TEACHING WRITERS REMOTELY
Using the Principles from
Every Kid a Writer
with Distance Learning
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“We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.”

—Bertha Calloway

The days in which we are living are unprecedented, uncertain, and ever-changing. Many of us feel like we’ve been shipwrecked in a sea of masks and mandates, plexiglass and panic, and change and challenge. We long for something solid and sure—a foundation on which we can stand and settle, gather ourselves, and breathe.

In the early spring, when I was finalizing the pages of *Every Kid a Writer*, my goal was simple and straightforward: share six practical ways to make shifts in our classrooms and our teaching to help even the most “reluctant” students write with energy and enthusiasm. Now, many of us are navigating new remote teaching platforms, new ways of building classroom community, and new ways of assessing and responding to students’ academic and emotional needs. During times like these, the temptation might be to revert back to more traditional methods of teaching writing (like workbooks or worksheets or formulaic, fill-in-the-blank exercises.) These aren’t effective, but they might feel like all we can manage right now.

It doesn’t have to be that way.

I believe we can keep the teaching of writing streamlined, simple, purposeful, and unfussy while also helping student writers rediscover their voice, their enthusiasm, and their confidence.
So, while I cannot calm the raging sea, perhaps I can throw you a small life preserver—a few concepts, strategies, and ideas that were important when you were teaching students in-person and that still hold true, even now.

My hope is that these might help you find your footing as you navigate the months ahead.

**Model, Rather Than Assign**

Deep down, we all know that a demonstration is more powerful than a description. It’s why so many of us turn to YouTube or other video sources when we are trying to learn something new. So, whether you’re teaching face-to-face or remotely, modeling still matters. The most powerful thing that writing teachers can do for student writers is to crack open their thinking and make the invisible process of writing visible. Kids need to know how an expert writer (that’s you) gets an idea from their head to the page. Don Graves (2002, 12) put it this way: “Top teachers reach to the heart of what they are trying to say and talk aloud about this search, so that students can witness the process of one’s heart coming alive in one’s own words.”

Here are some ways to reimagine what modeling your own thinking and writing could look like when you are teaching remotely:

- If you’re teaching from your classroom (while students watch synchronously or asynchronously) use an easel and chart paper to model your thinking and writing, much like you would in person.

- If you’re teaching older students who keyboard as they write, use the whiteboard function of the digital platform or simply share your screen as you open up a Word document. In this way, you can type a bit of your writing in front of students, stopping often to think, reread, revise, and change.

- For younger students, who aren’t yet keyboarding, consider moving your camera to a bird’s-eye view so that kids can see your writing from above. Or, if all else fails, think aloud as you write (using a table in front of you) and then periodically hold your writing up to the camera so that kids can see what you have written so far.
Whichever way you choose to show kids your thinking and writing, do keep it *oh-so-simple-and-brief*. If possible, keep your modeling to five or ten minutes, max. You don’t need to write your whole piece in front of kids; just a few sentences are enough for them to see and hear your thinking. Keep it clear, concise, focused, and to the point.

*(For more ideas about the power of teaching modeling, see chapter 2.)*

**Lean on Other Writers**

If you are like most writers I know, I’m guessing that you often look to the work of other writers before beginning your own piece. Are you creating a wedding or baby announcement? Chances are you look at dozens of examples to help you out. Are you updating your résumé or crafting a letter of recommendation? Likely, you’ll peruse other résumés and letters of recommendation before attending to your own. When we do this, it helps us think about how these pieces might be structured and what kinds of information is usually included. Simply put, these mentor texts help us to see what a finished product looks like: to see what we are aiming for.

When you think aloud and write in front of your students, making the invisible process visible, it’s only natural that you would show students how to lean on other writers for help and guidance.

For example, if you’re teaching students how writers conclude a persuasive letter, you might show them how you look carefully at how other writers close out their letters and use that information to help you craft your own. If students are writing reviews of take-out restaurants in your community, show them lots of examples of published reviews so that they can see how this type of writing is structured and formatted. If you’re teaching emergent writers how to add labels to their pictures, you might showcase a few published books in which the author and illustrator have included pictures and labels to help the reader know more about their topic.

Even though much of your teaching might happen remotely this year, don’t skip the opportunity to read widely to your students. Show students the deep reverence and respect you have for books and for the people who write them. Do whatever you can to get books (hard copy or e-books) into the hands of your students. Let them soak in the words of other writers and
use those words to create strong writing of their own. During this time, many publishing companies are granting non-exclusive permission to live-stream a read-aloud from the books they publish—as long as you don’t post the recording to a public YouTube channel or live-stream yourself reading on a public channel, group, or platform. In other words, most books can be shared freely in the private online settings you use for your students.

(For more ideas on using mentor texts to fuel engagement, see chapter 2.)

**Confer with Individual Students**

If conferring is the heartbeat of the writing classroom when we are teaching in person, perhaps it becomes even more crucial in a remote setting. Teaching (and learning) remotely can feel isolating, distant, and maybe even a little cold. What better way to counter that than to make time to connect with students one-on-one to talk about their writing and themselves as writers? When you coach, encourage, nudge, compliment, validate, and support individual kids, you are building a safe emotional space, one interaction at a time. And, there’s an added bonus of conferring with kids remotely: these conversations can provide a window into kids’ lives. When you take time to talk with individual kids, you learn about their interests, their pets, and their families.

I recently learned some simple and practical ideas on conferring remotely from the brilliant and practical Carl Anderson. Here are a few work-arounds and tips that Carl shares in his “10 Tips for Conferring with Student Writers Online” distance learning guide (https://blog.heinemann.com/10-tips-for-conferring-with-student-writers-online):

- If your online platform has a breakout room function, think of the breakout rooms like individual tables in your classroom. Put students into breakout groups while they write. Then, move among these breakout rooms much like you would move among the tables of writers in your classroom, taking a few moments to confer with a student or two in each room. Before you begin conferring with an individual student, you can give the other kids in the breakout room the option to either mute the sound on their computer so they aren’t distracted by your conversation, or listen in and learn alongside the student with whom you are conferring, much like they would do naturally.
if they were listening in to a writing conference at their table in the classroom. However, if the child with whom you are conferring finds it difficult to engage in the conference with everyone in the breakout room listening, you can make the conversation more private by inviting the others in the breakout room to turn off their speakers.

- If you’re conferring one-on-one with a student, simply have the child share their screen to show you their writing as you confer.
- If students have done their writing using a Google doc, you (or the student) can pull up that doc, share the screen, and talk about the piece of writing together.
- Students can snap a picture of their writing and send it to you so that you can pull it up on your screen while the two of you talk about the piece.

(For more ideas about conferring with and assessing student writers, see chapter 7.)

**Expose Student Writers to the Wide World of Readers Out There**

Perhaps now, more than ever, kids need to be sharing their writing—the end product of their hard work—with more than just their teacher. Let’s face it, it’s not very motivating to be given a writing assignment, complete it, and turn it in so that a teacher can respond to or grade it. Writers write to say something of value to actual readers. (Personally, I would not be spending my Saturday afternoon writing these very words unless I had hope that they would eventually find their way to a reader or two.) So now is the time to think about how to get students’ writing out into the world.

Here are some ideas:

- Older students can write simple instructions for younger students on how to use the digital platform that the school is using.
- Students can create procedural texts for parents about how to use online platforms and troubleshoot problems that may arise.
• Create a space for kids to use Padlet or Nearpod to post reviews and recommendations of books that are available for e-checkout. Work with the media specialist at your school or local public library to see if there is a way for kids to share reviews on whatever library platform is being used for kids to check out e-books.

• Invite kids to read age-appropriate blogs and then begin creating blogs of their own.

• This year, perhaps more than any other, the personal narratives that kids write will be powerful. If you have kids write about a moment or memory that has strong emotion attached to it, you’ll likely see kids write about the state of our world. How could those narratives be bound and shared with the community or beyond?

• The local businesses and restaurants in our community could benefit from a boost. Why not ask kids to craft restaurant or business reviews and then post them on a platform for business reviews or send them directly to businesses. Invite kids to write reviews and (with permission from parents) post the reviews online.

• Kids can craft thank you notes to someone in their family, school, or community who is making a difference or might be overlooked.

These kinds of writing experiences will still allow us to assess learning, teach standards, examine genres, and dive into standard conventions of print—but kids will be writing with an authentic audience and purpose in mind. And when kids write to an actual audience for a real purpose, they tend to be engaged and excited about the work.

(For more ideas about exposing writers to real readers, see chapter 4.)

Establish a Powerful Partnership with Families

The emergency teaching that we experienced in the spring of 2020 changed the way we engaged with students’ families—in some cases for the better, and in some cases for the worse. While some parents and caregivers became more involved in their children’s classrooms than ever, other students and families couldn’t connect with their classes at all because of a lack of technology, scheduling issues, or emergency learning policies. Many of us found
ourselves struggling to establish and maintain contact with students and their families, as well as struggling to respond to parents’ and caregivers’ questions and concerns about the what and how of our teaching. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure that we are working with the adults in our students’ lives.

So much has changed in education since parents were in school themselves; it’s only natural that they would benefit from clear communication about what writing instruction looks like and how it is structured. We can take this opportunity to teach parents and families what writing instruction looks like now.

One powerful way to do this is to take some time during your virtual back-to-school night (or during short sessions you invite parents to in the early days of school) to engage in a brief writing experience with parents. In an online setting, you can “teach” parents using the same digital platform that students will be using. That way, parents can see firsthand what writing instruction will look like for their child.

For example, you could show parents a shortened version of writer’s workshop by inviting them to craft a simple procedural text, following the same teaching structure you’ll be using with kids:

1. Show parents multiple mentor texts of simple procedural texts that we see in everyday life. (How to wash your hands, how to wear a mask, how to renew your driver’s license, etc.) At this point, you can explain to parents how using mentor texts help writers understand how a particular kind of writing is structured and gives students a vision for what they might include in their own writing.

2. Together, jot down the features of this kind of writing (clear, bold title, numbered steps, picture support, etc.) Explain how this co-created list will later help students create their own piece of writing. When students are working independently, they can refer back to the list to remind them of the features that should be included in their own writing.

3. Think aloud and model. Show parents how you think through multiple topics for a procedural text that you could write about and ask parents to do the same. (Parents can share their ideas using the chat box feature.) You could encourage parents to think about the kinds of procedural texts that might be useful at home, such as how to get ready for school or how to get ready for bed, so that the piece of writing
they create can actually be posted in their home as a useful text! Here, you might briefly explain how allowing students to choose a topic that matters to them helps to strengthen writing proficiency and engagement.

4. Think aloud as you use the mentor texts and the list of features to help you begin to write your own procedural text. You might draw parents and caregivers’ attention to the fact that, in this way of teaching, you are never asking students to do something they haven’t seen you do first. This isn’t about presenting a writing assignment. It’s about showing students how to write.

5. Give parents a few moments to begin working on their own writing.

6. Place parents into smaller breakout rooms (if your platform includes this feature), and then give them a chance to share what they have written so far and to discuss what they just experienced. Here, you might encourage parents to think about why—at this point in the process—focusing on spelling, punctuation, and grammar isn’t actually helpful. (Those skills will be more useful when and if pieces are polished and published for an outside reader.)

7. Bring parents back into the larger group and engage in a quick reflection. Today we learned how to write something called a procedural text—a text that teaches the reader how to do something. We noticed that this kind of text usually has a clear title, numbered steps, “bossy” language, and visuals to support the steps. And, we had time to begin working on our procedural text.

At the end of the experience, you can list all of the things we learned. That way, parents can see how this is more than just a fun writing activity: how it teaches kids many skills that will support them as writers, now and for years to come.

All in all, this experience with parents takes about twenty minutes.

You might also provide tips, strategies, or conversation stems to help parents and families think about how to support their children as writers. When I work with parents, I often have them think back to when their child was learning to walk. During that experience, the parent was the primary teacher, so it’s helpful for them to think about a time when they taught and supported their child when they were learning something big—like walking. I
ask parents to jot down what they did or what they said as they were teaching their child to walk. Parents are usually struck with the notion that most of what they said was praise and encouragement—even when the child “failed” by falling down after just a few steps. In fact, most parents realize that when their child fell down, instead of correcting them, sighing, or rolling their eyes, they simply picked them up, dusted their diaper, and said something like, “That’s okay. That’s part of learning to walk. Let’s try again!”

By showing parents how to channel that same positivity, encouragement, and support, we can guide them on how to help their children learn to write. Parents, families, and teachers can be a powerful partnership!

Here are some conversation stems that could be shared with parents and families:

- Look at how much you’ve written!
- Can you show me your favorite part of your writing so far?
- Wow! You worked really hard on this!
- Is there any support you need from me?
- What are you most proud of so far in your writing?
- Thank you for sharing this with me. I love listening to you share your writing.
- What is your next step in this piece?

In the same way, you might clearly tell parents what is not helpful:

- making kids look up words in the dictionary to check their spelling
- actively serving as a copy editor of the child’s writing
- rewriting it for the child
- making your child edit a piece and then rewrite it
- circling all of the mistakes in spelling, punctuation, or grammar

Additionally, it might be helpful to encourage parents to take a deep breath and know that they don’t need to create a Pinterest-perfect learning space for their child to engage in writing. Instead, you might encourage parents to talk to their child and find out where they like to be when writing.
Children can write:

- at the kitchen table
- sitting outside under a tree
- at a desk
- on a beanbag
- lying on their bed or floor
- snuggled under a blanket on the couch
- anywhere where the child feels comfortable while still being alert.

(For more ideas about creating a safe and daily space for writing, see chapter 3.)

**Keep It Simple**

It was a grey and drizzly morning in mid-April this year when I was making toast for my youngest son. As soon as I heard the toast pop up, I opened up the microwave and stared inside for a full minute wondering where the dang toast was.

That morning, like so many mornings this spring, my mind felt like a computer with twenty-four tabs open at once.

*Did I remember to answer that email for work? Does my eighth grader have his Zoom meeting for band today, or is that on Tuesday? Shoot! I was supposed to fill out that form for the school. I have a conference call at 9:00, but my youngest has a class meeting at that time. Maybe we can both use headphones so that we don’t distract each other? Wait, did I feed the dog?*

I was exhausted from too much meal prep and dishes and “proctoring” school for my kids while also trying to gather up the remnants of my own work. I didn’t have the mental or emotional bandwidth to deal with much.

I’m guessing that I wasn’t alone. I’m guessing that some of you reading this might be feeling the same way right now. I’m wondering if, during this school year, many parents, kids, and teachers will find themselves in a mental state which might lead them to stare into a vacant microwave, wondering where the toast is.

May I encourage you (okay, **beg** you) to *keep things simple.* For the families you serve, for the kids, and for **yourself,** keep things really, really
simple. I think there are very few kids, parents, and teachers who are needing or wanting instruction and experiences that are complicated or fancy. To be clear, simple doesn’t mean watered-down; it means streamlined, purposeful, and unfussy. If you find that the systems you’re setting up for students and families require lengthy and repeated explanations, that students are spending more time trying to figure out your directions than actually writing, or the “quick guidelines” you’ve written have stretched on to nearly a page, it’s time to simplify your plans. (Yes, even if the lesson you had in mind might have been beautiful, if only you could have managed to get everyone onboard.)

Perhaps it might help to keep these questions close when you plan writing lessons and experiences this year:

- **Is it meaningful?** Is what I’m about to ask my students to do meaningful, or is it simply a writing “task”?

- **Is it purposeful?** Is the writing I’m asking students to do serving a purpose other than simply checking a box to say that we did it? Is this writing going to impact an actual reader inside or outside the classroom?

- **Is this something that real writers do?** Do all writers fill out a graphic organizer each time they write? Do real writers re-copy everything they write until it is correct? Do published writers write in five-paragraph form? If it’s not something that actual writers do, then it’s probably not meaningful or purposeful either.

- **Would I be engaged in this work?** Is this an experience that I would enjoy doing? If not, chances are that students won’t enjoy it either.

**Keep the Humanity of Kids in Mind**

When we return to school (however school is structured or however it might look), kids will have been through quite a bit—COVID-19 and its aftermath, yes, but also a divided country and systemic inequalities that have been further exposed and deepened by the pandemic. This is not a business-as-usual kind of school year. While kids might not be carrying physical backpacks to a physical
space like a classroom, you can be sure that many of them are carrying the weightiness of what they have endured or are still enduring.

As teachers, we are in the business of looking out for kids’ well-being—not just their academic achievement. So this year, in particular, be mindful of the human beings in front of you. Center the student, rather than the content. Be on the lookout for ways in which our new ways of doing things this year might create or sustain inequities. Ask questions. Listen, really listen to kids. Respect their experiences and their voices. Help them see writing as a vehicle of power, a way to tell their stories, and perhaps a way to heal.

I am reminded of the words of Toni Morrison: “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”

Keep Your Own Humanity in Mind

Friends, there is not one shred of evidence that shows a positive correlation between the hours that you work and student success. And, when all this is over, there will be no prize for who worked the hardest. We just might be gearing up for a marathon, not a sprint. So, start now to develop some self-care routines, some solid boundaries, and some positive practices in your own life. These aren’t just nice ideas or selfish behaviors. If we, as teachers, let ourselves become depleted and joyless, school might become a joyless experience for kids. We owe it to ourselves and the kids we serve.

Here are just a few things to consider:

- Set office hours and stick to them. When “work” is done, close your laptop and do something that fills your soul. Take a walk, paint, read, cook, watch Netflix, play catch with your kids, pet your dog, etc.
- Read a book—for fun. Get lost in a romance or a mystery or a historical fiction book. Listen to an audiobook while you take a walk. Savor the rich language and stories from other writers.
- Write, even if it’s only a sentence or two. Each day, jot down something for which you are grateful for or something funny that a kid said. Send a thank you note. Send a postcard to the parents of your
students. (This could be stretched out over several days so you are only writing one postcard a day.) Start to see yourself as a writer—one who writes—and share that writing life with your students.

- Take a breath. And another. And another.
- Ask for help and support. No one is expecting this year to be easy. We need each other. Ask for help and support. Offer help and support to others.
- Show yourself (and others) loving kindness. Don’t strive for perfection. Be kind to yourself for showing up and doing hard things. Be kind to others; they are showing up and doing hard things, too.
- Make peace with failure. I recently heard someone talking about learning how to confer with writers remotely. He said, “I’ve learned how to fail and be okay with it.” None of us like this truth, but failure teaches us so much. In my office, I’ve displayed these words: “Fail. Learn. Move on.” It’s the reminder to myself to make peace with failure, brush myself off, and try again. That’s how we learn.

In her picture book, *The Day You Begin*, Jacqueline Woodson writes:

> There will be times when the world feels like a place
> that you’re standing all the way outside of...
> And all that stands beside you is
> your own brave self—
> steady as steel and ready
> even though you don’t yet know
> what you’re ready for.
> (2018)

*The Day You Begin* is often a book we read to our students. But today, friend, Woodson is speaking to you and me, both. We may not yet know what we’re ready for, but this year we can be brave and “steady as steel” in our resolve to support our students as writers and as humans.
REFERENCES

