

## **Storyboarding our Thinking: creating flexible writers**

Penny Kittle

Imagine the possibilities in story. I want to write about my father: I see us golfing together on an old course in Oregon in the chill of early morning. I see us side by side on the Wilson River with lines in the water, silent. I see us riding in one of his old American cars, his arm out the open window, his deep blue eyes hidden behind dark glasses. I see him in his recliner, leaned back, watching the television. I stop. That memory is dancing too closely to memories of his drinking; I want to write something beautiful, a memorial of his many gifts in my life.

I will select what I want to include from the hundreds of moments we spent together: the same task our students face when they choose a big thing from their life to write about, from the second grader who wants to write about why he loves his mom, to the 12th grader writing about a beloved grandparent recently passed. We face the same challenges: how do we teach to enter those challenges with students and unravel the complexity of writing without sacrificing its very nature? The writing process is about discovery and creation; sometimes we teach it as organized, predictable thought. In designing authentic writing experiences for the students I work with, storyboarding has allowed me to guide students in thinking about complex ideas as they ready themselves to write.

Because I've done some writing, I know that each of those moments with Dad can be a scene and I can weave them into any pattern I want, finding a theme by moving the pieces. Will I write of dad's teaching? Then I'll select those lessons on the water, in the backyard with a fly rod, or on the golf course. Do I want to write about his silliness? That leads me to dancing on the course when he sunk a putt or calling me Chowderhead with a deep chuckle when I wouldn't take the rod because the fish scared me. I would have to include a scene of him dancing a shuffle to Roger Miller songs like, "You Can't Rollerskate in a Buffalo Herd" or one of his ridiculous jokes. The act of imagining the stories I haven't written is engaging. I know to not plan ahead much, but rather, to write one and see where it leads me. Because I write, I'm willing to write to discover what I have to say instead of following a determined plan for my writing. What I've found more than once is that what seemed like the right series of scenes when I started can quickly become a task I don't want to finish, instead of writing that makes me sit up straighter and celebrate what I find. So I think in scenes, then imagine moving them around like pieces in a puzzle that hasn't been cut yet. And this is art: gratifying, sustaining, and completely engaging.

We can teach this to writers. We should, in fact. Here's why. If we step back from skills and think of the big picture of writing, we want students to be flexible thinkers who craft their experiences into art. We want sustained engagement with writing; we want deep thinking. We want them to imagine possibilities. We don't want writers who need our outline to write about snakes. They'll want us at every turn if we parcel writing into steps that we control. We want their vision structured into a logical movement of thought. Because I work with some amazing teachers in my work as a K-12 coach, I want to lead

you through our process of helping students storyboard their ideas to learn flexibility in thinking. I've done this teaching in grade 2-adult night school and graduate school, so I've seen that writers of any ability can do this.

## **How to Storyboard**

The resource I turn to deepen my own understanding of this process is *Visual Tools for Differentiating Reading and Writing Instruction*, by Roger Essley, Scholastic. His co-authors, Linda Rief and Amy Rocci, work in public schools in New Hampshire and have tested out this strategy in everything from character development in *Romeo & Juliet* to preparing third graders for a standardized test. My use of storyboards is different from theirs, but that is the essence of professional development to me. You will read this and imagine possibilities with your students, then transform my thinking by layering it with your own.

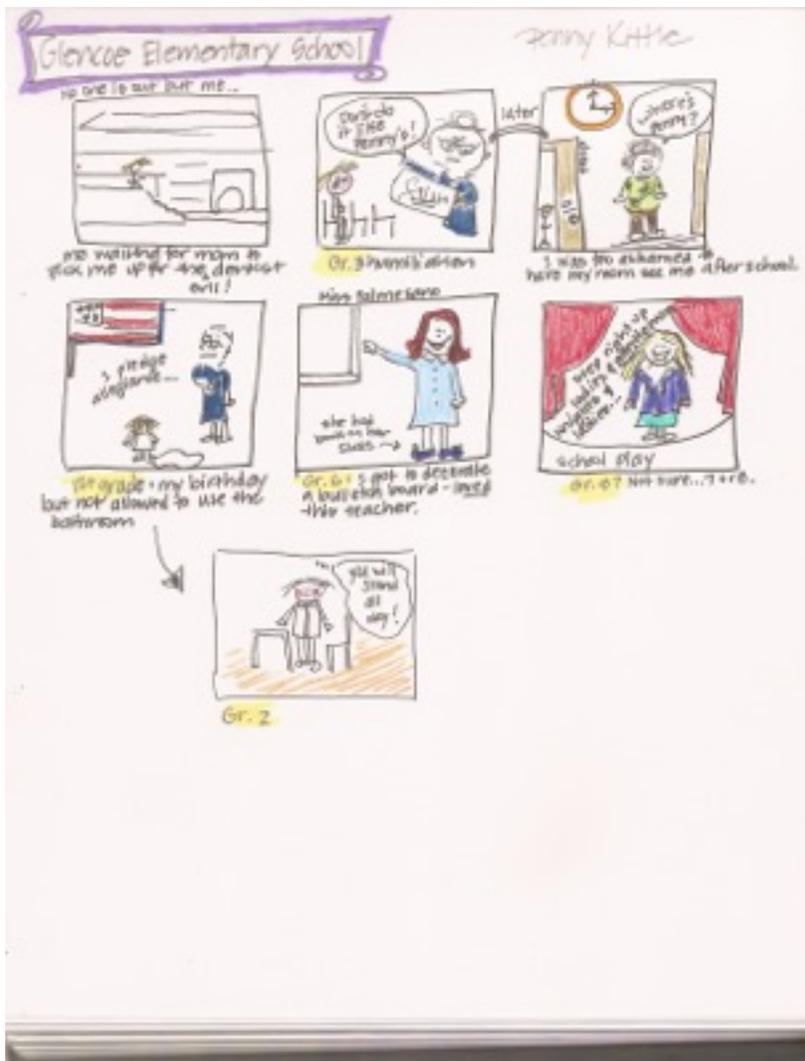
A storyboard is a combination of sketches and words that help to tell a story or organize an idea. They have been used to create films for decades. It is like designing a picture book, but instead of one page for each idea on the storyboard, I teach students to imagine each box as a scene in a larger story. We sketch our ideas, then imagine ways to tell this story of a person, talking through our thinking and the possibilities that arise as we talk, then we draft just one scene at a time. What I've discovered is that students learn the transitions that connect scenes through this talk about their ideas. They revise their thinking as they work and by listening to others, they find new ways to think about their stories.

## **Now you try it...**

So imagine a person or place in your life. Think of indelible moments that come to you when you think of that person or place. Sketch. Use stick figures if that makes the drawing easier. Know that by sketching you are activating a part of your brain that helps you remember details. As you sketch in the parts, you will remember more. Give yourself permission to draw badly and trust yourself to discover more as you sink into remembering.

On the next page is a sample of a storyboard of moments from my elementary school. I choose this because it is easier to teach from ideas that students can readily connect to.

I stopped after drawing six scenes because I have plenty to work with and I want to step back and consider what is in front of me. I notice I have three scenes that are linked with shame. I have two scenes that are triumphant, important memories of success, and then the first scene is how I looked at the school in the still of morning while waiting for my mom to pick me up for a dentist appointment. Whole stories could be written about that particular dentist, and I can feel the rabbit trails start in my thinking, but am determined to make this about that school, so I avoid them. I know that if I decide to write just about that dentist, another storyboard could help me think through what I remember.



There are several possibilities for structure with just these six scenes. I could pull out those moments that humiliated me and spend time on those. I could put them in chronological order (I wet the floor in 1st grade, I added in a vivid memory of being made to stand at my desk all afternoon in grade two when I couldn't unzip my coat after recess while writing this because I could see how it would fit, then I could move my story to 3rd grade when the teacher held up my paper as an example of what not to do.) I don't know what the point of this piece might be yet, but these scenes could work as evidence for a piece about the power of elementary experiences, the power of the classroom teacher, the stuff students are carrying that makes school life very trying, or just how those experiences made me into the teacher I am.

Now I could imagine this very differently. It could be a positive/negative piece of one hard memory, then one inspiring one. (I resist saying this is a 'compare/contrast' piece because I so often see that form used as a formula for writing, but it is the same thinking.) I could look at these parts or scenes in my experience in elementary school as both exhilarating and diminishing. I suddenly have lots of scenes flashing through my head, many that I haven't thought of for decades. Writing is just like this. As we remember one moment, others rush in. When students say they have nothing to write about, they are letting us know that they can't find those experiences that they want to relive in writing. We can lead them to those moments and all of their details through guided work like storyboarding.

### Choice is an important condition in a writing workshop classroom

A word about choice in writing. When I present a storyboard of my memories of elementary school or about my father, I fear that teachers will try this, then assign

students to write about school or their parents. The danger in this is that students will learn to wait for us to make choices about what they will write about. They do not discover the power in making their own choices and the power in trusting their own thinking from a glimmer of an idea to the finished piece. And even though they are given a prompt on standardized tests and are given topics in most college courses, we need to resist forcing students through this process of determined writing when they are still developing as writers. We need to build confidence in writers so that they will be able to write well in any setting. That doesn't come from mimicking those settings that will limit their options, but rather, from creating flexible thinkers who know they can write.

One way to build confidence in writers is helping them see their own lives as opportunities to find ideas for writing. I want a student who thinks, *I can write about anything, and I have experiences and ideas that will help show my thinking about this.* I try to broaden the possibilities as much as I can, not narrow them. I will show students ways I think through ideas, but always encourage them to find their own places, people, or ideas to storyboard. I celebrate the unexpected as they begin to form their own thinking. I'll say, "A storyboard on your dog! I love this..." even though a dog is not a person and is outside of what I originally modeled for this class. Conferences teach. When I confer with writers in workshop, other students are eavesdropping on my conversations and my openness to all writers' thinking is welcomed or limited by my response. Students learn these unwritten rules to our workshops in how we talk as we explore ideas with writers. I am determined that students will feel their ideas have merit, and listen well to their thinking. I resist the urge to adjust a writer's ideas to align with what I had in mind for our writing unit.

In my own case, I tried to work with the storyboard above and I didn't want to write the piece. I think those scenes of humiliation are just too painful. I chose instead to write about golfing with my dad to see where it might lead me. You might look at my draft from my notebook pages below, which include my first rereading and revisions. My notes in blue are notes on the process as I write. I try to be attentive to what I'm learning that I can share with writers.

### **Play with your ideas: move scenes and think deeply**

We know that talk is a foundation for writers; you will see how essential it is to move thinking when you ask students to tell each other the stories of their storyboard. Resist the outsiders who expect silence during writing workshop. Productive talk is essential.

I would like you to push yourself to be flexible in your own thinking here. Students will begin by thinking through one idea, then become more flexible and imagine several ways to work with the same central idea. I sometimes find a better idea the longer I play with my thinking. Sit and think of ways your memories could be pasted together. You'll be drawing on moves you've seen writers make in the books you've read, just as your students will be mapping their thinking on what you've discussed during read aloud time. I learned from Katie Wood Ray's book *Wondrous Words* that read aloud time is an opportunity to teach writing as well as reading, and I make good use of it.

## **Find one way you could write the story**

Once you've found energy for a way to tell your story, go with it. I tell students to find the way that they are most interested in exploring. I am seeking the deepest engagement I can. I want students determined to write, not just writing to fill time.

Students share these plans naturally as they work. Writers often talk their way towards a new way of thinking. I expect that throughout our genre unit of study on story, students will find one way to write and try it, then abandon it and try another. Some will stick with their original plan, but others won't because they'll find a new way to write that gives them more energy. Writers should be invited to work independently and be given time, choice, regular response, and the support of other writers in the room. These conditions stretch back across decades to the original research Donald H. Graves did for his ground-breaking book on workshop teaching, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*.

## **First talk or think through one scene, then write it**

During the process of creating and sharing a storyboard, revision happens. Students begin to discover that scenes they sketched are not very important. They delete them. They notice that they need to say more about something and add them. But revision work continues as drafting begins.

I ask students to choose one scene they are interested in writing today. I focus student attention on just one scene for several reasons. We have taught students voice, details, and dialogue as central components of an effective scene, but when students are rushing to write the whole thing, these get tossed to the side. This is why the student's great idea to write about the Space Mountain ride at Walt Disney World becomes a bed-to-bed story of, "We got up and brushed our teeth. Then we got in the car and drove to the airport. Then we had a pretzel. Then we flew in a plane. ..." By the time the student gets to Space Mountain, a page and a half later, interest for the piece has waned and the ride is reduced to one more bullet in a long list, "I rode on Space Mountain. It was fun." It is hard to revise from this place since cutting huge sections of writing to get to the heart is discouraging when those sentences were a great deal of work for a young writer.

It is important that the teacher have recent experience writing in the genre that students are writing in. This experience will transfer into smart thinking during conferences and the students will learn from the teacher's model of thinking.

Now is a great time to write one scene from your storyboard using as many vivid, sensory details as you can. Write in a voice that is comfortable for you, like the one you would use with a best friend when you tell the story. Include dialogue so that your scene does not read like a silent movie. As you write this scene, you'll find it is more difficult than you thought it would be. I often see things so clearly in my memory, but I can't make words cooperate. I liken it to sketching. I look out my window and want to capture

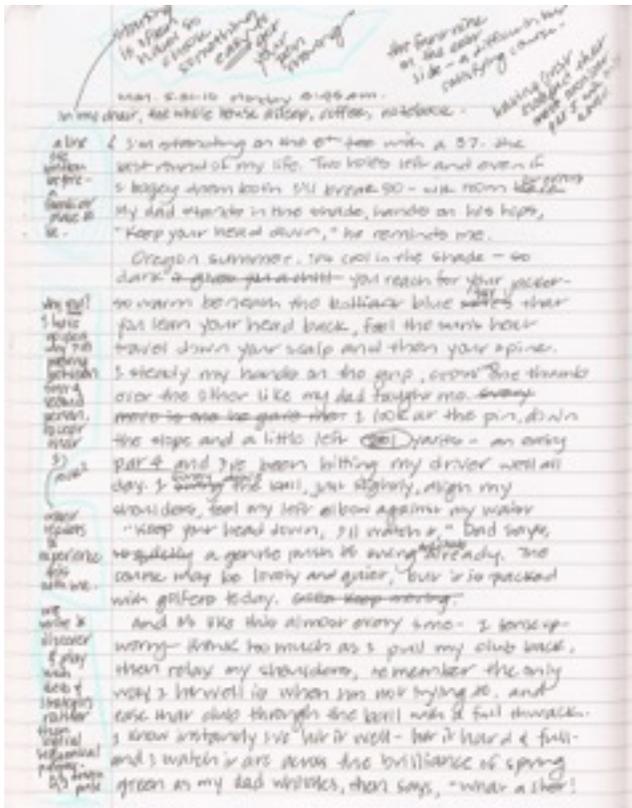
the pink roses that are filled with blooms this afternoon. As I sketch, I am frustrated by how hard it is to accurately represent the varied tones of color, the way buds rise from the stem, the way petals layer one onto another. The more I work, the more I realize that my approximation of what I see can be beautiful on its own. When you look in my notebook, the flowers won't be nearby, so you'll just enjoy what I have drawn. When you read my piece about my father, you won't be standing on the golf course beside me, so any details I forget to mention won't be lost to you. You'll hopefully just enjoy this glimpse into our time together and what I have to say about it. Trust yourself to write well enough to create an experience for readers.

Now go write.

### Be open to surprise

Here's my draft.

I didn't see this piece coming together the way it did. It is a synthesis of much that is happening in my life right now: my husband's cancer diagnosis, my grief for my father beside my gratitude for how we spent our time together. I will continue to work with this writing as I move it from my notebook to the computer, where revision is often easier for me. I will include my last draft at the end of this article.



I have to keep practicing daily during the  
 summer because there are 100 holes during a  
 tournament and I forget - I forget what order  
 they can catch and untwist it in - I forget  
 where it comes from - I forget how many  
 parts of junk I have to make something  
 good.

"What a beauty!" we watch a land just below the  
 green, an early chip in. "A shot like that, Puck, and  
 you'd beat your old man."

Before I say - you're not old - I feel the words are  
 still and are here on the course, over their Sunday afternoon  
 when, just a year from the East are quickly by us. We  
 get play a couple rounds a year - don't do the math -  
 when you're be enough left - anything can happen. I  
 know this - to do yet. I make up last week with an  
 average 3.5 car stroke if driving on a beautiful road  
 mid-summer - my left arm resting lazily on the open  
 window and I can see beyond the hole in the road ahead.  
 We're all in a mood that leads to the something, something  
 we just don't know if it's coming or, next turn on the  
 right, or it is thousands of miles and dozens of years  
 from here.

I look at my dad calling as he stands over the ball,  
 gripping the club with both hands, a force stroke, a  
 pause before he uncoils in a way slightly controlled  
 and a little loose through the ball. Someday I'll be  
 here without him, I think, and my stomach clenches  
 in fear. Just slow his down, Puck. Stop here. Before  
 I chip my ball beyond the green to the other side,  
 the hole is against the long grass and curb.  
 Before I unravel in the air - a little par 3 -  
 where your may see show off the top of the club &  
 mislead at the cart path - where it kills down  
 hill - before I chip and put my way past so to  
 another ordinary, extraordinary round. Be free.

Towards  
 legs begin to unravel in a cool and,  
 breath  
 and reaching, clearing, dipping towards me  
 the hole, the hole of clear plastic tubing that  
 keeps him off the course and trapped as he's pacing  
 and now it's the rest. Before he chipped 20 yards  
 off the hole's green and the hole's empty of you  
 And now, before the hole - father - is the hole,  
 stay with the drive as it leaves the tee and  
 rises against the air and air & trees, feel the  
 breeze move the hair on your arm, the fine tines  
 beneath your legs, see your father standing  
 beside you, telling you you'll do it. He'll watch the  
 ball. He'll keep score. He'll be here to watch  
 you take the next step and he'll buy you a beer  
 afterward. Into those you to whoever comes by, "this  
 is my daughter," he'll say, his pride - sweating  
 your heart.

Life is not about the moment. For the car  
 and week get out. Walk. You'll still get there,  
 but the view across fields at the ocean is better  
 now. You'll get a hole in one, a hole in one,  
 a par - you see a spot up ahead beneath an  
 old oak. How awhile. Write.  
 Write your life - then there.

After one hour - draft one.  
 revision - you're on it - I can't remember what I  
 wrote or what I wrote it for.

I'm standing on the eighth tee  
 with my father at a perfect hole.

I have a 37 the best round of my life.  
 I don't want to blow it, I know I'm going to blow it.

Dad says, "Keep your head down, Puck, I watch  
 the ball." Dad reminds me.

It's a par four. I need to hit in hand, but not to hand.  
 even - not in the woods. Do it.  
 I swing. It's perfect - I can feel it as I hit it.  
 Left elbow to my side, feet bent, "aim shot Puck, you're going to hit the side."  
 Feet planted, eyes on the ball.

I hear it - oh. I remember that I was here in hand.  
 Some day I'll be here without him, I know. And just like that  
 this round no longer matters.

### Teach from the raw thinking

In my classroom I model writing a scene. Here is a picture of the white board in my classroom when I wrote what became the opening scene for the draft above. Notice that I modeled how I might go farther with my thinking in a storyboard.

## Write the parts, write the whole

Young students see the parts easier than they see the whole, at least early in the process this is true. I have them slow down the action in each scene to teach them how details help readers see and understand their writing. We may talk about ‘this piece about mom’ as we confer, but the student is not writing everything there is to say about mom, just pieces. As the draft comes together, the piece may take on a focus that becomes the title. Elizabeth wrote “Grandma’s Kitchen” because all of her scenes ended up being centered there, even though the piece stretched across time. She originally planned to write a tribute to her grandma and include all of the things she and grandma had loved doing together. That was too big, and as she storyboarded and talked and drafted, she came to a narrower vision. Tyler (video above) started his thinking with writing about spending time with dad that ended with a trip to the convenience store, but as he wrote, he put a great deal of energy into fighting the fire and that piece was stretched into a full draft. The storyboard got both writers started finding a way to write about something important to them; following that storyboard is not as important as that authentic engagement with composition and thinking.

As you write scenes from your own storyboard, let the writing lead you. As George Ella Lyon says, “Remember, you are the expert on you. No one else sees the world as you do; no one else has your material to draw on. You know have to know where to begin. just start. Let it flow. Trust the work to find its own form.”

## Share process and products

Here is my last draft of writing on golfing with my father:

### **of golfing, and living, and letting go**

Penny Kittle

I’m standing on the eighth tee with a 37: the best round of my life. Two holes left and even if I bogey them both I’ll break 50. My dad stands in the shade, smiling, “Keep your head down,” he reminds me.

Oregon summer: it’s cool in the shade, and you reach for your jacket, but so warm beneath the blue sky that you lean your head back, feel the heat travel down your scalp and then your spine. I steady my hands on the grip, crossing one thumb over the other like my dad taught me. I glance at the pin down the slope and a little to the right--281 yards away. I rock slightly over the ball, align my shoulders, feel my left elbow against my waist. “Keep your head down, I’ll watch it,” Dad says again, a gentle push that means *c’mon and swing it already*.

I relax my shoulders and ease through the shot with a full thwack. We watch it arc across the brilliance of spring green as my dad whistles and says, “What a shot! What a beauty!” It lands below the green, an easy chip on. “A shot like that, Pooh, and you’ll beat your old man.”

Before I say 'you're not old' I feel its truth. It's still good out here on the course, but these rare Sunday afternoons when I visit from the east are quickly by us again. We play a couple rounds a year. Don't do the math, I tell myself, there won't be enough of them left.

Anything can happen. I know this; so do you. I had a dream last week that I still can't shake. I was driving on a beautiful road mid-summer, my left arm resting lazily out the open window. I couldn't see beyond the rise in the road ahead. I thought to myself, We're all on a road that leads to the cemetery; we just don't know if it's coming up next turn on the right, or if it is thousands of miles and dozens of years before us. I heard that truth with such certainty and peace in my dream that I kept driving, drifting along with the ride; but I awoke breathing hard.

I look back at my dad as he stands over the ball, gripping his club with both hands, a fierce stance, a pause before he uncoils in a just-slightly-controlled blast through the ball. Someday I'll be here without him, I think, and fear claws its way from gut to heart. Just slow this down, please.

Stop here.

Before I chip my ball beyond the green to the other side, then stub the next shot against long grass and curse.

Before I unravel on the ninth hole where I put my tee shot off the toe of my club and my second on the cart path, where it rolls downhill. Before I chip and putt my way past 50 to another ordinary, frustrating round.

Before the years begin to unravel towards a cruel end: before the emphysema and coughing, wheezing, rasping towards air. Before the oxygen leash that keeps him trapped at home pacing one room to the next.

Before he shaves 35 pounds off his boyish frame and can no longer sleep reclined, but sits shivering on the couch beneath blankets.

Before his eyes empty of light and mirth.

Before surgery and cancer and letting him go.

Before we return to this place, this exact place, on the day after he lies beneath a sheet, cold and still at the funeral home--

Stop here.

Stay with the drive as it leaves the tee and rises against a backdrop of ancient fir trees. Feel the breeze move the hairs on your arm, the fine sweat beneath sunglasses, see your father standing beside you, telling you you can do this, just relax.

He'll watch the ball.

He'll keep score.

He'll buy you a soda after and introduce you to whoever comes by, "This is my daughter," he'll say.

Life is lived right here in this moment. Pay attention. Pull the car over walk. You'll still get there, but the view across fields to the ocean is better seen one step at a time. Perhaps you've got a notebook, a pencil--you see a spot up ahead beneath an old oak. Rest awhile here.

Write.

Write this life and share.

I believe that just as writers try on the moves of other writers--moves we teach them by noticing them in the literature we read together and collecting that thinking as a class--

writers learn from the process of other writers. So just as I learned to repeat the phrase 'before' in my piece because I read a lot of poetry and a repeating line is a reoccurring tool in that genre, students can learn from my thinking in composing this piece. Students will learn from the thinking they share together.