

Powerful Writing Structures

Brain Pocket Strategies
for Supporting a Year-Long
Writing Program

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Preface

It was never my intention to write books for teachers. I am in my “happy place,” not in front of a computer, writing, but in front of a class of children, teaching. But as it turns out, I have written a new book for teachers every couple of years. The writing of these books has given me an opportunity to develop my thinking in many different corners of literacy and to share what I’ve learned in the classroom with other teachers. It also turns out I love teaching teachers as much as I love teaching students. For me, they go hand in hand: I could not stand in a room full of teachers, telling them how to teach children, had I not been doing it myself. Lessons taught become lessons shared. My years of teaching students how to read, write, think, find their voice, find their passion, and find literacy joy with a blank piece of paper and a pencil or a book has organically transformed into writing and presenting to teachers all over the world. While many teachers tell me they feel lucky being at one of my workshops, I truly believe I am the lucky one. I get to do what I love and then share that with others.

It’s been two years since my last book and, like clockwork, that urge to write and share my lessons, stories, charts, quotes, and anchor books is taking up expensive real estate in my brain! Pam Alyn says, “Reading is like breathing in, writing is like breathing out.” And now the time has come to breathe out and begin writing again.

While many of the key ideas here are similar to those in my other books about teaching writing, what I hope to achieve with this book is a way to help teachers introduce different writing forms and structures into an effective year-long writing program. Just as we introduce our students to a wide range of reading genres within our school year—from fiction to nonfiction, from mystery to adventure—we need to do the same in our writing programs. The challenge teachers face has always been how to fit it all in. How do we help our students develop into confident, competent writers while, at the same time, teaching them to write in different forms for different purposes, all in the very short span of 10 months? I hope this book will show you how!

So sit back, put on your seat belt, and get ready for the crazy ride through a year-long writing program! There will be some preparation for your journey, which involves setting up and launching your writing program. Once your writing routine is set, the journey proceeds with three major stops at three major writing structures, along with several short scenic tours through different mini lessons and anchor books. It’s a journey that I hope is easy to follow, full of joy, and one you and your students will enjoy taking as much as I have.

— Adrienne Gear

I had originally planned on doing a second edition of *Writing Power*; however, my thinking around effective writing instruction and assessment has evolved so much I felt it would work better as a new book that combines both *Writing Power* and *Nonfiction Writing Power*, and goes beyond both.

Introduction

Teaching writing is hard. I hear that a lot from teachers, literacy coaches, and coordinators I work with. And my response is always, “Yes, it is.” And while I could quickly list a dozen things that make teaching writing hard (not enough time, different levels of interest and ability, choosing writing topics, choosing lessons, editing, conferencing, etc.), in my experience the hardest part about teaching writing is not knowing from one lesson to the next what we are teaching or, more importantly, why we are teaching it. I call it “cherry-picking” teaching: the random grab of a shiny object (otherwise known as an isolated writing lesson) because it looks fun or we found it on Pinterest. It’s the cute, glittery, one-off piece of writing glued onto a turkey, a haunted house, or a Valentine’s heart. I was a master cherry-picker when I first started teaching and, back in the day, the orchard was much smaller with not nearly as many trees to pick from as there are now. The internet and social media have expanded the orchard dramatically, making all those cherries so much more accessible. But while cherry-picking teaching might fill a Thursday afternoon or a bulletin board, it does little to help us reach our ultimate goal: to help our students leave our classrooms better writers than when they walked in. And in addition to improving writing skills, we want to increase writing joy. “I love writing” is the probably the best thing I will ever hear a student say to me, equal only to “I love reading.”

So how do we shift from being cherry-picking writing teachers to being effective, responsive, purposeful writing teachers? How do we fit it all in and teach writing skills, writing structures, and writing joy in three hours or less per week? How do we ensure that the lessons we teach are, in fact, building competency and confidence in writing for all our students? Just as a hockey player doesn’t get better at hockey just by skating around the ice with a stick and a puck, you don’t get better at writing by simply writing. Students do not become better writers by being assigned glittery writing projects for a bulletin board; they do not become better writers by writing about their weekend in their journals; they do not become better writers by writing a story without knowing the structure. Don’t get me wrong—I believe students should have many opportunities for exploring writing in their own time, on their own topics, with the tool of their choice, in the medium of their choice. But the only way we can truly ensure our students become more confident and competent writers is to teach them the skills, the structures, the language, and the beauty of effective writing. We need to teach them the different structures of personal narrative, nonfiction, and story; teach them the skills of voice, word choice, sensory imagery, similes, organization; teach them to appreciate the beauty by noticing and listening to great writing mentors. And most importantly, we need to provide regular opportunities for our students to practice their writing skills.

“That’s hard!” you say.

“Oh, but it can be a little easier,” I reply, “if you use Brain Pockets.”

I developed the concept of Brain Pockets several years ago to help students identify places in their brain that help them make connections while they read. I have since used the idea for teaching writing. Brain pockets are the places in our brain that store our thoughts and ideas: one pocket stores our memories, one stores information, and the third stores our imagination. We use our brain pockets for both reading and writing: when we read, we use our brain pockets to help us construct meaning; when we write, we use our brain pockets to help us find ideas for writing. The more I thought about and talked about the Brain Pockets concept with students, the more I realized that the three brain pockets also represent the three major structures or forms of writing: we write personal narrative writing by accessing our memory pocket; we write nonfiction by accessing our fact pocket; we access our imagination pocket when we write stories. (Poetry is accessed through all three pockets as we can write poems from memories, facts, or imagination.) Like many of you, in my school district teachers are required to teach students different writing forms, so I thought using Brain Pockets would be an effective way to organize my writing program, as well as to weave a little metacognition into the picture.

In this book, I will outline the key elements of a balanced writing program and how to get started with an effective process-based writing routine that includes weekly practice writes, writing goals, and writing conferences. I will help you to organize your year-long writing program around three major text structures: personal narrative writing, nonfiction writing, and story writing. Within each of these structures, you will find an extensive collection of mini lessons and anchor books. If you follow a three-term school year, you can focus on one structure per term to ensure that students have learned all three by the time the school year is finished. What is important is that you provide not just one, but many opportunities for your students to learn and practice the structure. As with anything we learn, we can't just do it once and expect to master it. A child can't learn to ride a bicycle if you just show them once and send them on their way. We need to run beside them, giving them tips and encouragement. And while you run alongside your students, I will be running alongside you, giving you tips and encouragement!