

No More
“How Long Does It
Have to Be?”

Fostering Independent Writers
in Grades 3-8

Jennifer Jacobson



Hawker Brownlow
Education a Solution Tree company

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INTRODUCTION

I was a sleep-deprived, barely-head-above-water, first-year teacher when the gym teacher cornered me in the hall. She wanted to start a fifth-grade soccer program, and she needed a coach.

Yikes. I had never coached soccer (or any other sport, for that matter). I had never *played* soccer (or any other team sport, for that matter). But I did recall telling the interview committee that, if hired, I would be willing to take on an extracurricular activity. If I protested her decision to appoint me soccer coach, it didn't work.

Despite the fact that my father had been a basketball coach for most of my young life, I didn't, for a single moment, reflect on the meaning or import of coaching. I didn't think about the ideals or goals of a youth soccer program. And I certainly didn't consider the knowledge, needs, or desires of my young athletes.

What I did think about was rules and techniques. Pre-Internet, I went to the library and borrowed every single how-to-play-soccer book on the shelves. I made lists of everything the kids would need to know.

Then, I sat my kids down on the sidelines of the soccer field and proceeded to give them lessons on all that I'd learned. At the end of each lecture (when there was about fifteen minutes of practice left), I had them head out on the field and practice drills. Day after day, week after week. The kids grew less eager, more despondent. A few stopped coming to practice.

"We're sick of this," they whined. "When can we play *soccer*?"

If you're predicting that this is the point in my story where I confess that I saw the error of my ways, that I changed my approach, and that my kids went on to be the happiest soccer champs in the history of the game, you'd be wrong. Dead wrong.

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I was too afraid to let the kids loose on the field. What if they played incorrectly? What if they developed bad habits? “You can play when you know how,” I answered with as much cheerfulness as I could muster. I didn’t for a moment consider the probability that these kids came to me with some knowledge or experience with the game. (Okay, more knowledge than I had.) Nor did I give them credit for figuring things out as they went along.

From day one, I could have divided the kids into two teams and let them play. When all players bunched up on the ball, I could have momentarily stopped the game and shown them that keeping to their positions gave their team a greater advantage. The kids would have recognized that playing well required decision making: choice after choice after choice. Some choices serve the game, others do not. I could have balanced my fears with trust. I could have given up my overcontrolling, no-joy ways.

After all, who would try to create a winning team through a combination of lectures and isolated drills? Yet, that is how many of us have tried to teach writing.

My time in the classroom and my years of writing children’s literature have taught me that the process of learning to write most closely resembles the process of learning to play a sport. It requires practice, guidance, and immediate feedback.

NEW GAME PLAN

You’ve just told students their writing assignment. Several hands shoot into the air. It doesn’t matter which student you call on; you can predict the question on their minds:

How long does it have to be?

You sigh, knowing you have two responses: either you give students an arbitrary number of sentences, paragraphs, or pages and expect lackluster writing overloaded with underdeveloped thoughts, wordiness, and repetition. Or you tell them, *As long as it needs to be*, which will no doubt lead to students needing you for a concrete finish line.

What irks us most about this question, of course, is the evidence that our students are disengaged. They are not thinking like writers. Writers begin every task with an internal series of questions, such as *Who is my audience? What do I want to accomplish? How can I best approach this subject? Can I bring freshness to my approach? How will I prewrite?* The “how long” question, on the other hand, indicates passivity and a dependence on us to provide all the answers.

Although this student response is aggravating, it is not surprising. By the time students reach upper elementary or middle school, we've eliminated the essential decision making. Daily prompts; formulaic structures, such as the five-paragraph essay (preceded by graphic organizers); a lockstep approach to the writing process; and teacher corrections on first drafts all get in the way of building deeper understanding and independence. These well-intended but counterproductive methods take responsibility away from students rather than teaching them how to process, to plan, and to proceed in an effective manner.

There is another way. Writer's Workshop. Writer's Workshop provides students with ample practice, guidance, and immediate feedback. It was designed to help students grow into motivated, pensive, goal-setting writers. Writers who do the following:

- Are able to choose and develop their own topics or story angles
- Are familiar with a wide range of prewriting exercises and choose the ones that work best for them
- Write with audience in mind and know the effect they would like to have on that audience
- Identify which skills and strategies are their strongest and which they need to work on (and have the desire to do so)
- Readily look to mentor texts to learn craft
- Write with stamina, consistently wishing there was more time to keep going
- Bring their own questions and concerns to the writing conference
- Embrace revision as a way to achieve their goals
- Assess sample writing and suggest possible improvements
- Provide positive feedback to peers
- Incorporate peer feedback into revision plans

You may be skeptical. You may think that I'm speaking to a small population of teachers who live on the island of Ideal, where class sizes are small, children are well fed, and endless hours are packed into every day. Trust me, I'm not. I've taught Writer's Workshop at every grade level in communities all across the country but primarily in schools deemed "failing,"

and I can assure you the method works. We get so used to taking control of every minute of every school day (and every behavior our students demonstrate) that it seems impossible that letting go of some of this control could actually bring about better results. It does.

TAKING THE PLUNGE, FACING THE CHALLENGES

This book is intended to help teachers of grades three to eight make the shift from a teacher-directed program to a student-propelled workshop model. It is the long-awaited, frequently requested companion book to *No More “I’m Done!” Fostering Independent Writers in the Primary Grades* (Jacobson 2010). Like its predecessor, it will help you establish the spaces, routines, and tone to run a well-managed, highly productive writing time. All of the suggestions and minilessons were practiced in upper elementary and middle school classrooms. Your students will be eager to write, and they will apply the lessons you teach to their written work. They will grow. You will grow. (I am still growing in my understanding of what makes fine teaching and writing.)

Yes, there will be challenges. You will grapple with time. The way the day is compartmentalized for grades three to eight poses particular challenges. Depending on the requirements of your school district, you may have assessment requirements that pose obstacles. And no doubt, whether or not you teach to the Common Core State Standards, you are required to teach some sophisticated writing skills. No worries. We will tackle those challenges here. What I can promise is that hitting these challenges head-on will reward you with a more gratifying writing time for you and your students. I can promise that you will no longer hear those dreaded words: “How long does it have to be?”

CHAPTER 1

Planning for Independence

Though Writer’s Workshop takes very little time to get up and running, preplanning can go a long way in ensuring its success. The right learning environment can set the tone, ease transitions, support student stamina, and inspire.

CLASSROOM SPACES

It’s expected that primary classrooms will have many child-centered spaces. However, as we rise in grade levels, attention given to the physical space diminishes. Upper elementary and middle school classrooms are seldom designed with movement, choice, collaboration, and independence in mind.

Yet physical environment and access to tools play a role in learning success. In recent years, corporations have given a good deal of consideration to the design of work areas conducive to collaboration, creation, and innovation. Classroom teachers should, too. Think of your classroom as studio space—an environment that supports the experimentation and utilization of many tools, models, and ideas. Or better yet, let’s keep the sports metaphor going (until it completely collapses)—try to provide spaces that allow for whole-group huddling, sideline sharing, and solo performance.

THE MEETING AREA (WHERE WRITERS HUDDLE)

When I work in middle schools across the country, my suggestions for setting up a meeting area with a carpet or comfortable seating get the most initial pushback. Teachers often insist they don't have the space. But the real resistance, I believe, is born from the fear that students will feel babied or that the teacher herself will appear less rigorous—less scholarly—than other teachers in the building.

Yet, teachers who take the risk of setting up meeting areas, who see the enormous benefits of inviting students into a closer, more collaborative space for part of the workshop, are completely hooked. A meeting space does the following:

- Sets the tone of genuine inquiry. When we sit down with students, it sends the message that we are learning together. We teachers are no longer experts in the front of the room: *Listen carefully to my instructions. We are colleagues on the path of discovery: How might we add more voice to our essays?*
- Helps build community. We've dismantled the typical classroom hierarchy—attentive students in the front of the room, less-engaged students in the back. And because of the nature of gathering, writers end up sitting in new configurations every day.
- Improves listening and engagement. We can hear students as they process ideas (and they can hear one another). We're more likely to capitalize on astute observations and less likely to miss wrong turns. Our formative assessment improves.
- Allows for flexible seating. Sometimes you might request rows, other times a circle or clusters. We can easily make eye contact with all writers and they with one another. Students turn to partners without wait time.
- Provides an opportunity for movement. Movement in a Writer's Workshop signals a change in mode and an alteration of purpose. Students move from the meeting area (a place for listening and discussing) to their desks (places for independent thinking and creating). These predictable patterns not only ease classroom transitions but also let the brains know that it's time to open a new channel.



In addition to having comfortable seating (carpet or carpet squares, beanbags, pillows), the meeting center needs a means for modeling writing. Though whiteboards are great, easels with paper are terrific for saving anchor charts. (Consider asking students to be occasional scribes.) A document camera (or iPad) for sharing mentor texts is also useful.

You may want shelved books on one or more sides of the meeting area for quick, spontaneous checking of mentor texts. When you are considering how to create lively dialogue, you might raise the question, *How does Gary Schmidt do it?* One of your students can lean over, pull Schmidt's book *Okay for Now* off the shelf, and pass it to you to place under the document camera.

Consider having your meeting space do double duty. During the writing time, the meeting area transforms to the place for perusing mentor texts for examples and inspiration or perhaps it becomes an isolated spot for peer conferences.

CONFERENCE AREA

Many teachers circulate around the room while students write. I don't recommend it. Writing requires concentrated thinking, and that requires turning inward. Knowing that the teacher is about to pounce on them at any moment keeps students' brains on the surface, waiting for the arrival of the teacher, even preparing what they might say. As long as the teacher is floating and chatting with students, students will chat with one another.

What if you're a teacher who has to share a space with colleagues?

Try some of these techniques:

- To cut down on noise when creating meeting spaces, place tennis balls under legs of desks and chairs.
- Store carpet squares in the room or on your cart.
- Develop guidelines for shared use if writing supplies are stored in the room. Or carry writing supplies in a shoe pocket holder (one that can hang on a nail).
- Use your phone to play Quiet 5 music (see explanation of Quiet 5 music in Chapter 2).

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Instead, I recommend setting up a conference area and having students sign up to come to you. A small table with several chairs works well. In your conference area, you’ll want the following supplies:

- A mode for playing music during Quiet 5 (see explanation of Quiet 5 in Chapter 2)
- Your writer’s notebook
- An assessment binder with a page divider for each student—in each student section is a rubric for the current unit of study, and notebook paper for anecdotal records—or a device such as a tablet or laptop for keeping digital records (many teachers use conferapp.com or Evernote)
- Sticky notes for summaries and reminders
- A highlighter for marking student rubrics
- Copies of mentor texts
- Conferring cheat sheets (see appendix)

SUPPLY AREA

First things first. Do you want your students to write on loose-leaf paper, in a bound notebook, or on a digital device? Believe it or not, the logistics of how to compose and store writing has been debated for the thirty-plus years that Writer’s Workshop has been in existence. Most teachers have strong opinions on this topic. (And so do students. You may want to give writers a choice of writing in longhand or digitally.) Here are some pros and cons:

Bound Notebooks

Pros: All of students’ written work is kept in one place. Therefore, it’s easy to assess growth (or the lack thereof). Notebooks are easy to carry if students are moving from one room to another for classes. And many believe that writing in longhand (particularly cursive) leads to tapping more creative regions of the brain.