

Craft Lessons

Teaching Writing F–8

Second Edition

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Introduction

If there's a book you want to read, but you can't find it, you've got to write it yourself. Novelist Toni Morrison said that and we took it to heart. For years we had worked with teachers, helping them fine-tune their writing workshops. When it came to ideas for mini-lessons, teachers were ravenous; they couldn't get enough.

“Isn't there some kind of book of mini-lessons?” they asked. “Boy, could I use that now!”

When we wrote the first edition of *Craft Lessons*, we felt a measure of excitement (Here it is: *The Secret Book of Mini-Lessons!*) that was tempered with caution. Such a book would undoubtedly be useful to teachers, but we were also aware of potential dangers. We believed then, and still believe now, that skilled writing teachers need to become resourceful and self-reliant. Smart writing teachers learn how to “live off the land” by being responsive to all the unplanned teachable moments that arise during a writing workshop (Calkins 1986). In addition, we didn't want teachers to become reliant on any one-source, pre-printed lesson materials.

Notes on This New Edition

After *Craft Lessons* was published in 1998, it quickly became a best seller.

Since that time the world has changed in many ways, but one thing has not: teachers everywhere continue to feel starved for time. In fact, with new curriculum mandates, daily specials, “pull-outs” and precious time devoted to test preparation, the situation has never been worse. That’s why we believe that a book like *Craft Lessons* – a short, pithy, practical text – will continue to be useful for harried writing teachers.

In this new edition we have made a number of changes:

- We added seventeen brand-new craft lessons, most of which were drawn from teachers’ comments about what needs they see in their students’ writing.
- We made revisions on other craft lessons, swapping out mentor texts we use as models that have gone out of print for enduring titles that are in print and are expected to stay in print for a long time.
- We included our latest thinking about teaching the elements of craft.
- We explained the role of the writer’s notebook in helping students develop a sense of the writer’s craft.
- We included thoughts about how these craft lessons fit into our newest thinking about the qualities of writing: Ideas, Design, Language, Presentation.

New editions of books like this one have a tendency to gain bulk, something we wanted to keep to a minimum. In updating this book we worked hard to strengthen it while maintaining its feel as a “lean-and-mean” resource for the diligent but harried writing teacher.

Writing as a Developmental Process

When it comes to the writer’s craft, teachers often find themselves working in the dark. What are reasonable expectations for a Year 1 writer? a Year 5 writer? These questions rarely get answered in any satisfactory way. When they do get answered, we all breathe a sigh of relief.

Four Year 1 teachers met to talk about writing. After about fifteen minutes, the talk moved to editing.

“What editing skills should you teach a Year 1 student?” one teacher wondered aloud. “What’s a reasonable expectation for a kid that age?”

“I’d say teach them ending punctuation: periods, question marks”, a teacher suggested. “And teach them to start the next sentence with a capital letter.”

“Okay”, the first teacher agreed. “But then what?”

After a moment’s pause, the second teacher shrugged and replied: “Then they’re ready for Year 2.”

Everybody laughed.

Writing is a developmental process, but the word *developmental* does not give a blank check for unlimited growth. Year 1 students are not miniature university students. Experienced writing teachers understand this and don't introduce a skill like paragraphing until Year 3 or 4. Rough developmental guidelines exist at every age, describing the range of what young writers can, and cannot, do.

This book explores what children can learn about the writer's craft as they become more sophisticated writers. Some of the questions we attempt to answer include: What behaviours are typical of Year 1 writers? How can we help Year 3 students focus their "bed-to-bed" narratives (stories that recount everything that happened from the time they got up to when they went to bed)? How might we best teach a Year 5 student about the use of time in writing?

While we do not embrace a rigid scope-and-sequence of writing development, we do believe that writing teachers need to have a deep and profound knowledge of writing. This knowledge should include a sense of how writers grow as they move through the year levels and move towards proficiency. We hope the information provided in this book serves that purpose.

Teaching Craft Lessons

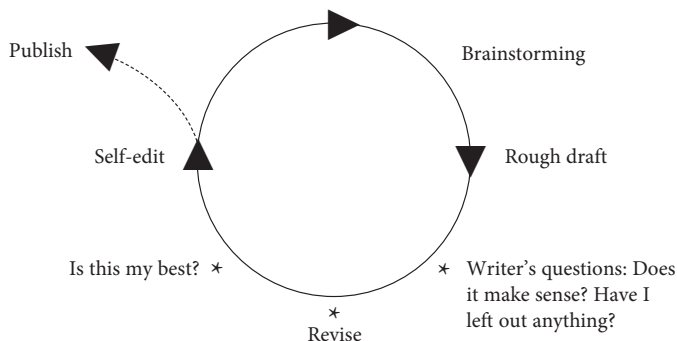
We might visualise the writing process like this:

Conceive → Craft → Correct

It has been our sense that many teachers tend to interact with their students at the ends of the process – conceiving and correcting. Teachers show students how to use a variety of pre-writing techniques (webs, story maps, time lines and outlines). They give students detailed editing checklists to use, either individually or in pairs.

The item in the middle – craft – gets the least attention. During this part of the authoring cycle, students are left on their own to make a thousand decisions in their texts about leads, choice of verb, voice, structure, supporting detail, mood, character and so forth. This is unfortunate because craft matters. Craft is the cauldron in which the writing gets forged.

Here's another way to envision the authoring cycle. You may have seen a similar diagram:



Match Words with the Picture

RESOURCE MATERIAL

- *Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggy Rathmann

ALTERNATIVE TEXTS

- *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart
- *No, David!* by David Shannon
- *Good Boy, Fergus!* by David Shannon

DISCUSSION

In both reading and writing, we want students to appreciate that there are layers of meaning. Picture books, with illustrations and text on each page, provide a good introduction to this idea.

This is a simple but important craft lesson that builds on the “tongue-and-groove” relationship between text and illustrations. It asks students to go back, re-read their stories and check for consistency between these two symbolic worlds.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Let’s revisit a book we all read and loved earlier in the year. I know you remember *Officer Buckle and Gloria*. Let’s take a look at some of the pages. Do you remember how important those pictures were to the story?

You’ll notice in this picture book that the pictures match the words.

(Show examples from the picture book.)

If the author writes on one page about Officer Buckle watching himself on TV, you can be sure that the illustrations on that page will show the same thing. That’s true about almost every picture book you read. The words and the pictures work together like a good team.

That’s also true about the stories you write. A boy named Rob wrote a story that went like this: “One day I was going to the dentist.” That’s a perfectly good thing to write about. But when he looked underneath the words, he saw that he had drawn a picture of a dog. What’s wrong with that?

(Discuss.)

When Rob noticed that his words and his picture didn’t match, he wanted to fix it. He could change his story in two ways. First, he could draw a picture that went with his story. He might draw a picture of the dentist or the dentist’s building or maybe even show some of the dentist’s tools – like the drill!

Or, if he really wanted to write about the dog, he could go back and write words about the dog picture.

Whenever you write you need to ask yourself, Does my picture match my words? Do my words match my picture? It’s important to check this if you’re writing a story on one page. If you’re writing a book with different pages, you’ll want to make sure that on each page the words and the pictures work together like a good team.

Using Illustrations to Convey Information

RESOURCE MATERIAL

- *A Medieval Feast* by Alik

- This lesson could also be done with picture storybooks published in Big Book format. We like *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams.

ALTERNATIVE TEXTS

- *Goodnight, Gorilla* by Peggy Rathmann

- *Ten, Nine, Eight* by Molly Bang

DISCUSSION

Donald Graves (1983) has argued that kids can write the very first day of school. Of course, this requires us to broaden our definition of the word *writing*. For young children, drawing may serve as writing well into the early months of the first year of school. Rather than pushing these children into conventional print, we can learn to make use of this important time when the young writer uses drawing to compose with fluency.

Picture books offer limitless resources for focusing children's attention on the role of illustrations in telling stories. In a good picture book, the art carries meaning that is not otherwise recorded in the text.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Today we're going to read a story that you all know. But instead of reading the words, we're going to very carefully read the pictures. This will help us think about the way the pictures help to tell the story.

(Look at selected pages from *A Medieval Feast*. You might also project the illustrations onto a wall by using transparencies or an opaque projector.)

Listen to the words Alik used to tell this part of the story.

(Quote from the text.)

Now let's look at the picture that goes with those words to see what new information the picture adds.

(Project the illustration and allow children to talk about what they are learning from the pictures. Help children notice the details the author included to present more information to her readers. Repeat with other selected pages.)

When you go back to your writing today, I'd like you to take some time to carefully read your pictures. Ask yourself if there is anything you might add that would help the reader see more of the story. Maybe you'll want to include details to better describe where your story is taking place. Or maybe you can teach us more about a character by adding details that show what that person is like.

Using Cut and Paste

RESOURCE MATERIAL

- Multiple pairs of scissors, rolls of tape, extra paper

- “A Change in the Weather” (see Appendix 6) (Here is another good, if less dramatic, alternative to story surgery. Take another text where the author has forgotten to include essential information. Show students how to tape a blank piece of paper onto the side. A writer can draw an arrow from the place where the new material is needed to the blank paper and write it there. In some classrooms the kids cut strips of paper, write what they want to add and tape these strips onto the margins.)

DISCUSSION

Why don't more kids revise their writing? They sit in the author's chair and answer readers' questions. We make suggestions during writing conferences. We talk about revision until we're blue in the face. Students may be aware *what* their writing needs, but they may not know *how* to weave new material into the text they're working on. Copying the whole thing over may seem like the only solution to many kids. We need to show students concrete ways to incorporate new information into their existing drafts. We need to do everything we can to make it fun, to encourage them to be playful with their revisions.

HOW TO TEACH IT

I want to read the first draft of a story to you.

(Read “A Change in the Weather.”)

After I wrote this story, I re-read it and asked myself two writer's questions. First, Does it make sense? I think it does. Second, Have I left anything out? Yes, I have. We anchored our boat at an island and all of a sudden we saw four dolphins. They swam right up to the boat and started surfacing right in front of us. My son put his hand into the water and the dolphins rubbed against it. Then he told me he wanted to swim with them and I told him: “You stay in this boat!” He really wanted to jump in with those dolphins.

What do you think – would my story be better if I added the part about the dolphins? I think it would. I think I would add that dolphin part in the middle, probably right here (see asterisk in story). But how do I add that part without going back and recopying the whole thing?

I could do what I call story surgery – take a pair of scissors and cut the story open right at this point. I'm going to tape the top part of my story onto a blank piece of paper.

(Demonstrate.)

Look. I have opened a window into my story. I'll tape this other part of my story down here depending on how much I write. If I write a lot, I'll tape it way down here. I'll need to write first, then tape.

Go back and re-read your drafts. Ask yourself those writer's questions. Have you left out anything important? Would you like to try some story surgery on your writing? I've left tape, scissors and extra paper in the writing centre.

Writing with Voice

RESOURCE MATERIAL

- The writing of other students in the class

- *Honey, I Love by Eloise Greenfield*

- *Stevie* by John Steptoe

- *Danny, the Champion of the World* by Roald Dahl

ALTERNATIVE TEXT

- *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* by Margaree King Mitchell

DISCUSSION

Some writing has a spark, a quirky humanness that makes us know beyond doubt that the author is a real person talking to us. This quality is known as voice. By Year 3 and 4 we can begin talking about this concept. But – alas! – it is just at this point that teachers pile on so many skills expectations that many young writers begin to lose the fresh voice they had as primary writers.

Pat Meehan teaches Year 3. She says that teaching students to write with voice is a major goal during the year. “They may not be old enough to appreciate voice in their own writing, but they can sense it in the literature they read because that’s when you can’t pry them away from their reader’s trance.”

HOW TO TEACH IT

“What makes your writing different from anyone else’s?” Pat asks her students. “Are there certain ways that you can recognise an author you like? Is there something that draws you to a particular author? A good writer can capture your attention in many ways; however, there is one quality that stands above the rest. It is voice. It is this quality that reveals the author’s true self. It is theirs only, the personal style that makes them the author they are. It is the ability of the author to express herself honestly. It is her secret for grabbing the audience, for revealing herself. Donald Murray [1996] says, ‘It is the voice that attracts us to the story and makes us believe or not believe it. Voice is the magic that is hard to describe, but it is the most important element in the story, the music that supports and holds the story together’ [p. 91].

“I tell my students that a good writer must give part of herself away, must share with her readers if she is to be believed. She must have convictions, be strong and show passion. She must define herself by speaking sincerely and truly about what she believes. She must shake out her deepest self.”

Pat challenges the students to listen for real voice in their own writing: “The evidence for me must be their awareness of showing absolute honesty in their writing – to write from the heart.”

Experiment with Endings

RESOURCE MATERIAL

- *Fig Pudding* by Ralph Fletcher

ALTERNATIVE TEXTS

The following books offer a variety of endings:

- *Coming on Home Soon* by Jacqueline Woodson (use of title as ending)
- *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart (using illustrations to end beyond the words)
- *Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting (ending on a small but significant detail)

DISCUSSION

The ending just may be the most important part in a piece of writing. The final words leave a lasting impression on the reader. But coming up with the right ending is hard. Students often use the same ending over and over again: “I woke up and found that it was just a dream.” Or: “That’s All, Folks!” Or (in large letters); THE END.

“[Year 3 students] are always in the middle”, says Pat Meehan, a Year 3 teacher. “They’re in the middle of trying to be responsible in school. Parents expect them to know all the conventions of perfect spelling in their writing, but they’re caught in the middle of understanding the art of good writing and trying it out. They also *write* in the middle. They really don’t use beginnings or endings. And I think one reason is because they don’t use a beginning or ending when they *tell* their stories, either.”

HOW TO TEACH IT

Pat begins by raising her students’ awareness of various kinds of endings. Then she challenges them to rethink the way they have been ending their writing: “Could you come up with something better?”

“I point out to my students that often they write only the middle of the story. I explain that in writing we must leave one room first before we can enter another. Otherwise we can become lost, as if we were in a maze of pathways without doors.

“I read aloud the ending of a story or book that is familiar to students. I often use ‘The Tackle Box’ chapter in *Fig Pudding*. The ending – ‘It seemed like a small price to pay’ – shows an alternative to typical [Year 3] endings.

“I ask students to find several different ending types, and enter them into their writing notebooks. Sticky notes are handy for collecting. The students keep pads out all the time, and enjoy filling up their desktops with examples. Later they can add them or just paste them into their writer’s notebooks.”