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## Elements of writers workshops in a third grade classroom

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## Elements of writers workshops in a third grade classroom

### Abstract

The act of writing is a natural process and should be treated as such. For children seven years and older, writing usually is not a linear act that follows a prescribed set of steps in a particular order, but a recursive process in which writers move forward and back through the different components of writing to make meaning. A classroom that includes writers workshops, or groups of children working together to interact about writing, must incorporate several important elements to allow this recursive, natural process to happen. These elements include classroom organization, ample writing time, models of writing, teacher instruction of language elements, and opportunities to conference with the teacher and others about writing.

This article provides background information on the writing process and the elements that are necessary to make the process successful. The article shares a teacher's experience in implementing writers workshops into a third grade classroom.

**Elements of Writers Workshops in a Third Grade Classroom**

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**by**

**Gale L. Nagunst**

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## Abstract

The act of writing is a natural process and should be treated as such. For children seven years and older, writing usually is not a linear act that follows a prescribed set of steps in a particular order, but a recursive process in which writers move forward and back through the different components of writing to make meaning. A classroom that includes writers workshops, or groups of children working together to interact about writing, must incorporate several important elements to allow this recursive, natural process to happen. These elements include classroom organization, ample writing time, models of writing, teacher instruction of language elements, and opportunities to conference with the teacher and others about writing.

This article provides background information on the writing process and the elements that are necessary to make the process successful. The article shares a teacher's experience in implementing writers workshops into a third grade classroom.

All children have the desire to write and believe they can do so. About 90 percent of children entering first grade see themselves as writers. Only 15 percent of this same group think they can read. Children and their families have been taught to expect problems in reading, but they have different expectations for writing (Graves, 1983). Children should be approached with the belief that they learn to write as they learned to talk. Lucy Calkins (1983) relates,

“When a child says ‘ady’ instead of Father, we do not worry that the child will fixate on bad habits. We are not afraid to let children talk as best they can. We view their errors as closer and closer approximations. We delight in whatever the baby can do” (p. 13).

### Nurturing a Productive Writing Environment

In order for students to engage in the writing process as naturally as they do in speaking, the classroom must include several important elements. Some of these elements are promoting writing as a recursive process, organizing the classroom for writing, providing time to write, supplying models of writing, providing teacher instruction of language elements, conferencing, and publishing.

As writing is begun in a classroom, children need a real purpose for writing. A supportive context for the growth of student writers includes an environment in which students and teachers work together to improve their

writing (Galda, 1997). Nancie Atwell (1987) describes the elements of a positive writing environment:

- Writers need regular, predictable periods of time for writing.
- Writers are given the opportunity to choose their own topics (rather than having topics assigned to them).
- Writers need response to their work.
- Writers should be taught mechanics in context rather than as isolated sets of skills.
- Writers need to know adults who write.

#### Viewing Writing As A Recursive Process

Donald Graves (1994) states, "The writing process is discovered by doing it. 'Process' refers to everything a person does from the time he first contemplates the topic to the final moment when he completes the paper" (p. 250). The components of the writing process include pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland (1997) define these components as follows:

- Pre-writing: The writer spends time thinking and talking about what he or she will write about.
- Drafting: During this phase, the writer puts words on paper. Meaning is the main focus of drafting.

- **Revising:** In this phase, the writer refines what is already written. Revision usually involves content and style.
- **Editing:** When editing, the writer focuses on correcting conventions.
- **Publishing:** The writer brings a piece of writing to final form.

For children seven years old and older, the writing process is usually recursive (Calkins, 1987). Writers of this age and older do not follow a set of sequential steps in the writing process. The components of the writing cycle overlap as writers move back and forth among the selecting of an idea, the drafting, redrafting, and revising of the idea, and perhaps publishing the idea (Galda, et. al., 1997). For many writers, pre-writing, and rehearsing is a constant process. It is important for students to be allowed the time and freedom to engage in this recursive process (Routman, 1991).

### Organizing the Classroom for Writing

Meaningful writing reflects the conditions for learning in the classroom. The classroom environment should be predictable and secure (Graves, 1994).

To facilitate the writers workshops, the small groups of assigned children that meet to interact about writing and their involvement in the writing process, the children's desks should be arranged so they have easy access to each other in such a grouping. For conferencing, teachers may use a specially designated conference table (Galda, et. al., 1997).



Children need assistance in organizing their writing pieces so they can experience the writing components easily and can reflect on their writing progress. Each child needs a folder for his or her writing. It may have sections reflecting the components of the writing process (Graves, 1994). A working portfolio, a collection of children's writing, selected during the conference times, can show the child's interests, writing activity, and progress. At the end of the school year, the child with the assistance of the teacher can compile a showcase portfolio that is representative of the child's writing during the year to be sent on to the next teacher (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

The writing classroom should provide different writing materials. These may include paper, staplers and staples, tape, and white out (Galda, et. al., 1997).

At the beginning of the year, procedural information about how to handle contributions in the writers workshops, conferences, and sharing time can be provided (Galda, et. al., 1997). Graves (1994) states that children must know what is expected of them during these times. Students must respect each other's contributions in the writers workshop and work independently as the teacher conducts conferences and mini lessons.

### Providing Writing Time

A successful writing program provides children time to write (Hatch, 1991). They need time to think about the ideas that are developing for a writing piece and to know that writing is ongoing and can be continued during the next writing time (Butler & Turbill, 1984). Students need an opportunity to write at least four out of five days each week for 35 to 40 minutes at a time so they will have time to think through the process of writing. Graves (1994) states, "In addition, as our data on children show, when writers write every day, they begin to compose even when they are not composing. They enter into a constant state of composition" (p. 104).

### Supplying Models of Writing

Children need examples of fine writing as models for their own work. Two sources of modeling are quality children's literature and the classroom teacher's involvement in the writing process.

Quality children's literature. Fine children's literature can stimulate children's writing (Hatch, 1991). Every classroom should have available materials that represent a wide range of reading interests and levels. These works should include children's literature books from all genres as well as newspapers, magazines, and even pamphlets and brochures (Butler & Turbill, 1984). In addition to providing a model of ideas for writing, access to different types of print improves writing ability. McQuillan (1998) states,

“Those who read more have better reading comprehension, better vocabulary, and better writing skills” (p. 70).

Students acquire ideas for topics, genres, and strategies when they read and share the writing of professional authors (Hansen, 1987). Students learn to write in a particular genre by listening to, reading, and examining the literature of that genre. Teachers may stop in the midst of reading a story aloud to students to call the students' attention to a particular feature of the text. Sections of a page or paragraph can be photocopied onto overhead transparencies to show the whole class important phrases or key words an author has used (Routman, 1991). Galda, et. al., (1997) suggests a similar approach. Teachers may stop while reading aloud to reread interesting sentences or passages. They can be written on the chalkboard and examined. Students and teacher can discuss why the author made a particular choice of words.

Teacher as a writer. Just as quality literature provides a model for students to follow in their writing, so does the teacher as a writer. Donald Graves (1983) explains the importance of the teacher's role in nurturing children's writing: “Teachers can answer children's questions only if they know the writing process from both the inside and the outside. They know it from the inside because they work at their own writing. They know it from

the outside because they are acquainted with research that shows what happens when people write" (p. 220).

A teacher's literacy can have a long-term influence on the class (Graves, 1994). Graves (1994) relates, "Writing with your students is probably the single most powerful thing you will do to help them learn to write" (p. 42). Writing, like speaking and reading, is a social activity that develops from watching and imitating mature language behavior (Hatch, 1991). Students will take writing more seriously if the teacher writes in the classroom, developing his or her own piece or working with students to develop a work (Routman, 2000).

The teacher can write with the students using an overhead projector or chart tablet. As the teacher writes, he/she can share the thought processes that are being used. In this way, children can interact with an experienced writer (Graves, 1994). Sharing a piece of writing written for a real purpose is a good way to begin writing. The teacher can model the writing process by doing a shared writing activity after a field trip or other common class experiences, verbalizing his/her thinking as it is written in front of the students. Students can see how the teacher as a writer changes his/her mind as he/she writes to refine the piece by expanding, deleting, and revising. The students can see that a writer may not know what will be composed until the writing actually begins (Routman, 1991).

As well as composing different types of writing, a teacher can keep a journal about what is going on in his/her world, outside of school. The journal can also be used to respond to literature the teacher has read. It can be shared with students (Galda, et. al., 1997).

### Providing Teacher Instruction of Language Elements

Conventions help writers express precisely what they mean (Graves, 1994). The teaching of conventions can be done in the form of mini lessons. A mini lesson can be conducted with the whole class or a small group. Such a lesson can also be conducted in a conference with an individual whose writing indicates a need for instruction in a specific element (Calkins, 1986). Mini lessons usually involve focusing on students' own writing pieces. Students also learn mechanics as they notice the writing of others. Isolated instruction on writing elements has been found to have little transfer to students' writing (Galda, et. al., 1997).

### Conferencing

Small group or individual conferences with students give the teacher an opportunity to listen to what the children know about writing and can help children explore and expand upon their pieces. If a conference is being conducted properly, the child speaks about 80 percent of the time and the teacher only 20 percent. Graves (1994) states, "What authors of any age need most is attentive listeners" (p. 133). In order for children to be willing

to open up and talk about their writing, the teacher must listen intently and sensitively to the student (Wilcox, 1997).

The setting of the writing conference may be as important as the teacher. The setting is a form of nonverbal communication that conveys the message that the teacher is willing to listen (Graves, 1983). The teacher should sit near the child so that both can see the writing and at an equal height instead of towering over the child. Eye contact should be made with the child rather than avoiding it (Graves, 1983). Wilcox (1997) states that during a conference, "It may be a good idea for the teacher to invite the child to read the paper aloud. While reading the paper, the child hears his or her own voice, which reinforces the sense of ownership and the realization that the paper is - - and should be a genuine expression of what the child wants to say" (p. 509). Teachers should keep a record of which students they have conferenced with so everyone eventually gets an opportunity to share writing pieces (Graves, 1994).

Teachers should spend a few minutes each day with each student to find out what they will be writing about. This practice helps students focus their writing and think about where it is going. These brief conferences also give the teacher a valuable record of student progress (Galda, et. al., 1997).

Peer conferences, either in pairs or with the members of their writers workshop, allow students the opportunity to confer with each other so they

know that they are writing for a broader audience than just the teacher.

During these conferences students learn from each other, generate ideas, and help each other maintain an interest in writing (Hansen, 1987).

### Publishing Works

The publishing component is an essential part of the writing program. Graves (1983) states, "Writing is a public act meant to be shared with many audiences" (p. 54). Publishing gives students an opportunity to share their writing with real audiences (Hatch, 1991). It contributes to a writer's development by giving meaning to the reason for writing (Graves, 1983). It also motivates children to polish their pieces for others to read (Butler & Turbill, 1984; Routman, 1991).

Publishing may take many forms. Books published for the classroom library provide students with authorship and access to their peers' work. Teachers should also publish something for the classroom library. Publication of a classroom newspaper gives students a chance to learn about the parts of a paper. Bulletin boards are a user-friendly method of publishing student work (Galda, et. al., 1997).

### Assessment of the Writing Process

Student writing may be evaluated both formally and informally. Informal evaluation is ongoing and occurs through self-reflection, conferences, writer's workshops and class discussions, portfolio collection, teacher anecdotal notes,

and checklists (Frank, 1994). Conventional, or quantitative, assessment does not address whether or not children see themselves as readers and writers (Calkins, 1991).

The writing folder can provide the simplest, most efficient form of assessment. Writing folders can show specific changes in children's work. In reflecting on their writing activity, the work in the children's folders can serve as a focal point. From the writing folders, pieces can be selected for portfolios to document students' writing growth (Graves, 1983). Marjorie Frank (1994) offers this definition of a portfolio:

"A writing portfolio is an organized and purposeful collection of work that shows the student's achievements, efforts, growth, and attitudes in the area of writing. The collection includes some statement or evidence of purpose, reasons or criteria for selection of the pieces, and examples of student self-reflection on the work" (p. 14).

The difference between a writing folder and a writing portfolio is that a writing folder contains all of a student's work presented at conferences with the teacher. A portfolio contains selected writing exhibits from the writing folder. An essential element of a portfolio is that students record why the pieces of work are of value to them.



Four types of observations can be used in assessing a child's writing:

- folder observation: a review of the writing in the child's folder
- distant observation: observation of the child from across the room while he or she is writing
- close-in observation: watching how the child approaches writing while seated next to the child but without interrupting
- participant observation: asking questions sparingly about the child's composing process (Graves, 1983).

Assessment from observations can help teachers trouble shoot and can allow both teacher and student to celebrate successes. The secret of good observation is to be systematic and regular in their use. With practice, teachers can get the feel for the class' progress and sense which students need assistance (Graves, 1983). Observation alone, however, is not enough (Routman, 2000).

Three types of checklists may prove helpful in keeping ongoing records for the purpose of assessment. First, an entire class checklist helps a teacher see at a glance what the class has done over the period of a week. Absences are denoted by blanks in the record and may help to explain why some students are not making progress (Graves, 1983).

Teachers may also keep a loose-leaf notebook with names of the students on tabs. As the students and teacher conference, the teacher records the highlights of the conference. A checkoff system that uses few words may be the most efficient way to record this information. A rating system that

evaluates the overall quality of the child's work may include the following symbols (+) for good, (-) for poor, and (o) for unsure or cannot tell (Graves, 1983).

A third type of checklist may be used to occasionally assess student behavior during sharing time. The list includes space for the teacher to record the names of students who have shared their work and the quality of responses by other students to that work (Graves, 1983).

Writing samples may be evaluated with a rubric, a more formal assessment, to obtain a numerical score. Rubrics measure specific characteristics of writing. Rubrics should include a rating scale and the criteria to be used for judging the work. It may be helpful for students to participate in the creation of the rubric. Rubrics should not be used to score every piece of a child's writing, rather occasional writing samples (Frank, 1994).

### Implementation of a Writing Program in Grade Three

The goal of this project was to expand the writing program in my third grade classroom by implementing many of the ideas found from reviewing professional literature.

The classroom was comprised of twenty-one students, ten girls and eleven boys. Students at this school come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, but the majority of the students are at the lower end of this

range. The school services a temporary housing facility for homeless families. Geographically speaking, this school's boundaries cover a large area of the inner city.

The reading and writing ability of the students in the class varied greatly. Four of the students were classified as talented and gifted. They spent part of each day in a pullout program for social studies/literature. Three other students were classified as resource and/or SCI. They, too, spent part of each day out of the regular classroom for language arts and/or math. All students participated to some extent in the writing program of this classroom.

I began the writing program with the intention of promoting children's writing by including important elements of a writers workshop into my writing program. I attempted to present a learning environment throughout the day that would enhance and support the writing process and improve student writing and enjoyment of writing regardless of the child's literacy ability.

### Organizing the Classroom for Writing

Each student was provided with a laminated two-pocket folder for his/her writing pieces. These folders were kept at the writing center in an easily accessible location in the classroom. Also, housed at the writing center was lined and unlined paper of several different rules. Because the handwriting ability of the class varied from rudimentary manuscript to cursive handwriting, I provided paper that was ruled in one inch, three-quarter inch, and three-eighths inch increments. Conventional notebook paper was also

available. The paper supply was always well stocked so students could get paper without teacher assistance. The writing center also included monthly calendars with writing ideas and picture cards that students could use as writing prompts.

Each student kept a journal in a spiral notebook. Journals were used for any type of writing the student chose to do. Students often returned to journal entries for material that they would develop more fully during writers workshop time. Once each week I collected student journals, looked them over, and wrote comments. With some students, this process became a dialogue. These comments and responses gave me another opportunity to model writing for students.

Each student was provided with a third-grade level spelling dictionary titled, More Words I Use When I Write (Rosemont, NJ: Modern Learning Press/Programs for Education, 1990). This dictionary listed frequently spelled words and provided space to add words as needed. Also, included in this dictionary were lists of state names, days, months, and holidays. Many students kept this dictionary in their writing folders. I established a rule regarding the spelling of unknown words. I would gladly spell a word for a student, but they must have tried to look it up in their spelling dictionary. If they were unable to find the word, they should try to have the dictionary open to the correct page, and then I would write the word in the book.

At the beginning of the year, the students were divided into writers workshop groups, small groups of four to six children. Each group had a child who was a strong positive influence among the peers. I instructed the students about the routines of writers workshop at the start of the workshop sessions. After discussing each guideline, we talked about why that guideline was necessary. I gave each student a copy of the guidelines to keep in his/her writing folder. I also placed a copy of the guidelines at the writing center (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1

#### A List of Writer's Workshop Guidelines

1. Write on only one side of your paper.
2. Write on every other line.
3. Cross out changes, do not erase.
4. Put the date on everything you write.
5. Save everything you write in your writing folder.

#### Establishing a Routine for Writing

During the block of time each afternoon for writing, I established a routine. The first ten minutes was quiet writing time for all of the students and the teacher. As students continued to write or conference with other students in their assigned writers workshops, I quickly checked with each child to determine what he/she was working on that day. I recorded this information on a form I adapted from Galda et. al., (1997). These brief,



On Tuesdays and Thursdays, after touching base with each student, I moved directly into a mini lesson. Occasionally, these lessons would be whole group sessions. At the beginning of the year, many of these sessions dealt with the different components of writing: how to find a topic, how to extend the meaning, how to make the meaning clearer, how to publish. More often, I called together smaller groups with similar needs. The content of the mini lessons was determined by information gleaned from student conferences, observations of student writing, student journals, or the school district's curriculum frameworks. The mini lessons included organizing the writing notebook, cutting and pasting to rearrange or add text, using interesting words, writing a good beginning, writing a good ending, and paragraph writing. While I worked with these students, the remainder of the class continued to work independently or with peers in their writers workshops.

I also modeled writing on the overhead, chalkboard, or chart tablets so students could see the many purposes for writing. When parent notes were sent home, they were drafted in front of the whole class at the overhead projector. After our class attended a luncheon as part of River City Roundup festivities, I used a chart tablet to model the writing of a thank you note. As these notes were written, I reread, crossed out, and rewrote until each note made sense. While writing, I shared with the students what I was thinking and why I was making the changes.





Two days a week, the writing period ended with a sharing time. Children signed up on a calendar if they wished to share (see Figure 4). Students were to prepare for sharing by selecting a piece that could benefit from peer suggestions and by practicing reading the piece beforehand. At the beginning of the year, appropriate behavior during students' sharing was discussed. The importance of careful consideration of others' rights and feelings was emphasized.

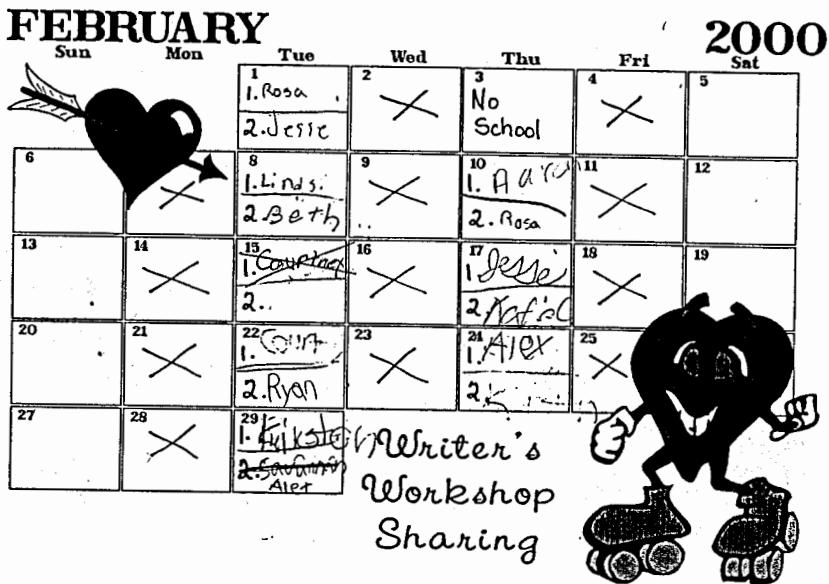
Student responses to others' work at the beginning of the year consisted mainly of comments such as, "I liked your story," or "Why did you choose to write about that?" Many times students would ask the same question that another student had previously asked. These early questions seldom generated suggestions that could help student writers better develop their pieces.

After a few of these less than productive sessions, I changed the focus from questioning to recalling. The listeners were to focus carefully on what the author had written and recall or repeat something they had heard. This type of response seemed to focus the listeners' attention on what the author was saying. As the students gained proficiency in this type of response, I attempted to move them to asking questions that might help answer a question they had about the piece. I did this by repeated modeling of the

types of questions that could be asked of the author. By the end of the year, almost every student could formulate a specific question for the author.

Figure 4

Sharing Calendar



Supporting Writing with Literacy Activities

Each day students participated in activities that supported writing. Silent reading time was built into each day's schedule. The classroom library was stocked with literature of a wide range of reading levels and from all genres. The school library media center was another resource for literature experiences. Students could visit the school library as often as they wished to select books.

Each day I read aloud to the class at least once from different genres. After reading aloud sessions, I would sometimes reread and discuss passages that illustrated aspects of writing. Poetry often was presented on a chart pad and frequently was followed by group oral reading. The works selected often related to a current theme, an author, or curriculum area. For example, after presenting several winter poems, many students wrote winter poetry of their own (see Figure 5).

### Figure 5

#### Two Examples of Student Poetry

#### Winter

Riding in an iceboat all morning.

Sledding all afternoon under the sun.

Ice skating in the moonlight.

Derrick

Winter is Here  
 A snowy day! A blowy day!  
 Play with me on a snowy  
 day. My dog is ready  
 to run and play!  
 I am ready too. Are you?  
 Snowman, Snowman  
 round and fat. Do you  
 need a hat? Do you need a scarf?  
 Do you need buttins  
 to button your coat? You  
 need two buttins for  
 your eyes. you need a  
 carrit for your noes.  
 The end  
 By Savannah

Time was set aside twice a week for students to read aloud to the class from a book of their choice. Students who wished to participate in student read alouds signed up on a calendar. They were encouraged to select a portion of the text that they thought was significant and read the section before presenting it so they were comfortable in reading. This practice helped the students read aloud with more fluency. Students were also to explain why they felt the section they shared was important, funny, or interesting. For some students, the discussions became a springboard for writing alternative endings (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Alternative Ending for the Book, The Skates of Uncle Richard (1978), by Carol Fenner, New York: Random House.

Masha's Skating lesson on ice  
 the next chapter  
 It was the first day of Masha's  
 skating lesson. she was nervous!  
 But she did not have to  
 meet her Uncle Richard. she went  
 to her mom and ASK her. her  
 mom said "that hes at the  
 lagoon." so she walk to the  
 lagoon. she found her Uncle and  
 skated her lessons. first she fell  
 down but she got back up. then her  
 Uncle Richard tot her to do a  
 figure eight. It was getting late.  
 they went home and went to Bed.

### Assessing Student Writing

To assess the writing of the students in my class, I used a combination of qualitative methods. First, and most important, I reviewed the students' writing portfolio folders on a regular basis. Since each piece of writing was dated, I was able to note progress over time. The writing portfolios were useful at parent-teacher conference time to offer parents concrete examples of their child's writing abilities.

I also used the conference record sheet to aid in assessment. It was easy to look back at a student's conference activity over a period of time and assess their progress. Occasionally I would use a rubric to assess a particular piece of writing. Before doing this, however, I shared the rubric with the children so they knew how they would be evaluated. The rubric I used was adapted from Baltzel, 1992 (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Rubric for Evaluating Student Writing

	Ideas	Organization	Word Choice	*Sentence Structure	*Mechanics
4	Fresh, original Focuses on topic Supporting details	Ideas connected Strong beginning, middle, end Sequenced and logical	Wide variety used Consistent and appropriate usage Words "enhance" ideas	Clearly written Complete sentences Variety of sentence length	*Appropriate or acceptable: - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
3	Some original ideas General focus on topic Most supporting details included	Most ideas connected Good beginning, middle, end Most ideas sequenced & logical	Some variety Mostly consistent and appropriate Words generally support ideas	Most sentences clearly written Simple sentences Some variety of length	Some errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
2	Few original ideas Moves away from focus Few supporting details	Some ideas connected Attempts beginning, middle, end Not always sequenced & logical	Common word choice Some appropriate word choices Little use of descriptive words	Some unclear sentences Run-on, fragmented, sentences Little variety	Several errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
1	Incomplete ideas Unfocused Lacks details	Few ideas connected Lacks beginning, middle, end Little sequence & logic	Limited word choice Inappropriate word choices No attempt at descriptive words	Sentences not clear Frequent fragmented sentences No variety	Many errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
0	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt

\*May vary depending upon which draft it is of the child's writing

## Conclusions

By incorporating elements of writers workshops into my writing program, I hoped to improve the writing of my third grade students. However, as the school year and this project progressed, I discovered that there were three other essential insights that I wanted my students to gain. First, that writing can be pleasurable, not just a chore. Second, that writing is used by many people for many purposes. Last, that writing is an ongoing, recursive process, not just an end product. With the guidance I provided in the form of the basic elements of the writers workshop, this third grade class did become better writers. I believe that many of them also gained those three essential insights.

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