

Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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Tip #56: Writing on Demand

When I think of process writing, I usually associate it with huge amounts of time. Good teachers of writing are aware of the stages and allot significant time to each of the following: prewriting, rough draft writing, conferencing, revising, editing, and publishing. Often we spend even more time on the revision stage so students have ample opportunities to weave in the six traits. Now those of you who know me well are aware of my weakness for acronyms and mnemonics. Can I resist throwing another one at you? No way! So when you think about process writing, consider:

What to Write

Research and Develop

Initial Draft

Two Edits (content and mechanics)

Extend to Audience

(Source: The Learning Institute. Writing Success. Palo Alto, CA: Pitman Learning, Inc., 1982.)

But realistically, do writers always have the luxury of time on their side when they write? Not really. When I write an email correspondence, I usually have some kind of deadline which requires me to limit my writing process. When I interview for a job, I am often asked to complete a writing sample in addition to the formal questioning that takes

place. In both of these cases, I would love to have all of the time in the world and plenty of resources on which to rely. Because there are really two very different kinds of writing situations, I think it is important to give our students experiences with both. Writing on demand should be intentionally planned for and infused into your curriculum.

Many of us approach writing on demand through fast writes, quickwrites, timed writings, or whatever you choose to call them. Usually, this kind of writing on demand is a 5-minute exercise with a low stakes feeling. When completed, we share these mini-writings in groups asking students to respond to the content only.

An increasingly more difficult writing on demand task should be considered, too. After all, the Benchmark test requires students to write on demand with pre-assigned topics. Yes, the Benchmark test is untimed but requires all the steps of the writing process to take place within the same time frame of a period or a morning. Partners cannot give feedback. Dictionaries and thesauri are unavailable. The stakes are higher for students in this kind of situation. In fact, in high school the stakes are even more demanding when the writing test score determines whether students get a diploma or a certificate of attendance. Therefore, we should give our students experience with longer, writing on demand tasks.



Marcia Indahl (Hanshew Middle School) does this kind of writing periodically. She tells me that this is a mandatory assignment she uses prior to her student-led conferences. She wants students to write to a topic she has chosen in a half hour period in order to give parents a snapshot of writing without all of the teacher/parent/peer support available. Students attach a quick note to the writing sample that reads something like this:

Dear Mom,

Attached you will find an example of how I can write within a half-hour time limit. I did not have a choice on my topic, and I had to work by myself. It was kind of hard getting started, but I really like what I wrote and hope you do, too. I think I still need to work on my spelling. I did save time at the end so I could reread it. I checked for capitals and periods. I found myself using a lot of voice, but I forgot to think about word choice. I usually do that better when I have a longer time for a piece of writing. I think the next time I do something like this that I will jot down some ideas before I start to write.

Love,

Polly

Marcie tells me that her students perform beautifully on these kinds of assignments. She often receives better work than assignments that are done at home without any time restrictions. She believes this might be the case because a time constraint is given and students simply rise to the occasion understanding the accountability involved with the task.

Activity

This "What If?" writing assignment was just published in the April/May issue of *Writing!*.

Marcie brought it to my attention because she was using it for prompt ideas for writing on demand. [I am attaching it as a file](#) so that you can run it off easily for your students to use.



What If?

It's a game that all writers play: They start with reality – and ask what would happen if something were different. Exercise your writing muscles by writing about "what if?" situations. Take 30 minutes to choose one of the ideas below or create one of your own, plan your writing, and create a timed writing to practice for state exams. Remember to have an introduction, body, and conclusion. You may prewrite first – but give yourself enough time to finish.

What if...

- schools were cancelled for a whole week because five feet of snow fell over two days?
- beings from Mars arrived in your school cafeteria to do scientific tests on the meat loaf?
- average U.S. temperatures increased or decreased by 20 degrees year-round?
- scientists determined that chocolate is health food?
- people no longer needed to sleep?
- you could change ONE thing about yourself forever?
- your pet developed the power of speech?
- the person you secretly love suddenly expressed undying love for you?
- a person you most definitely do not love suddenly expressed undying love for you?
- just by thinking about it, you could determine the outcome of any sporting event?
- time started going backwards?
- time started going faster?
- it were always raining?
- you could choose to live forever by pushing a button on your computer keyboard?
- you could learn anything in your sleep?
- you _____ ?