



Becoming Butterflies: A Transformative Writing Unit

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by Lauren E. Freeman

Introduction

In examining the ELA classrooms of today, you will find that most teachers use best practices to instill a strong sense of the components of Reading, Writing, Spelling and Handwriting. We delight in watching the students take note of the lessons that are taught and then run with it. In recent years however, the focus on writing in many districts has waned due to the restrictive nature of standardized assessments and the limited amount of learning in other subject areas that follow. Because the focus is so strong in the areas of Math and Reading, other, more expressive and vibrant subjects fall to the wayside. For teachers who love to share the deeply personal, yet freeing act of writing, exploring and expressing, with their students, this is detrimental. Additionally, the children are denied, in a sense, from further enriching experiences as they are bound to a world of only two subjects, Reading and Math. Educators today complain that the lack of depth in other subject areas such as Writing and Social Studies hamper a child's success later on in life.

Kindergarten teachers have seen a more academic track for their young students as the United States desperately attempts to keep up with other nations around the world that show levels of literacy that surpass those of American students. Now seen as "first grade" to some, a Kindergartener's day has less play or time to hone their imagination, and more time doing skills work. In my own Kindergarten classroom, Terra Nova assessments were administered for two consecutive years until they were ceased at that grade level. During those years I spent in Kindergarten, I also saw a large number of students who entered as four-year-olds. Some were ready for schooling to begin, while others could have used time in pre-school or simply more time at home to mature. Parents are sometimes shocked when they find out that the legal age at which their child is to attend school in the state of Pennsylvania is actually eight years.

Looking back on my experiences in writing, I can recall a rich perspective with a thorough understanding that I had been given a chance to express myself and showcase any and all aspects that my imagination could bring. I was excited about it and relished any opportunity to create and share. I participated in competitions and touted the subject as my absolute favorite. Being involved in music since the age of four, I did not discern a difference between the art of music and the art of writing. Furthermore, I had a family and several friends that provided wonderful books as Christmas and birthday gifts that were lovingly signed and presented, later to be shared together for an even warmer memento. From Shel Silverstein to reference books of all types, my exposure to literacy was great and frequent. As an educator today, I have brought many of those same gifts

into my classroom for my students to enjoy. I make certain to share with them that these were gifts and that they are extremely special. They truly internalize the importance of these personal keepsakes (and laugh at my age when they read the inscription “Happy sixth birthday Lauren! Love, your friend Alyse!” and do the math).

Pittsburgh Dilworth Traditional Academy

Out of the many elementary institutions within the Pittsburgh Public School District, Dilworth Traditional Academy is the only one that has a focus on Arts Integration and the Humanities. Our school feeds into the 6-12 International Baccalaureate program, as well as the Creative and Performing Arts Academy (also 6-12), located in Downtown Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Dilworth PreK-5 is a traditional Magnet school with an emphasis on arts integration and humanities for all subject areas. We believe that all children can learn, and that education begins with a safe and healthy learning environment. It is our goal to help students understand how our world and lives are interconnected through their academic, arts, and humanities experiences.

Rationale

I currently teach ELA at the third-grade level in the Pittsburgh Public School District. There are several PreK-5 buildings within my district and mine is a magnet school that focuses on Arts and Humanities. I am responsible for four subject areas, including Reading, Spelling, English & Grammar, and Handwriting (which many individuals are trying to remove as a graded subject-me not included). As you can see, there is no “Writing” class. It is embedded in English and Grammar. During the eight 45-minute class periods in our school day, there is a mandatory, daily 90-minute block set specifically for Reading. The other subjects are to be inserted during the remaining periods. Being that we are departmentalized, I am left to squeeze in Spelling, English & Grammar and make space for productive and informative Writing time. Even though we are a magnet school and have a specific focus, we are bound to district and state assessments which require extensive preparation. Unfortunately, this monitoring and preparation detracts from the subjects that I and my students love. It is my goal to use this unit to expand upon the subject of Writing, and turn it into a time that can be meaningful, productive and innovative for my students. The unit will transform the children’s thinking and help to create a spark that will lead to knowledgeable, informed writing that each of them will beg to publish and share as a celebration of their journey into the intermediate levels of education.

The unit will begin with the aim of getting students to effectively transform their writing through a series of exercises and interactions to help them grow, think and construct habits that will become an innate part of their skillset for the remainder of their schooling. This process functions using the inquiry-based approach in which the students drive the learning. Through discussion, small group work, mentor texts such as *The Relatives Came*, by Cynthia Rylant and *Smoky Night*, by Eve Bunting, students will gradually improve on their writing. They will focus on multiple “stages” (as a caterpillar does during their transition) during this process, discussing how they can improve as well as become more innovative and expressive writers. In the end, having completed an intense and closely monitored writing process, students will emerge as butterflies who have completed their famous transition. Their writing will be filled with colorful language and lilting expression. They will continue on as pollinators of skill and strategy that will follow them as they grow and

share their work.

As stated earlier, standardized assessments have drained classrooms of fun, meaningful and informative learning opportunities in many subjects. In recent years within my school district, the only writing that the students have been required to complete for a portfolio are basic writing pieces such as narratives, summaries, responses and TDAs (text-dependent analyses). They spend a very small amount of time focusing on expressive, in-depth writing that is personal and creative. There is even less time to actually share it, publish it and celebrate it. The goal of this unit is to truly put Writing in the forefront and make it something that is very different, yet useful and lasting for students.

Some people may view Writing as an art form and skill, such as music. In my experience with music as a young child up to the present, it is common for the musician to perform at higher levels of skill and artistic form when they enjoy the piece being studied. Keeping this in mind, students' experiences during this transformative writing process are expected to promote a deep-rooted love of writing that surprises even the most reluctant student. With collaborative work, mentor texts, teacher modeling and sharing out, the hope is to completely change the direction of the students' skillset and overall love of the subject.

Content Objectives

Reading/Writing as One

Writing is an act of expressive communication achieved through the medium of print. It is but one of the four modes of linguistic communication. The other expressive mode is speaking, while listening and reading comprise the two receptive modes.¹

When implementing this curriculum unit, it is critical to consider a rich and open environment that encompasses writing and all that entails. Classroom surroundings should be brimming with a myriad of writing samples. These should include student and teacher writing as well as references, examples of style, processes and strategies. If possible, local writers' works in varying formats would be appropriate to include as well. Most of all, however, this unit will promote the pairing of Reading with Writing in a format that is quite tandem. They should be referenced together on a regular basis in order to bolster the fact that they are interconnected. The interconnection of these two subjects is overlooked oft times, but when further examined, they can provide an in-depth realization of the five reading components paired with direct correlations to the chosen writing focus genre. The unit relies on a firm foundational knowledge of these core aspects of Reading in order for it to be joined succinctly with Writing. In addition to having good ideas, you need to be able to show that you can communicate them precisely and economically.²

There are five components of Reading that will be discussed regularly. They include:

1. Phonemic Awareness
2. Phonics
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary
5. Comprehension

The first two components encompass the closest relationship to writing in that they literally include the smallest pieces of our language, which are sounds and letters. These elemental tidbits lead to combined sounds and letters, which in turn, connect to words. Sentences follow, with paragraphs and stories not far behind. Therefore, it is pertinent that a thorough knowledge base of the Reading and Writing standards play a major role in the planning, implementation and assessment portions of lessons.

Standards

The Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards regarding Reading and Writing are found to contain similar requirements of students. In addition, they encompass the Reading components mentioned earlier. As you will come to see, the standards being used further explain the necessity of teaching Reading and Writing in a closer format. The standards to be used throughout this particular unit pertain to Reading and Writing which are identified as CC.1.1 and CC.1.4. These two foundational skills standards state that students gain a working knowledge of the concepts of print, alphabetic principle and other basic conventions (Reading Foundational Standard). Furthermore, and even more importantly the Reading Literature standard show interconnectivity between subjects in that it requires that students read and respond (verbally and written) to works of literature, with emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence. For the Writing standard, students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.³

Essay-The goal of students in moving through this unit has been previously stated as a transformative journey filled with collaborative discovery and question. The essay is a form of writing in which the students will not only generate insight and experience, reflecting upon themselves, but also consider and reach out to their audience. For the first time, the third graders will be considering much more than simply one person. They will need to address an audience as well; they will need to connect with purpose. An audience consists of those to whom the essay is directed— the people who read the article, listen to the speech, or view the text. The question about audience might be posed in related ways: For whom did the author write? What readers does the author hope to reach? What readers did he or she actually reach?⁴ In addition to audience, there are many other aspects of the essay to consider. Each lesson should carve out a meaningful set of rules, routines and best practice for the genre. A critical element in improving students' writing performance is the identification of effective instructional procedures for young, beginning writers. Providing effective writing instruction to these students should maximize the writing development of children in general and minimize the number of children who experience difficulties learning to write.⁵ The concept of essay writing is one that will act as a tool to pull the content out of the children and promote utilization of the skills and strategies taught. Essay writing can come in many formats, with slight variances that make them useful in pinpointing a specific achievement in writing. Good writing can appear anywhere.⁶ When students accept the fact that they can produce good writing, they are more apt to becoming confident in what they are generating. It is the hope of teachers everywhere that this new-found confidence will stay with the children as they will certainly need it in the continuation of their schooling. Current trends in higher education place an ever-increasing emphasis on the written assignment as a means of assessment, and many students find it difficult to cope.⁷

Personal Experience-This type of essay will expose the young writers to their most fond thoughts as they reach inside to recount experiences of late as well as in the past. The probability that there will be some experiences that may not bring about happy thoughts is high, however, no student will be expected to share any piece they don't feel comfortable with. For many students, 'essay' and 'nightmare' are virtual synonyms.⁸

But, more often than not, children have an “ah-ha” moment with this type of essay. They realize that if they fret writing and opening up about a specific experience, they can regain power over their emotions and even begin a healing process. The “takeaway” will be the equivalent of the public point that we included during the seminar on *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay!* The students will be asked to ponder this aspect and share out on their thoughts and wondering around the takeaway.

Profile-The profile essay gives students an opportunity to connect with someone outside of themselves. This can be a freeing experience in their writing journey as they delight in sharing thoughts and memories on a person they are extremely familiar with. The children take pride in bearing their idea of this person and will add this to their growing portfolio of essays. Sharing this profile with the person they are writing it about will be the highpoint of this type of essay.

Memoir- Memoir is just a bit different from personal experience and profile in that it requires the writer to reflect upon a specific memory that is spoken about from the present. Getting to know the subtle differences between the varying types of essay is key. As you read an essay, think about its form: What it includes, how the writer presents the subject, what features seem distinctive. If you read a pair or group of essays assigned by your teacher, you might ask yourself whether they represent the same genre or are noticeably different.⁹ The memoir will be a series of essays that focus on having the student take a look back from the standpoint of today.

Teaching Strategies

The following strategies are to be used throughout the unit as the children familiarize themselves with more frequent an in-depth writing. Because this is a transformative project, it is imperative that many of the strategies be implemented at the beginning of the school year. They will need to be conditioned little by little as they venture into their transformation as young writers! Some students may experience small amounts of discomfort in the beginning as they get used to writing on this level. We will begin the year with several strategies aimed at refining these new skills and sharpening each child’s sense of expressive, and self-reflective writing. What is important to remember, is that this is a unique situation for incoming students at the third-grade level. It is essential that while all strategies listed are useful, not all have to be used at once. A meaningful combination of the following items as a “toolbox” will do.

In their primary years, the children struggle with the turnaround as they transition from primary, foundational reading (learning to read), to intermediate reading (reading to learn), in which they are expanding on their skills as well as discovering new text, such as chapter books, higher instances of non-fiction, reference books and more. What the students are not aware of is their parallel journey to that of a butterfly. Each step in this process is, as stated earlier, transformative in nature for the children. This underlying effect is to be revealed at the end of the unit in a culminating journal of pieces that track this experience.

Journaling-Daily writing that touches on various skills learned through minilessons and continuous peer interaction.

Through journaling, students strengthen the skills and strategies they have learned in class. They also use the journals as a safe way to explore expression and the gathering of ideas for other pieces. The children also

build stamina by writing more and more during this process. As any athlete would build endurance toward a goal, so do they. Daily journaling can also remove any fear the student may initially feel toward this initial undertaking. Kept in a specific file with writing tools readily available, each child gradually and meticulously constructs a routine that will instill a new curiosity, if nothing else, for the writing process.

Mentor Texts-Carefully chosen stories that model examples of style, voice and more. These texts provide students with the background information needed to move forward in the style presented.

The mentor texts are an especially significant part of this process. Due to their informative nature each student is exposed to exemplary writing from well versed, award winning authors. Through listening, discussion and analyses of the texts, the students will gain insight as to the style and format of the writing that they will recreate. They provide, in detail, what “good writers” do. For this particular unit ten texts have been chosen. They are as follows:

1. *The Relatives Came*-Cynthia Rylant: students will find great examples of specific detail to connect with readers, such as “all of that new breathing in the house!”
2. *Smoky Night*-Eve Bunting: the discussion of such a harrowing event as rioting can help children hone their skills on writing about deep emotion or fright as it relates to experiences.
3. *Fly Away Home*-Eve Bunting: promotes understanding and empathy regarding different family dynamics, homelessness and perseverance.
4. *Owl Moon*-Jane Yolen: personal relationships and personal experience. Promotes the importance of detail in storytelling.
5. *Blackout*-John Rocco: similar to Bunting’s *Smoky Night* with a city setting and frightening experience. Students learn to write expressively about a tense situation.
6. *Jabari Jumps*-Gaia Cornwall: helps children with writing on a topic of courage. Can model sequencing and build-up of the story.
7. *Those Shoes*-Maribeth Boelts: promotes experiences in friendship and loyalty.
8. *Enemy Pie*-Derek Munson: promotes friendship, kindness and other positive character traits that are great to share with writing.
9. *Fireflies*-Julie Brinckloe: models experience with moral decision-making and pride.
10. *Mango Moon*-Diane de Anda: students learn how to write about experiences that are intense or frightening. Sharing challenges, cultural differences and tolerance are all modeled through this story.

Read Aloud-Promotes better and more informed reading, which leads to the overall improvement of other literacy skills such as writing.

Reading aloud to children of all ages is said to be a great predictor of children’s early literacy and language skills. Unfortunately, these days, it is happening less and less for children in the United States. Not only does it provide immense entertainment, it provides children with the listening and comprehension skills that they will need when venturing into their writing. As with mentor texts, reading aloud is a perfect way to show what “good readers” do. Furthermore, students can use this strategy in small groups or pairs when taking part in Readers’ Workshops. It helps with fluency, comprehension, prosody and even grammar due to the punctuation and new vocabulary involved.

Think Pair Share-Working collaboratively to analyze reading. The sharing of ideas that were first pondered individually, then discussed with a partner to be shared out with the rest of a larger group.

It’s difficult to incorporate read alouds and mentor texts without the inclusion of a Think Pair Share (TPS)

session. Children need to process information as it comes in when reading. Doing this generates questions, which in turn generates thoughts on answers, leading to all around comprehension of a concept. Additionally, student engagement is key in literacy. The children must get their juices flowing before, during and after reading a text. This rounds out their ability to show their instructor that they've obtained a healthy mix of the five components of reading, namely fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Student Choice-Allows the child to be a part of their own inquiry and growth during the writing process.

This strategy is extremely helpful with students who may feel defeated by assignments that give them no sense of "purpose." Many of the writing assignments required at this grade level are very specific in nature and come with an even more specific listing of components for the students to include. This can stifle the child's excitement for the subject and make them feel as if what they're producing is simply not their own. In reflecting on moments like these one writer shares the feeling of being able to make his own decisions when choosing a topic. "I was liberated from having to fill somebody else's expectations, which were not the right ones for me. I was free to succeed or fail on my own terms."

It is paramount that young writers feel a sense of freedom to an extent, in order to feel truly successful and hungry for more. Remember, the goal is for writing to become a part of the child's life as an innate part of their academic personalities. If they are hampered, this feeling can fade. It is also important to remember that no teacher wants twenty-five copies of the same person writing about the same topic. What we're all looking for-what we want to see pop out of your papers-is individuality. We're looking for whatever it is that makes you unique.¹⁰

Brainstorming-The gathering and organizing of thoughts and the steps it will take to pull them together to form a cohesive piece of writing.

Even though the idea in this unit is for students to be more open and free with their explorations in writing, there are still times when a little scaffolding is needed to keep a forward momentum. Starting a piece can sometimes be the hardest part of writing even when you have a clear topic in mind. Students will take part in a minilesson on getting started and other aspects of hitting the ground running in their writing.

English/Grammar Mini Lessons-Reflecting on the mechanics of good writing, these are short lessons designed to inform students and provide a firm background on the conventions of writing.

Keeping in line with the Common Core State Standards of Pennsylvania, students will partake in brief lessons that help keep good form and promote a well-informed piece that audiences of all kinds can enjoy. Students will take part in exercises that will remind them of core English and Grammar principles in areas such as parts of speech, sentence structure, punctuation and other foundational English practice to be used in their writing. These conventions will be a standard part of their writing guidelines within their journals as well as their individual pieces.

Literary Elements and Technique-Character, setting, plot, etc.. Also, figurative language, and mood.

Similar to other minilessons, students will review various elements and techniques that will enhance their pieces and set them apart from their classmates. The discussion of these elements and techniques goes along with various Common Core State Standards for Pennsylvania. Moreover, this will be an introduction into adding color to writing and creating a well-rounded and understandable piece. Having a thorough knowledge of these items will be a major part of the transformation that occurs within the students. Knowing that these

staples are in place helps to drive not only their individual work, but aides in discussion with peers and editing/revising before publishing and sharing.

Writers' Workshop-The process of working collaboratively as well as individually to create and share writing of any genre.

One of the most important strategies when teaching Writing is using the Writers' Workshop. During these sessions, students use a highly structured lesson format that yields thorough understanding of how to craft a piece of writing, but how to revise it and share out publicly. Furthermore, students can take full ownership of their work and showcase it with an appreciative audience of their peers who have just completed the same process. The Writers' Workshop can look different from day to day as the teacher may include a myriad of lessons planned by using valuable formative assessment data gathered during either individual or small group conferencing.

Vocabulary Study-Vocabulary and the study of words overall is something that joins Reading and Writing together. Having an immense vocabulary at early ages has been said to be a fairly accurate predictor of success in students.

Vocabulary used in Reading helps to break down barriers and leads to a more thorough understanding of text. It heightens comprehension and provides students with a never-ending source of learning within many intelligences. Using Latin and Greek roots to construct meaning is an invaluable tool that arms students with all they need to unlock any subject area, familiar or unfamiliar. It catapults children farther than any competitor and contributes to the explorative aspect of literacy for youngsters.

Writing Marathons-The act of writing for any given amount of time without stopping. Completed in areas of all types.

This strategy is one of the most compelling in that it urges the students to push through anything that may be blocking their thought process or creativity. A writing marathon is really quite simple. It's about setting people loose to write. The emphasis remains focused on the writing. Yes, it involves small groups, a particular protocol for reading and responding, a common setting, some socializing, and a sense of community.¹¹

Transformation

If you are a gardener or simply an admiring spectator of nature, you might find joy in watching a lilting butterfly as it flits through the flowers, pollinating as it goes. No, you haven't wandered into another unit; the butterfly and its ability to transform from a caterpillar to this magical new configuration is the metaphor that will drive this unit. Students will subconsciously transform themselves as writers. They will begin the unit unaware of the potential that is inside of them as an undiscovered writer. Each new concept in their writing process will see them enter into another "phase," until they emerge as young writers with a new sense of agency over their thoughts as they see fresh, undiscovered ideas, words, and pages unfold throughout the unit.

Eggs: Students arrive to the third grade in the egg stage. They haven't really begun to tap into writing due to the foundational nature of second grade. Though they have had some exposure, according to the standards, to sentence structure, word choice and some parts of speech, they are still preparing to use those skills as a jumping off point into more in-depth approaches to the subject. With some introduction and practice with basic writing skills that follow the standard, as well as some examples and read alouds from the mentor texts

discussed later in the unit, the students will begin the road to transforming.

Caterpillar: As the students begin to listen and discuss various readings, they will formulate strategic questions that will enhance their discovery of new writing styles and techniques. Minilessons on parts of speech, word choice and voice will continue their path forward. The addition of daily journal writing will be key during this particular phase of reading and writing. Here, students will begin to discover deeper elements of understanding, personality and brainstorming. Moreover, the classes will learn about marathon writing and begin pushing themselves to build stamina as they progress. Here is where the children begin to develop ideas of who they are and a unique identity as emerging writers.

Pupa/Chrysalis: This stage is one of the most important and most involved stages for the students in that they are really getting into their routine through a homogenous mixture of Reading, Writing, exploring/questioning and practicing. Through these exercises, a new mindset is forming, and the children should be shedding any inhibitions toward writing. The pertinent part of this stage is the Writers' Workshop. More mentor texts as well as deeper journaling concepts and writing marathons give way to more and more instances of collaboration. Students will begin to rotate small groups and pairs to spend time writing together as well as individually. During this stage the children will begin focusing on revising their work, getting used to change. This will ready them for preparing it to be published and shared. The students will begin to take ownership of each piece they write. Minilessons and mentor texts will continue throughout.

Butterfly: In this final stage of the writing transformation, the students will revisit older works from their beginning stages and make decisions on revisions with their small groups and partners. Sharing will become more prevalent and the read alouds will now be comprised of student pieces as an addition to the mentor texts alone. Students may type final drafts to be published and monitor the file in which they keep their pieces. The class as a whole, with their new-found voices, questioning skills, and all-around approach to writing may ask for opinions on their work. They may have each other edit and mull over pieces and converse about "glows and grows," which translates to what works well and what may possibly need improving or additions.

The writing marathon is also quite meaningful due the nature of its spontaneity. The students involved in this curriculum unit will be subject to several writing marathons as they build their stamina and hone their craft in the area of expressive writing. It is another tool that helps peel away inhibitions and fears little by little as we move forward in the unit. The marathon will be used here in many different settings as well. The reasoning for this is that the more you move the children around, the more inspiration they will find. Part of the transformative nature in this unit is that the students will surprise themselves with their inner discoveries, moving through the process. During the marathons, this will happen in the sense of time as well as the sense of content. Children may find that they can come up with a valid and intriguing piece of writing in smaller amounts of time as they continue with this exercise. From indoors, to outdoors, and corner to corner of the classroom, children will challenge themselves to literally keep their pencils to the paper and grind out their thoughts on a given topic. The exercises are meant to be shorter in nature but heavier in outcome.

Activities

The third-grade students partaking in the activities within this unit are enrolled in a school which departmentalizes in earlier grades, therefore, in order to maximize the class periods spent together, the activities will unfold over a period of two months. The activities are pertinent to not only the success of the unit, but the thorough development of each student's writing skills and transformation.

Journal Writing:

(15 min.)

To begin, students will participate in several instances of, *responding*, *questioning* and personal *reflection* in their individual journals. This will help create a visible, sharable pathway through the transformation of each child's writing skills. Initially, students will respond to teacher prompts in order to set a clear example of their "starting point." As the children continue to complete responses, asking questions and reflections, they will receive stamps notating their whereabouts in the transformation process. Students will have opportunities to share (voluntarily) collaboratively as well as out loud. Journaling will begin with three entries.

Entry 1: Question

How do you feel about the subject of Writing? What do you expect to learn as you explore the subject?

Entry 2: Question

What do you know about butterflies?

Entry 3: Question

What is the coolest and most amazing fact about butterflies?

The journals are a part of the daily routine so that the students get used to and grow in their writing regardless of topic or style. Coming from second grade, the need to build stamina and introduce additional forms/genres of writing is crucial. This is all a part of the transformation, that the students will speak to toward the end of the unit.

Mentor Texts and TPS (Think-Pair-Share):

(10 min.)

There are ten mentor texts that are to be used throughout the unit. As students begin to build stamina with journal writing, they will add to the experience with mentor texts to be read aloud and discussed. Beginning with *Owl Moon*, by Jane Yolen, which the children may have already experienced in the previous grade, it is important to point out that this story is first and foremost, an experience. The students will Think Pair Share about "experience" and what that term means to them. Ask them specifically to recall an "experience with a loved one." Have the students think silently for a few moments before pairing with someone for "Chicken Coop Soup" (students make two quick "wing" movements with elbows and a short chicken sound). They turn to their "wing mates" and pair up in order to discuss their thoughts on the question. After a few moments, a signal is given to come back to listening their positions for sharing out. Students can relay what was

discussed with their partner. Having thought about the word “experience,” and discussed it, the teacher can begin to read the story, reminding students to listen for key aspects of the characters’ experience, and what makes it special and important. Charting the responses from students will help construct meaning and understanding of this term so that the students can have a reference when they reflect on their own and begin to write essays on personal experience.

Writing Marathons:

(ascending intervals – 3 min., 5 min., 7 min., and 10 minutes)

Because students moving into third grade will be faced with a significantly larger amount of writing, and due to the nature of the various genres covered, it is extremely important that the children should build their writing stamina. In third grade, students will write summaries, response pieces, and narratives, among other genres. The marathon is a simple task that is perfect for helping students dig deeper in their thinking when it comes to beginning a piece and shaping it as the ideas flow. It is imperative that the marathons become regular practice for the children. Just like exercising at the gym, they must keep practicing in order to see true results. This is a critical year in that the first standardized assessments, which require several examples of writing prompts and tasks, will be administered. In practicing writing, and focusing on building stamina in the subject, each child will hone their skills in the entire process. From brainstorming, to revising, the children will construct strong foundations and collaborative practices. The collaborative piece is also key in refining their skill. A common concern is that students’ writing often seems incomplete or confusing and that writers did not seem to notice until they read their work with the teacher.¹²

The first marathon should be 3 minutes with a simple topic. This may seem like a short amount of time, but is designed to ease the children into the practice. Remember, three minutes may very well seem like an eternity to new third graders. However, they must keep writing, even when they run out of things to say (some kiddos may find this amusing). The rule is that they must keep their pencil moving and continue to write words on the paper. Begin with “Tell me what you did before school this morning.” This particular topic is based on personal experience and will ready them for a more rigorous version as they transform.

When students finish, have them read their piece out loud (voluntarily). Ask each child that shares if they can pinpoint where they ran out of ideas. They will discuss what they chose to write as the time continued.

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Appendix: Implementing District Standards

Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards

In the state of Pennsylvania, the Common Core State Standards play a major role in planning and educating the youth in our classrooms. The following standards focus on two subject areas (Reading and Writing). Although the two subjects are different, they can be used in accordance with one another to enhance the

literacy skills of third graders. Items 1.1, 1.3 and 1.4 are the overall standard. Individual items are listed below, with clear objectives/targets for student learning.

1.1 Foundational Skills

Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions. These foundational skills are not an end in and of themselves; rather, students apply them as effective readers.

1.3 Reading Literature

Students read and respond to works of literature—with an emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

1.4 Writing

Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

Reading-Foundational Skills

CC.1.1.3.D-Know and apply grade level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

CC.1.1.2.E-Read with accuracy and fluency to support comprehension

Reading-Reading Literature

CC.1.3.3.A-Determine the central lesson, or moral in literary text; explain how it is conveyed in text.

CC.1.3.3.B-Ask and answer questions about the text and make inferences from text, referring to text to support responses.

CC.1.3.3.D-Explain the point of view of the author.

CC.1.3.3.E-Refer to parts of texts when writing or speaking about a text using such terms as chapter, scene, and stanza and describe how each successive part builds upon earlier sections.

CC.1.3.3.F-Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in grade- level text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral meaning as well as shades of meaning among related words. *CC.1.3.3.I*-Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies and tools.

CC.1.3.3.J-Acquire and use accurately grade- appropriate conversational, general academic, and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal spatial and temporal relationships.

Writing

CC.1.4.3.M-Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

CC.1.4.3.N-Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters.

CC.1.4.3.P-Organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally, using temporal words and phrases to signal event order; provide a sense of closure.

CC1.4.3.Q-Choose words and phrases for effect.

CC.1.4.3.R-Demonstrate a grade- appropriate command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

CC.1.4.3.S-Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and informational texts.

Notes

1. Ortlieb, Ortlieb & Verlaan,
2. Turley, R.M., 2000
3. Pennsylvania Department of Education
4. Goldthwaite
5. Graham, Harris & Mason, 2004
6. Zinsser, W., 2016
7. Turley, R.M., 2000
8. Turley, R.M., 2000
9. Goldthwaite
10. Zinsser, W., 2016
11. National Writing Project
12. Bourque, P., 2015

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