

Understanding Lucy Calkins' Writing Workshop Model: A Guide for Parents

(provided in part by Montclair Public Schools—Montclair, NJ)

I'm very excited to be able to share our new writing curriculum with first grade students this year. This new curriculum adheres to Common Core State Standards, and is based on 35 years of research and development made by the Teachers College at Columbia University, and spearheaded by the ever-talented Lucy Calkins. I know first grade students at Lindsay School are really going to enjoy becoming better writers, and I look forward to facilitating their progress.

The Teachers College Writing Workshop model allows students to have the “last” word by allowing students to take something commonplace in his/her life and give it meaning. Students learn that their lives are worth writing about, and that they should care about what they write. Using the foundations of the curriculum, students will see that writing is a craft, and they will enjoy learning how to become better readers through hard work and practice. Writing will happen every day, and students will write in a variety of ways that touch on several different genres. Students will not be assigned specific topics, but will have flexibility to choose to write about what matters to them, within the guidelines of the specific genre of study.

What does Writing Workshop look like in the classroom?

- Writing Workshop begins with a mini-lesson that teaches a new strategy: Teachers start with, “So far we’ve been.....Today I want to teach you...” or with an anecdote that connects to what the teaching point of the day is. Or the teacher can let students know that she has been thinking about them as writers and that she is going to teach them something that they are actually ready for: “Watch me as I...”.

The teacher may begin with a sample of her own writing or a sample of someone else’s writing, a specific to the unit or genre being studied or with a shared writing piece that the class is working on together.

- Helpful charts will be on display in the classroom. These charts are visual reminders that reinforce writing strategies; they may help with dialogue, structure, elaboration, or conventions.

- Ideas are generated and students practice telling their story to a partner. Storytelling is a rehearsal for writing; students develop ideas (time is spent on teaching students how to generate, and choose, a seed idea). Students may choose a good seed idea by asking themselves the following: *Do I remember it well? Is this a moment that taught me something? Am I comfortable sharing it?* Students may possibly create a timeline and identify their feelings at each point on the timeline.

- Nurturing and growing the seed idea comes next through rehearsal: students

are encouraged to re-read their entry and think about the big, important events in this moment, what they were thinking/feeling at each point, how did they change as the story unfolds. Students then learn to make a writing plan. Some ways to make a writing plan are:

1. Create a timeline that tracks our stories and our emotions. Quickly jot down ideas on dots placed on the timeline. Go back to each dot and ask, *How was I feeling at this point?* Students can then jot the emotions down on a parallel time line using more than one word. Finally we revise our entry, making sure that we show our emotions and thoughts at the time.
2. Take small moments and break them into beginning, middle and end. Develop the tension and the problem. The problem is not the event. Use box pictures. Tell the story using the boxes. Draw pictures and label them with words. Adding words helps formulate the story.
3. Make a story booklet with illustrations of four major events – this forces students to remember and start thinking about major themes.

- Students then tell their story to their writing partner. They show each other their sketches., and they may be prompted to add more pictures and words. Partners ask questions like, *What would they be saying? What would they be thinking?* Students can draw dialogue boxes to reflect inner thinking.; it is often easier to hear *voice* before *writing* – the teacher may say, “How can you bring that feeling out with your words?”

- Drafting is the next step in the process. Writers get ready to draft by thinking about meaning...they are taught to ask themselves, *What am I trying to say? What is my story really about?* Paper choices vary according to grade level, and there is paper choice within each grade level. Students may draft with just picture boxes, and then eventually students may draft on “black dot” paper with lines skipped so that there is room to go back and add new ideas and revisions.

- A few days of revision then occur. Teachers will not mark up students’ papers extensively, but rather facilitate a process where the students themselves are thinking about what to revise. The editing process also includes a focus on grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Students may use an editor’s checklist. Students learn that good stories have dialogue, detail, inner thinking and setting. This is what we are looking for when we revise. The teacher may demonstrate, and then have the students try it: “Watch me, now you try it right now in your piece.” The teacher may also demonstrate by having students look at a generic text; students all work at once on adding dialogue, for example. The teacher may demonstrate by showing the students a of a great writer. The teacher encourages students to try a similar style in their own writing.

- The publishing process (when applicable---not all pieces will be published, as students will learn to abandon pieces when needed) can take place in many different ways: a museum walk where students walk around and read others' writing posted all over the wall, student read-alouds in front of the class, a publishing party with parents, leaving writing out on students' desks and having others walk around the room, read the stories silently, and leave a comment. The students are taught that their writing is not solely for the teacher anymore; it is to be shared and celebrated with everyone.

First Grade Writing Curriculum:

Unit 1: Establishing Writer's Workshop Routines/Launching "Small Moments"

Unit 2: Authors as Mentors: Craftsmanship and Revision

Unit 3: Informational Books

Unit 4: Opinion Writing/Reviews

Unit 5: Poetry

Unit 6: Informational Writing About Science

Unit 7: Realistic Fiction

Writing Workshop Vocabulary (or Frequently Used Terms)

Storytelling: Writing in the air; it is important to teach the difference between storytelling and reporting.

Fancy it up: Adding details and elaborating.

Small Moment: Students learn to take the everyday events of their lives and stretch them into focused, well-structured stories.

Seed Idea: To create to a really good story, it helps to think of a smaller subject, or seed, within the big watermelon topic.

Play a Movie in your Mind: Students can make a movie in their mind to support what is happening in the story they are reading or writing. This helps students visualize the events in the story, enhances comprehension while reading and allows a writer to add greater detail to their piece

Show Don't Tell: Imagery is language that paints a vivid picture in the mind of the reader.

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Long and Strong: Developing stamina increases student output on tests. There have been reports that high SAT scores are directly related to the length of the piece. Writing gibberish isn't going to make a good piece, but learning how to write long AND strong is important for kids to know how to do.

Heart of the Story: Students are taught to find the "heart of the story" and stretch it out to an event-by-event sequence.

Writing Strategies to Use at Home with Your Student

1. Encourage your child to carry a small notebook with them, paying attention to details and thinking, "I could write a true story about this."
2. Think of a strong feeling, and then list "small moment" stories pertaining to that feeling. Choose one to write about.
 3. Think of the stories that your family tells and retells.
Write about one of those.
4. Keep an ongoing list of story ideas in your writer's notebook.
5. Think of a subject, or a person, place, or thing that matters to you, then list small moments you remember. Choose one to sketch and then write the accompanying story.
 6. Think of first times, last times, or important times in your life.
Write about one of those moments.
7. Use a book and look at the moments and relationships and see what you connect to and may want to examine in your own life.
8. Take small moments and break them into beginning, middle and end. Develop the tension and the problem. Tell the story using the boxes.
Draw pictures and label them with words.
Adding words helps form a foundation for formulating the story.
9. Diagram places of memory and label the pictures with individual words
 10. Encourage your child to show, don't tell!