

Guided Writing

by Lisa Frase

Most teachers are familiar with working with small groups of students through guided reading. Recently a number of teachers have adopted the concept for math. Working with small groups is not a new idea, but how many teachers apply it to writing?

Guided writing allows a teacher to work closely with a small group of students based on a common need. During a guided writing lesson, a teacher might gather a small group and model writing, or maybe they will complete a shared writing experience together. Guided writing lessons give teachers the opportunity to bring together students who are struggling with similar skills for a mini-lesson, or a re-teaching session.

Guided writing, like guided reading and guided math, takes students where they begin and helps them grow as writers. Guided writing affords a chance to model peer critiquing by turning the small group into a critique circle. The possibilities are endless, and the best part is guided writing fits neatly into writing workshop.

During writing workshop the teacher spends time conferencing with each student individually. Many teachers become frustrated with long lines of children wanting their attention. Everyone wants their turn, and there is only one of you. The writing portion of writing workshop needs to be organized in such a way the teacher is able to spend quality time with students without feeling as if they are being pulled in ten different directions at once.

Begin by setting up individual conference baskets. Students who are ready for a conference place their piece in the basket, and go back to their desk to work on a different piece. Take a little time each day to quickly read through papers and make sticky notes for conference discussions. Stick to the idea of two stars and a wish: two

stars represent two good things you find in their paper, and a wish is one thing to go back and make improvements on. This technique keeps matters simple, doesn't overwhelm students, and can be taught to students for peer critiquing.

During writing workshop, spend half of your time in one-on-one conferencing, and the other half in a guided writing lesson. Establish a ground rule that if a student wants or needs a conference they should place their paper in the basket. They should expect to wait until the following day for their turn. In the meantime, they should work on another piece. Keep a conference checklist to make sure you are visiting with each student once or twice a week.

Prior to your guided writing session, quickly make the rounds, and check to determine each student is on task. Prior to beginning individual conferences and guided writing, train your students to form peer critique groups. They can help each other while you work with a small group. Do not allow students to interrupt your lesson unless it is a true emergency. Deal with off task behaviors after the session.

You can pull groups together for a number of reasons. Perhaps you have a group of struggling writers who can't put two sentences together. You might have a group of students who need a boost to get their writing over the top. After assessing your student's writing, you might find a small group who continuously write the word "l" in lowercase. This is your opportunity for a quick mini-lesson with a small, flexible group.

Don't feel the need to rotate groups. Select students based on a common need. Meet with one or two groups during each writing workshop session. Try to include every student in a guided writing group at least once every couple of weeks. Your talented writers need special attention as well. They may benefit from learning a new writing technique the rest of the class isn't ready to tackle yet.

You will find when you organize your time and readily prepare your students, your writing workshop time will become more productive. The small group creates a

focused intensity lacking in a whole class lesson, or even quick one-on-one conferences. This is a time to write and share together. Think of guided writing as “breakout” sessions. This is your chance to differentiate and meet individual needs. It also creates a tighter writing community within your classroom as students learn to listen and share their writing. Guided writing is one way of bringing together students with a common need for a shared writing experience.