In addition to having ample class time to work on assignments, students are continually exposed to an environment of on demand writing. It is essential for students to master writing on demand in order to prepare for state testing accommodations.

In addition to conferencing with me, students use each one

another for feedback and advice on their writing. Kittle (2008) explains the value of individual feedback as follows: "My students need to know what they know and what they don't so they can continue to improve as writers" (p 217). If there is time at the end of the period, I always like to have a few students share a piece of what they worked on with the class. I find that there may not always be time at the end of the class period for sharing, so it is important to work that in at least one part of the day.

Essential Components of My Middle School Writing Workshop:

- **Writing into the Day (Jumpstarts):** Quick writes are generally 5-10 minutes. This is time to spur student thinking and the start of writing topics that often develop into longer pieces. It is important to tie the quick writes into the mini-lesson.

- **Time:** Students need time to write in class. Practice is necessary for students to write well. Therefore, predictable routines are essential to the workshop. Students should expect to write every day in class. Time to write is also when the teacher has time to conference, providing essential one-on-one time with each of the students in the class.

- **Choice:** Students write better about topics they know and care about. However, choosing a topic is a skill writers need to develop. Units focusing on studying a particular genre work well to meet the needs of student choice but also narrow the field. Writers tend to have preferences on which genres they like to write, but they also need practice outside of their comfort level. By studying a particular genre, but providing room for student choice, the workshop creates a challenging and engaging environment.

- **Conferencing:** On a daily basis, the teacher should be conferencing with 2 to 3 students. This approximately allows the teacher to conference with every student at least once within a two week time period. Conferences should be student led, and not dictated by the teacher. Students know what they need help with and will ask. Keep track of conferencing notes to ensure student progress and accountability for the next meeting.

- **Mentor Texts:** When asking students to write in a certain genre, it is important to provide specific examples of writing from that particular genre. By unpacking the author's writing, students are able to identify techniques and skills that are essential in writing workshop. Using mentor texts as models helps student understanding of the expectations for a particular piece; what makes a piece of writing 'good'.

- **Modeling:** Teachers should write with students and share their work frequently. By the teacher modeling for the class, the students are able to learn unique strategies for writing. The students are also able to see that even an experienced writer may struggle. No piece is perfect the first time. Writing always takes several drafts.

- **Safe Community:** Building a welcoming and comfortable environment at the beginning of the year is essential to the

success of a writing workshop. Students need to feel like they are a part of a writing community where it is safe to share their writing and seek feedback from others. Gallagher (2006) observes that "[w]e must teach them that because they are finished with a first draft, they are not finished with the paper. We must teach them to respond meaningfully to each other's papers" (p 12). An Author's Chair is a great way to build the setting for a safe sharing environment. When students share their writing with the class, the other students respond by T.A.G.ing - Telling something they liked, Asking a question, or Giving a suggestion. This enables the students to feel comfortable giving feedback to one another.

What Makes It Work

In order to have a successful writing workshop, it is important to establish and maintain a predictable routine. Kittle (2008) states that writing workshop should be predictable so that students can plan for time to write in school and to think about their writing pieces when not in school. My classroom is structured with four essential components of the writing workshop: writing into the day, mini-lesson, time to write, and sharing. From day one, the students know to expect and to follow this routine.

Time Needed for the Strategy:

- **50 minutes:** My writing workshop is structured around a 50 minute class period. Since I am a full time writing teacher, the writing workshop is utilized on a daily basis. I teach five 50 minute class periods including GT and general instructional levels.

WHAT DOES A TYPICAL DAY OF WRITING LOOK LIKE IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM?

Mrs. Sanders' Seventh Grade Writing Workshop
- ❑ Jump Start 10 Minutes
- ❑ Author Share 5 Minutes
- ❑ Brain Jam 10-15 Minutes
- ❑ Independent Writing 20-25 Minutes
- ❑ Author's Chair 5 Minutes

However since most school districts do not separate reading and writing instruction, the writing workshop can be implemented 2-3 days a week as "workshop days" and do

literature studies on other days. Teachers on a block schedule can use half the class period for workshop and spend the rest of the period on literature study. To see the most growth in student writing, writing workshop is best implemented all year long.

Materials Needed for the Strategy:

- **Writer's Notebook:** A spiral or composition book that will be used for daily writing entries at home. This notebook is used as a ticket in the door each day. Students are free to write about any topic in any format as long as each entry includes the date and a minimum sentence requirement. The minimum sentence requirement is established by the teacher each nine weeks. The requirement increases over the school year. For example: first nine weeks – five sentences, second nine weeks – ten sentences, third nine weeks – fifteen sentences, and fourth nine weeks – twenty sentences.
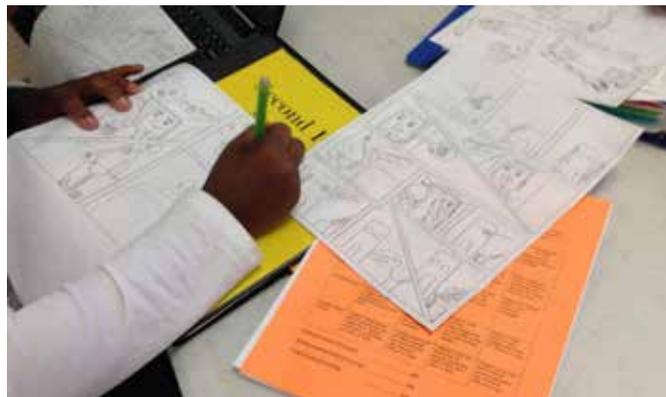
- **Writer's Manual:** A composition book that will be used on a daily basis in the classroom. This journal will include responses to quick writes (Jump Starts), writing territories, a table of contents, notes from mini lessons: skill and craft, resources: handouts, power vocabulary and phrases.
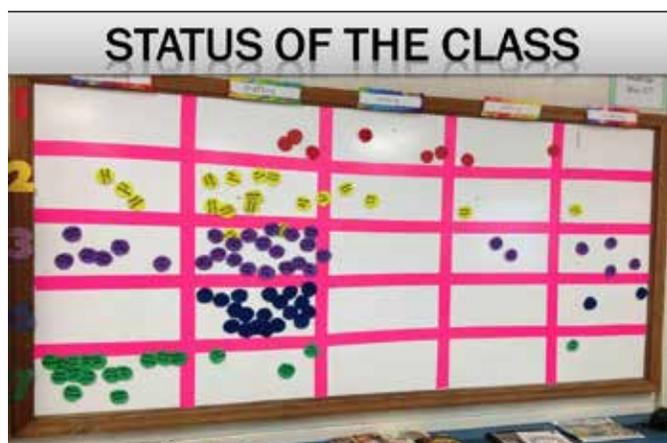
- **Status of the Class Board:** A display somewhere in the classroom that indicates the writing process and the students' current progress on a current piece. This is a helpful tool for student assessment and planning teacher as well as peer conferences. This is especially important since the middle school writer is responsible for keeping up with multiple writing pieces each nine weeks.

- **Writer's Portfolio:** A two pocket folder that will serve as a collection of major writing assignments over the course of the year including student reflection/self-assessment as well as peer assessment and feedback for those assignments. All writing in completed in class and the student is responsible for keeping their drafts organized in the portfolio.

- **Writing Process Folder:** Two two-pocket folders taped together on the outside binding. This creates a four pocket folder to represent each step of the writing process. All writing outside of the Writer's Manual is kept in this folder. It's helpful to keep the folder in the classroom so their writing doesn't get lost.

- **Classroom Arrangement:** The arrangement of the classroom should foster collaboration. Groups make peer response to writing and other kinds of student collaboration very easy. Groups also help build writing community. Therefore, clustering desk in groups or using tables.

- **Mentor Texts:** During a particular unit of study, it's helpful to maintain folders containing copies of mentor texts used during the unit in a place students can easily access. Students tend to visit these folders frequently while writing or the teacher can easily refer students there during a conference.

- **Conferencing Table or Stool:** Many teachers have a designated conferencing table where students come to meet with the teacher for writing conferences. Some teachers prefer to move around the classroom, and a stool can be helpful for this.

- **Author's Chair:** A designated seat or area for students to share their writing in front of the class in order to receive feedback.

- **Writing Supplies:** Pens, pencils, markers, dictionaries, thesauruses, paper, access to computer lab: Make whatever materials that will encourage students to write readily available. Some teachers have a station in the room with all these materials; some put it at each group of desks.

Valuable Professional Sources that Support Writing Workshop

Being a teacher is committing to being a lifelong learner. Just like the writing process, it is essential to revise any product we create. The most important thing to keep in mind with a writing workshop is that there is no wrong answer as long as it works for your students. My workshop is the result of a compilation of ideas from many different resources and writing experts. Here are some of the best professional resources that focus on the secondary writing workshop:

Gallagher, K. (2006). *Teaching Adolescent Writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fletcher, R. J., & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kittle, P. (2008). *Write beside them: Risk, voice, and clarity in high school writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rief, L. (2014). *Read write teach: Choice and challenge in the reading-writing workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Sipe, R. B., & Rosewarne, T. (2006). *Purposeful writing: Genre study in the secondary writing workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading and learning with adolescents.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Calkins, L. (1994). *The art of teaching writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gallagher, K. (2006). *Teaching Adolescent Writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools —A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English. (2014). Strategy guide: Implementing the writing process. Retrieved from http://www.readwritethink.org/resources/resource-print.html?id=30386&tab=1

Kittle, Penny. (2008). *Write Beside Them.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Sipe, R. B., & Rosewarne, T. (2006). *Purposeful writing: Genre study in the secondary writing workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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Typical MS Writing Workshop Lesson Plan

I've tried to describe in the space below what the average workshop day in my classroom looks like. Things do vary a bit based on where students are in a piece, but this represents an average day.

Basic Lesson Components	Instructional Lesson Step	Notes for the Teacher
Write into the Day [Jump Start]	1. Teacher displays or distributes the prompt while the students write independently for 10 minutes in response to the provided prompt. 2. Once the students have finished responding to the Jump Start, they can begin working on their Notebook Entry for that night.	1. Students begin class by writing into the day in order to launch the mentality for writing. To help build a writing community, the teacher should write with students. Typically, the prompt relates to the mini lesson or the unit being discussed. For example, a personal narrative unit may have the prompt, ["If you were stranded on a deserted island, what three items would you bring?" 5 Sentences Minimum] 1 & 2. Responses must meet the MINIMUM sentence requirement. The minimum sentence requirement increases every nine weeks. For the first nine weeks, general students are expected to write at least 5 sentences and GT students are expected to write at least 10 sentences. During the second nine weeks, general students are expected to write at least 10 sentences and GT students are expected to write at least 15 sentences. 2. Students are expected to write an entry every night of the week. In order to receive credit, the entry must meet a minimum requirement of sentences as determined by the teacher. Entries are checked on a daily basis as a ticket into the room. The students can choose what to write about in the notebook entry.
Share [Authors Share]	1. Selected students will share their response to the Jump Start with the class.	1. Limit this part to about 5 minutes. The selected student shares his/her writing directly from his/her seat. Alternate the selected students so that each student has a chance to share at least once every two weeks. Although the class is not asked to T.A.G. the piece, the teacher should provide feedback on one thing that was done well and one suggestion for the next step of the piece.
Mini-lesson [Brain Jam]	1. The teacher provides a short lesson focused on a single topic to help students with a particular writing skill.	1. This part should take 15 minutes maximum. Some mini-lessons are planned in advance. Some mini-lessons are derived from observations during student conferences. Some mini-lessons are based on analysis of prior student writing. Teacher may use a mentor text as a model for writing. Examples of possible mini-lesson topics: Strong voice in writing Showing instead of telling Strong word choice Paragraphing for effect Developing a claim Supporting a claim with credible evidence 2. Students may apply the strategy to a new piece or a previously developed one.

| Time to Write [Independent Writing] | 1. After the mini-lesson, the students need time to write in order to move through the circular process of writing: Prewriting – may or may not involve Literal writing Drafting Revising Peer Conferencing Publishing Students need a predictable routine to practice their skills. | 1. This should be the most important part of the day. Allow 20-25 minutes for students to write.

The student applies strategies from the mini-lessons to writing. The student also conferences with the teacher during this time.

Students will be at different parts of the writing process on any particular day. That is why it is important for the teacher to use some type of status of the class to easily assess where each student is in the writing process.

2. The teacher should conference with 3-4 students each day.

The teacher should confer with every student within two weeks.

The teacher should have some way of keeping track of the notes from the discussion during the conference. Examples: Popsicle sticks Index Cards Seating Chart Rooster Check Student Index Binder |
| | 2. While students are writing, the teacher is writing with the students or conferencing with the students. Time to write provides the teacher with essential 1 on 1 time with each student in the class. | |