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Introduction

No matter what writing program you use in your classroom, the ultimate goal is to get kids to write. Well-established rules and routines keep most of your students on task most of the time. But during the course of every school year, there will come a time when you are faced with the daunting task of inspiring a room full of highly unmotivated writers. Think about the day of the class Halloween party, the week before winter break, the period after a school assembly, the class interrupted by a fire drill, the day after students hand in a long-term writing project, the first snowfall, the first really warm day, and the entire last month of school. At those times you know it's going to take more than a five-paragraph-essay prompt to get kids writing. That's where this collection comes in handy! With 28 innovative, easy-to-implement writing activities that can be modified to fit your students' abilities, your time constraints, and your school environment, this guide is the cure for the common writer's block.

Make This Book Work for You

Even the best writing programs can use a bit of shaking up from time to time. This collection is designed not as a stand-alone writing program, but as a resource to turn to when your regular writing program needs an energy boost. Read the following prescriptions to find a cure for your class's specific writer's block symptoms.

- ⇒ **Take regularly to treat boredom.** You've noticed that many of your students struggle to come up with topic ideas, their essay openings are snoozers, and their fiction is uninspired. Just like all skills, creative thinking requires practice. Read through the ideas in this book and highlight the ones that are practical and workable for your class. Schedule them into your curriculum at regular intervals (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) to give students practice seeing the world in new ways, thinking outside the textbook, and writing with abandon.
- ⇒ **Supplement Friday fun writes.** Fridays, even those without holiday parties or early dismissals, test students' attention spans. Why fight human nature? Make every Friday a fun day in writing. Implement an activity from this collection and turn your formerly unproductive Fridays into periods of creative-thinking calisthenics that stretch students' writing in new directions.
- ⇒ **Prevent system overload.** You've just collected the final drafts of the persuasive essays your students have worked on for the past three weeks. The students feel relieved and proud of their accomplishments, but they aren't exactly geared up to start the next unit. (And sometimes, neither are you.) The period needn't be a waste. Use an idea from this book to take advantage of the class's celebratory mood and keep them writing.
- ⇒ **Channel energy into writing.** Most teachers feel a twinge of dread at the prospect of motivating their students to stay on task before a holiday party, after a school assembly, before a long break, after a field trip, and during the entire month of May. These are the times when students are the most energetic, but the least inspired to put pencil to paper. Implement fun, active ideas from this book to channel that energy into writing and "hold down the fort" until normal routines resume.

Introduction *(cont.)*

Set Up Your Writing Class for Success

Few subjects test classroom-management skills more than writing. To take a blank page and fill it with words that originated as abstract ideas inside the mind can be downright difficult. Now, imagine what that tall order feels like to students who don't think they are any good at writing, who struggle to recall basic words and spell them correctly, who haven't been exposed to good writing outside the classroom. What about for those who are distracted by a bully or face serious problems at home? When you think about how your students feel as they face that blank page, it's easier to understand why they chatter when it's time to write and why they make paper airplanes instead of making progress on essays. That doesn't mean you have to accept poor behavior, though; it just means you have to set your writing class up for success with some simple strategies.

- ⇒ **Stock up on supplies that will inspire writing.** Set up a Writing Center in your classroom and stock it with tools for writing. Collect a variety of papers, notepads, envelopes, manila folders, pencils, pens, highlighters, and special markers. Add some correction ink, paper clips, tape, hole punches, and staplers for students to use. Stickers, yarn, and stamps are fun extras for “publishing” finished pieces. Store dictionaries, thesauruses, and other writing tools in the same area. Keep an Idea Box nearby for students to look through for inspiration. Give students ownership of the Writing Center by making them responsible for keeping the supplies organized and in good condition. As the year progresses, ask students for input when it's time to replace or add new supplies.

In addition to the supplies in the Writing Center, each student should have his or her own Writer's Notebook to keep with them at all times. Print out fun labels and invite students to decorate the covers to make them unique. It's amazing how a few stickers can create an attachment between a student and a spiral notebook. Students can keep ideas, first drafts, journal entries, and assignments from this book in their notebooks.

- ⇒ **Make “I don't know what to write,” a forbidden phrase.** Spend the first few days of your writing class planning for writing. Explain that the best writing comes from writing about what you know. Have students make list after list of ideas from their own lives that they could write about throughout the year. Then, tell them to keep the lists in their Writer's Notebooks to reference whenever they need a topic idea. Make it clear that you never want to hear the words “I don't know what to write.” Here are some lists to start with:

✍ My favorite/least favorite things

✍ My hobbies, interests, and talents

✍ My good/bad memories

✍ My goals for the future

Now that your students are equipped with a wide variety of ideas for topics, it might be time for you to expand your definition of what constitutes writing. The five-paragraph essay, while extremely important, is not the only way for students to improve their writing skills. Any piece of writing—a poem, a song, a play, an advertisement, a letter written in code, a newspaper article, a secret file, a poster, a diary, a radio broadcast, a brochure, a dialogue, a comic book, an e-mail—can be great practice and great fun. As you plan your writing lessons, think about using new genres of writing to teach the same basic craft lessons, grammar skills, and convention rules.

Introduction *(cont.)*

Set Up Your Writing Class for Success *(cont.)*

- ⇒ **Set high expectations and stick to them.** Writing time will be silent. Writers have a choice during writing time—to brainstorm, to pre-write, to draft, to edit, to revise, to proofread, or to publish writing . . . and that’s it. Clear expectations like those are designed to help all students do their best work. Make sure you follow through with swift consequences when students make poor choices. This shows students from the start that you take writing time seriously and that you expect them to do the same.

This doesn’t mean your writing classroom will always be silent. Give students a chance to get excited about writing. Brainstorm topics together, allow time for sharing ideas, put students on stage to celebrate writing successes, and use the exciting lessons from this book to build enthusiasm for writing. But, when it’s time to put pencils to paper, your classroom should be a place where writers can write.

- ⇒ **Create a culture that protects risk takers.** Writing is risky business. When students put their innermost thoughts and ideas down on paper, they are really putting themselves out there. The activities in this book encourage risky writing. Make sure you create a classroom culture where students feel safe taking those risks.

Start by putting yourself out there. Model real-life writing for your students. Write-aloud a thank-you note to a friend, ask students for input on a scrapbook page you’re making, etc. This will show students that writing is challenging for you, too, and provide reassurance when they struggle.

Another way to make your class a safe zone is to teach students how to respect each other’s work. Don’t just tell kids to respect each other, because they don’t really know how. You must make the difference between constructive criticism and cruelty explicit. Role-play scenarios together, showing how not to talk about people’s work, as well as how to talk about writing. Brainstorm a list of words never to use when talking about another person’s writing. Post the list and refer to it often.

Finally, praise all kinds of writing achievements every day, not just the ideal essay with no spelling errors. Get excited about a title a student comes up with, cheer for a finally finished first paragraph, share (with student permission, of course) funny character names from a short story, read aloud a unique description, “ooh” and “ahh” over the illustrations in a student-created comic book. In short, make sure every student, even those who struggle with traditional writing, feels successful in your class.

- ⇒ **Don’t forget the books!** Have you ever noticed that most good writers are also avid readers? It just makes sense that the more good writing you read, the better equipped you’ll be to recognize and produce good writing yourself. This is not copying or plagiarism; it’s imitation, and that’s how we all learn. So, don’t isolate literature in reading class. Bring picture books, novels, newspaper articles, plays, menus, travel brochures, and other examples of good writing into your writing class. If you’re teaching comma rules, have students search for examples of the rules at work in novels. If you’re teaching persuasive writing, have students read magazine advertisements. If you’re teaching dialogue writing, have students listen to conversations from a book on tape. Authentic texts will help young writers develop a better grasp of the skills you’re teaching every day in class.

Introduction *(cont.)*

Think About Assessment

Assessing writing is very different from grading a math paper. There's no answer key and no numbered answers to check wrong. It's subjective, it's time-consuming, and it can be overwhelming. Here are some ideas to make assessment more manageable.

- **Consider the steps of the writing process.** Brainstorm, pre-write, draft, edit, revise, proofread, and publish—those are the steps in the writing process, and it's unrealistic to expect every writing assignment to pass through every step. Set a goal to take just a few assignments per quarter through the entire writing process. Then, give yourself and your students permission not to publish everything. If you can let go of revising every piece, your students will spend much more time actually writing. The more they write, the better they will get at writing.

Many of the activities in this book are designed to be writing exercises, fun activities that stretch students' skills in new directions. As such, most activities fall into the brainstorming, pre-writing, and drafting stages. Differentiation tips for each activity offer suggestions about how to extend the lessons to the publishing stage.

- **You don't have to grade everything.** Imagine a little boy learning to ride a bicycle. Every time he falters, his parents shout out the letter grade "F!" If students are graded harshly the first time they write a persuasive essay or a haiku, will they be excited about trying again? Consider holding back a score or letter grade until students have had a few chances to practice a new skill. After that third or fourth practice, assess students' learning informally through observation, editing conferences, simple checklists, and student self-assessments. Reproducibles have been included on pages 76–77 for your convenience.

- **Sharpen your focus.** Focusing on a few important skills can make assessment much less overwhelming for you and your students. Before implementing a lesson, select three to five important skills you want students to focus on. For example, you might decide to assess a narrative essay based on the quality of the lead, the use of transitions, subject-verb agreement, and end punctuation. Use the "Focus on Five Rubric" on page 78 to help you do this, and be sure to let your students know up front how you will be assessing their work. Then, as you read students' essays, ignore other errors. (You may wish to circle misspelled words, but don't make them part of the final score.) Focus only on what you decided ahead of time to assess.

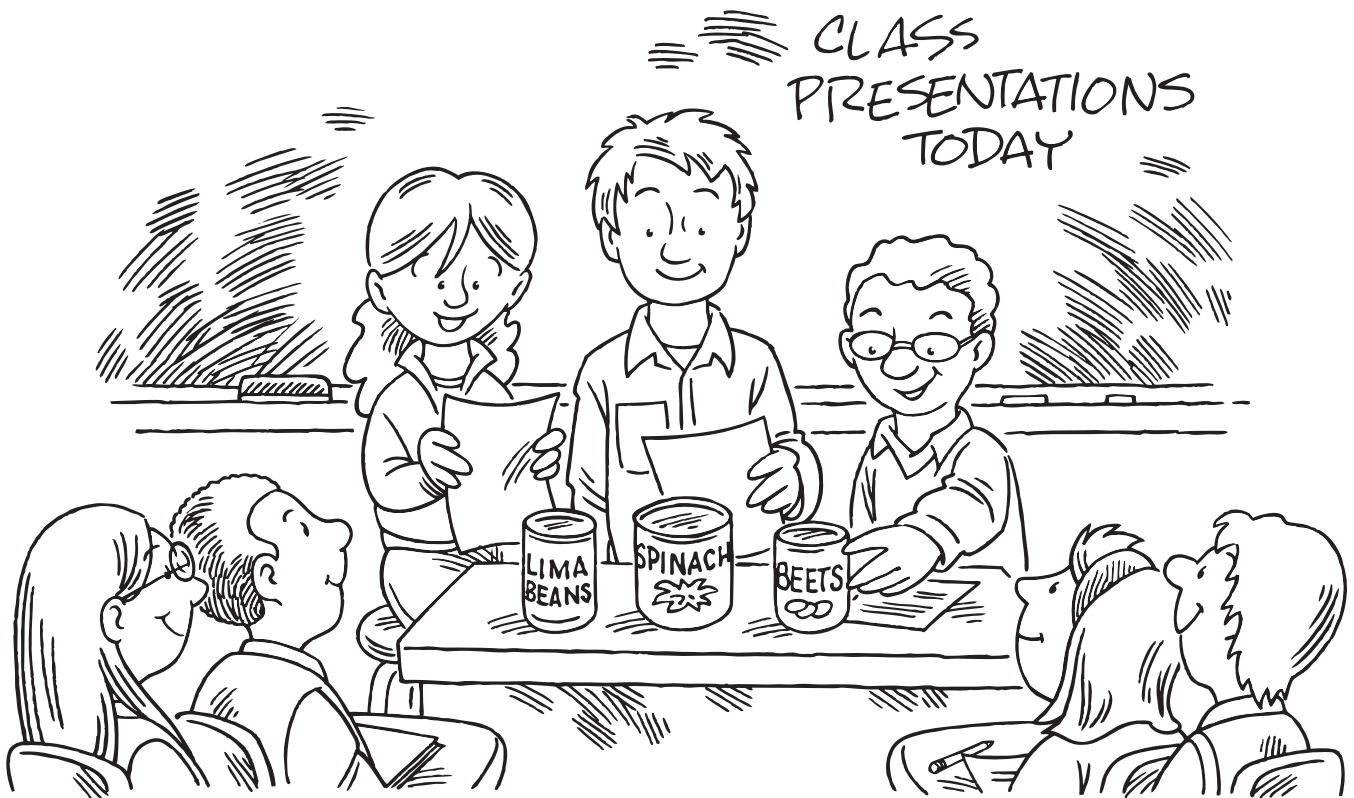
If you choose this approach, make sure your students and their parents understand that proper spelling and correct grammar are always important in your classroom. Explain that at certain times you will be looking especially closely to make sure they have mastered specific skills. As the year progresses, raise the bar on your expectations and let your assessments reflect that.

- **Use a rubric.** The best time to choose or create a rubric for grading writing is before you teach the lesson. Set your standards for the final product, gear your teaching to those standards, and share the rubric with students so they know exactly what to expect. This will add some time to your lesson preparation, but it will save you time when grading papers. Rubrics remove much of the subjectivity inherent in writing grades by setting clear expectations. They also speed up the grading process by helping you focus on a few important elements as you read. See pages 78–80 for several rubrics.

Get Up!

**MOVE THE BODY,
SPARK THE IMAGINATION.**

There are some days when you know that motivating your students to write will be a losing battle. An upcoming field trip, a school assembly, or a holiday party has the kids all hyped up. Don't try to squelch that energy—channel it into writing! This chapter is filled with lessons and games that encourage movement and a change of pace—just what the doctor ordered to keep your class on track when your schedule is derailed.



Send Spy Kids on a Mission



In a Nutshell

Kids love the idea of being spies. Take advantage of their enthusiasm by turning “spying” into a pre-writing mission. Like writers who keep notebooks to record descriptions of real-life characters, snippets of overheard conversations, and other observations of daily life, students can gather interesting **details** for their stories just by **observing and listening**. Practicing those skills becomes a lot more exciting when you call it “spying.”

Plan Ahead

- ✍️ Request permission and/or notify colleagues about the activity you have planned.
- ✍️ Reproduce 1 class set of Mission Log worksheets (page 20) and 1 class set of Story Map worksheets (page 21).
- ✍️ Reproduce 1 Sample Mission Log (page 22) and 1 Sample Story Map (page 23) as overhead transparencies for teacher use.

How It Works

Pick several locations where small groups of your students could “spy on” other students. This activity is especially fun when students can observe much younger children rather than their peers. They enjoy hearing the funny things little kids say and will have fewer opportunities for gossip and malicious teasing. When giving instructions, be sure to note that public places are appropriate for the activity but that places where people expect privacy are not. For example, bathrooms and school offices are off limits, but the lunchroom and the playground are perfect for gathering good information. With permission, gym classes, art classes, and science labs work well.

Spies should avoid interaction with their subjects. Their mission is to watch and listen carefully, recording descriptions and dialogue on the Mission Log worksheet (page 20). Encourage spies to watch and listen for funny or strange remarks, events, and details. Remind students that secrecy is important, so names should be left out of the log. Show an overhead transparency of the Sample Mission Log (page 22).

Set a time limit of 10–15 minutes for spying. When students return to the classroom, have them pair up and compare notes. Circulate and assist as they identify their most interesting observations. Show an overhead transparency of the Sample Story Map (page 23). Distribute the Story Map worksheets (page 21) for each student to complete.

Differentiation Tip

With quick-write activities, it is not necessary to take lessons through every step of the writing process. The goal of this lesson is for students to see how observations can inspire writing, so you can consider your mission accomplished when Story Maps are complete. If some students struggle to make the jump from the Mission Log to the Story Map, model your thought process with a “Think Aloud.” Read one volunteer’s observations, explain your thinking as you select the best tidbit, and begin filling out a Story Map on an overhead transparency. To extend the lesson, encourage students to write a short story based on the Story Map.

Mission Log

Property of Secret Agent _____

Code Name: _____



Unusual Events: _____

Suspicious Conversations: _____

Important Details: _____

Story Map

Property of Secret Agent _____

Code Name: _____

<p style="text-align: center;">Characters</p> <p>Who will star in the story?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Setting</p> <p>When and where will the story happen?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Plot</p> <p>What action will happen in the story?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Resolution</p> <p>How will the story end?</p>

Sample Mission Log

Unusual Events:

- first grade boy in striped T-shirt chases little girl with pigtails, tries to kiss her, little girl kicks little boy, boy tells teacher
- girls kick soccer ball over the fence into the street, teacher uses whistle to stop traffic to get ball

Suspicious Conversations:

- “I can fly,” one second-grade boy says to another. “You’re lying,” other boy answers. “I can too fly. You can ask my mom,” first boy says. “What’s her number? I’ll call her right now,” other boy says.
- “Glue tastes good,” second-grade girl tells her art teacher.

Important Details:

- little boy in striped T-shirt has shoes on wrong feet; pigtail girl has on red cowboy boots; soccer ball got run over by a bus and popped with a loud bang; teacher in street jumped when she heard the pop

Sample Story Map

<p style="text-align: center;">Characters</p> <p>Who will star in the story?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billy, a second-grader who finds out he can fly. He spends the story trying to prove he can fly, but his powers don't work all the time. • Sam, his best friend, who thinks he's lying. • Billy's mom • Mrs. Johnson, the boys' teacher 	<p style="text-align: center;">Setting</p> <p>When and where will the story happen?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly at Clark Kent Elementary School • Also at Billy's house
<p style="text-align: center;">Plot</p> <p>What action will happen in the story?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billy almost falls off jungle gym and finds out he can fly. • His classmates think he's lying. • He spends the story trying to prove he can fly, but his powers don't work all the time. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Resolution</p> <p>How will the story end?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A little girl starts to slip off the climbing wall, and Billy flies over to save her just before she hits the ground. • All Billy's classmates see him fly. • He learns that his powers only work when someone really needs help.