36 Workshops to Get Kids Writing from Aliens to Zebras

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Thanks to everyone at Pasadena Public Library, the incredibly talented and supportive colleagues who I’ve been blessed to work with for five years.
Writing in the Library
A Radical Idea

Imagine you are asking a child what a person can do in a library. “Read books,” you will hear—after all, we already know that, in the eyes of our public, books are our brand. What else can you do in the library? Depending on the child’s experience, you might hear other answers: “Go to storytime.” “Do arts and crafts.” “Join a book club.” “Play with puzzles.” “Go to a magic show.” “Hear a band play.” “Do a science experiment.” “Claim a prize in Summer Reading.” What do all these answers have in common? Not necessarily books. For many decades now, literacy, not books, has been the true emphasis of most children’s services in the library. And most children’s librarians can tell you that books alone are not the sole foundation of literacy. Early literacy is all about talking, singing, playing, reading, and writing. We figure we’ve got most of these covered in our library’s storytimes, music shows, art programs, book clubs, and play areas.

Talking, singing, playing, reading, and . . . writing.
Where’s the writing?
And a more urgent question: Where’s the writing for the kids who need it the most, as they are learning how to read and write?

Most language arts teachers are familiar with the research going back decades showing that children learn to read through writing. But librarians have missed out on that literature. We tell ourselves that we are about encouraging children to read. We tell parents over and over that children learn to read when you read to them great books that appeal to them—and that is true! But we don’t think about how children learn to write when you let them write for fun, and that writing is a vital and necessary part of building a child’s reading skills.
So once again, where’s the writing?

“All across the country, libraries are offering writing programs for adults and teens,” writes Ally Blumenfeld in a 2016 blog post on the Library as Incubator Project website. But do a search for public libraries offering writing programs for children in the primary grades, and chances are good you won’t find many. Librarians might be forgiven for thinking that offering creative writing workshops to children in kindergarten is a radical idea—even as those same librarians put on frequent art programs, craft programs, science programs, and music. How is it that our profession has come so far in offering creative writing opportunities to young adults while ignoring the needs of the youngest and earliest writers who are at the critical age where they are developing an identity grounded in literacy?

Our emphasis on promoting reading greatly outweighs any efforts we make to do programming about the other side of literacy—writing. Consider the prevalence of summer reading programs across the United States and other countries around the world, and then try to find a single public library advertising writing workshops for children under the age of 8.

Have libraries been failing to emphasize the importance of writing in their efforts to push more reading? Nearly thirty years ago, James Moffett criticized the nation’s schools for favoring reading over writing, making both “harder to master,” while simultaneously making students “more the consumers of others’ thinking than original thinkers themselves.” Kay Cowan wrote in 2001 that “the emphasis on writing in our classrooms and in the research literature is minimal compared to the attention given reading.” A decade and a half later, educators and researchers are still talking about the “apparent dominance of reading over writing in schools.”

Do these same complaints apply to libraries? Despite our devotion to books, is there more we could be doing to promote literacy? And what can librarians do to promote creative writing, not just for teens but for primary-grade students as well?

CHILDREN LEARN TO READ BY WRITING

This tendency to support only the reading side of literacy when serving children in primary grades ignores more than thirty years of education research which tells us that reading and writing develop simultaneously in early childhood. “Just as they figure out the complex phonology, grammar, and vocabulary of spoken English by about the age of five,” write Jean Wallace Gillet and Lynn Beverly, “children figure out much of what writing is and how it works entirely by experiences with it, in about the same time frame.”

Just as children learn to read by being read to, and in their early attempts at reading they show that they notice the correspondence of print with the sounds they hear, children learn how words are formed by early attempts at writing. This process starts with their earliest scribbles, which, according to
the toddler, stand for words. As they learn the alphabet and develop invented spellings, indicating their growing understanding of which letters to assign to a particular word or sound, they are developing important strategies that they need to read words.8

Over the years, primary-grade teachers have emphasized a reciprocal, “two-for-one” kind of relationship between reading and writing, which helps students acquire both skills more quickly.9 Ruth Culham calls the two skills of reading and writing a “one-two punch”: “When we work on the skills related to one, we quite naturally work on the other.”10

When children do creative writing, they bring all that developing print awareness and early literacy together with play and imagination to push themselves to express their ideas. It is so important for children in kindergarten through first grade to have creative writing opportunities, because creative writing is a child-driven activity that motivates them to learn how to write and makes them better readers. As the child is deciding which words to use and comes across a word he does not know how to spell, the child sounds out the word and attempts to write it down anyway. The child is driven internally to increase his literacy, word by word, when writing something that comes from the imagination in a fun, friendly learning environment.

**WRITING IS PLAY**

A 1999 study by researchers Danling Fu and Jane Townsend followed seven children through two years from kindergarten to first grade to determine how different teachers’ approaches to teaching writing might impact the children’s academic growth and literacy skills. What the researchers found was astonishing (and downright heartbreaking). The same children who flourished at or above grade level with a kindergarten teacher who encouraged daily creative writing became stifled and miserable about writing with a first-grade teacher who treated creative writing as an exercise in correct punctuation and spelling.

First let’s look at how the kindergarten teacher’s emphasis on reading and creative writing activities every day promoted the children’s overall academic performance:

By the end of the year, the seven children selected as our case studies all passed the grade requirement test; two of them were above grade level (Eddie was one of these), and the rest were at grade level. The test evaluated three areas: letter naming, phonemic awareness, and book concepts. This class, which did more writing than did any of the other four kindergarten classes at the school, received the highest average grade-level score. When asked how she accounted for the high score, the teacher said that she thought the children’s frequent writing activities had made the difference.11
Now contrast this picture of children writing joyfully and scoring high academically with the following picture of those same children just a few months later, when they were asked to undertake endless, meaningless writing worksheets intended for little other than testing the children’s knowledge of writing conventions:

Eddie . . . proved himself to be a writer in kindergarten. But the worksheet writing [in first grade] didn’t give him any chance or room to be creative, to think and imagine, or even to experiment with language. He learned to put forth the least effort and get the best grade, to write nonsense, to use words without much meaning. He also learned that school reading and writing were not for personal expression or communication. Keith, a boy in the same class, said it all when asked if he understood what he was doing. “No,” he said, “I just do it.”

What does writing mean to Eddie? When asked in an interview at the end of his first-grade year how he might improve himself as a writer, Eddie responded: “To write with the best handwriting, the straightest writing like the computer does.” His words tell us that he had learned that “good” writing has little to do with creativity or with providing information. Eddie’s first-grade view differs sharply from what he valued in his writing were the “good words” and “good stories.”

The story of young Eddie is a cautionary tale for anyone teaching children to read and write, because even as it demonstrates the academic achievement possible by providing children more opportunities for creative writing, it unfortunately details the tragic destruction of their enthusiasm for learning after their new teacher’s methods sucked all the creativity out of the process. Certainly it is important for children to learn the conventions of print, spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. But this learning will happen in time, the more they write. As teachers and librarians, we must find a way to set aside time for children to write simply for the joy of it, with no expectations or demands attached. Otherwise, children will come to resist writing and avoid it at all costs. In the words of Lucy McCormick Calkins, “We forget that we, too, would yawn and roll our eyes if we were asked to write about our summer vacation or our favorite food. We do not consider how we would feel if the only response to our hard-earned stories were red-penned ‘Awks’ and ‘Run-ons.’”

There is a place for instruction in grammar and print conventions, but first children need to be given a safe space for exploring and dreaming, and that is what I suggest a library writing program or primary-grade classroom workshop can be.

**CHILDREN WRITE BEFORE THEY CAN SPELL**

It is putting the cart before the horse to expect children to learn how to spell before being invited to write anything fun or meaningful. Sara Ackerman said
it quite well: “[C]hildren are not expected to refrain from speaking until they have fully grasped oral language. Likewise, they should not be expected to form letters neatly, spell perfectly, or use punctuation accurately before being invited to write.”14 Between the ages of 3 and 5, children are discovering that “marks on paper have the power to make meaning.”15 It is not important yet to make sure that those marks can be published in an academic journal. Rather, at this early age, it is simply necessary that we as educators and librarians “respond” in a positive way: “Just as infants learn the power of their gestures through our response to those gestures, language learners discover the power of their print and pictures through our response.”16 While young children play with telling stories by putting marks on paper, and eventually make those marks with letters, it is up to us to support those children and applaud their progress.

Even as children get old enough to learn to spell, there will be misspellings, and these errors are an important sign of learning. “Spelling progress is shown not necessarily by fewer errors, but by errors that show more complex strategies.”17 These errors are actually “signs of intelligent, ambitious language use rather than deficiency.”18

Dare to challenge the idea that making spelling errors is a “bad” thing, and, instead, find the growth and motivation contained in them. Let us encourage young children to write, and to write boldly!

WRITING IS NOT TOO ACADEMIC, IF DONE RIGHT

In recent years, many educators and parents have expressed concerns that kindergarten is becoming too academic—“the new first grade”—and is not giving children enough opportunities for play. These concerns are valid. But please do not assume that these concerns apply to the act of creative writing. Creative writing is play. Calkins said it best: “It is not children—but adults—who have separated writing from art, song, and play; it is adults who have turned writing into an exercise on dotted-line paper, into a matter of rules, lessons, and cautious behavior.”19 When done well, creative writing lessons for kindergartners can offer plenty of opportunities for silliness and imagination, especially when we weave in singing, talking, reading, playing—in other words, when we give writing the support of the other four early literacy practices that can bolster it and help it thrive.

Deborah Wells Rowe, Joanne Deal Fitch, and Alyson Smith Bass had great success when giving children toys during writing workshops and encouraging the children to use the toys to make up stories and then write down those stories. The authors followed the children’s natural inclination to play pretend and helped the children talk out those stories and transcribe them. It just takes a little time for the magic to work. “We found that children often developed their most creative ideas after 20–30 minutes of play. It often took this much time for children to select characters, negotiate their roles and relationships, develop some agreement on the nature of the story world, and explore plot ideas.”20
Others have found that simply introducing conversation and collaboration can turn the whole process into one of play. Kay Cowan used a tape recorder to record the stories her students came up with orally and then gave them support with writing down the stories. Cowan also noted that some students consistently preferred to begin with drawings and then used drawing as their vehicle for working out their ideas. Finally, acting out stories has been another important avenue used by teachers to help children start creating written stories. “Once children were comfortable with generating stories by playing with toys and other objects, they often suggested acting out stories written by others as a way of understanding and enjoying them.”

The research showing how kindergartners respond to creative writing activities has been consistently positive. There is truly no scientific basis for assuming that teaching creative writing to 5-year-olds is expecting too much or placing too heavy a burden on the children. Quite the contrary—it opens them up to new possibilities and is usually embraced enthusiastically by the kids. When Maria Berzins started encouraging her kindergarten students to write from their very first day in school in 1998, her 5-year-old students became “consumed with a kind of literacy fever—they wanted to read and write all the time! Expecting students to write from the first day of kindergarten allowed their potential for literacy to unfold much earlier and helped motivate and encourage them as emergent writers.” What Berzins learned was an echo of what kindergarten teachers before her had begun trying ever since Lucy Calkins wrote in 1986: “[C]hildren can write sooner than we ever dreamed was possible.”

HUMOR IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF PLAY

Humor is one of the primary connections that children make between books and play. We see it as they return again and again to their favorite funny books, and we see it develop as they share their early attempts at humor. There is something about humor writing that not only is entertaining for both the writer and the audience but also stretches children’s imaginations and motivates young writers to revise their work in a quest for more fun. Humor can also create a kind of “even playing field” between children and grownups because we can all connect over a funny story and admit to times when we are being foolish or silly.

For that reason, when we get into the writing lessons based on picture books, you will notice that I place a very heavy emphasis on funny picture books. When children are laughing, they are emboldened to make more courageous and outgoing choices in their writing. They take more risks. And when children are feeling shy, unsure of what to write or where to begin, laughter can be a very effective icebreaker.
BUT I'M NOT A TEACHER, JUST A LIBRARIAN

I hope you’re laughing as you read that, because no one is “just” a librarian. Most libraries serving children already provide programs teaching crafts, inviting them to draw or paint, build with LEGO®s, do hands-on science activities, learn computing skills, and more. And although the role of the youth services librarian or school librarian may not be the same as that of a teacher, getting familiar with some of the research on literacy development that has informed generations of primary-grade teachers can have enormous benefits for the work of youth services librarians to encourage and promote literacy. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) crystallizes some of that research in its official position on the teaching of writing, saying that writing helps children “become better readers”: “In their earliest writing experiences, children listen for the relationships of sounds to letters, which contributes greatly to their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge.” The NCTE’s position statement is written for teachers, but there are lots of ways that librarians can take it to heart and help teachers with that mission. Consider the following skills that the NCTE recommends for teachers:

In order to provide high-quality writing opportunities for all students, teachers need to understand:

• How writers read for the purposes of writing—with an eye toward not just what the text says but also how it is put together;
• The psychological and social processes reading and writing have in common;
• The ways writers imagine their intended readers, anticipating their responses and needs;
• That text structures are fluid enough to accommodate frequent exceptions, innovations, and disruptions;
• How writers can identify mentor or exemplar texts, both print and digital, that they may want to emulate in their own writing.

Librarians can help by being aware of “mentor or exemplar texts,” and we can make sure to carry those texts in our collections to support primary-grade teachers and young writers. We can help also by providing more opportunities for creative writing in our programming. Although we cannot replace the role of the teacher, we can provide a great deal of extra enrichment and support to both teacher and child.

In its “Position Statement on the School Librarian’s Role in Reading,” the American Association of School Librarians encourages school librarians to take this kind of role:

• School librarians take a leadership role in organizing and promoting literacy projects and events that engage learners and motivate them to become lifelong readers.
• Classroom teachers, reading specialists, and school librarians select materials, promote the curricular and independent use of resources, including traditional and alternative materials, and plan learning experiences that offer whole classes, small groups, and individual learners an interdisciplinary approach to literacy learning.28

The activities in this book will help you create those interdisciplinary learning experiences. When students come to your library to be introduced to a hilarious book and do a fun writing activity, they will associate the library with literacy on a whole new level in which they are more than just consumers of the books in your collection.

CREATIVE WRITING AND THE COMMON CORE

People have many opinions about the Common Core State Standards, but one thing is undeniable: the new standards “take a clear stand on behalf of reading and writing across the curriculum.”29 According to Ruth Culham, “Writing has finally taken a place at the big family table with reading and math,”30 and it’s true—writing has infiltrated and permeated all the academic subjects, as it always should have. In the past, test-taking skills, solving problems in the conventional way, and selecting the right answer were considered paramount to success in mathematics. Now, you’ll notice that the ability to write a few sentences about the process for solving the problem is a staple feature of math homework.

There is also a more holistic approach to literacy in the Common Core, which I believe teachers and librarians will find welcome. As Rachel Wadham and Terrell Young wrote, “Ultimately the Core defines literacy as more than reading and writing, as it also puts an emphasis on communication, collaboration, creativity, problem solving, technology, citizenship, information literacy, and life skills.”31 And creative writing, in particular, offers countless opportunities for exploring those skills.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

As you go through the activities in this book, you will see frequent references to specific Common Core Standards, listed in detail at the beginning of each chapter and referenced at the beginning of each lesson. The standards themselves change only a little from one grade level to the next, adding a bit more each year, so I have defaulted to the ones for second grade. But it will be useful to start your work with this book by reviewing those differences.
Let’s take a look at the first few writing standards for kindergarten and explore how they change as children progress into first and second grade.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.1**: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., My favorite book is . . .).

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.2**: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.3**: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.

By first grade, children’s writing should have developed to the point at which their opinion pieces “supply a reason for the opinion, and provide a sense of closure,” their informational texts provide more “facts,” and their narratives include more “details” (italics added):

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.1**: Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.2**: Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic, and provide some sense of closure.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.3**: Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.

By second grade, children should be using more “linking words to connect opinions and reasons” and learning about transitions. They should also be using “temporal words” to signify the order of events in their narrative writing and be putting more emphasis on “actions, thoughts, and feelings” (italics added):

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.1**: Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons, and provide a concluding statement or section.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.2**: Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.3**: Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.
It’s not that kindergartners or first graders cannot supply details about their thoughts or feelings, or use facts or linking words in their writing. The standards merely imply that by the time they finish second grade, all students should be capable of that level of complexity. The standards are a benchmark, but I have met kindergartners who were capable of meeting that benchmark much earlier than the standards would require.

You will note that, throughout this book, I refer to additional Common Core Standards that are not included in the “Writing” section but have been assigned to the “Reading” or “Language” sections of the standards. Personally, I agree with Susan Martin and Sherry Dismuke’s argument that this categorizing creates an “artificial separation” of the foundational skills for reading from other skills needed for writing. Especially where early writers are concerned, the ability to “generalize learned spelling patterns when writing words” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.2.2.D) or to “identify real-life connections between words and their use (e.g., describe foods that are spicy or juicy)” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.2.5.A) is, of course, relevant to the act of writing anything. So wherever possible, I have attempted to bring together all the English language arts standards that would apply to each lesson in this book.

My other complaint about the Common Core State Standards for writing is that the recommended literary forms are sometimes too narrow. Poetry, letter writing, journal writing, and other formats don’t always fall neatly into the categories of “narrative writing, informational writing, and opinion/argumentative writing.” Nonetheless, I will show how each activity in this book, regardless of its genre or format, involves the skills children need to achieve proficiency in those required types of writing. I just hope that, as the standards are refined and expanded in years to come, they will include a more diverse variety of writing genres just as they have successfully pervaded a diverse variety of school subjects. Writing activities such as comic strips, funny stories, circus posters, and riddles can all support the development of a strong foundation in writing arguments and organizing ideas as well as promote the “command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing.”

**USING THESE LESSONS IN THE CLASSROOM**

The thirty-six lesson plans provided in this book are intended as a weekly supplement to the daily practice of doing writing workshop. I am referring to the concept taught by Lucy Calkins in her 1986 book *The Art of Teaching Writing*, which urges teachers “to set aside an hour a day, every day, for the writing workshop” while warning that “[i]t is almost impossible to create an effective writing workshop if students write only once or twice a week.” Encouraging your students to sit down and write about whatever comes into their heads, and to work on revising drafts they have already written, should be a daily routine in every classroom. But sometimes children need a prompt, a new starting point...
for generating ideas. That is why I suggest making these activities a once-a-week or once-a-month practice, to spice things up and to give your kids new prompts and expose them to new mentor texts.

PRESENTING THESE PROGRAMS IN THE LIBRARY

Unlike teachers, librarians don’t often get to follow each child’s progress over the course of a year or have the benefit of seeing a child’s project morph from draft to draft. Most school librarians get to see each child only once a week, and the frequency is much less for public librarians. With that in mind, these writing workshops were developed to work like any other stand-alone children’s craft or art program that you might do at a public or school library, with the output being a work of creative writing inspired by a popular children’s book.

To me, it was always important that my library writing workshops—I call them “Writing Parties”—draw explicit inspiration from the books in my library’s collection. I try to lead the kids to engage with the books as a writer would, and I find that they are usually eager and capable of developing a deeper understanding of the author’s craft. Roy Corden studied this approach more formally and found that when quality children’s literature is used, children develop a “metalanguage” that they readily apply to discussing their own writing—even primary-grade children can absorb such concepts as literary devices and can talk about a text’s effectiveness, once they see someone break down those concepts using concrete examples from books they enjoy.

When you read kids a book that prompts a creative or wacky suggestion, such as “What would happen if someone tried to organize a panda parade?” or “What would a scary public service announcement about evil butterflies actually look like?”, kids jump at the challenge of creating that concept and bringing it into existence, engaging with the book on a new level. I discovered this outcome for myself when I read the book *A Pig Parade Is a Terrible Idea* by Michael Ian Black and Kevin Hawkes to my daughter (who was 5 at the time). She loved how the book ended with the suggestion that a panda parade might work out better. She said, “That was so funny! Can you bring home *Panda Parade* tomorrow?”

I said, “I don’t think they’ve written that book. But you could write it.” My daughter was more interested in puppies and kittens than pandas, so she wrote a picture book called *A Puppie Parade Is a Terrible Idea* (her spelling). This response inspired me to find out whether other picture books could provide creative writing ideas for kindergartners like my daughter, which led me to develop these programs and write this book.

Librarians, picture this with me: once a week or once a month, children between the ages of 5 and 8 are invited to a fun event at the library in a festive, decorative environment. They will hear a funny story told by an expert storyteller (you) and then they will be encouraged to find some inspiration in that story to create their own book (or poem or another kind of creative writing).
When they are finished, they will participate in a different kind of “storytime” in which they will be the storytellers. With the handouts and book templates we’ve created, most of these programs will take only a few minutes to prepare, though the parents will think you spent hours on them. The children will come away remembering the fun activities they did at the library, proud of the stories they created there.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Whether you work in a school setting or a public one, you’re going to encounter children with a wide range of prior experience with writing, with telling stories, and with communicating in English. This book will give you ideas to help English language learners and give them extra scaffolding, so that they can benefit from these creative writing programs.

I have seen English language learners grow by leaps and bounds when their imaginations are set free in a low-pressure, high-literacy environment. When I first started doing these writing workshops at the library, there was a Korean family whose boys (ages 5 and 7) always attended but who struggled to write for a long time because they were still learning English. The boys had limited conversational skills (and I don’t speak Korean), but I would often sit with them and talk about story ideas or ask them about the pictures they were drawing, trying to elicit more information about what interested them. They liked humor. They would ask me to write things for them or spell words, and I would help them, but I always got the sense that they felt lost. After six months, however, I noticed a change when the 7-year-old wrote (independently) a story about a fly who flew away from home because his mom always made him eat his vegetables. Both boys were laughing and excited, and I was just overjoyed for them! I couldn’t take all the credit for this transformation and felt sure that they must have had very good classroom teachers, but I do think that coming to these creative writing programs helped them, over time, absorb a lot of new language, come out of their shells, and start engaging in English writing for fun.

Often, the standard environment in which English language learners are placed is very restrictive, with a reductionist approach to learning to write. Nadeen Ruiz, Eleanor Vargas, and Angelica Beltran wrote of this reductionist approach:

Characteristics of reductionist instruction include an overwhelming focus on fragments of texts such as letters and single words (in the hopes that conquering the subskills of literacy will add up to proficient reading and writing); on copying (in the hopes that inculcating “good habits” such as correct spelling will prevent “bad habits” such as incorrect spelling); and on comprehending specially constructed texts with little reference to students’ experiences (in the hopes that practicing with phonetically or lexically controlled texts will lead to comprehension of authentic...
texts). Studies show that these hopes were not realized: bilingual students achieved poorly or showed limited engagement in reductionist instructional contexts.36

If those Korean children were confined, like so many other kids, to a reductionist classroom for English language learners, how likely would it be that they would have found themselves writing a funny story about a frustrated, rebellious fly? Would they be reading texts that were appropriate for their age and interests and developing sense of humor, or babyish texts chosen specifically to advance a limited development in English vocabulary and decoding skills?

Instead, at the library they found a program that promoted deep engagement with texts full of silly, exciting ideas, and an environment that said, “Write a book of your own—the sky’s the limit!” I can’t help but think that encouragement was important in their growth. I think Ruiz, Vargas, and Beltran would agree, too, because they wrote that a major principle of effective instruction with English language learners involves creating “opportunities for students to meaningfully and authentically apply their developing oral language and literacy skills.”37 These authors recommend encouraging English language learners to study authentic children’s literature, not just texts that have been chosen for promoting phonics or decoding skills, because such reading “ups the ante for active participation when compared to other types of reading instruction.”38

The more often English language learners are encouraged to talk about books, make notes and lists, brainstorm ideas, and talk about story ideas they are still developing, the more likely they are to be able to produce creative writing that is internally motivated and authentic.

Researchers have recommended several strategies that have demonstrably helped English language learners learn to write: interactive journals (in which both teacher and student converse in writing, and the teacher writes comments about the student’s written ideas), vocabulary lists, and early conferences with students (talking with children early on about their story ideas even before they have done much writing).39 Allen Koshewa wrote, “Working with English language learners, I found that conferring early on, even if a student has written only a few sentences, helps relieve some of the pressure they feel.”40 In a non-graded, pressure-free environment like the library, it’s possible that we can take advantage of our ability to remove even more of the intimidation that English language learners understandably feel about writing. The result is magical: a child learning the words she needs to express what she wants to express.

**TOOLS FOR YOU**

At the beginning of each chapter of this book, you will find an introduction to the Common Core State Standards that are promoted in that chapter’s lessons. Each lesson is organized around one or more featured books, with a detailed summary. I’ve included a Public Relations Blurb (hereafter PR Blurb) in each

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lesson for use in designing your publicity or your flyers. The PR Blurbs cite the specific Common Core State Standards used in each lesson and can be used as “talking points” to help you explain the program to interested parents or teachers. In the past, I had a very generic flyer that invited kids to come and write, but I’ve learned that parents want more information when deciding whether to bring their kids to a program. The PR Blurb will show you what I typically share with parents.

Each lesson provides all the handouts you will need—you can copy and distribute them to the kids. Some lessons have extra handouts intended to support English language learners. For many of the lessons, we created special blank books that can be downloaded from alaeditions.org/webextras, printed, and photocopied. Kids love coming to the library to “write books,” and they often show an intense motivation to fill every page. I usually create a sample book to model for them how easy and fun it is to fill those blank pages with their words and artwork. When they see what I’ve written, they are always more comfortable and confident about writing and sharing their writing. I strongly recommend this practice for anyone implementing these workshops, because when you create your own book, you get inside the mind of a child doing the workshop. It puts you in touch with your own inner child. Get to know that child, because that child is going to be your best advisor!

The structure of the workshops reflects my personal program planning style of mapping out blocks of time ranging from five to twenty minutes each. I like knowing that I have enough planned to fill an hour or an hour and a half. In each workshop, you will be teaching one or more lessons about language or literary devices. Parents are always happier when they see that at least one concrete fact or skill is being taught and modeled. Don’t stress about the lessons, though—just try to make them simple and engaging, using the tips I have included for eliciting kids’ active participation.

The supplies you will need for each program will vary somewhat, but for all the programs you will want to have either a whiteboard or flip chart pad, lots of tables and chairs for kids to write comfortably, and plenty of pencils, crayons, and markers. Any additional supplies you might need are listed at the beginning of the lesson.

**TAKING THE LEAP**

Perhaps you agree that more writing is needed in literacy programming, but you are still not ready to take the leap and start providing creative writing workshops for beginning readers. Librarians, you might have purchased this book to use it as a resource for the teachers you serve, but you may not think yourself ready to tackle the challenge of teaching this “active side of literacy.”41 My hope is that, after you see how fun and easy these writing programs are, your feelings will change. You’ll catch the creative writing bug and start trying
these suggestions as a way to encourage literacy. The results will be far-reaching, as you will watch kids of all backgrounds and abilities find new avenues for learning how to read, driven by their own desires and ideas. By giving kids more creative writing opportunities while they are still in the primary grades, we will create writers and readers who will be more likely to read proficiently by the third grade. We will improve the dismal statistics that show 68 percent of U.S. fourth graders not reading proficiently, because we will share with them the reading-writing connection—and we will start early on.⁴²

For many children, their teachers might be the only adults they know who have ever asked them to write anything or showed them that writing can be fun, satisfying, and empowering. I hope that, after librarians have read this book, children will be able to add librarians to that list.

NOTES
12. Ibid., 408–9.
16. Ibid.
24. Calkins, The Art of Teaching Writing, 47.
27. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 306.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.

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