

# Writing Power

*Engaging Thinking Through Writing*

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# Introduction

“To have great poets, there must be great audiences too.”  
—Walt Whitman

When I was in elementary school, writing consisted of one double period on Thursday afternoon referred to as “creative writing.” In this double period we all wrote on the same topic: “My Summer,” “Pets,” “Halloween,” “My Friend,” etc. “Creative writing” did not include instruction from the teacher on any aspects of the craft of writing, nor were we read a carefully selected picture book that reflected a particular trait we would then try to integrate into our own writing. No planning, brainstorming, or pre-writing took place. One could say that, once a week, we were given a topic and then asked to do what would, by today’s standards, be considered a “cold write.” At the end of the double period, a few of us would be selected to read aloud our quietly crafted pieces of writing. Then papers would be handed in and the red pen of the teacher would scratch, circle, underline, and highlight all the spelling, punctuation, and grammar mistakes. These mistakes were counted and would be the only factor in determining our grade. No editing was done. No consideration of style, voice, or word choice was given. Corrections were done and “good copies” were completed the next week.

Thankfully, we have come a long way since then. Thanks to the generous insight into the gift of writing and writing instruction from such fine educators as Donald Murray, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Georgia Heard, Shelley Harwayne, Ralph Fletcher, Joann Portalupi, and Ruth Culham—to name a few—writing is now considered a process rather than a product; writers are encouraged to draw from their own lives and experiences as sources of writing; literature is often used as a model for good writing; and, in terms of assessment and evaluation, value is placed as much on meaning, word choice, and ideas as on mechanics.

## Connecting Reading Power and Writing Power

While writing has always been a personal hobby, my passion has always been reading. My work over the past ten years has focused primarily on guiding teachers to find ways to enhance their reading instruction to include specific and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. Developing the Reading Power teaching practice was a way of taking a practical approach to a complex problem—helping our students become not just better readers of text, but also better thinkers of text. The shift from assigning and assessing comprehension questions to providing purposeful and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies has been a significant one that we might equate to the “big shift” that occurred in how we provide writing instruction.

It is both a blessing and a curse to be in a constant state of reflection. While I join the many thousands of teachers who revel in their comfort zone when it comes time to pull out a unit that I’ve taught 17 times before, Reading Power

would never have evolved had I not reflected on the fact that there were some serious gaps in my reading instruction. In fact, there was more than just a gap—I can say now, looking back, that my reading instruction was nonexistent. While no one would question the fact that I “did” reading with my students, I did little to teach reading. Recognizing that reading instruction should not end once students have acquired the ability to decode and that all teachers are responsible for providing explicit instruction in reading, no matter what grade they teach, was a revelation for me. The result of that revelation was determining what reading instruction, or more specifically comprehension instruction, might “look like.”

Reading Power was considered somewhat of a breakthrough for many teachers because it was new. There had been little in the way of comprehension instruction being implemented in many classrooms. Primary teachers focused their reading instruction on phonemic awareness, while intermediate teachers, for the most part, provided opportunities for their students to apply reading skills to projects, novel studies, and reading-response activities; however, explicit instruction in reading comprehension was rare. *Reading Power* provided teachers with a practical way into comprehension instruction.

Writing instruction, on the other hand, has already experienced many breakthroughs in the past 20 years. So much has been explored on the subject of teaching writing that one might now feel there is almost too much to choose from. The “big shift” that happened with reading comprehension in the last ten years occurred in the field of writing more than 30 years ago. Donald Graves’ research and revolutionary approach to writing instruction, known as the Writing Process, changed the face of writing instruction throughout North America and the world (Graves, 1975). Prior to this, writing in schools consisted of the “creative writing” classes I remember. Little or no writing instruction went into those writing periods, other than a strong emphasis on conventions and spelling. Donald Graves and his contemporaries, including Lucy Calkins and Ralph Fletcher, introduced us to a whole new world of writing as a process that included planning, drafting, editing, mini-lessons, conferencing, and nudging children to go deeper with a word or a thought, to use their own experiences and observations to write about. Writing instruction in schools was never the same.

The Traits of Writing (Hicks & Spandel, 1997) and/or 6+1 Traits (Culham, 2003) represent another significant breakthrough in writing instruction and assessment. This concept also changed the way teachers provide writing instruction by showing a system designed to teach students the craft of quality writing. Breaking down good writing into very specific traits, such as voice, organization, ideas, and conventions, has proven to be very effective in providing quality writing instruction and improving writing skills. The Write Traits model has been implemented throughout North America and, again, has changed the way teachers think about, plan, execute, and assess writing in their classrooms.

Both the writing process and the writing traits models have been instrumental in influencing the way teachers provide writing instruction in their classrooms. One could say that the writing process helped explain the *how* of writing—how to plan, draft, write, edit, etc.—and that the writing traits model helped explain the *what* of writing—what specific elements of good writing should be considered. But, as I do often when evaluating my teaching practice, I found myself thinking that something was missing. And what appeared to be missing was the *why* of writing.

Now this, I admit, feels like venturing into some uncharted territory. I acknowledge with gratitude the many professional resources already available

“The skill of writing is to create a context in which other people can think.”

—Edwin Schlossberg

Foundation of Reading Power	Foundation of Writing Power
<b>Metacognition:</b> an awareness of my own thinking	<b>Alocognition:</b> an awareness of others' thinking
Good readers are aware of their own thinking when they read. They know that in order to find meaning in what they are reading, they can make connections, visualize, ask questions, make inferences, and transform their thinking.	Good writers are aware that readers think while they read. As good writers, we want to ensure that our writing engages our readers and invites them to make connections, visualize, ask questions, make inferences, and transform their thinking.

### Lesson: What Writers Need to Know

BOOK by George Ella Lyon invites readers into the pages, asking the question: "Readers, look at the book you have just opened... what is it you hold in your hands?" It is no longer in print; however, if you can find it in your library, it can be a wonderful addition to this lesson.

Just as I encourage all teachers who use Reading Power in their classrooms to begin with an introductory lesson that introduces students to the overall concept of readers as thinkers and metacognition, I encourage the same to introduce the concept of Writing Power. I want students to understand the concept of alocognition, becoming more aware of *why* they write and that their readers are going to be *thinking* about their writing.

- Begin the lesson:

This year, we are going to be doing a lot of writing in our class. Today I want to spend a little bit of time talking about writers.

- Ask students, "Why do writer's write?" (You might get a wide range of answers here!) Explain to students that some people write diaries and journals, which is a private kind of writing. But, most often, writers write because they have ideas they want to share with other people.

The phrase "gifted me" originated from Carrie Gleason, extraordinary primary teacher at Admiral Seymour Elementary School. When one of her students writes something extraordinary or surprising, she will say, "\_\_\_\_\_ (student's name) gifted me with his/her writing today."

Writing is a way of giving a small piece of yourself to somebody else—and that somebody else is anybody who is going to read your writing. To me, a book is a gift from the writer. When I open up a book, it feels like I'm opening up a present—and I never know what the present might be. Sometimes the book is so good I feel as though it is the greatest present and I want to say thank you to the writer for "gifting me" with their words and their ideas.

Now I want to talk about readers for a minute. Readers are very important to writers. Writers need readers. Why? (because without readers, there would be nobody to read your writing) What do good readers do when they read?

(For those students familiar with Reading Power, this conversation can review the Reading Power strategies.)

When I read something funny I might laugh; I might cry or feel sad if I read something sad; I might feel suspense. When I read something, I might start making a connection, or visualizing, asking a question, or making an inference. I might even start to think about something in a different way. When I read, I *think!* Writing is very powerful because it invites readers to think. Good writers want their readers

to think; they want to write in such a way that their readers think, feel, laugh, cry, make connections, ask questions, visualize, infer, and transform their thinking. From now on, when we write, we are not only going to be thinking about *how* to write or *what* we write, but also *why* we write. We are going to be thinking about our readers and trying to make sure our writing invites them to think.

**Invitation**

If you are a dreamer, come in.  
 If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,  
 A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean  
 buyer...  
 If you're a pretender, come sit by my  
 fire,  
 For we have some flax golden tales  
 to spin.  
 Come in!  
 Come in!  
 —Shel Silverstein

- Read the poem “Invitation” by Shel Silverstein.
- With students, discuss who the invitation is from and who it is to. Discuss what “Come in! Come in!” means.
- Show a party invitation. Ask the students what it is, when they might get one.
- Explain that, like Shel Silverstein, you are going to be inviting your readers to think by making “thinking invitations” for them. Explain that a thinking invitation is an invitation to readers to think when they read your writing. Students can fold a blank sheet of paper twice to make an invitation. Students can either copy the information from the board or make up their own.

Cover: Come to a Thinking Party!

Inside

You are invited to a Thinking Party.

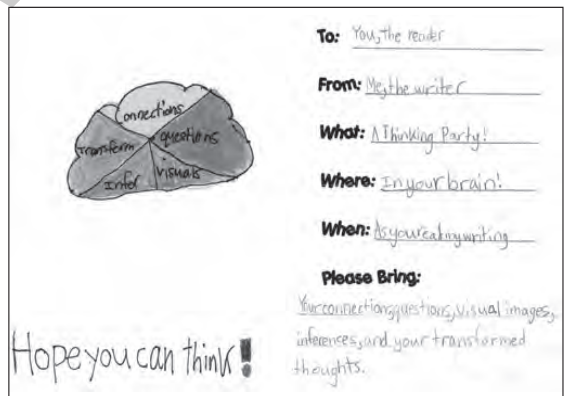
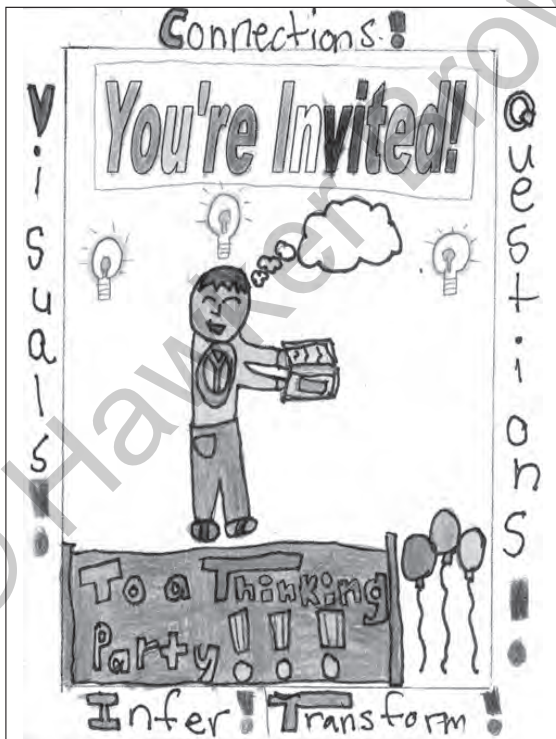
Where: Inside your head.

When: Whenever you read my writing

Please Bring: Your thinking! (connections, questions, visual images, inferences, transformed thoughts)

Hope you can come!

RSVP to \_\_\_\_\_ (student’s name)





Cheryl and Cassie were friends again.

(Explain that now the story is finished and that your reader was not left stranded at the top of the hill!)

Emergent writers would most likely still be writing in first person, but are certainly capable of writing a climbing story with some guidance.

- Students can begin writing their own story about friendship, using their planning sheets to help them generate some details and examples.

**Lessons 3 and 4**

See page 61.

Story Strip for Emergent Writers: My Friend \_\_\_\_\_

My friend _____ is ...	We like to...	One day...	Then...	Finally...
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This story strip is by a student in Grade 2.

Story Strip 3  
My Friend Sonia

My friend Sonia. She has long hair. Her hair is as dark as night. Maybe even darker.	We like to play video games together and we wanted to play a game we've met each other when we were 2 months old.	One day, we were fighting about a game we wanted to play. "I want this one!" I was very mad.	Then, I went to the kitchen. I thought for a moment: "Maybe I will let her choose. I don't mind..."	Finally, I let her choose the game. It was a fun game maybe I can choose the same one next time.
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**Connecting to a Sibling**

See the Connecting to a Sibling Planning Sheet on page 80.

You might wish to do a lesson similar to Connecting to a Friend, but focusing on connecting to a sibling rather than a friend. Students can use a walking or climbing structure for this writing piece. For lessons, see pages 68–70.

**Anchor Books for Connecting to a Sibling**

- Judy Bloom, *The Pain and the Great One* (I)
- Anthony Browne, *My Brother* (P)
- David MacPhail, *Sisters* (P)
- Patricia Polacco, *My Rotten-Red-Headed-Older-Brother* (I)

- Judith Viorst, *Super-Completely and Totally the Messiest* (P, I)
- Charlotte Zolotow, *Big Sister and Little Sister* (P)

## Connecting to a Bad Day

### Anchor Books for Connecting to a Bad Day

Julia Cook, *The Worst Day of My Life, Ever!* (P)

Eugenie Fernandez, *The Difficult Day* (P)

Tom Lichtenheld, *What are You So Grumpy About?* (I)

Steve Metzger, *Dinofours: I'm Having a Bad Day!* (P)

Amy Krouse Rosenthal, *One of Those Days* (I)

Judith Viorst, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (P)

**Narrative Power:** Walking or Climbing Story (students can choose)

**Technical Power:** Writing in the Third Person (p. 49); Anchor Lines (p. 47); Adding Details (p. 43)

### Lesson 1: Planning

- Remind students that you are working on writing that invites readers to make connections. Previous writing has included connecting to self, feelings, special grown-ups, friends. This week they will be focusing on connecting to something new.
- Share one or two of the suggested anchor books. Ask students to notice their own connections while you read. After reading, have students discuss and share a connection with a partner. Ask: What connections were you making? What did you notice about these books? (they are about bad days) Explain that almost everybody has bad days and that writing about your bad day will help readers make connections to a bad day they've had.
- Ask students to think about something that can turn a good day into a bad day. Record their ideas on the board or chart paper.

Getting in trouble at home or school

Losing something special

A special plan gets cancelled or doesn't work out

Losing an important game or not winning a prize

- Ask students to search their Memory Pockets for a bad day. Ask them to share the following with a partner:
  - When did it happen?
  - How did the day start?
  - What happened to turn it into a bad day?
  - How did you feel?
- Pass out the My Bad Day Planning Sheet (page 81) and invite students to record their ideas on it.

### Lesson 2: Writing

- Remind students that their writing focus this week is connecting to a bad day. Return their planning sheets and have students share them with a partner.
- Students can choose to write a climbing story about one particular bad day (like *A Difficult Day*) or a walking story describing a variety of bad day experiences (like *One of Those Days*). Remind them that, if they are writing a walking story, they will need to think about an anchor line (e.g., "... terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day!"). Stories can be written in third person or first person.

This lesson can be adapted or repeated by focusing on Connecting to My Best Day Ever. Anchor Book for Connecting to My Best Day Ever: Amy Krouse Rosenthal, *Yes Day!*