

What We Learn When We Free Writers

by Penny Kittle



Fifteen minutes a day, and you'll have a book in a year, Don Murray told me. It was early in our friendship, and his advice came with a laminated sign that is still taped to the front of my computer monitor: *nulla dies sine linea*, or "never a day without a line" (Horace, 65–8 B.C). These words have allegedly hung over many writers' desks through the centuries. I wanted to be part of that club, so I taped the sign to the bottom of my monitor. I have tried for more than a decade since to respond to rather than ignore this wisdom.

Murray believed that a constant state of composition was essential for writers. He said, "I try to write every day," but more importantly, Murray described what happens when we don't, when we're out of practice. "And when I miss a day or two, or a week, it becomes harder and harder to write. I want to write for all the days I haven't written; I want to write more than I can write, and better than I can write. And therefore I cannot write at all" (1985). I know this. I know how much easier it is to think like a writer when I'm practicing every day, providing that practice is grounded in the conditions writers need: time to write and choice of what to write about (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1977). Teachers have always struggled to provide both, particularly if they're not in the habit of writing—because it is easy to discount the value of those precepts when you haven't written something you consider important in years.

And now, with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, there is a hurry-up feeling in classrooms. The standards did not change what we understand about the process of writing or its importance in leading writers to confidence and clarity with words. We are, however, faced with an important question: how do we give students time and choice in writing in this hurry-up world? Students need time to think about what to write and time to follow ideas and images in free writing, building the independence and confidence that we want them to have as writers.

As Tony Wagner noted in *Creating Innovators*, there are three interrelated elements to intrinsic motivation: play, passion, and purpose (2012). These are not words used in the Common Core State Standards, but they are habits of mind we must cultivate in writers. Time to wait for words is a critical stage in the development of independence.

My colleagues and I found an answer in a challenge to 55 sixth graders last fall: write each night in notebooks. We challenged every student in sixth grade because we refused to limit possibility or define our pedagogy around the 5 percent who might lose their notebooks more than once or forget them at home.

But let me make a few important points before you read farther. One point: Nightly writing was a class challenge, not homework. It was not graded, and no one was shamed for forgetting or for skipping a night or two.

Another: My colleagues and I wrote or sketched or listed ideas in our notebooks as well. We were part of the challenge. I confess that most weeks I scrambled to sit with my notebook outside of class four times a week, but as you'll see in the linked video interview of one teacher, our constant state of composition changed us as writers and leaders in the classroom. We wrote more this year than ever before. We deepened our understanding of writing, the content we teach.



Watch Kim Mathison, sixth grade teacher at Conway Elementary in Conway, New Hampshire, explain what she learned as a writing teacher through regular writing and revision in her notebook at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bajZ4Wl0g_0.

We celebrated the unexpected—the variety—the individual heart of student work often. We celebrated the risks students took as writers and thinkers, and their willingness to share what they were working on to learn from one another. The guidance counselor started a lunch group, Writers' Café, and a wide range of students gathered to share.

And lastly: We wrote and reread and practiced revising each day in class. We modeled and shared an interest in free writing as a community in the classroom first, sprung from the beautiful language of poetry or short readings from books, and then asked students to sustain writing and thinking at home in any way they chose to.

Nightly writing gave students freedoms we couldn't provide each day in class: they were in charge of when they wrote, how long they wrote, under what conditions (headphones in? on the floor? outside?), and, most importantly, what they wrote about. Student control nurtured student independence. Students did not ask, "What should I write about?" They learned to read their world like writers. They learned to wait for words. As you will see in the video, they wrote and sketched and explored genres by asking: "What do I have to say?" "What am I thinking about?"



Watch sixth grade students answer questions posed on their process as writers at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFNp2dITuc4>. These interviews were conducted at the school in June of 2013.*

Donald Murray (1985), who first proposed that we teach students to work as writers do, suggested that a process approach to teaching writing included just three things:

1. Teach process, not product.
2. Write yourself.
3. Listen to your students.

And William Zinsser echoed this faith in process: "Trust the process. If the process is sound, the product improves" (2001). You will not see the hallmarks of teaching in a process-centered approach in many classrooms today, however. We assign writing products, which we don't write, and we too often can't find time for conferences. Somehow we hope that writers will grow under these conditions, and so often they do not. They depend on us for topics and for feedback for revision. We complain they are dependent, but we have made them so.

This persistent conflict is evident when I speak to teachers about writing workshop. "If I don't give them a topic, they can't write," teachers tell me. I believe both the lack of self-direction and the lack of motivation (these habits of mind that nurture lifelong seeking and learning) are a product of practices in our classrooms. Visit primary children who have been given the freedom and good teaching to work in a writer's workshop, and you have to wonder why so much has changed once they hit middle and then high school. A child who can manage the complexity of organizing information for readers about a subject he is passionate about (after collecting the information, sorting it, and determining importance) is suddenly in high school unable to write an essay without guidelines for each paragraph. We expect too little. We control too much. To mangle Zinsser's quote, when we focus on products, the process is dependent and does not last. It will not transfer to the wide range of writing that will be asked of all of us in the future.

I believe the challenge for all teachers is to live in a constant of state of composition. This means that ideas will spin inside of you while you're doing other things. I first considered what to say here as dawn crept over the skyline in my office. I began with pages of phrases and images from teaching in a jumble of notes—raw, unorganized thinking, which is an essential stage in my process, and something too often bypassed in hurry-up teaching toward products. I worked on ways to organize while driving to get groceries; I considered my argument and the evidence I needed while on hall duty. Because I worked on drafting this for several mornings in a row, I was constantly composting, turning over thinking as I reconsidered and deepened my understanding of what I had written just that morning. I trusted the process, which made finding words easier when ideas awoke me before the alarm.

*In the video, the students refer to RADaR in their writing. This is a revision acronym—*replace, add, delete, and reorder*—that Kelly Gallagher (2011) created.

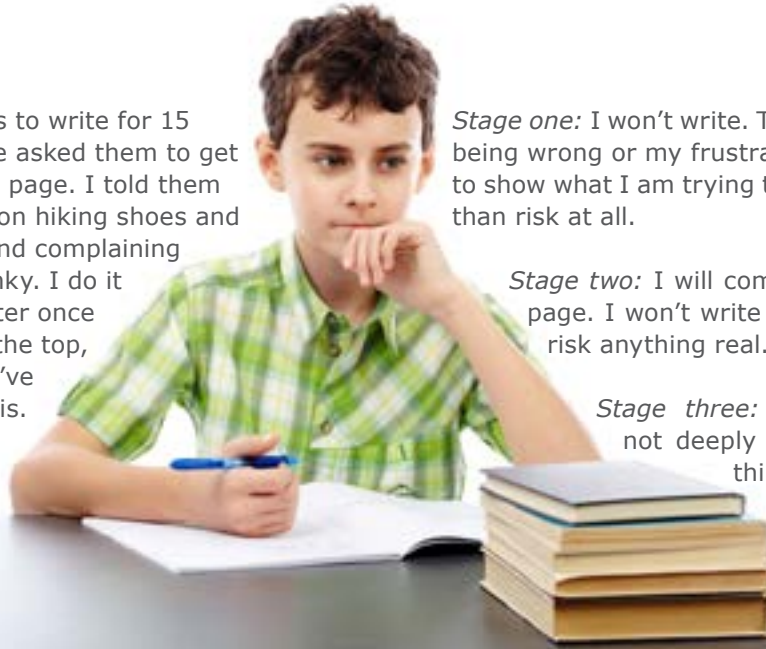
We challenged our sixth graders to write for 15 minutes, four nights a week. We asked them to get comfortable sitting with a blank page. I told them sometimes it is like my putting on hiking shoes and driving to Mt. Willard, cursing and complaining the whole way because I'm cranky. I do it because I know that it gets better once I'm on the trail. The view from the top, after all that work, is worth it. I've had enough practice to know this. Writing has to contain this knowledge as well.

Our work in sixth grade rested on the belief that teachers must be practicing writers. Writing your ideas and

experiences is a process you must practice to understand well enough to teach it to others. If you never liked writing—or never felt good at it—then you're having your students do things as writers that you yourself don't understand very well. The act of writing, even (or especially) when it isn't going well, is lesson preparation. If we understood this connection between writing and skillful teaching, we'd bring notebooks to every classroom, every staff meeting, and every evaluation conference.

I will enter class this morning with all this word work in my head. I'm prepared to model writing with my high school students. But consider one of my students: Robert, a senior, who didn't take an English class last year because he planned to take it online and then didn't. He barely passed his other classes, where the writing he had to do was minimal. He isn't ready to plan, organize, sift through ideas, and come up with good ones now that I've asked him to. He is mired in a belief that he is not a writer and will just have to suffer through a pile of assignments to earn high school credit. His eyes are focused on the last day of class. I have to set up conditions that will help him find words to name something important to him. Once he sees himself creating meaningful writing, he'll be willing to invest more.

Because I believe learning is dynamic, I expect Robert to move from resisting writing in September to exploration in his notebook by the end of the semester. I see all my current students sprinkled along a continuum of growth:



Stage one: I won't write. This is a defense against being wrong or my frustration with finding words to show what I am trying to say. I'd rather not try than risk at all.

Stage two: I will comply, but only to fill the page. I won't write what matters to me or risk anything real.

Stage three: I will write, but I'm not deeply engaged with my own thinking. I want you to tell me what to write, so I can do it the way you say so and move on.

Stage four: I freely write, explore, and trust that words can communicate my ideas. I find the surprise and joy in words that name my experiences. I want to write more.

Teachers can shift mindsets. If we say, "These kids won't . . .," we stop trying to move students along this continuum. Instead we must believe that no matter where we start as writers, we can reach for more. What classroom conditions will help each writer move? Freedom will lead writers to independence. Telling students what to write is dangerous teaching. Instead, let us reach to empower all our students. Let us find words to name what is vivid and crucial to us, so we are ready to pass on the energy of creation. In sixth grade, we asked students to live like writers, and we joined them. They left us in June as confident, fluent, independent writers, notebooks in hand.



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Penny Kittle is a high school teacher and literacy coach in Conway, New Hampshire. She won the James N. Britton Award from the Conference on English Education, NCTE, for Write Beside Them (Heinemann) and recently co-edited Children Want to Write: Donald Graves and the Revolution in Children's Writing (Heinemann) with Thomas Newkirk.

Deeper Writing: Writing Below the Surface of the Common Core

by Robin W. Holland

What do I write?

I don't know how to start.

I don't know where to start

Where am I supposed to get an idea for this paper? This assignment? This project?

They always say to write what you know.

But . . . I don't know what to write.

This chorus of laments and questions may sound familiar to you. Answering this chorus with supportive words, expert knowledge, and sound teaching is the challenge we encounter as teachers in 2014.

For over a decade, writing has taken a backseat to reading, as No Child Left Behind hid the reciprocal and symbiotic nature of these two subjects.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), on the other hand, have elevated writing and pushed it once more to the forefront. So the good news is we are now talking about writing.

With the Common Core's focus on engaging students in clear, coherent writing in a variety of text types and purposes, including argument and information or explanatory writing, as well as narrative

and sustained research, we are forced to critically examine what we are currently doing in writing classrooms across the nation.

For one thing, many of us will now be asking students to produce extensively more writing than we have expected in the past. And we may also be asking them to write more frequently.

CCSS Writing Standard 10 calls for us to *write routinely over extended time frames* making certain that our writers have ample time for *research, reflection, and revision*. In addition, and perhaps more importantly for this article, Writing Standard 10 also calls for *shorter time frames*—writing that can be completed in a *single sitting or a day or two for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences*.

In response to the requirement for both longer and shorter opportunities for writing, you may be chanting laments and asking questions similar to those of your students:

How will I find the time?

Where do I get ideas for all these writing assignments?

I don't know what to have them write.

As we wrestle collectively to provide meaningful writing experiences for our students—experiences that lead to substantive, meaningful, and authentic writing—I offer what I have come to call *deeper writing*.

In addition, I offer four readily available *sources of ideas* that will produce deeper writing—writing that will fulfill the requirement of Writing Standard 10 for short daily writing experiences.

