

# *The Write Genre*

Classroom activities and mini-lessons that promote writing with  
clarity, style and flashes of brilliance

LORI JAMISON ROG

PAUL KROPP

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# Contents

## **Introduction** 7

Writing with Purpose and Audience in Mind 7

A Framework for Teaching Many Genres of Text 8

## **1: How Writers Really Write – The Writing Process** 10

No One-Draft Wonders 11

Pre-writing 12

Drafting 13

Revising 14

Your Best Revision Tool: The TAG Conference 16

Editing 17

Publishing 18

*Reproducible Resources* 20

## **2: How Students Learn to Write – The Writing Workshop** 26

Elements of the Writing Workshop 26

Organizing the Writing Workshop 28

Frequently Asked Questions 29

*Reproducible Resources* 34

## **3: Using Rubrics for Writing Instruction and Assessment – The Six Traits** 36

What Makes “Good” Writing? 36

Ideas and Content 37

Organization 38

Voice 38

Word Choice 39

Sentence Fluency 39

Conventions 40

How to Use the Six Traits Rubrics 41

*Reproducible Resources* 42

## **4: Telling Their Own Story – The Personal Memoir** 47

Immerse Students in the Genre 49

Pre-writing 49

Drafting 53

Revising 54

Editing and Publishing 57

*Student Writing* 59

*Reproducible Resources* 63

<b>5: Our Plot Thickens – The Fictional Narrative</b>	<b>67</b>
The Difference Between Fictional Narrative and Memoir	67
Reading as Writers	69
What Drives a Story?	70
Pre-writing	71
Drafting	74
Exploring the Elements of Fiction	76
Revising	80
Editing and Publishing	82
<i>Student Writing</i>	84
<i>Reproducible Resources</i>	88
<b>6: Just the Facts, Ma’am – The Informational Report</b>	<b>93</b>
The Importance of Process in Informational Writing	94
Strategies for Reading Nonfiction Texts	94
Pre-writing	96
Drafting	99
Revising	100
Editing and Publishing	102
<i>Student Writing</i>	103
<i>Reproducible Resources</i>	106
<b>7: What Do They Really Think? – The Opinion Piece</b>	<b>111</b>
Understanding What’s Fact and What’s Opinion	112
Taking a Position	113
Techniques for Persuasion	114
Issues to Write About	115
Pre-writing	116
Drafting	118
Revising	119
Editing and Publishing	119
<i>Student Writing</i>	120
<i>Reproducible Resources</i>	122
<b>8: Doing It My Way – Procedural Writing</b>	<b>126</b>
Reading “How-to” Texts	127
The Challenge of Clear Directions	128
Pre-writing	130
Drafting	132
Revising	133
Editing and Publishing	134
<i>Student Writing</i>	136
<i>Reproducible Resources</i>	139

**9: More Than Rhyme Time – Poetry 141**

- Marinate Students in the Genre* 142
- Teaching the “Tools” of Poetry 143
- The Writing Process in Poetry 147
- Student Writing* 151

**10: Putting It All Together – The Multi-genre Project 153**

- Teaching the Multi-genre Project 153
- From Conception to Celebration 155
- Evaluating the Multi-genre Project 158
- Student Project Outlines* 159
- Reproducible Resources* 162

**Annotated Bibliography 164**

**Index 166**

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# Introduction

Think about the kinds of writing you do in your life: reports, notes, memos, instructions, lists, business proposals, agendas, reference letters, resumés, calendars . . . the list is long. As adults, all of us are writers, but we're primarily writers of nonfiction. Even in our house, where Paul makes his living writing novels for young adults, he spends much of his day on many other kinds of writing. What does a working novelist do when he's not working on a book? He writes reports, notes, memos, instructions, lists, business proposals, agendas, letters, resumés and calendars.

Our point is simple. If our goal as teachers is to provide students with lifelong literacy skills, we must ensure that they are exposed to a variety of forms and genres of text. Although most of the reading and writing we do in elementary school is narrative, most of the reading and writing we do as adults is expository. Both types of writing are important for our students to become successful writers throughout their lives.

## **Writing with Purpose and Audience in Mind**

All of us write best when we have a purpose for writing and we know someone is going to read what we've written. When we want to remember four or five things to pick up at the grocery store after school, we write a list, not a descriptive paragraph. When we write a letter of complaint to the manufacturer of a defective product, we describe the problem and outline our requirements for compensation; we don't send a poem. When we send a postcard to a friend, we write a short vacation memoir, not a professional resumé.

If student writing is to be purposeful and "authentic," our students must learn the structures, formats, language and style that are most appropriate for the writing tasks they will ultimately face. Our job is to teach them how.

When Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins and other teacher-researchers began to tell us about a writer's process more than a decade ago, many of us interpreted their advice as a hands-off approach

to writing instruction. We saw our role as teachers to create the environment, provide the opportunity to write, and offer response to what was written. Decisions about topic and genre, revision and editing, and publishing or not lay solely in the hands of the student.

As a result, many of our students were writing a lot *more*, but not necessarily writing a lot *better*.

While we still advocate student ownership and choice, we now know that a “balanced” writing program must include instruction in the elements of both craft and conventions. This instruction may take the form of brief mini-lessons or longer maxi-lessons, may be done with the whole class or by individual coaching, and should be presented in a variety of styles and formats. But, whatever form your lesson takes, it should be directly connected to a meaningful writing experience. For students to become better writers, they need an immediate opportunity to practise what is taught and enough time to craft purposeful writing that someone is actually going to read.

As with all aspects of your language arts program, *balance* is the key to effective teaching and learning. Balanced writing instruction includes full-scale assignments carried through all stages of the writing process, as well as short exercises to practise a skill and to encourage fluency and experimentation. But teacher-directed assignments are only one component of the balanced writing program. Students must also have opportunities to engage in self-selected writing and writing to learn.

Whatever the writing form or genre, it must be explicitly taught, carefully modeled and extensively practised in a safe and supportive writing environment. This, and this alone, will make your students better writers.

A balanced writing program has three key elements:

- assigned writing
- self-selected writing
- writing to learn

## A Framework for Teaching Many Genres of Text

*The Write Genre* is designed to help teachers organize their writing programs around the text forms that our children will be using for the rest of their lives. We use the word “genre” to identify the following six kinds of text:

- personal memoir
- fictional narrative
- informational report
- opinion writing
- procedural writing
- poetry

In this book, we offer tools and techniques, ideas and mini-lessons for teaching each of these genres within the framework of the writing process.

The first two chapters contain ideas for implementing a process approach to writing and ways to organize your classroom routines for success. Chapter 3 describes the Six Traits rubric, a powerful tool that links assessment and instruction. Chapters 4 to 9 are organized around systematic teaching and practice in each of the six featured genres. The final chapter describes a unique culminating activity – the multi-genre project – that will give your students a chance to work with all the text forms you’ve taught them through the year.

In every chapter, we offer ideas for pre-writing, drafting, revising and publishing. More than 50 mini-lessons are provided to help teachers present aspects of process, style and craft. Each chapter concludes with a set of reproducible resource pages that may be used as posters or as teaching aids for classroom use.

Student writing samples are also included in each genre chapter. These are models – both good and not-so-good – of what students have written. The samples may be reproduced to give your own students practice in revising someone else’s work.

In *The Write Genre*, we have integrated a Writing Workshop approach with systematic instruction in a wide variety of writing tasks. In each chapter, we provide the scaffolds that students need in order to understand how writing differs for different purposes and audiences. Throughout, our book is designed to give you lessons to hone the craft of writing in many genres.

Not all of your students will grow up to write eloquent articles for national magazines or professional journals, but they can all learn to write with clarity, style and flashes of brilliance. It all begins with good teaching.

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