FIVE to THRIVE

ANSWERS *to Your* BIGGEST QUESTIONS *About*

TEACHING ELEMENTARY WRITING

Melanie Meehan

CORWIN

Thank you

FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Writing.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

What Are Some Systems and Structures of a Writing Community?

As is the case with any community, a writing community thrives on systems and structures that all community members understand. As you consider some of these elements, think also about how students can have ownership of their development.
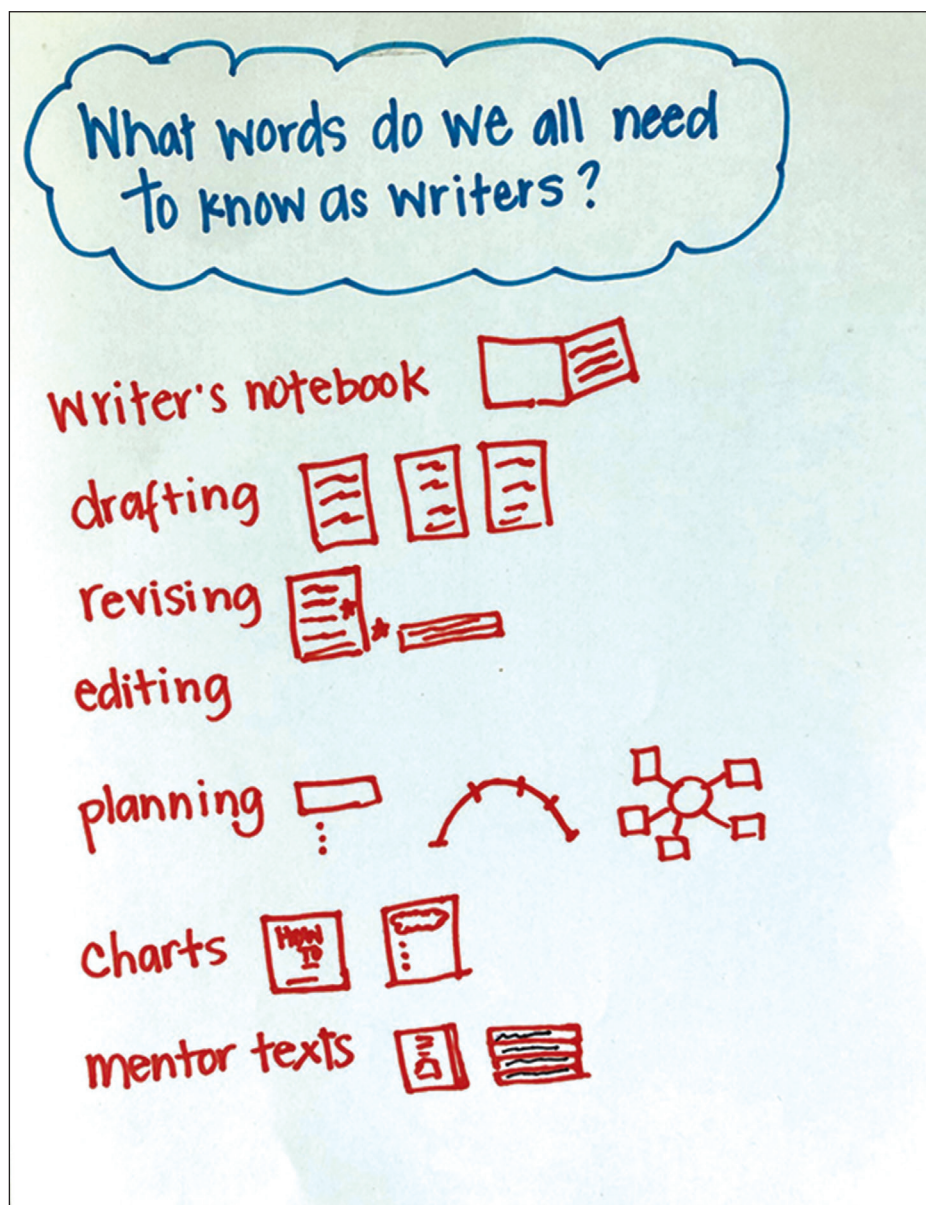
A COMMON LANGUAGE

As you establish your classroom's writing community, you will want to consider the terms and common language you want students to know and understand. In Chapter 3, you will read more about whole group instruction and the opportunities for inquiry lessons, as well as more about what the terms below mean and how they relate to instruction. That being said, language is a critical component of a community, and key terms could be a wonderful inquiry lesson: *What words and ideas do we all need to know for writing class to go well?* I envision this lesson to be about essential elements, materials, and processes in a writing classroom, including but not limited to:

- Writer's notebooks: Keeping places for ideas, plans, strategies, and more
- Charts: Visual representations of the learning that's happening
- Mentor texts: Books and other texts that inspire writers with craft moves and ideas they can duplicate
- Planning: Part of the writing process that helps writers know and remember what will be included in their pieces
- Drafting: The writing of a piece itself, to be done outside of the notebook
- Revising: The process of adding and eliminating text to make it stronger and clearer for readers
- Editing: The adding of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling to make it easier for an audience to read

You could create a chart along the lines of Figure 1.7, on the next page.

Figure 1.7 A common vocabulary helps communities function at high levels.

The responses to this question should vary from class to class, grade to grade, and teacher to teacher, recognizing the importance and value of a shared language among community members.

COMMON AND INDIVIDUAL GOALS

Students should understand what they are working on, and they should have systems and structures for expressing their goals. Not everyone will be working on the same thing at the same time—that undermines the importance of independence and choice. You will want to establish and cultivate a community of goal-setters, a mindset that will benefit all content areas, and not just writing.

How do we push students to think beyond the goals that they score on fields or in rinks, and toward the goals they can set for themselves within more academic settings?

An important starting point for students at all levels across all content areas is to teach them about goals, and the following questions provide entry points into important conversations:

- What is a goal?
- What inspires goal-setters?
- What gets in the way of goal-setters?
- How do we decide on goals?

The answers to these questions vary for experienced goal-setters and brand-new ones. Some people don't like to announce goals. Others need a daily reminder. Some people thrive with goal partners, and other people may need more reinforcement along their goal-achieving pathway. To make the answers to these questions even more complicated, goal-setting patterns should evolve, as people learn about themselves and develop growth mindsets. As comfort levels grow in the goal-setting process, public goal-setting may become inspiring instead of uncomfortable.

Agency and Identity

Goal-setting is a way to build agency for learners. When students decide on, know and understand, and make a plan for their own learning, you are much more likely to see growth!

Because of the variation in goal-achieving strategies and techniques, you may want various ways to present them to students. Here are a few that you could incorporate into writing instruction.

- **Develop a repertoire of questions that keeps the responsibility for learning with the student.**

    - What are you working on?
    - What is your goal as a learner for this work?
    - What strategies are you using to help with this goal?
    - What strategies would you like to work on to help with this goal?

    Feel free to develop others, but keep using the language of setting goals, developing strategies, and working on techniques. Soon, you will find your students speaking naturally about their goals and strategies.

- **Create checklists that encourage learning.** I love the checklists that are included in *Writing Pathways* by Lucy Calkins (2014) for many reasons, but an important reason has to do with the columns for "starting to" and "not yet." These phrases imply that these skills will develop, but learners must work at them. The important trick is to get students to evaluate their work reflectively and see the power in setting targets and goals. We shouldn't have all our checks in the yes column if we are really learning!

- **Involve students in their selection of daily learning.** Teachers I work with set up seminars for students, and students can sign up or register for them. Seminar sign-ups help manage small group instruction (more on that in Chapters 3 and 5), and they also inherently involve students in goal-setting and ownership of their learning lives.

Figure 1.8 When students sign up for seminars, it builds their goal-setting mindsets.

- **Nurture the habit of leaving goal cards with students when you confer with them.** In my toolkit, I keep blank 3 × 5 cards. Whenever I work with a student, I leave a card. (More on this in Chapter 3.) That way, *everyone* knows what that student is working on, including and especially the student. These cards serve as a teaching point and as a strategy card for the goals of the individual student.

My most important and impactful learning moments have all involved goals. Celebrate the accomplishments of students, help them understand all they have learned and achieved, and then keep nudging them to set goals that focus on their writing lives.

Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Writing

ROUTINES

Many exercise classes have a structure they follow, and different instructors may vary it. Regular participants expect a routine or structure, even if it changes a bit from time to time or instructor to instructor. And most participants would express a comfort in their expectations. "This is the part when . . ." is a phrase that grounds people and invites them to think less about what will come next and more about what they are working on at that given moment.

Taking the time to establish routines, roles, and responsibilities provides security and stability for the writing community. In Chapter 3, I talk extensively about the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students during writing instruction. I also talk more about materials and resources in that chapter as they relate to instruction, but they also relate to the environment. That being said, there are routines pertaining to the environment and the materials that you'll use and want to establish. Some routines may include, but aren't limited to:

- What paper do students use, and how and where do they get it?
- What writing utensils do students use, and what care do those utensils involve?

  - Who sharpens pencils?
  - What pens are okay, and what aren't?
  - How do we keep pens so that they last and don't burst open with ink?

- How do we access and sign into devices, and how should work be organized?
- Where can students work within the classroom?

The more that community members know, understand, and agree to the answers to these questions, the better the community will function as a whole.

CHARTS AND RESOURCES WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENT

Charts, tools, and resources are both instructional elements and environmental elements, and you'll want to make sure that your classroom offers students ways to build independence without overwhelming them. When students are involved in developing the resources within their classroom, there are several positive results. First, students understand the rationale and the purpose of a tool if they've helped choose or create it. Additionally, students feel more ownership of their learning when they've helped plan and design it (Fletcher, 2008).

At a recent workshop for new teachers, I emphasized the importance of unfilled spaces when they welcome students into their classrooms. We toured several classrooms, and everyone could feel the difference between classrooms with lots of materials already on the walls and classrooms with blank spaces waiting to be developed. "The blank spaces are less overwhelming," one teacher reflected. "And they are sending a message that we'll develop the room together," another teacher added.

What Are Some Systems and Structures of a Writing Community?

27

Exactly.

These two new teachers hit on two important points. For one, it's important to remember that the beginning of the year feels stressful for many students, and too much stimulation may add to that stress. Think about the experience of walking into a loud and raucous environment with neon colors and flashing lights, as opposed to an environment with quiet music and neutral colors. You want your classroom to be a place of laughter and joy, but not a place that accosts the senses.

Minimalism is welcome as you begin the school year, and, as you teach, you'll develop your classroom along with the students. That co-creation will build and nurture the sense of community that will inspire students as writers and as people. Students will not only *understand* their environment, but they also will have ownership of it.

Notes