nulla dies sine linea   Never a Day Without a Line. Horace 65-8 BC

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach and Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach or Picasso; they needed models. This is especially true of writing. ~ William Zinsser

Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little. ~ Tom Stoppard

Exercise the writing muscle every day, even if it is only a letter, notes, a title list, a character sketch, a journal entry. Writers are like dancers, like athletes. Without that exercise, the muscles seize up. ~ Jane Yolen

If you tell your students what to say and how to say it, you may never hear them, only the pale echoes of what they imagine you want them to be. ~Donald Murray
Five Big Ideas in workshop teaching in middle & high school:

* We must help students build reading lives.
* We practice daily writing in notebooks to develop fluency, a writer’s voice, and the habit of rereading.
* We study texts to unpack craft & imitate it.
* I write beside them. My process is a bridge for students.
* I confer with readers & writers daily and teach into their intentions, meeting them where they are & nudging them forward. Conferences multiply by proximity.
Analyzing Writing Craft in Independent Reading

This is called ‘rhetorical reading’ and it means to break the text down into the sum of its parts... to determine what the writer was trying to achieve and which writing strategies he/she used to try to achieve it. A rhetorical analysis is always looking at the why and the how of the writing.

1. Read one whole chapter of your book today. When finished, go back and skim read to map out what happens in this chapter in your notebook. Write about how the author put the chapter together. Consider what we’ve studied that writers do to move the action: flashback, zoom in, zoom past, narrator aside, etc.
   a. **Day 2**: consider the development of the chapter above and explain why you think the author wrote this chapter at this point in the story in this way.

2. Find several interesting sentences and copy them into your notebook. Annotate them to show what makes them interesting to you. This is an author’s craft question, so I am looking for observations you can make about a writer’s choices in this section that you find interesting.

3. Focus on one of the lenses for reading that we have focused on so far in second and third readings of poetry: word choice, voice, sensory details, tone, or pace. Now apply that to a section from your independent reading book. Write about what you noticed when you reread the section with this lens.

4. Make observations about punctuation today. Does your author favor short or long sentences? What moves in writing craft would you say are common for this particular writer?

5. Take one section of dialogue from your reading today. Analyze what is said (what you learn about plot or character) and then what is NOT said. What are these characters withholding?

6. Style is tricky... sometimes we love the way a writer writes and sometimes we get irritated by too many narrators or moments when we lose our way (yes, I’m talking about that second narrator in *The Book Thief* again)... how was the reading of this book for you? Explain what you loved/grew frustrated with/etc. What would you say to the author (if you could) about how this was written?

Analyzing Text Structures in Independent Reading

1. How important are time and place (setting) in your book? Would anything be lost if your novel were set in a different period of time or in a very different location?
   a. If you are currently reading non-fiction, consider the date of publication of the book. If the book is more than two years old, search online for how the field studied in this book has changed in the last two years.
b. If you are currently reading non-fiction that is place-specific (memoir, war stories, etc.) consider how the setting impacts your understanding of the book. Did you come to the book with strong background knowledge in the area? If not, how did you overcome your ignorance?

2. Consider the narrator of your story. What do you know about him/her? Do you trust him/her? Explain what makes the narrator reliable or not. What do you question about what the narrator says at this point in the narrative? How does the narrator affect your sympathies for other characters?
   a. If the narrator is the author (often true in non-fiction), do you trust this author? Why or why not? What do you think this author does not see clearly or should research more thoroughly?

3. Consider the title of your book. Explain why you think it was chosen. How does the title give meaning to the work?

4. How does the writer arrange ideas in this text? Is there any pattern to this arrangement?

5. Consider the arrangement of ideas in this text. Is it chronological? Alternating between a forward chronology and flashbacks? (If so, why so?)

Analyzing Literary Elements in Writing

1. Skim reread sections of your book. Look for repeating images, motifs, or repetitions and consider their implications on the larger body of work here. What can you find? What might you continue to pay attention to as you read?

2. Literature often uses a specific story to explain something larger about humankind. Can you see connections between the story you are reading and the characters’ conflicts, revelations, or insights that might also be true for all people?

3. Conflicts in literature can be internal, external, or both. Which do you see in your book at this point? Explain how they contribute to your overall engagement with the text.
   a. Writers are skillful with weaving in sub-conflicts and multiple story lines. If you see this in your story, explain how this has impacted your understanding and engagement with the story. (Game of Thrones readers—I don’t mean ALL of them!)
   b. Writers create conflicts on three levels in literature: conflicts within the character, conflicts between characters, and conflicts with something outside the character: the world or God, perhaps. What do you see happening in your book?
   c. Have you ever noticed how authors put obstacles in the way of characters resolving conflicts? Find them in your book.

4. Language is central to writing and it is chosen with care. How does this writer use language? Is it formal? Informal? Technical? Slang? Does the language change throughout this piece?
5. Some writers use humor to identify one character or to present ideas in a text.
   Do you see evidence of humor? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Why might the author have used them in this book?
6. There are several comparison devices available to writers: similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc. Can you find examples of any of these in your text? If not, why not?

Vocabulary

You know I believe that the single best way to increase your vocabulary is through wide reading. Now I want you to show me how...

1. Find a word that you didn’t know before you read, but feel you understand after reading it in this book. Write the passage where the word occurred and then explain how the words around the word you didn’t know helped you understand it.
2. Collect at least four words a week from your writing. Keep them in your vocabulary section of your notebook. Look up the definitions and then determine how it was used in the book you’re reading. Here’s the big challenge: start using them! See if you can slip them into conversation. (I suggest you pay attention to pronunciation keys in the dictionary or ask me for help. Many words sound differently than they look.)
Shake the Dust by Anis Mojgani

This is for the fat girls. This is for the little brothers. This is for the schoolyard wimps. This is for the childhood bullies who tormented them. This is for the former prom queen. This is for the milk crate ball players. This is for the nighttime cereal eaters. This is for the retired elderly Wal-Mart storefront door greeters.

Shake the dust.

This is for the benches and the people sitting on them. This is for the bus drivers, driving a million broken hymns. This is for the men who have to hold down three jobs, simply to hold their children. This is for the night schoolers, and the midnight bike riders who are trying to fly.

Shake the dust.

For the two-year-olds who cannot be understood because they speak half English and half God. Shake the dust. For the girls with the brothers that are crazy, shake the dust.

For the boys with the beautiful sisters, the gym class wallflowers, the twelve-year-olds afraid of taking public showers, the kid who's late to class 'cause he forgot the combination to his lockers, for the girl who loves somebody else, shake the dust.

This is for the hard men, who want to love, but know it won't come. For the ones who are told to speak only when spoken to, and then are never spoken to, the ones who the amendments do not stand up for, the ones who are forgotten:

Speak every time you stand, so you do not forget yourselves. Do not let a second go by that does not remind you that your heart beats nine hundred times a day, and there are enough gallons of blood to make you an ocean.

This is for the police officers. This is for the meter maid. This is for the celibate pedophile who keeps on struggling. This is for the poetry teachers. This is for the people who go on vacations alone, and for the crappy artists and the actors that suck, shake the dust.

This is for the sweat that drips off of Mick Jagger's lips, for the shaking skirt on Tina Turner's shaking hips, for the heavens and the hells through which Tina has lived. This is for the tired and the dreamers, the family that'll never be like the Cleavers with the perfectly-made dinners and the sons like Wally and the Beaver. For the bigots, the sexists, and the killers, the big-house pint sentence cat becoming redeemers, and for the springtime, that always comes after the winters.
This is for you.

Make sure that, by the time the fisherman returns, you are gone. Make these blue streams worth it, because, just like the days I’m burning at both ends, and every time I write, every time I bike through the night, every time I open my eyes, I am cutting out a part of myself to give to you. So shake the dust, and take me with you when you do, for none of this has ever been for me.

All that was placed inside, that continues pushing like waves, pushes for you. So take the world by its clothespins and shake it out again and again, jump on top and take it for a spin, and when you hop off shake it out again, for this is yours.

Make my words worth it. Make this not just another poem that I write. Not just another poem like just another night that sits heavy above us all - walk into it. Breathe it in. Let it crash through the halls of your arms, like the millions of years and millions of poets that course like blood, pumping and pushing, making you live, making you live, shaking the dust, so when the world knocks at your door, turn the knob and open on up, and run into its big, big hands with open arms.
Teeth
By Phillip Kaye

“Ojichama” is what I call my Japanese grandfather. In 1945 this Tokyo home was burned to the ground. Grampy is what I call my American grandfather. In 1945 he was serving on the U.S.S. Shangri-ia, sending off American fighter pilots to burn down Japanese houses. Our jaws have not yet healed.

1906 Poland.
Grampy’s father is hiding in an oven. He has heard men singing on the street below, hyenas my family called them, after drinks and songs the outside townspeople will come into the Jewish ghetto for a celebration beating. Molar fireworks and eyelid explosions. Even when Grampy’s father grows up the sound of sudden song breaks his body into a sweat. Fear of joy is the darkest of captivities.

1975 Tokyo.
My father, the long-haired student with the pension for bad sexual innuendo meets Rako Hori, the well-dressed banker who forgets the choruses to her favorite songs. Twelve years later they give birth to a lanky lightbulb.

1999.
My mother speaks to me in Japanese. Most days I don’t have the strength to ask her to translate the big words. We burned that house down, Mother. Don’t you remember?

1771 Prague.
In the heart of the city is a Jewish cemetery, the only plot of land where Grampy’s ancestors were allowed to be buried. When they ran out of room they had no choice but to stack bodies one on top of the other, now there are hills of tombs. Individual tombstones jutting out crooked like valiant teeth emerging from a jaw left to rot.

1985 My parents’ wedding.
The two families sit together smiling wider than they need to. Montague must be so happy we can Capulet this all go.

1997.
From the safety of his Tokyo apartment Ojichama scrawls postcards to his old four-poster bed: haven’t been able to sleep since you left, wish you were here.

1999.
I sit with Grampy’s cousin. He is 91 and dressed in full uniform. I beg with him to untie the knots clenched in his forehead. He says, “Hate is a strong word, but it is the only strength that I have left. How am I to forgive the men that severed the trunk of my family tree and used its timber in the fireplaces of their own homes?”
2010.
Grampy and I sit together watching his favorite: baseball. In the infertile glow of the television I see his face wet. Grampy sits in his wheelchair, mouth open, teeth gasping out of his gums like violent and valiant tombstones in a cemetery left to rot. The teeth sit and I can still read them. William Chotles, killed at Auschwitz. Sara Lee killed at Dachau. Bill Kayne killed off the coast of Okinawa. “I will never forget what happened to our family, Grampy,” and he looks at me with the surprised innocence of a child struck for the first time. “Forgetting is the only gift I wish to give you. I have given away my eldest son trying to bury a hatred I can no longer burden. There are nights I am kept awake by the birthday songs of children I never let live. A plague on both your houses. They have made worm’s meat of me.”

Do not forget that all the writing you do, all the writing you read, all the responses you hear in conference and in workshop are part of your preparation.
~Donald Murray

| A handful of my favorite spoken-word poems you can find on youtube: |
|---|---|
| “Knock Knock” by Daniel Beaty | All by Sarah Kay: |
| “Teeth” by Phillip Kaye | “Hands” |
| “Pretty” by Katie Makkai | “Point B” |
| “An Origin Story” by Phil Kaye & Sarah Kay | “Hiroshima” |
| MSA 2009 Taylor Phillips | “Montauk” |
| “Thinking of You” by Mike Taylor | “Postcards” |
| “Shake the Dust” by Anis Mojgani | “Private Parts” |
| “Repetition” by Phil Kaye | “A Love Letter” |
| “Crab Apple Pirates” by Andrea Gibson | “Brother” |
| “To This Day: for the Bullied...” by Shane Koyzcan | “Sarah Kay’s Playlist” |
| “Beethoven” by Shane Koyzcan | watch Sarah Kay’s Ted Talk |

Our students are terrified of failure when they need to know how to make use of it. They have been taught, by teachers and parents, the press, and their own instinct, that everything must be done perfectly the first time. They are inhibited, constipated, frightened—in no condition to produce good writing. Writing that is written to avoid failure guarantees mediocrity.
~Donald Murray

Penny Kittle
Harper's Index

Help students write from information. Not only does this require deeper reading in order to analyze what exactly is being said, but transferring that understanding into sentences that can support a claim is a foundational skill for writing well in argument. Helping students write from factual information is challenging, so I first model how I might write from one of the examples. I show them how I break down the information to understand what the statement is saying and then transfer it into words to support a claim. I then have them talk and write together in pairs before attempting to do this on their own.

Number of people killed in mass shootings in the United States last year: **66**

Number killed by Muslim-American terrorists since September 11, 2001: **33**

Percentage of movies that led the U.S. box office for at least one weekend in 2011 that featured Apple products: **42**

Portion of all North American Internet traffic accounted for by videos streamed from Netflix: **1/4**

Percentage of U. S. population that is foreign-born: **13**

Percentage that was foreign-born in 1913: **15**

Factor by which energy drink-related emergency room visits have increased in the past eight years: **14**

Number of reports of record-high temperatures by U. S. cities in 2012: **362**

Number of reports of record lows: **0**

Percentage change since 1969 in the portion of U.S. schoolchildren who walk or bike to school: **-76**

Percentage change since 1992 in the portion of U.S. women who diet: **-12**

Percentage of U.S. women who believe they have a personal responsibility to help the worse off: **42**

Of U.S. men: **27**
Average salary subjects in a September study offered a fictional woman applying for a U.S. university laboratory position: **$26,508**

Average salary they offered a fictional man with identical credentials: **$30,328**

Percentage of U.S. children who save their allowance money, according to a survey of American parents: **1**

Percentage change in the likelihood a child will eat an apple from the school cafeteria if the apple has an Elmo sticker on it: **+68**

Projected year by which more than half of Americans will be obese: **2030**

Average number of times each week U.S. surgeons operate on the wrong patient or body part: **40**

Average SAT score (out of 2400) of students from households with an income below $20,000: **1322**

From households with an income above $200,000: **1722**

Percentage of British teens who say they are embarrassed to be seen reading: **17**

Percentage change in the past twenty-five years in the Consumer Price Index: **+41**

In the price of beer: **+40**

Of books: **-1**

Number of students currently attending the thirteen Washington, D.C., public schools expected to close this year: **2,633**

Number of them who are white: **2**

Percentage of U.S. college graduates who are women: **51.1**

Of Fortune 500 CEOs who are: **4.2**

Percentage change since 1970 in the portion of U.S. children growing up in single-parent households: **+133**

*The source of this information is harpers.org, which publishes the index every month.*
NOTEBOOKS
Penny Kittle

Passage Study... helping students imitate great writing to understand conventions better and to generate ideas for other writing

_The important thing about my family being Baha’i was that growing up I was exposed to lots of big ideas about philosophy, art, spirituality, and the human condition. Don’t get me wrong. My parents were dysfunctional misfits who couldn’t effectively parent a sack of russet potatoes. But they were good hearted dysfunctional misfits with eclectic and expansive ideas. (Wilson, x)_

The important thing about my family being in crisis in neighborhood of perceived perfection is that I was taught to lie to cover up my father’s absences from work, the bounced checks at grocery stores, or the new scrapes and dents in our cars. Don’t get me wrong. My parents were funny and lively and serious and playful, creative and thoughtful and truly generous people who were always extending themselves to help others. But in the first 12 years of my life when alcoholism had a hold of my father, we spun like a wobbly top keening from one side to another, unable to right ourselves for long. Lying was not only expected, it was practiced, perfected, and used regularly to minimize immediate consequences, and that is volatile skill to teach a pre-teen.

~Penny Kittle

_More than once did Elizabeth in her ramble within the Park, unexpectedly meet Mr. Darcy.—She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought; and to prevent its every happening again, took care to inform him at first, that it was a favorite haunt of hers.—How it could occur a second time therefore was very odd!—Yet it did, and even a third. ~Jane Austen_

More than once did Penny in her first reading conferences with students, unexpectedly discover a history of non-reading—and she felt all the perverseness of the misfortune that should bring a student through three years of high school without reading a wit; and to prevent it from recurring, took care to inform him of the wealth of books that might be just right and worthy of his effort.—How it would occur moments later in another conference was therefore very sad!—Yet it did, and even a third. ~Penny Kittle

_Depend on when you met me, I might have been: a checkers champion, the kid who squirted Super Glue in his eye, a competitive Ping-Pong player, Tweedle Dum, a high school valedictorian, a fake blond, 1/12 of an all-male a capella group, a graduate of the Vanderbilt School of Engineering, a nomad, a street musician, or a pigeon assassin. ~Devon Gundry_
Depending on when you met me I might have been: a curler, a kid who set a boy’s pants on fire, a competitive tennis player, Big Bird, a soda jerk, the second-shortest in my class, 1/5 of the varsity football cheerleaders at Franklin High School, a graduate of cooking school (twice), Lady Macbeth, a dedicated, early a.m. runner, or a clown at children’s birthday parties. ~Penny Kittle

My family members could not be more different from one another. The mix includes one rocket scientist brother; one fashionista sister; one honey-harvesting, lover-of-all-creatures-big-and-small mother; and one classic music enthusiast father. And then there’s me—a camera junkie and jetsetter with a penchant for tasty type treatments (and alliteration). ~Golriz Lucina

And from non-fiction...

Early mornings are a wondrous time on the backside of the racetrack. The shed rows are alive with pre-dawn activity, the stalls getting mucked out, the hay racks restocked, the feed tubs refilled. Floodlights partially sweep aside the darkness. Mist hangs in the heavy air. Seabirds swoop past in low arcs. ~Barry Bearak, “The Jockey”, New York Times

Early afternoons boil with energy on the backside of a school day. The classrooms empty of teenagers, the locker doors slam, the voices and shouts bounce toward the exit, cars fill then stack onto Eagles Way, nudging slowly toward the traffic light. Athletes sweep aside the silence of the practice fields. Drummers spinning sticks with fast hands gather and march through the now-empty parking lot. Teachers clear white boards, shelve books, gather papers, and begin reading, marking, learning. ~Penny Kittle
People gambled and golfed and planted gardens and traded stocks and had sex and bought new cars and practiced yoga and worked and prayed and redecorated their homes and got worked up over the news and fuzzed over their children and gossiped about their neighbors and pored over restaurant reviews and supported political candidates and attended the U.S. Open and dined and traveled and distracted themselves with all kinds of gadgets and devices, flooding themselves incessantly with information and texts and communication and entertainment from every direction to try to make themselves forget it: where we were, what we were.

~Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*

His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman’s, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward like a cowlick at the rear of his skull, his forehead was slightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him.

~Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*
Tinkering/Revising for Fearless Writing

• Penny Kittle, Kennett High School, Conway School District, NH
• Tom Romano, Dept of Teacher Education, Miami University, Oxford, OH
• Judy Rowe Michaels, Poet-in-the-Schools for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Teacher Emerita, Princeton Day School
• Maja Wilson, Teacher, Writer, Consultant (Looking for a job -- know of any good ones?)

Strategies to bring “second genius” to your words*

• **Create Mind Pictures.** Leave your writing for half-an-hour, a day or three, a week. Reread as a stranger and interact with your words. Be open to new images that appear; choose language to capture and refine what you imagine. Look for *narrative summary* that would benefit from the immediacy of being recast as *dramatic narrative* (characters in action, scenes exploded, slowed down).

• **Add Sensory Detail.** Find places where the addition of sensory detail will help readers experience your words (In writing about a favorite place in her childhood, one student wrote, “Big Mouth Spring bubbled up, and you’d put your face down there and suck. It was like a liquid crystal ball, cold on your lips . . . .”)

• **Improve Sound and Rhythm.** Do the sound and rhythm of your words create music? Reread in a deliberate, appropriately paced voice, giving each word its due. Listen to the language. Enhance rhythm and sound by deleting, adding, or changing words, altering sentence lengths, repunctuating. (Listen also for a “clang” and recast to eliminate it: “When I came back home, my back began to hurt.”)

• **Add Precise Words and Interesting Language.** Are your words living and leaping? (Did the homeless man go away or disappear or vanish?) Are the words vivid, specific, palpable? (Did the teacher drive a car or a *Mini Cooper*?)

• **Vary Sentence Length.** Does one sentence length dominate and become monotonous? Do some sentences need combined? Do long sentences need broken into shorter sentences for clarity and comprehension? Can you use a short sentence for emphasis? Remember Melville’s first line of *Moby Dick*? “Call me Ishmael.”

• **Placement and Payoff.** Words, information, and ideas gain or lose impact by where and when they appear in a sentence, a paragraph, a piece of writing. Beginnings are powerful spots for placing information. Endings are even more powerful. Anne Lamott wrote, “. . . she transferred me to a two-thousand-year-old monk. Or at least this is how he sounded, faint, reedy, out of breath, like Noah after a brisk walk.”

• **Weed the Garden.** Unnecessary words or longwinded passages can sneak into your writing without you even realizing it, sapping the energy from what is good. Do you need all the words in, “Bob swaggered arrogantly”? (Not all adverbs are bad; they can be useful; but be wary when they volunteer).

• **Pump Up the Verbs.** Have you used “verbs of muscle” as Mary Oliver called them? (Did the teen go into the room? Or did she walk or limp or shuffle or dash or stride?) In her poem, “John Chapman,” Oliver did not write in an emotional moment for her character, “. . . his gray eyes turned into ice.” She wrote, “. . . his gray eyes brittled into ice”).
In a multigenre paper about a summer job she held as a waitress at a country club, college junior Leah Wessman had written this sentence:

“Hey, Leah,” Celeste follows me hurriedly into the kitchen. “Gaggini requested you.”

Leah tinkers with the language, finds a stronger verb, and eliminates an adverb. Amid her tinkering and language work, she also creates additional visual detail:

“Hey, Leah.” Celeste scurries behind me as I plow through the swinging kitchen doors. “Gaggini requested you.”

*Kim Stafford coined the "second genius" in The Muses Among Us*

**Change the Lead/Write Numerous Leads.** Does your first sentence/paragraph/page/chapter draw readers into the writing? Would the writing work better by beginning with a paradoxical statement, bit of dialog, critical description, or compelling scene? Below are leads Tom wrote in his notebook as his students began their “Literature Relationship Papers.” When we write leads with reckless abandon, trusting the gush of language within us, we not only write ourselves into a beginning, but also generate information we can use in other parts of the essay/story/poem. Tom wrote about his relationship over the years with a Robert Frost poem. The leads include the irrelevancies, redundancies, misinformation, blathering, errors, and raw thinking of five-minute quickwrites:

**Lead #1: Begin telling about the piece of literature (include some of your research here):**

Robert Frost wrote “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” in June 1922 while he was living in VT, the really getting warm days in that part of NE, the children just getting out of school. It was published the following year in his volume of poems titled New Hampshire.

Frost told the story that he had been up all night working on a difficult poem, titled “New Hampshire.” It wasn’t finished, but at dawn he walked outside to see the sunrise, thought of a snowy evening, the little horse—and it was as if he had a hallucination. He went inside the house, he says, and wrote out the poem “in just a few minutes without strain.

He says.

I'm not Frost, but gosh it's humbling.

**Lead #2: Describe the circumstances of your life at the time of your initial reading.**

First year of teaching at Marion L. Steele HS in Amherst, Ohio. I was brand new, afraid of being revealed a fraud for not knowing enough about literature, about reading, about teaching. And I “taught” (loosely using the word in the way my professors had taught me. I assigned the literature for out of class reading. Then when students came to class, I stood in front of them at a podium, lecturing about the literature, in this case a Robert Frost poem, with the infamous help of the “teacher’s manual,” which explained the meaning of the poem. I noticed nothing amiss. That was, after all, how I had been taught (I use the word loosely).

**Lead #3: Use dialog with no conversation tags or explanations**

Why are you looking at me like that? / Do you remember what you did? / Did I say a poem? / Yes. Don’t you remember? / I remember something. I remember thinking, “This seems weird but I’m not stopping. / That’s what the poem was: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. / I know that poem by heart. / You didn’t miss a beat. Here, eat a cracker and drink the juice. / Did the nurse’s think it was weird? / No. / What did they do? / They went about their business, Tom. They have work to do, you know?

**Lead #4: Write a lead that states a paradox/makes a blunt statement**

Frost’s poem about death has given me many lives: teaching lives, philosophical lives, writing lives. Frost’s quintessential poem of winter in New England with a rural setting and snow falling steadily amid the trees was written by Frost a few minutes after he had stood on his porch in ______ VT, and
watched the sun rise on June 22, 1922. I labor over all my writing. I can’t even resist sometimes tinkering with a text message. I can’t seem to get anything written right the first time through. And one of the poems I admire most was written, said RF, in just a few minutes, his “best” bid, he wrote the poet Louis Untermeyer, “for remembrance.”

**Lead #5: Describe a place that is somehow important to you and the literature**

The graveyard is beside and behind the large white clapboard church in Old Bennington, VT. Somehow I knew he was buried there and went looking for the gravesite. It took me awhile before I found it: two large slabs, each maybe 2 ½ feet by 6 feet, lying flat on the grass more than 50 years now with the names of several family members carved into it. RF, his wife, and one of his daughters. And someone—the church perhaps, or the town planning commission, maybe literati of some kind, planted two birch trees by the slabs; they still slim and shooting into the air maybe 15 or 20 feet.

**Lead #6: Render a significant scene, an indelible moment**

One of the most vivid memories I’ve spent in the classroom in my 39 years occurred in my second year of teaching, 1973 or 1974, I taught a class of Honors sophomores and I loved working with them dearly, since I hadn’t yet learned to work with unmotivated students. I prepared for the Honors sophs, made sure I knew my subject matter inside out. When we approached Robert Frost’s “Stopping . . .” I had something up my sleeve. With the lit anthology open on a podium in front of the classroom, I glanced at it then began saying Frost’s words, “Whose woods these are I think I know.” I left the podium and walked about the front of the classroom . . .

[For the lead to this creative nonfiction essay, “The Lives of a Poem,” Tom built upon Lead #3. In Lead 4 he stumbled upon language that suggested his title. Information and lines of reflection from the other leads worked their way into the essay, too].

Penny Kittle
Conference Script: Robert, September  
Penny Kittle

So prior to this one, when was the last book you read?
   I don’t know. I did not read any books last year.
And you’re a senior?
   Yes.
(Did you read in) 10th grade?
   I read in 10th grade.
You did? What happened last year?
   I didn’t take an English class.
How did you get away with not taking an English class?
   I took online classes. I took history and math online.
And you took English online?
   I was supposed to but I never got to it.
So that’s why you’re in my night class.
   It is.
So you don’t usually read for homework. And how about this one? Not yet. Mainly
(you’re reading) during reading break here at school, but not elsewhere. So if I think I
can transform you into a kid who wants to read when you leave school... (he laughs) The
likelihood of that?
   Not very.
Seriously?
   Yeah. I read once in awhile at home, but..
What if it was so good that you wanted to read it?
   I don’t know.
Maybe?
   Maybe.
That might be the book.
   I don’t know. I’ve had a couple of books like that. But even then I only read in
school. When I’m not in school I don’t really do much with school.
On your next list you’ve got Butter and Thirteen Reasons Why. Those are good books,
good books for next. Cody’s reading this one: right here.
   And Cody said he likes it which is weird. I’ve never seen that kid read.
I know. So I’m going to put up there on the board under Best Night of My Pathetic Life,
Butter, and put your name up there because it’s going to have a waiting list. That way
you’ll get it.
   It might take me awhile to finish this book.
It might not. You might actually want to read so much that you actually read at home.
Writing in the Moment
Three students, three conferences, twelve minutes
Penny Kittle

The title represents the pressure English teachers feel to confer and move on—I’ve trained myself to limit my conferences to 3-4 minutes, in order to talk to 6-8 students each day during writing workshop, trying to solve one problem that might also teach other students nearby.

But it misses a most important point. I work to create calm and ease in my conferences, hoping students find conferences purposeful, but not rushed. Why? All writers deserve a chance to be heard in the midst of their composition process—to be encouraged to continue working, to be nudged forward in their skills & purposes, to be listened to. Too many students simply aren’t listened to much over the course of a day in high school.

Student one: I don’t know what to write

Sam is a tenth grader. He is a general level student with a wonderful attitude, but not a lot of experience with reading and writing. He hasn’t been resistant, but he has been slow to work through our transition back to school this fall. For independent reading he chose a book, April Morning, that didn’t hold his interest, so he has swapped it for one I suggested, Guts. I don’t know yet about his reading history, except that he didn’t read last year. Our first assignment is to write a scene that shows a moment in time and includes voice, sensory details and dialogue. We have been quick writing in notebooks and most students have started writing in notebooks moving to computers today.

I initiate this conference because when I scan the room I see Sam not working. He didn’t ask for my help, but I figure he needs it. I make this move to Sam because it is early in the school year and our transition to a writing workshop. Later I will try to stick to my clipboard of notes, cycling through one student after another so that I don’t find myself only conferring with students who can’t get started or only students who are weak writers and need lots of help. But early on—I look for students who aren’t engaged and move to them to get the workshop humming with purpose, not students wasting time. There is something critical about establishing a tenor of work, not that wasted time in class feel of ‘take the last few minutes to get started on your homework’ that happens in a lot of classes. Students come to expect that is the rhythm of class and I want this to feel from the outset very different.

This is also true with the close of class. As soon as students get up and transition to putting things away—with five or more minutes left—I have to squelch it or watch it unfold as regular practice after that.
Important things to notice and think about:

• My model of scene writing has engaged Sam. He has offered feedback on my writing. My scene demonstrates what I’m asking of students, but I also asked them to give me feedback and help on the piece itself, drawing them into natural conversations about improving writing in my room, which is central to conferring.

• When Sam says he doesn’t think hunting is a good topic because ‘nothing big has happened yet hunting-wise’ I can respond by showing him my piece was about nothing—but he liked it. Nothing happens (my dad and I are getting our gear together to go fishing) and you can see he gets what I mean instantly when I say, “Nothing happens here, but you can write just about being there in the moment.” This is the power of writing with students, anticipating what they need to see modeled for them and allowing that model to teach them about working through writing challenges.

• Sam must maintain control over what he is going to write about and how he will do it. If I tell Sam what to write, I make him dependent on me. Writing workshop is always about encouraging independence and problem-solving.

• I try on ways to start writing while I talk to him so that he might begin writing when I leave. This move is not echoed in either of the other conferences simply because the writers don’t need this help from me.

Student two: Am I doing this right?

Before this conference starts, the chatter that happens at her table is important. These students are off camera, but listen to what they ask and how I answer. I would call the two quick clarifications I give students at this table ‘touch and go’ conferences. I find this happens a lot as I move from table to table in my room. I give them just enough to get going, then focus on the student who has asked for my help. But they quiet down as I talk to her and I am certain they are learning from what I say to Jade.

• Lindsey was absent the last time class met and wants clarification on the assignment. First of all, can she have another day to work? I say no, I want what she can do that day. This first scene writing is a pre-assessment of what students understand about narrative. I want to move forward into more complexity with story based on this baseline, so I pressure her to finish in class. You’ll notice I repeat the central goals of the writing for her, even though we just explored those in the mini-lesson on my scene.

• The other student asks a question about his user name for our school’s log-in, then adds “basically a third person account” as I talk to Lindsey about what is expected of her. I correct him that it can be first person and practice a line using that voice. I also look at Jade while I talk to them to acknowledge that I know she is waiting for me.
I begin the conference by asking Jade what she needs from me. She says she wants to know if she is doing it right. I push her to clarify. All of my students are asked this question throughout the year: how can I help you as a writer now? I seek independent writers, so I need writers who can analyze what they are doing in their writing and how that writing falls short of their goals. They need to come to conferences with questions to direct the conference: both with me and with their peers. As I push Jade, she offers more and I use her question to direct my work with her.

(I did not ask this question of Sam since he did not ask me to look at his writing, and when I ask it of the third student here, she has an answer, so I can move forward. This is the differentiation in conferences that occurs daily because writers are in such different places in their understanding and in their writing as we move through a unit of study.)

Jade finally asks if it is too much—so I skim read her piece (reading aloud so she can hear it too) and then address only this question in my response. I see all kinds of other things I could discuss with her, but when a writer asks for help on one thing, learning that thing is exactly in the zone of proximal development. I don’t miss the opportunity to address it.

After I read, first I acknowledge that this is a big story (her father’s heart attack) and important, and she may want to write all of it in our next unit on narrative.

I mark in her notebook where the writing she has so far might be four scenes. I talk through how each part could be a scene, then ask her to choose one, slow down time, and get writing. Later, when she has one scene I will follow up with how writers choose where to zoom in and where to zoom past—where to fully develop a scene and where to summarize for readers.

**Student three: is this too long?**

Ah, the diversity of students. Kayla has a full page and a half of writing. She came to class with it and has been rereading and revising it while workshop has buzzed around her. She asks me to come and look at her work and tell her if it is too long. (You’ll notice that I am at the third table of six in my classroom. I try to do one conference at a table and move on to another to keep my presence throughout the classroom and to give more students the opportunity to eavesdrop.)

Kayla asked for length and as she talks, I skim her piece. I see much to celebrate so I ask her if there is anything else she wants from me. She mentions length, so I prod her with questions about how much information she has included and why it might be too long. I sense it isn’t, so I push her for questions about more than length, figuring this girl is already analyzing her writing and I might be able to help her with a more complex question about writing with her invitation to do so. She wants to know if her description
is ‘cheesy’ and I ask her if she means ‘cliché.’ Then I start reading. I skim read and think about what to teach.

One thing I have learned to do in conferences is watch my confusion as a reader and then explain it to students. Donald Murray did this for me when I was writing Public Teaching. He called me and said, “Let me tell you what I’m thinking as I’m reading this.” I made notes as he talked and learned a great deal about what was happening in my writing that I simply couldn’t see yet. My skills in reading like a writer were rudimentary. I needed his guidance to hear how craft decisions I was making affected a reader’s experience with my story. This is what I offer Kayla.

I talk through my confusion with her and give her direction as to how to solve it, then I tell her I’m reading for the ‘cheesy’ question and talk through when her description is and isn’t cliché.

The class has quieted, so I take a moment to keep reading. I add a paragraph on her piece and explain how it will help readers by eliminating the proximity between she and ‘Kayla’ in the moment. Again, I am working with a writer I know is strong, so I explain very little here, but feel confident she understands me.

I mention what she has done in her ending. My voice is the only one in the room and I know others nearby are going to hear me, so I want to mention how it brings readers to a different place. Endings are perhaps the most challenging skill for young writers, so when I find a student who has nailed one, I often use it as a sample text in class the next day. Across the table from Kayla is another strong writer who stops typing to listen in. This is the power of conferring with writers in the midst of the class. I talk to Kayla about why her ending works so well, and I hope Nathanial might ask to read Kayla’s piece after I leave.

The key to this series of conferences is the differentiation of teaching made possible in conferring.
Deepening Understanding of Content
& Increasing Independence in Writing

Goal: Develop writing that is informative and persuasive, complete, supported with evidence, clear, smart, and balanced. It advances the conversation within the discipline and demonstrates facility with its conventions... confidence in writing is demonstrated in word choice, tone, and clarity in multiple genres (from feature articles to essays and arguments).

In writing process this means: how a student develops an idea, understands what information is needed to support it, then organizes, analyzes and refines writing in response to the needs or questions of a real or imagined audience with limited teacher direction.
The Art of Writing Story:
increasing skills & learning to trust the writing process of discipline & struggle

**Process**

**Volume:** words in, words out (You have to read a lot to write well. There is no substitute. Also, the more you write, the better you write.)

**What writers need:** time (use it wisely), choice, response (learning to set direction in a conference, collaboration, self-reflection)

**Conditions of a writing workshop:** independence & deadlines, resources, and respect for our writing community

How writers find ideas: Daily notebook writing beside beautiful words + rereading our writing to listen to it & finely tune it for clarity and voice.

**Study models of writing:** read like a writer; study author’s craft moves; emulate the moves of other writers; write (& punctuate) with intention

**Study models of process:** class feedback conferences, multiple drafts, writing groups, analyzing your process over time

**Imagine readers:** analyze your audience; revise structure, tone, & craft to engage readers; read your work aloud to others, listen to response

**Skills**

Effective voice(s), point of view/multiple narrators

Sensory details which add clarity & precision

Skillful, fluid dialogue /what is & isn’t said

Show and tell/when to show, when to tell

Scenes work together within a logical, coherent structure

Sentence structure is fluid, rhythmic

Smooth transitions between scenes

Controlling time in a story: zoom in/zoom past

Read like a writer

Analysis of growth in reading & writing

Text study & annotation of pace

Evidence of proficiency with skills

Story + ‘so what?’ resolution in conclusion

Subtlety & clarity with language

FX: memorization, pacing, performance

Rereading your work like a reader, anticipate Qs & respond

Use of flashbacks in a smooth progression of events

Character development through experiences, dialogue & reflection

Developing theme: interpretation & elaboration of big ideas

**Products**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>scenes/moments</th>
<th>narrative: fiction or memoir</th>
<th>Q1: reading ladder</th>
<th>storyboarding ideas</th>
<th>extended, annotated narrative + digital story</th>
<th>Q2: reading ladder</th>
<th>FX: portfolio/class book</th>
<th>storytelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: reading ladder</td>
<td>storyboard reflection</td>
<td>revision unit of study</td>
<td>extended, annotated narrative + digital story</td>
<td>portfolio/class book</td>
<td>storytelling</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
The Art of Writing Research:
increasing skills & learning to trust the writing process of discipline & struggle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volume:</strong> words in, words out (You have to read a lot to know enough about your topic to write well. There is no substitute.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What writers need:</strong> time (use it wisely), choice, response (learning to set direction in a conference, collaboration, self-reflection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditions of a writing workshop:</strong> independence &amp; deadlines, resources, and respect for our writing community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How writers find &amp; develop ideas: <strong>Daily notebook writing</strong> beside information crafted skillfully + <strong>rereading our writing to listen &amp; finely tune it for clarity.</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Study models of writing:</strong> read like a writer; study author’s craft moves; emulate the moves of other writers; write (&amp; punctuate) with intention</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Study models of process:</strong> how/where to find info, class feedback conferences, multiple drafts, writing groups, analyzing your process over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imagine readers:</strong> analyze your audience; revise structure, tone, &amp; craft to engage readers; read your work aloud to others, listen to response</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>precise writing from charts/tables/graphs/primary sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read like a writer: text study &amp; annotation of organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skillful introduction of topic (blending genre: story, information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>find well-chosen, relevant and sufficient facts &amp; details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use of formal style &amp; objective tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentence structure is fluid &amp; rhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smooth transitions to clarify relationships among complex ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concluding statement or action motivates/inspires readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skillful, fluid blending of well-chosen quotations or facts w/researcher’s voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizes complex ideas &amp; concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reread your work like a reader, anticipating Qs &amp; responses of readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develops sub-topics with clear relationship to central idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use varied transitions to link sections of the text, clarify relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anticipate audience’s lack of knowledge &amp; provide appropriate info/examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use precise language &amp; topic-specific vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annotated bibliography to demonstrate credibility of research</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Products</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>evidence writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from timeline/events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feature article: multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1: reading ladder portfolio reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: reading ladder revision unit of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extended research of 10-20 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>digital information/advertisement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Penny Kittle 25
The Art of Writing Argument:  
increasing skills & learning to trust the writing process of discipline & struggle

Process

**Volume**: words in, words out (You have to read a lot to write well. There is no substitute. Also, the more you write, the better you write.)  
**What writers need**: time (use it wisely), choice, response (learning to set direction in a conference, collaboration, self-reflection)  
**Conditions of a writing workshop**: independence & deadlines, resources, and respect for our writing community  
How writers find ideas: **Daily notebook writing beside ideas crafted precisely + rereading our writing to listen to it & finely tune it for clarity and voice.**  
**Study models of writing**: read like a writer; study author’s craft moves; emulate the moves of other writers; write (& punctuate) with intention  
**Study models of process**: class feedback conferences, multiple drafts, writing groups, analyzing your process over time  
**Imagine readers**: analyze your audience; revise structure, tone, & craft to engage readers; read your work aloud to others, listen to response

Skills

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<tr>
<th>Precise writing from charts/tables/graphs/primary sources</th>
<th>Skillful, fluid blending of quotations w/text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read like a writer: text study &amp; annotation of organization</td>
<td>Organizing strengths &amp; limitations of ideas in a logical, coherent structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skillful introduction of claim (blending genre: story, information)</td>
<td>Reread your work like a reader, anticipating Qs &amp; responses of readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of evidence to develop clarity &amp; urgency of claim</td>
<td>Develops claim &amp; counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of formal style &amp; objective tone</td>
<td>Organizes to establish relationships among claim &amp; counterclaims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structure is fluid &amp; rhythmic</td>
<td>Anticipate audience’s knowledge level &amp; concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smooth transitions between claims &amp; counterclaims</td>
<td>Use words, phrases, and clauses to link major sections of text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding statement or action supports the argument</td>
<td>Annotated bibliography to demonstrate credibility of research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence writing from timeline/events</th>
<th>Letters to editor: claim + evidence</th>
<th>Q1: reading ladder portfolio reflection</th>
<th>Extended argument of 10-20 pages</th>
<th>Q2: reading ladder revision unit of study</th>
<th>Digital argument/advertisement</th>
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