

Crafting Writers K-6

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Crafting Writers K-6

Elizabeth Hale

Stenhouse Publishers
Portland, Maine



Stenhouse Publishers
www.stenhouse.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hale, Elizabeth, 1971–

Crafting writers, K–6 / Elizabeth Hale.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-57110-739-8 (alk. paper)

1. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Elementary)—United States. I. Title.

LB1576.H215 2008

372.62'3—dc22

2007041422

Cover, interior design, and typesetting by Martha Drury

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free, recycled paper

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
Lucy McCormick Calkins
who planted the seed

and to

Cheryl Watson-Harris
who helped it grow

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2: Specific Craft	7
CHAPTER 3: Gathering Craft	15
CHAPTER 4: Categories of Specific Craft	31
CHAPTER 5: Crafting with Punctuation	63
CHAPTER 6: Primary Writing	81
CHAPTER 7: Teaching Craft Lessons	95

CHAPTER 8: Researching Strengths in a Conference	119
CHAPTER 9: Researching Next Steps in a Conference	139
CHAPTER 10: Teaching the Conference	159
CHAPTER 11: Group Conferring and Other Management Techniques	185
CHAPTER 12: Assessment	201
Final Thoughts	211
Appendix A: Additional Mini-Lessons on Craft	213
Appendix B: Mini-Lessons for Independence in Memoir Writing	219
Appendix C: Mini-Lessons for Independence in Nonfiction Writing	225
Appendix D: Mini-Lessons for Independence in Poetry Writing	229
Appendix E: Forms for Researching Craft	233
Appendix F: Guided Practice in Researching Craft	237
Appendix G: List of Specific Craft Presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6	243
References	249
Index	251



Acknowledgments

To Lucy Calkins: Even though it has been years since I was your student, my appreciation for your instruction has never faded. You were the first to show me how my two passions of writing and teaching could come together in such a meaningful way. And to Cheryl Watson-Harris: Your leadership has been an inspiration to me since my very first year in Boston. You believed in me from the start and created opportunities that allowed me to grow professionally. Thank you for all that you have done for me and for the children of Boston.

To my two other principals, Suzanne Federspiel and Rosemary Harmon: I am so lucky to work with principals I respect immensely and whose company I enjoy so much. Your vision for children is inspiring and your support and trust in my work, so appreciated. To Ann Deveney, who hired me to give my first district-wide workshop in Boston: Thank you for that first opportunity to

work with teachers outside my school and for all your support thereafter. Thank you also to all the teachers in the Boston Public Schools who have taken my Introduction to Writing Workshop course: Your questions and conversations helped shape my thinking and my ability to better communicate the skills behind effective writing instruction and conferring.

Thank you to the Boston Athenaeum and the Calderwood Writing Initiative, whose generosity and support of teachers gave me a forum in which to begin this work in earnest. To the Calderwood family of teachers and writers, led by Judith Goldman: I can't think of a more positive, supportive, and enjoyable environment to make public the words and thoughts that would eventually become this book.

Annette Stavros and Sally Dias, thank you for being such advocates for me in the academic world and welcoming me into the Emmanuel College community. To my Literacy and Literacy Methods classes: I am so lucky to have such incredible students. Thank you for all your enthusiasm, and I look forward to hearing about your teaching careers.

Thank you to the teachers at the Tobin K-8, Farragut, and Thomas Kenny schools in Boston and Our Lady's School in Waltham who allowed me to use their students' writing in this book and whose teaching has been an integral part of my own growth: Eleanor Auerbach, Marian Bailey, Jessica Barry, Caitlin Gaffney, Michelle Gann, Vanessa Hargrove, Patricia Keyo, Iris Escoto, Maria Duarte, Judy Norton, Marilyn Pastor, Anna Rosa, and Rosa Verdu. A special thanks to Michelle Gulla: Collaborating with you these last few years has been such a pleasure and an asset to my own growth. I also give a special thank-you to Eli Jeremie: You are such a wonderful teacher and person, and your never-ending support for me has been irreplaceable. To Dee Watson and Helen Cooper, thank you for all your support during my first year of teaching in Boston. Your advice and encouragement that helped me get to my second year has not been forgotten.

Thank you to Thomas Payzant, former superintendent of Boston Public Schools, for your dedication to the district, both in years and quality of work. I am particularly appreciative that your support of writing workshop and its ability to affect students' enthusiasm for writing has never wavered. Thank you also to Mayor Thomas Menino for your many years of service and your dedication to the Boston schools.

To my editor, Bill Varner: I honestly can't imagine having a better experience writing a first book. Working with you has been a true pleasure, and I am grateful for all your advice that helped shape this book. I am also grateful to the wonderful team at Stenhouse, including Erin Trainer, Jay Kilburn, and Doug Kolmar, who supported this book from different angles. To Beth Lothrop and Peggy Sherman: You were both key in moving the process of this book along in the beginning, and I am grateful for your assistance.

Jacquelyn Judge, you have supported me so much from the very start, when this book was just a proposal. I'm grateful for your time, your laughter, and your friendship. To Connie Jacquays and Dyan Smiley: Your friendship, both in and out of the literacy world, has been an important part of my life in Boston. To Jean Marie Liggio, who has seen me through the highs and lows of life, and has been there for me no matter what: Your friendship is a blessing.

To Xavier Rozas: I don't think this book would have been nearly as enjoyable to write without you in my life. Hours of writing always seemed easier when I knew you were at the end of my day.

To Olivia and Joseph Landino: You have been such a gift to our family. I can't wait to see what you will write some day. To Tony Landino: It's been such a pleasure to welcome you into our family. And to Chrissy, my twin sister, my best friend: Thank you for a lifetime of friendship in which mutual admiration and laughter just seems to keep growing. Your unwavering support and love bigger than life means everything to me.

To my mom and dad, Sandy and Stan Hale: I'm not sure if "thank you" quite covers what a parent can make possible for their children, but thank you for everything. For the childhood that really was, for the opportunities in my life that are not always givens, and for the encouragement of my happiness, regardless of what avenues in life I chose to pursue.

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CHAPTER

1

Introduction

At a recent birthday dinner, I realized I had two types of friends. Six of us had met at a new restaurant and we all ordered the special appetizer—butternut squash soup. This soup was so good that, after only a few spoonfuls, we started talking about making it ourselves. Dara doubted that the restaurant would give us the recipe. Tim shook his head and said there was no need for that. He then proceeded to list off the possible ingredients—onion, chicken stock, butternut squash, apples, nutmeg, cinnamon—and, after a few minutes of puzzlement, Tim and I both realized the secret ingredient might be orange juice or perhaps orange zest. As I looked at the faces around the table of six, I realized that three of us were nodding in agreement with each ingredient he listed. The other three looked at us with something between confusion and amazement. “How do you know that?” Dara asked.

“I’m not sure,” Tim replied with a shrug. “I guess I can just tell.”

As a literacy staff developer in Boston, I have seen an important connection between what I saw at dinner that night and the teaching of writing. Just as all six of us could recognize that the soup was “delicious” and “flavorful,” most people can recognize when writing has “voice” and “lots of details.” Only some of us, however, can look at a page of writing with the same degree of confidence and identify the craft an author has used to give the writing voice or lots of detail. It might be no surprise that Tim and I love to cook, whereas some of my friends at the table rely more on takeout and restaurants for dinner. It is not that Tim could “just tell” as if by magic. He had experience putting different, specific ingredients together in order to create “flavorful” soups.

Both cooking and writing are considered to be an art and a science. There are basic rules to each but also a tremendous amount of room for individual choices. When I cook, sometimes I am more scientific, like when I follow a recipe from a cookbook for the first time. At other times I don’t measure anything and decide what ingredients to add as I go along, pulling from dishes I’ve learned from my mother, dishes I’ve eaten at restaurants, and the more inexplicable facet of intuition. The writing process is also full of countless choices, which leads to products unique as the person creating them. And we wouldn’t want it any other way. Imagine going to bookstores where the books have different jackets and plots but are all written in the same style. That’s like going to different restaurants, ordering chocolate cake for dessert, and even though it might be served in different shapes, having it taste exactly the same. The artistic side of both cooking and writing is integral to our enjoyment of them.

In schools, however, writing is also an academic subject, a long-standing member of the three Rs—reading, writing, and arithmetic. Until recently, the presence of writing in schools has far out-favored the more scientific side of this art and science. Spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence diagramming, handwriting, and all the predictable rules of the English language have tended to be the major emphasis of writing instruction and assessments. And, until recently, not knowing a lot about the craft of writing has not been all that problematic. It certainly does not affect how much we can enjoy literature, whether we are teachers or not, and it has never stopped society from producing prolific writers whose books line the shelves of bookstores and libraries.

But now, many teachers at the elementary and middle school levels are being expected to teach the craft of writing—the more artistic side of this art and science. Although this is absolutely a positive shift in education, it has also been challenging for many teachers. This transition seems to have been less of a challenge in the primary grades simply because primary students are learning to craft writing in more scientific ways. Even though there is room for individual expression through both word choice and drawing, a good deal of instruction falls under the rules of writing: letter formation, spacing, making a

sentence, letter to sound relationships, and inventive spelling as well as conventional spelling of irregular words. As students need less instruction on *how* to write, there is more room for instruction on how to write *well*. Fortunately, educators recently started to validate the fact that if effective writing is about the words that are used and the way they are put together, then we need to move beyond just teaching the rules of grammar and the rules of mechanics.

Most people would agree with the notion that writing on your own outside of class time, even if it's once in a while, will greatly benefit your own instruction. Writing can be a powerful way to process ideas, reflections, and thoughts, whether one teaches others or not. Teachers who don't see themselves writing at home can still create a writer's notebook with a few entries from each genre to use for instruction. Having a notebook makes a public statement that writing is something adults do on their own: it's not just something done in school. It also makes a tremendous difference to students, whether they say so or not, that we are willing to put parts of our own lives on paper just as we are asking them to do.

While I support the concept that writing outside of class time is desirable, I also believe it is not necessary to write on a consistent basis in order to teach it well. Nor is it realistic or even fair to expect that all teachers, especially elementary school teachers who are responsible for teaching at least three or four other subjects besides writing, should have to write in their spare time. What I do believe is that if the expectation of what we teach students about writing is changing, then so should our preparation. If we are to teach the craft of writing to students, and not just mechanics and spelling, most of us cannot rely solely on our own histories of writing instruction.

Teachers have a valid reason, of course, for not automatically having a ready knowledge of craft. Very rarely, if ever, did we receive instruction in writing. Most of us just got writing assignments and handed them in. We might have received a grade or a smiley face. We even might have received feedback on our mechanics and grammar or comments such as "very nice" or "vague" scribbled in the margin. But when did we ever get actual instruction, either in whole-class lessons or individually, on how to improve the craft and style of our writing? In addition, anyone who went on to become a teacher and study pedagogy did not receive much support about the teaching of writing. Most teacher preparation programs, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, have been rife with instruction about reading acquisition and how to teach reading. Most programs also address how to teach writing in the primary grades—how to support letter and word development as well as sentence structure through interactive and shared writing. But it seems that very few teacher preparation programs have offered as much guidance on how to teach children in the upper elementary grades to write well.

The fact that I came from a writing background, combined with the fact that I studied under Lucy Calkins, who did focus on upper elementary writing

as much as primary writing, meant I had an advantage going into my first teaching job. There were other subject matters I struggled with that first year, but writing was not one of them. This didn't mean I was very good at that point—I still had a lot of growing to do—but because of my previous experiences, I started with a solid foundation and, perhaps more importantly, I was comfortable teaching writing. At the time, I probably couldn't explain very well what made me good at teaching writing, but it didn't really matter. My job was to teach my twenty-eight students, and that's what I did.

When I became a staff developer, however, the nature of my job changed. My job no longer was to help students write well but to help teachers find ways to refine and improve their writing instruction. When I started to teach district-wide workshops on writing workshop in Boston, the same expectations held true. It didn't matter how good or comfortable I personally felt when I conferred with students or planned and taught lessons for writing workshop. What mattered now was how I could help others become more comfortable and independent with teaching writing. This independence is particularly needed for conferring, where the very nature of on-the-spot assessment directly followed by teaching excludes the immediate use of support materials. Teachers can use professional literature to plan lessons and learn more about conferring, but once the conference starts, teachers have to rely on themselves and what they know about writing in that moment. In my workshops, I could show teachers a video of a great conference or describe successful conferences I've had and show samples of improved student writing, but I kept hearing the same question from teachers: "This all makes sense, but when I go back to my classroom, how do I know what to teach?"

I realized I was giving teachers a lot of information about how to go about *doing* a conference, but somehow that wasn't enough. So, rather than spend time primarily on the structure of a conference, I shifted and tried to share the skills behind conferring. I tried to figure out what went on in my mind that helped me notice craft in many different levels of writing and how I made the more craft-like aspects of writing, such as description and sentence fluency, more tangible for students. Although conversation with students was and is part of my research during a conference, this is not where I dug deeper. I was probably not much better than a lot of other teachers when it came to talking with students about their writing. I knew it was what I could see in the writing itself that made me feel more comfortable in conferences, especially with students who were writing below grade level.

As the goal of my instruction shifted, so did the content of my workshops for teachers. I no longer jumped into the stages of a conference or the structure of a mini-lesson. Before we got to the teaching of craft, teachers spent time looking at and studying writing in a step-by-step process. I emphasized getting to know specific craft, not just general concepts, that support the ability to write well. Teachers could then go back to their classrooms and give stu-

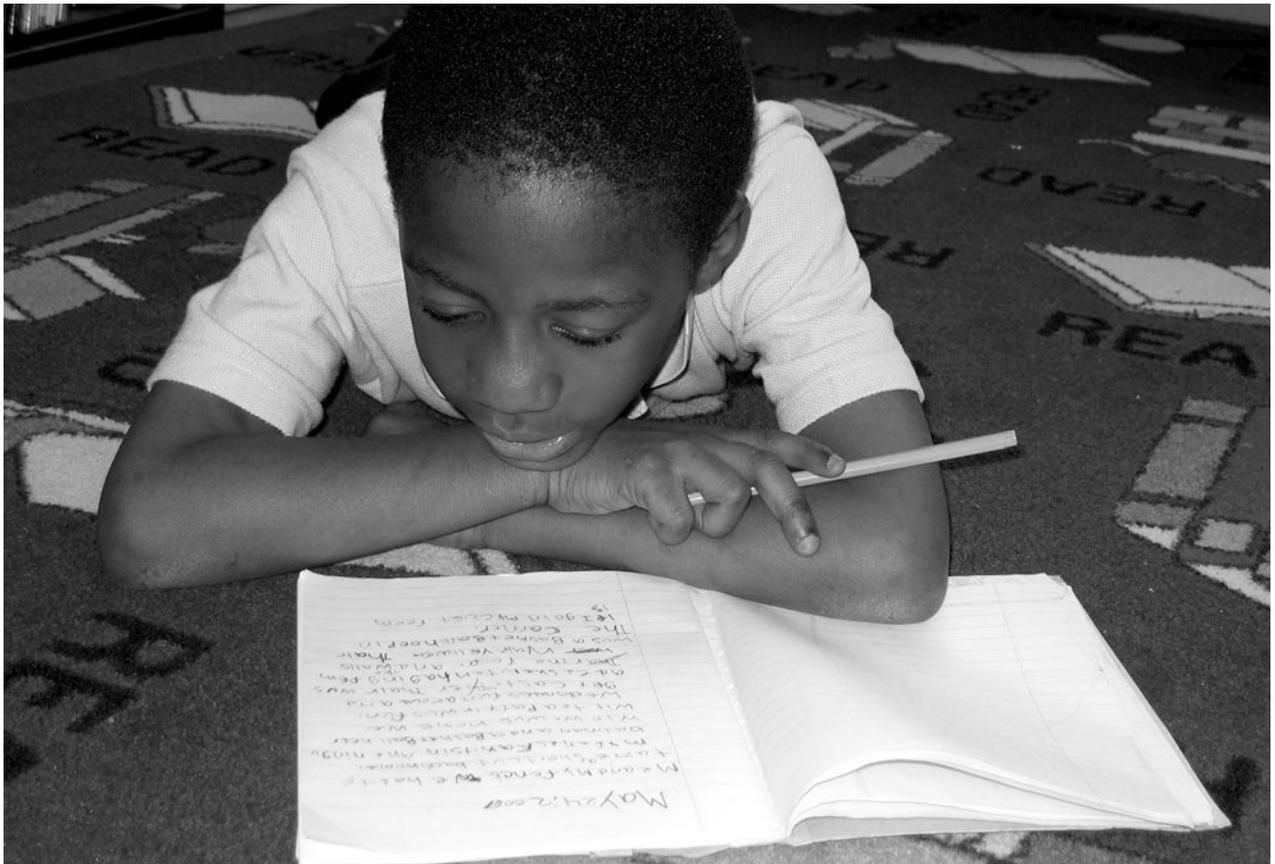
dents tangible, attainable craft lessons to help them reach the larger goals of voice and descriptive writing. Our study of writing also gave teachers a concrete process for noticing craft so they could continue to notice and gather ideas for craft lessons on their own. I wasn't asking teachers in these workshops to become writers or to develop an expertise in writing, but I was asking them to take time to become more familiar with the smaller craft skills behind writing.

For this reason, *Crafting Writers* begins by looking at the art of writing itself. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce readers to specific craft and a process for noticing craft in writing. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 offer many specific writing techniques that relate to different categories of craft such as word choice and sentence variety.

Chapter 7 moves from the art of writing to the teaching of writing and offers strategies for teaching craft in whole-class lessons. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 look at teaching craft in one-on-one conferences and demonstrate how knowing many specific craft techniques can help teachers see strengths and possible next steps in all levels of writing.

The last two chapters look at aspects of writing workshop that support overall instruction: the management of conferences, group conferences, and using rubrics to assess writing.

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CHAPTER

2

Specific Craft

One of my first lessons about teaching was not in a classroom but a pool. I worked as a lifeguard on the weekends the summer after my junior year in college. The Columbia University pool is in an immense room, several floors below the main entrance, without a single window. Because I was there to make sure no one drowned, I wasn't allowed to read or do homework while on duty. It might be no surprise that I spent most of my time watching people swim. It was easy to recognize the good swimmers and notice how smoothly they moved through the water. I didn't grow up as a swimmer myself, but watching some of the more experienced swimmers, with their amazing combination of power and grace, made me want to get better at this sport. Just watching them, of course, would only get me so far. I knew I needed help.

Luckily, my friend Chris Tessin was on the Columbia swim team and agreed to give me lessons over the summer.

From the first day of these informal lessons, Chris always taught me specific techniques. After watching me swim a few laps, he told me that the first thing I needed to work on was breathing on both sides when I swam. I also had to work on keeping my head lower in the water. After I got better at those skills, Chris taught me specific techniques to help me improve my arm stroke. First I had to roll my shoulders more. Then Chris taught me how to keep my elbows higher, and later on in the summer, he taught me how to keep my arm movements symmetrical. Whether he was teaching me about my breathing, my arms, or my kicking, he always gave me specific teaching points.

In order for me to improve, it was essential that Chris's suggestions were specific. I would not get very far with Chris just telling me, "Make your arm stroke smoother," even if that was my eventual goal. In order to make significant improvement, I needed someone to name the small skills that would *add up* to a smooth arm stroke. The same is true in writing. Teachers can tell students as many times as they want that their writing needs more voice or description. But these are not next steps. Much like "swimming smoothly" is an overall description of the desired final product, so are "writing with details" and "writing with voice," descriptions we hope will define our students' writing.

Another reason it was so important that Chris gave me specific teaching points is that it kept me accountable for practicing what he taught me. Any technique he introduced was specific enough that I could work on it when I swam by myself. I could make myself accountable for rolling my shoulder or keeping my elbow up. But if he had told me to practice making my arm stroke smoother, how would I hold myself accountable for that? He even could have modeled it for me, but the fact is, I couldn't just leap from swimming my way to swimming like him. There were too many small skills that went into the final product.

As long as we give students general next steps in writing, they will have a hard time holding themselves accountable when they go back to their desks and write on their own. Even though "adding more details" may be an accurate assessment of a student's writing needs and describes what we want him or her to do, it is not a next step.

This is not to say that discussing the concept of voice or helping students recognize descriptive details is not helpful or important. We want students to be aware of their goal, and any exposure to or conversation about good writing is beneficial. But instruction that supports recognition of descriptive writing should be purposefully different from instruction that helps students write descriptively themselves.

Let's first look at some common ways teachers try to help students write with more description.