Make Every Minute Count

Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery.
–Henry Miller

Am I making the best use of children’s time? Everywhere, teachers are overwhelmed with how to find time to write each day, conference with each child, meet the needs of writers who struggle, challenge the “good” writers, and incorporate more reading and writing into math, science, and social studies. Most teachers understand that extensive opportunities for sustained writing are essential if all students are to become fluent and willing writers who do well in school.

If we are to find the extended time that’s necessary for sustained writing, we have to be smart about how we use and manage the time we have. Typically, we feel so pressured with the limited time we do have that we may commit to instructional activities we don’t truly value. We need to stop and reflect.

I want to free you up so you have time to thoughtfully consider what’s most important to teach. In this way, you will become a wiser, more efficient, and successful teacher. What’s more, you will reclaim the time you need to live your life more fully.

I enter school each day full with the anticipation of joyful learning that teaching makes possible. I know as a teacher the incredible opportunity I have to impact children’s lives and influence their future. First I have to reach each child’s heart, and so I have to open mine. While I do leave my problems behind once I enter the classroom and focus exclusively on children and learning, I do share with my students what I can of my life—and what is appropriate to share. If I am to be an effective teacher, our hearts have to connect as well as our minds.

The students and teachers I work with know that my dad lives nearby in a nursing home, that Frank and I are with him many hours every week, that we try to enrich his life as best we can. They know I am a good cook, that in the summer I especially love to make fruit pies, tarts, and preserves, that I love picking wild blackberries, and creating my own recipes. They know that I have two granddaughters that delight me, that I have an extensive collection of books that I have carefully organized, that I love to walk, that I like to garden and love flowers, that my most favorite thing to do is go to a farmer’s market, that my friends matter to me and I make time for them, that I do little email but write lots of letters. They know I love to read because I bring in the books I have recently read and am reading. They know about my life as a writer because I show them my letters about to be mailed, poems, drafts, and I talk about how and why I write. Little by little,

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**teaching tip**

*Share the Secrets of Good Writers*

Let students know that writing can be hard but that there are “secrets” that good writers know. Tell them about and model some of these secrets, and post them on a classroom chart. Keep the chart posted all year; as students “discover” their own secrets, they can add them or create their own list.
I share my “Secrets of Good Writers” with them (see below) and we create our own chart. Mostly, they come to know I am a person with hopes, fears, joys, hardships—just like them. Connecting our hearts and minds and lives in and out of school makes teaching and learning easier and richer. We are not just teachers of curriculum. We are also life role models, striving to make our time with students count.

### SECRETS OF GOOD WRITERS

- Think about their writing all the time (not just while they are writing).
- Reread as they go. It helps their thinking.
- Read the piece aloud to hear how it really sounds.
- Read a lot, read quality literature, and read like a writer, noticing what authors do.
- Get their behinds in the chair every day and write.
- Often write best in a quiet, organized space.
- Stick with it even when the going gets rough.
- Don’t always love to write but love having written.
- Get feedback from other writers.
- Write with their reader in mind.
- Are relentless about accuracy: facts, conventions, form.
- Revise as they go along, not just after they have written.
- Know a lot about their topic, or find out what they need to know.
- Write to figure out what they want to say.

### Look into Their Eyes

After my dad had his stroke, he lay immobile except for a few brief moments each day when he opened his eyes. I looked into those eyes and I knew he was “in there.” His spirit, his soul, his wanting to live, were in those expressive brown eyes. I saw it immediately and never doubted that his mind was mostly okay. And so I treated him as such, talking to him with dignity, with encouragement, and above all with the belief that he was an intelligent person, not just a critically ill patient. I read to him from The New York Times every day because that was his daily habit. I used news and sports stories to talk to him about what was happening in the world, pique his interest, and stimulate his brain.

I wrote a one-page biography about him, who he was, how he had lived and worked, what he loved to do, how dear his family was to him. I gave a copy to everyone who worked with him. “Talk to my dad,” I told all the caregivers. “He is a very smart man.” I knew if he was to “recover,” it would happen through personal connections, through nurses and aides “seeing” the intelligent person behind the disability.

When I work in schools, I look into children’s and teachers’ eyes seeking to find learners who love what they do and who find energy in joyful work. I notice especially the sad, tired,
defeated eyes that speak of failure, exhaustion, and heartbreak. If my time in schools is going
to matter, if I’m going to help learners experience hope, risk taking, success, and enjoyment,
then I have to spend time meeting those eyes and giving them reasons to smile. I have to
believe I can make a difference.

One way for us to bring more joy and success into our lives in and out of school is to be
picky about how we spend our time. Although there are always the non-negotiables
(curriculum, standards, district requirements), we do have choices about how we spend our
time teaching writing and other subjects.

Conserve Your Energy

The next time you plan a project, grade a stack of papers, create a center, ask yourself, Is this
the best use of my time? Is what I’m about to do going to help my students become more joyful
and accomplished readers, writers, and thinkers? It might be that the best use of your time is
to read a professional book, see a movie, visit with a friend. Sharing that experience with your
students may be a more useful way to get them to think about their writing than marks and
comments on a paper.

Then, too, we sometimes tire our students before they write with all the planning,
modeling, talking, and setting out of requirements. Be sure that most of your writing time is
devoted to writing, not preparing for writing or doing activities about writing. Safeguard
sustained writing time; it’s critical for becoming a writer. (For our youngest writers, that
writing time may be mostly shared writing and demonstrating, until they know enough to
write on their own.)

Reduce the Paper Load

It’s hard to come to school all excited about teaching if you’ve spent hours the night
before poring over papers. I believe we do ourselves and our students a disservice
if our out-of-school time is all about paperwork.

Put more responsibility on students—for organizing the classroom library,
taking over most of the editing of written work, doing classroom jobs, and setting
their own goals for reading and writing. Of course, you have to show them how to
do these things first and support them along the way, but once they are more inde-
pendent, you are freed up to think about the profession of teaching and not the
labor of teaching.

Limit the Work You Take Home

In the elementary grades, I do almost all the writing work in school. Rest assured
that you are not neglecting your job as an effective teacher of writing. Teachers’
comments on students’ papers do little to improve writing, even if the comments
are positive ones. For the most part, students ignore our written corrections and
suggestions. It is far more effective to conference with students and focus on
specific writing issues with the student at your side.

For teachers in grades where the student load is too great to do that, limit
writing comments on papers to one issue, for example, organization or spelling. We
teachers tend to comment on everything, but when comments are limited, students
are more likely to pay attention and make some improvement. Writing fewer
comments is a big timesaver, too.
Limit take-home work for students too, and place more emphasis on free-choice reading. Having more reading experiences positively impacts growth in writing skills.

_Eliminate (or Reduce) Daily Worksheets and Isolated Exercises_

My experience has been that the more knowledgeable teachers become about teaching writing, the less they rely on isolated exercises. Lots of teachers assign such work at the beginning of the day or before writing time. It’s not that such work is wrong or bad; the payoff isn’t big enough for the time involved, and students’ attitudes about writing can be negatively affected. (See Marquita’s letter, page 32.) There is no research that shows that doing isolated skills work improves writing (or reading). “Those taught well enough to complete grammatical exercises without error do not therefore write either better or more accurately.”

If you feel the need for daily oral language exercises, try composing the sentences with your students rather than using a commercial program. Your own sentences—connected to students’ lives and curriculum—will be far more meaningful and engaging.

Carefully observe whether or not your students are transferring isolated skills work to contextualized writing. If not, rethink your teaching practices.

Take note (through observations, conferences, shared writing, district guidelines, standards) what skills you need to teach, and teach them through writing aloud, shared writing, minilessons, whole-class share.

Evaluate how much time you spend introducing discrete skills. Teachers whose students do lots of extended writing (and have high achievement) do not spend a lot of class time teaching discrete skills.

_Be Choosy About What You Read_

When I am working in schools that depend on basal texts and programs for reading and writing, I am respectful of those resources and show teachers how I might use those materials with children. Usually, it takes me hours to read through the publisher’s notes to teachers. Writing and reading are often broken into so many pieces that I am quickly exhausted and overwhelmed by the volume of reading required to access all the teaching points and suggestions. Even for new teachers, I recommend spending more time on professional reading that increases teacher knowledge and ability to make wise curriculum decisions and less time on directive and prescriptive materials and programs.

_Ask So What?_

So, you spent hours creating a fabulous learning center, project, assignment, bulletin board, or writing report cards. (The last one is a sticky one.) Did that effort pay off in improved learning for students? I always ask _so what?_ with the teaching and assessing work I do. Just because the kids enjoyed it and everyone participated doesn’t mean it was a worthwhile activity. Ask yourself, _How did what we do help students become more competent, confident, and independent as literacy learners?_
IMPORTANT TIMESAVERS

- Schedule writing every day or at least on consecutive days (see sample writing schedules on pages 185–186). This saves time getting back to work in progress. (If you schedule writing early in the day, you’re more likely to get it in.)

- Limit the use of prompts that have no real audience (such as, “Write a letter to the author telling him one thing you would change about the story”).

- Provide more choice of writing topics. Students write more easily about something they’re interested in.

- Integrate test preparation.

- Teach basic skills in context.

- Teach students to revise and edit as they go; this saves time later on.

- Expect high-frequency words to be correctly spelled. This saves correction time and aids speed of writing.

- Expect legible handwriting. This saves time for your students and for you.

- Encourage invented spellings within reasonable, agreed-on guidelines. This speeds up writing and encourages broader use of words.

- Use parents (carefully selected and trained) as final editors in the classroom.

- Tell students why—make writing purpose understood. Students will invest more in their writing.

MY BEST ADVICE

Here are my top ten suggestions for fitting writing into the fabric of your classroom every day and keeping it manageable and enjoyable:

1. Keep it short (modeling, requirements, assignments).
2. Keep it simple (directions, routines, assignments).
3. Slow it down. (Write “small”; less is more.)
4. Start with the whole. (Focus first on meaningful content.)
5. Move on. (In shared writing, accept any reasonable response and continue.)
6. Teach it first. Label it later. (See pages 195, 230.)
7. Trust yourself as a writer and as a teacher of writing.
8. Stop when energy is high.
9. Use common sense.
10. Enjoy writing!
Live Your Life

Finally, don’t forget to breathe. With all the time you’ve saved, relax and enjoy writing—and your life. One way to reduce stress and have more energy for teaching and advocacy is to have a life outside of school. I worry about teachers and principals who work twelve-hour days. I have seen no research that shows that educators who work the longest hours get the best results or that longer reading and writing projects teach more about reading and writing. Keep evaluating whether what you’re staying late for—or the hours of work you take home—will help your students become more effective readers and writers.

You may be better off doing fewer elaborate projects and more thinking and reading, taking more time for conversations and outings with colleagues, family, and friends.

Take time to see the light.
Write Your Own Ending

As I was writing the final chapters of this book, I received a letter from a very happy second-grade teacher: “I have loved every minute of writing this year! The biggest change for me is making the writing meaningful for my students.” She then described how her students had just finished writing and publishing “The Game Book.” Earlier in the year the school principal had asked the teachers to find ways to help students follow playground rules better. This teacher had shared that request with her second graders, who suggested, on their own, writing a book about how to play some new playground games. “There’s not enough to do at recess,” they reasoned, “so kids get in trouble.” After the book had been drafted, a fourth-grade class, supervised by the physical

Dear Mrs. Jennings,

Our class decided to make a playground book for our BBC friends. Some of the students at our school can’t find anything to do at recess or they are complaining about students that are not following the rules of games. We thought we could create “The Game Book” to help the students while working on our writing skills. We would like to ask for some money to pay for all the equipment needed for some of the games. We need:

- 1 small nerf ball $4.00
- 5 hula hoops $25.00
- 20 small tennis balls $4.00
- 2 playground balls $8.00
- 8 bean bags $11.00
- 1 stuffed pig $4.00
- 10 cones $6.00
- 2 soccer balls $10.00
- 4 bases $8.00
- 1 state map $3.00
- 1 toy bone $2.00
- 1 large container $8.00

**Total money needed:** $93.00

We know this is a lot of money! We think having a game book with organized games and equipment would make our school a better place. Students would use their lifeskills of cooperation, friendship, and common sense while having a blast at recess. We would appreciate any help you can give us with this book. Thank you for all you do!

Your friends,
The Writers of 108
This field test produced a number of suggestions to make the writing clearer. It also revealed that the school didn’t have the equipment needed to play some of the games. Undaunted, the second-grade authors researched the cost of the necessary equipment, drew up a suggested budget, and wrote a persuasive letter to the principal. They explained why the new games were necessary and broke out the cost of each piece of missing equipment. (Their letter is reproduced below.) The principal, impressed with their carefully considered argument, granted their request and arranged for the equipment to be purchased.

When the printed book came back from the district print shop and the new equipment arrived, the school had a big celebration. Each of these second graders, every classroom in the school, the principal, and all the playground supervisors got a copy of the book. The second graders then went on to introduce “The Game Book” to the rest of the students in person. Enlisting the help of a class of fifth graders who needed an end-of-the-year service project, they created across-grade teams, coached by the principal, and the teams made presentations in every classroom on how to play each of the games safely.

These students took the initiative to use writing to accomplish a worthwhile goal, and their teacher instilled in them the skill and confidence to carry it off. Writing as thinking and problem solving has become part of who they are as learners. Their teacher marveled, “I have never been involved in a writing project that my kids were so invested in and where they actually saw the power of the pen.”

I especially love telling this story because it took place in a school in which, several years before, the teachers’ greatest concern in relation to student writing had been getting high test scores. For the most part, the teachers were not knowledgeable about how to teach writing well, there was no schoolwide collaboration or vision, and writing was the first activity to go when they were pressed for time. Now writing is routinely used as a way of getting things done and is central to all teaching and learning.

Yes, the school also has high test scores now, but they have so much more. They have kids who love to write and know how to write for themselves, for genuine purposes, and for valued audiences. They have a principal and teachers who work as a team to increase their knowledge and confidence as writers and teachers of writing.

Writing empowers us as teachers, as students, as learners. When we have the knowledge and confidence to use our own voice to ask hard questions, examine our practices, and advocate for change, amazing things can and do happen. When we are open to possibilities and committed to excellence, kids soar as writers. As one teacher said after seeing what her students were capable of writing, “I see a lot of potential I didn’t see before.”

Take the lead in seeing that excellent teaching of writing is at the heart of your school’s culture. Go where the excitement and the promise are. They are not in programs, scripts, drills, or story starters. They are in poetry, in the stories of our lives. They are in our collaborative thinking, the celebration of our successes, the joy we discover as writers and readers. These are the essentials. Don’t settle for anything less.