

# Educational Leadership

October 2004 | Volume 62 | Number 2

**Writing!** Pages 42-45

## Is There a Hemingway in the House?

**Creative warm-up activities can unblock your most reluctant writers.**

*Laurel Schmidt*

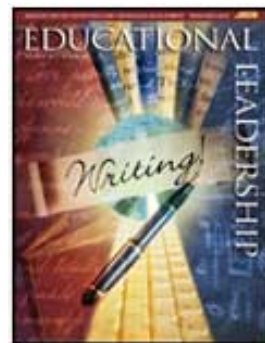
Lots of smart, articulate students hate writing. They spend their school careers wondering, *Why do I have to write anyway? The teacher's standing right next to me! Can't I just tell her what I want to say?* Writing seems like an inefficient way to communicate—slower than talking and far more dangerous: When you speak, nobody notices where you put the commas; write, and they're after you with a red pencil. And then there's the grueling process of lining up hundreds—even thousands—of words in single file. *Who knows which ones the teacher wants? How can I tell when I'm done?* For prose-hating kids, writing is tough, puzzling work.

The more creative ones manage to turn their writer's block into a sport. First comes “search and rescue.” When you say it's writing time, they dive under their tables as though you just announced a duck-and-cover drill. They're intent on finding their favorite pencil, which is tragically AWOL. If they locate it, it's never sharp enough, requiring several trips to the sharpener. Then the chair must be precisely aligned toward some invisible compass point, and a drink of water is required to lubricate the writing muscles.

When these students finally *do* get a few words on the paper, they're inevitably the wrong words, so it's time for a brisk round of erasing. Anti-writers employ a full-body approach to the task. Holding the upended pencil in a death grip, they begin scouring the paper like a murderer removing bloodstains. Soon the tabletop is strewn with bright pink eraser crumbs, and you can see light through the freshly scrubbed paper. Next, these un-writers carefully gather the crumbs into a miniature pyramid. For the big finish, they inhale deeply and expel a small tornado, sending crumbs in all directions. For kinesthetic learners, this is heaven. And cardiovascularly speaking, it's a tour de force. Unfortunately, these students produce little or no writing.

### Fear and Trembling

When someone asked Ernest Hemingway what frightened him the most, he replied, “A blank sheet of paper.” Many of my writer friends seem to agree. They get up every day intent on



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their literary goals, and they all have their warm-up rituals. Some rise at dawn. Others can't drag themselves out of bed until the morning talk shows have yielded to the afternoon soap operas. Some go out for coffee and then hit the gym, while others lounge in their pajamas, reading the headlines . . . the classifieds . . . *anything* to avoid writing. Some review every word they wrote the day before, tweaking and polishing before they take the plunge. One types the alphabet over and over, to jump-start his brain. I can count on one finger the number of writers who just sit down and dive into their scribbling with relish.

## **Warming Up to Writing**

To take the fright out of writing—or at least to lower initial resistance—try some of the following writing warm-up activities with students in the elementary grades.

### ***Hand Writing***

Hand Writing is a warm-up for students in grades 1–3 that captures youthful imagination and uncovers a trove of rich vocabulary in one fell swoop. You can use this activity when students are getting ready to write about any topic—science, history, literature, or current events. Suppose you want your students to write about the amazing rainstorm that drenched your city last night. Simply ask them to picture the storm and “write” with their finger one word on the palm of their hands that describes it: *clouds*, *puddles*, or *thunder*, for example. Because students write the word with their finger, it's invisible—no worries about spelling or penmanship.

Have students hold up their hands for you to see. Scan their invisible words and respond with comments like, “That's a great word! Would you read it to the class?” or, “I love that word! Tell everybody what you wrote.” Once your students grasp the imaginary nature of this game, they'll probably feel brave enough to scribble more sophisticated words that have made it into their listening and speaking vocabulary but not yet into their writing.

Exclaim over their words and write them on the board. Then tell students to erase the words on their hands and write a new word to describe something else about the storm—what they like to do best on a rainy night, for example. Repeat the reading-and-praising process and add the new words to the others on the board. In no time, students will be staring at a wealth of words about the topic, clustered in such categories as “words describing a storm” or “rainy-night activities.” Now they know some words to use, and they don't have to fumble for the correct spellings.

Hand Writing is powerful for kinesthetic learners. These learners crave tactile stimulation and learn best when they use larger muscles and nerve endings, along with their cerebellums. This strategy also helps visual/spatial learners to see related words organized in clumps, which later turn into paragraphs. Most important, all students can successfully participate in the activity.

### ***Skinny to Steroids***

This audience participation warm-up emphasizes adjectives and adverbs, the rich embroidery of the writer's art. Challenge students to transform minimalist sentences into something more. Write a mind-bogglingly simple sentence on the board. Try something like “The cat eats.”

Leave big spaces between the words. Then ask students, "Does the sentence tell what the cat looks like? Do you know what it's eating? Or where? Or why? What words could you add to make the sentence tell us more about this cat?" At first, you'll get suggestions like *black*. Stick the word in front of *cat*, and reread the sentence aloud. Continue asking for suggestions. Squeeze words in, put them on stilts above the sentence, and hook them on from below. In no time, you'll have a sentence on steroids.

The beauty of Skinny to Steroids is that it's a stand-alone activity that you can do in two minutes. It's perfect for those scraps of time before the bell rings and while stragglers are getting to their seats at the beginning of class, or for rousing groggy brains first thing in the morning. Once you've modeled the process with the class, you can use it in small groups. Have several groups work on the same skinny sentence for three to five minutes and then have them read their "steroid" versions aloud for all to applaud.

### ***Empty Your Head***

Writers like to play with lots of ideas before they close in on the actual writing process. Kid writers have lots of ideas, too, but faced with a writing assignment, they sometimes go blank. Empty Your Head gets ideas out on the table. You can use this strategy to prime students for writing about a historic event, a character in a read-aloud book, or any creative topic, and they can engage in the activity in groups or individually.

Start with the outline of a head—either on the board, on a chart, or on individual handouts distributed to each student. Now ask students to "empty their heads," writing all the words that come to mind about the designated topic. They just keep writing until nothing else comes out. When they're finished, ask them to count their words and circle the most interesting ones.

You can take this a step further by visually linking related words. Give students a set of markers and ask them to review their words, choosing one and drawing a line from it to all the words that go with it. For example, if the topic is frogs, students might link *skin* with *green*, *shiny*, *bumpy*, and *spots*. Then they choose a different-colored marker and link another set of words.

This exercise reinforces the idea that although all the words in the Empty Head are related to the major topic, the linked words belong together in robust sentences or paragraphs. This activity helps visual/spatial and kinesthetic learners organize their ideas before they start writing.

### ***Annotated Drawing***

Annotated Drawing is similar to Empty Your Head, but it plays on the strength of visual learners, who think in pictures. To help students warm up for a writing assignment, have them sketch the topic's main ideas. If the topic is winter, they might sketch snow, rain, birds migrating, or children skating or skiing. Have students surround each sketch with a halo of words that elaborates on it. The picture of snow could be accompanied by *blizzard*, *drifts*, *snowplow*, *snow day*, *fort*, and *frostbite*. The final product resembles a thought diagram that can be used as a starting point for constructing sentences, paragraphs, or a longer piece of

writing.

### ***Listen and Draw***

Listen and Draw is another technique that helps students grasp the picture-making power of words. Have students draw pictures that capture what they're seeing in their heads as you read aloud. They can make simple sketches, stick figures, and even abstract lines and shapes that capture emotions, sound, or action. Have your students make a listening journal that they can use all year. Read vivid material and then ask students what they saw in their minds and what words the author used to make those pictures come alive. For example, the opening chapter of Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* is loaded with tantalizing phrases: The windows were "so small they looked like they were holding their breath."

When students cite a passage that created a picture for them, reread the relevant parts while they hold up their drawings. Ask them to write some of the words that the author used around the edge of their pictures to make a border or frame connecting the words to their images.

### ***Writers' Hats***

Many writers and artists have favorite items of clothing that put them in a creative frame of mind—shirts that reek of turpentine or fishing hats, for example. Encourage your students to bring in a favorite hat to wear whenever they write. Hats can block out visual distractions and focus young writers on the world of ideas inside their hat. Being playful about writing eases anxiety in reluctant writers and announces that this is a special time of day when creativity and individualism rule.

### ***From Your Lips to Their Pens***

You can double or triple the horsepower of your read-aloud sessions if you select books with the art of writing in mind. Search for literature rich in visual imagery and emotional content; find books that use words in surprising ways.

Show your students how to listen for the writer at work behind the words. Before you start reading, ask students to listen for excellent sentences or unusual words and to try to visualize pictures in their heads. In a history unit, I read aloud from novels written for adults—books about life in Plymouth Colony or the fall of Constantinople—because the authors captured the intimate details of life in the past, which no textbook could ever communicate. My students hung on every word. When you finish an exceptional passage, ask these questions:

- What pictures did you see in your head?
- What words did the author use to make those pictures?
- What was your favorite part? Why?
- What was a great word that you heard?
- What phrase or sentence did you love?

Students improve their writing by listening to you read aloud because they hear new words in context, so their vocabulary grows. They internalize the tricks that writers play with sentences—

using sentence fragments, for example, or words that stand alone. Students discover how dialogue can sharpen and add drama to their writing. They learn the characteristics of various literary genres, and when it all comes together, they get lost in a book.

## Stretch Those Writing Muscles

Great teachers know only too well that writing is hard work—exhausting for students and massively time-consuming for teachers. But they also understand that if students are to make knowledge their own, they must wrestle with facts, struggle with details, and rework raw information into language that reaches their audience. Students need effective, bite-size opportunities to help them master writing skills. They can become more than just short-order wordsmiths: Warm-up activities like these can help them become real writers.

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