

The Writer's Notebook

Use this activity to improve your students' literacy skills

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If you want to see an immediate, almost magical improvement in your students' writing skills, add the Writer's Notebook to your curriculum. A Writer's Notebook is a blank book in which a writer gathers ideas and plays with language. Keeping a notebook allows struggling as well as advanced students to practice fast-paced, timed, on-demand writing pieces that boost confidence and unblock internal sensors.

In addition, these notebook sessions build a sense of community among students and provide teachers with many on-the-spot formative assessment opportunities. Minimal preparation is required for teachers to execute lessons that provide big payoffs in literacy improvement for students.

There are two basic sections in a Writer's Notebook: the collections and the quick/free writes (quick writes are three-minute writing sessions; free write sessions can be as long as 12 minutes).

Collections, quick writes and free writes

Here are some things students can collect in their notebooks:

- Lists of life experiences that stir emotions
- Borrowed lines from stories, poems or news articles

- Favorite words and topics
- Photographs
- Quotes
- Character names
- News clippings and magazine pictures.

Many of these collections will become resources for students to use in speculative, persuasive and personal choice writings throughout the year.

Here are some quick and free writes students can use in conjunction with or separate from their collection entries:

- Writing in response to music
- Writing about random objects
- Writing from self-selected photographs
- Writing during nature walks
- Writing using transition stems
- Writing after guided fantasies
- Writing as a reaction to visual cues.

Quick writes allow students to practice fluency in timed writing situations, reveal students' natural voices, and provide non-threatening revision and redrafting opportunities. Some of the skills that are practiced in Writer's Notebook sessions include: generating believable dialogue, developing strong characters, using sophisticated transitions, selecting powerful verbs, and creating hyphenated modifiers.

One of the most difficult aspects of writing for students is the revision process. Using a Writer's Notebook makes the revision process a snap. As students read their writings, they decide which

lines to keep, delete or change. Students are asked to connect to the five senses when they write while including strong verbs and vocabulary words. Each line must match or exceed the power of the last line. Lines that do not maintain the power of the piece are either deleted or revised. By using *Synonym Finder* by J.I. Rodale, students will find a plethora of words to make the revision process fun and educational.

Sample lessons

Develop a Story Around a Word—

Place a word on an index card (e.g. rain, fire, run). Have each student select an index card from the pile. Tell students that they have three minutes to write an opening to a story using the selected word. Have students share completed openings with a partner. Or for a different approach, after students have written the opening using the word, have them switch notebooks with another student and have the students continue their classmate's story for one minute. The book will then be returned to the original owner. Book switching will continue until the teacher ends the writing session.

What skills will be developed as a result of this lesson? The practice prompt that was released by the state last year asked students to develop a character and solve a problem. The random word

exercise assists students in developing characters and finding solutions for their conflicts.

Using a Name for Character

Development—Write down the first and last names of characters that could appear in a story. Have students select a name (e.g. Beau Savage, Tiffany Chappelle). In each Writer's Notebook, students will become the character first by generating phrases to describe themselves and then by developing their character in narrative form. You may have students become the characters and act out how the character would behave in a scene incorporating the setting of your choice.

What are your expected outcomes for this lesson? Kids will develop strong voices in their writing as they take on the personae of the characters.

Using Pictures to Develop Settings in

Stories—Have students bring in a picture of a setting and/or have a selection of pictures on index cards available for student use. Then utilizing the five senses, students will write descriptions in their Writer's Notebook. Adjectives and strong verbs should be used in each line for each sense. For instance, if the picture is of a forest fire, the student may see red flames dance around the tree trunk and engulf the surrounding leaves. In a future lesson, the student can highlight the verbs and adjectives and replace weaker choices using a synonym finder or thesaurus.

What skills will be developed as a result of this lesson? Students will use settings to develop conflict rather than simply identifying time and place. Additionally, students make reading and writing connections as they analyze how setting drives the plot.

The big payoff

I first used Writer's Notebook to reinforce and teach new writing techniques in 2007. Students looked forward to using and sharing their writings. I didn't realize the full impact of the Writer's Notebook activities until the following September when former students shared recent writings from their eighth grade language arts class. Within these writings were all of the compositional risks and advanced writing techniques that I had taught through Writer's Notebook. The pieces were high school level writings. Each of the students said that Writer's

Notebook was the vehicle that enabled them make these advanced writing techniques part of their writing style. It just doesn't get any better than that!

For more information on Writer's Notebook activities, visit the Galloway Township Public School's blog at www.gtpsblogs.org. To view a PowerPoint explaining the Writer's

Notebook Project, click on "What is Writer's Notebook?" Our district welcomes your comments on the blog as you use Writer's Notebook with your students. You will also find a list of resources we have used in developing this and other strategies.

Through our company, Secrets of Teaching, LLC, we have developed materials to use in conjunction with Writer's Notebooks. They include Content Area Cards, Transition Theater Tickets, Character Strips and Content Area Card Posters. Descriptions of these resources, ordering and price information can be found at www.SecretsofTeaching.com.

We also offer opportunities for professional development for teachers of students in grades 5–12. Workshop topics include: Using the Writer's Notebook to Spike State Test Scores, Engaging Grammar Lessons, Literature Circle that Students Love, Fun with Holistic Scoring, Tips and Tricks for Crafting Powerful Narrative Writings, Revision Strategies That Work, Tips and Tricks for Crafting Powerful Persuasive Pieces, and Bloom's Taxonomy for the 21st Century.

Lifelong writers will emerge through the consistent use of Writer's Notebook. Students will internalize the skills and writing techniques to develop their own unique voices. 🏠

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Galloway Township teachers Janice Malone and Michele Fishman (l-r) started Secrets of Teaching, LLC to focus on the advancement of literacy. Visit their district's Writer's Notebook blog at www.gtpsblogs.org.

credits and have many years of experience at all levels of education. In 2008, they started Secrets of Teaching, LLC, a team of veteran teachers, teacher trainers and design consultants. The company's major focus is the advancement of literacy across the content areas. Fishman and Malone can be reached at info@secretsofteaching.com.

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