

The Writer's Notebook: Sowing the Seeds of Written Composition

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*"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others:
read a lot and write a lot"*
(King, 2002, p. 145)

Inquiry Question:

How might a writer's notebook help adult writers reconnect with writing seeds from their life that they could grow into meaningful compositions?

Resource:

Buckner, A. (2005). *Notebook know-how: Strategies for the writer's notebook*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Learning Objectives:

- In this lesson, you will try out several "seed story" strategies designed to bring up memories from your life.
- In this lesson, you will organize your writer's notebook in a way that works for you.
- In this lesson, you will practice generating ideas, writing fluently, talking through compositions, and revising your work.

CCSS ELA-4th grade Writing Standards

- W.4.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience
- W.4.5: With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising and editing.

Background: When I was last in the elementary classroom, I found the writer's notebook to be an essential tool to my writing instruction and my students' development as writers. *Notebook Know-how* by Aimee Buckner taught me almost everything I still know and use when it comes to writers' notebooks, and I've used her strategies extensively with good success, as I've taught both children and adults. Today's lesson will be an accelerated one with multiple strategies; with students, I would spread these strategies out across a week or even two and provide a lot more time for generating ideas through talk than I do in today's lesson.

These strategies are best suited to establishing the notebook as an essential tool, helping writers know how to organize it, and "seeding" the notebook with ideas so that students have lots of fodder for stories.

Some Key Points & Strategies I'm Sharing:

1. **Clock Partners:** Give every student a clock. Have students follow these directions: When you find an empty slot, write THE OTHER PERSON'S name in the time slot on

your clock and make sure they write YOUR name in the same time slot on their clock. Paste this into the front or back cover of the writer's notebook for future use. It will be a very valuable tool for organizing talk in your classroom.

2. Organizing the Notebook:

- a. Front to back: daily, self-selected topics, writing on the left-hand side of the page only (right-hand side is for Try-Its)
- b. Back to front: notes from lessons, ie revision, editing, grammar notes (or model inquiry lesson notes!)

3. Biobags:

- a. Start on a fresh page in your notebook, titled "Biobags" and the date
- b. Draw a large container or bag.
- c. Brainstorm all the books/titles that have had a formative influence on your life. Think birth 'til now!
- d. Turn to the person on one side of you to share.
- e. Which ones have a story living in them?

4. Writing from a List:

- a. New, fresh page, titled "Writing from a list" and the date
- b. Ten best things that have ever happened to you.
- c. Ten worst things that have ever happened to you.
- d. Turn to the person on the other side of you and share one idea from your list.

5. Neighborhood Maps:

- a. New, fresh page, titled "Neighborhood Maps" and date
- b. Don't worry if you're not an artist! Draw a map of your childhood neighborhood, as best as you can remember. Put a star where there are stories to be told.
- c. Provide time for writers to share a story from their map and begin writing on it.

6. Try Its: A structure provided by Buckner for students to revisit starts in their notebook and "play" with their writing to improve it in some way. Generally, Try-it's go on the page opposite the start, so that everything is together in one place.

7. Try five:

- a. The "try five" strategy is a great way to brainstorm starts to a story.
- b. Go to a story you've started and on the opposite page (the right hand side of your notebook), write "Try it: Try Five"
- c. See if you can generate five different starts to the story. Think about using dialogue, a question, jumping right into the action, or starting with the end of the story. These are just suggestions.

Helpful chapters about revision in the *Breakthroughs Book*:

- *"Quoc Tin and Sona: The Story of a Peer Journal Project"* by Myron Berkman
- *"I Was a Journal-Topic Junkie"* by Anna Collins Trest
- *"Teacherless Talk: Impressions from Electronic Literacy Conversations"* by Elaine Ware and Karen Murar
- *"Romance in the Classroom: Inviting Discourse on Gender and Power"* by Diane Waff