



Curriculum News



Why Writing?

For at least the last five years, we have been trying to improve our scores in writing. This applies to the Primary and Junior EQAO testing (formerly known as the Grades 3 and 6 testing) as well as to the grade ten Literacy Test (OSSLT) results. And by “we”, I mean the Kenora Catholic DSB as well as the province in general. This year we are supposed to reach our target of 75% of students achieving at or above the provincial average in reading, writing, and mathematics. To do this we will have to see significant gains in writing.. So, what will be different?

Well, first of all it is a narrower focus than we have been working on up until now. In the past we have been using strategies to enhance literacy. We have tried to increase achievement in writing by working on reading. To a point, this

is a valid way to go. Better readers are better writers. However, we need to teach writing skills also explicitly. We need to look at what writers do to be successful. And one of the most important things that they do is that they write! Everyday! They talk, they think and they share their ideas and their writing. They write for real audiences and for actual meaningful purposes that hold real meaning for them. Perhaps most importantly, they write “to learn about themselves and their connections to the world. Through writing, students organize their thoughts, remember important information, solve problems, reflect on a widening range of perspectives, and learn how to communicate effectively for specific purposes and audiences. They find their voice and have opportunities to explore other voices. By putting their

thoughts into words and supporting the words with visual images in a range of media, students acquire knowledge and deepen their understanding of the content in all school subjects. Writing also helps students to better understand their own thoughts and feelings and the events in their lives. ¹

We must teach students the inherent power of writing. Of course, to do this, we must believe it ourselves. We need to see ourselves as writers and then we need to share that identity with our students.

We need to find time to give students the opportunity to grow into good effective communicators.

So, what are you doing differently this year?

¹ *Literacy for Learning: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario*, 2004, p. 79.

Writing Workshop in a Nutshell

There are many books that describe the writing workshop. Workshops have these two key elements: kids write everyday and they follow a set routine for each session.

Katie Wood Ray in *The Writing Workshop* outlines these further characteristics of the workshop approach:

- Choices about content
- Time for writing
- Teaching
- Talking

Periods of focused study
 Publication rituals
 High expectations and safety
 Structured management
 If you want to know more about these topics, watch our website under **Teachers / Writing** or more details to be posted.

Writers on Writing:

The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say. ~Anaïs Nin

If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

~Toni Morrison

Special points of interest:

- We need to increase our Junior scores in writing by 12%
- Writing workshop is a tool that can allow students to develop writing in authentic contexts
- There are only 4 overall expectations in the writing strand in the Language Arts curriculum for grades 1—8

Do we know what we are looking to find?

According to the overall expectations for the writing strand, we are want to ensure that students will:

1. generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience;
2. draft and revise their writing, using a variety of informational, literary, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience;
3. use editing, proofreading, and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression, and present their work effectively;
4. reflect on and identify their strengths as writers, areas for improvement, and the



When we plant the acorn, do we know to look for the oak leaf?

strategies they found most helpful at different stages in the writing process.

However, do we really know what this looks like and how to enhance its growth in our students? Our students have four roles as they become writers. They are learning to be meaning makers, text us-

ers, text analyzers, and text crafters. To do this, they must develop the skills of writing. They need to learn how to generate ideas, how to organize, how to make good word choices, how to create voice, how to write with fluency and how to use the conventions of writing.

There are many excellent ways of teaching these traits of writing to our students. Ruth Culham's book *6+1Traits* is an excellent resource as are the many websites on this topic.

However, if we keep in mind that we are trying to develop sophisticated writers who can communicate effectively in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences, we should be able to plan with the correct end in mind.



Conferring—the Heart of Teaching Writing

If you are like me, as a student you were given writing topics (perhaps an essay in high school or a prompt in elementary school) and then sent home to do your writing at your lonely table by yourself. The work was done and handed in and you never found out about your writing until it was too late. The work was already graded and you were given lots of suggestions in the margins to let you know what you should have done differently. But, ultimately, it made little difference. The work was done, the writing was over and the mark was what the mark was. This is the kind of experience from which we want to shield our students. We want to show them how to improve

their writing as they are doing it. **Conferring with our students gives us that opportunity.**

First of all, we need to give students ample time to write in class. We need to be there to help them get it right. Secondly, we need to teach them as they work. A conference with a student should be approximately 2—7 minutes of direct teaching on an area of need in that student's work. It consists of four things: research (to see how the student's writing is going) deciding (to see what the student needs to be taught at this point in their work), teaching (in an individualized on-the-spot lesson) and recording (where

you or the student (or both) makes note of the essential content of the mini lesson).

I was never given that kind of helpful feedback when I was a student. I never had the opportunity to talk about my ideas in progress or to share where I was in my work until it was completed. This short moment of connection can help you to keep a pulse on the needs of your students. It can help you to connect with what is interesting to your classroom of writers and it can help you to hone your own skills as a teacher of writing. Plus it benefits the students as well!

Perhaps it is worth a try!

“Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.”

Author Unknown

“Writing became such a process of discovery that I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning: I wanted to know what I was going to say.” ~Sharon O'Brien

“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

Anton Checkov

“If my doctor told me I had six more minutes to live, I wouldn't brood. I'd type a little faster.”

Isaac Asimov