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Teaching
WRITING
in Small Groups

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Portsmouth, NH

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361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020924811
ISBN: 978-0-325-13234-1

Editors: Katie Wood Ray and Zoë Ryder White

Production: Victoria Merecki

Cover and interior designs: Suzanne Heiser

Author photograph and interior photography: Nick Christoff and Michelle Baker

Interior art: © Deemak Daksina / Shutterstock (*bee icon*); © AVIcon / Shutterstock (*owl icon*)

Video editing: Michael Grover and Sherry Day

Typesetting: Gina Poirier Design

Manufacturing: Val Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 BB 26 25 24 23 22 21

January 2021 Printing

*This book is dedicated to
the teachers who showed up
physically, mentally, and
emotionally (whether through
a screen or in person) for
children and families every
day during the pandemic.
With unending gratitude
and awe, I see you.*



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PART II: Types of Small Groups

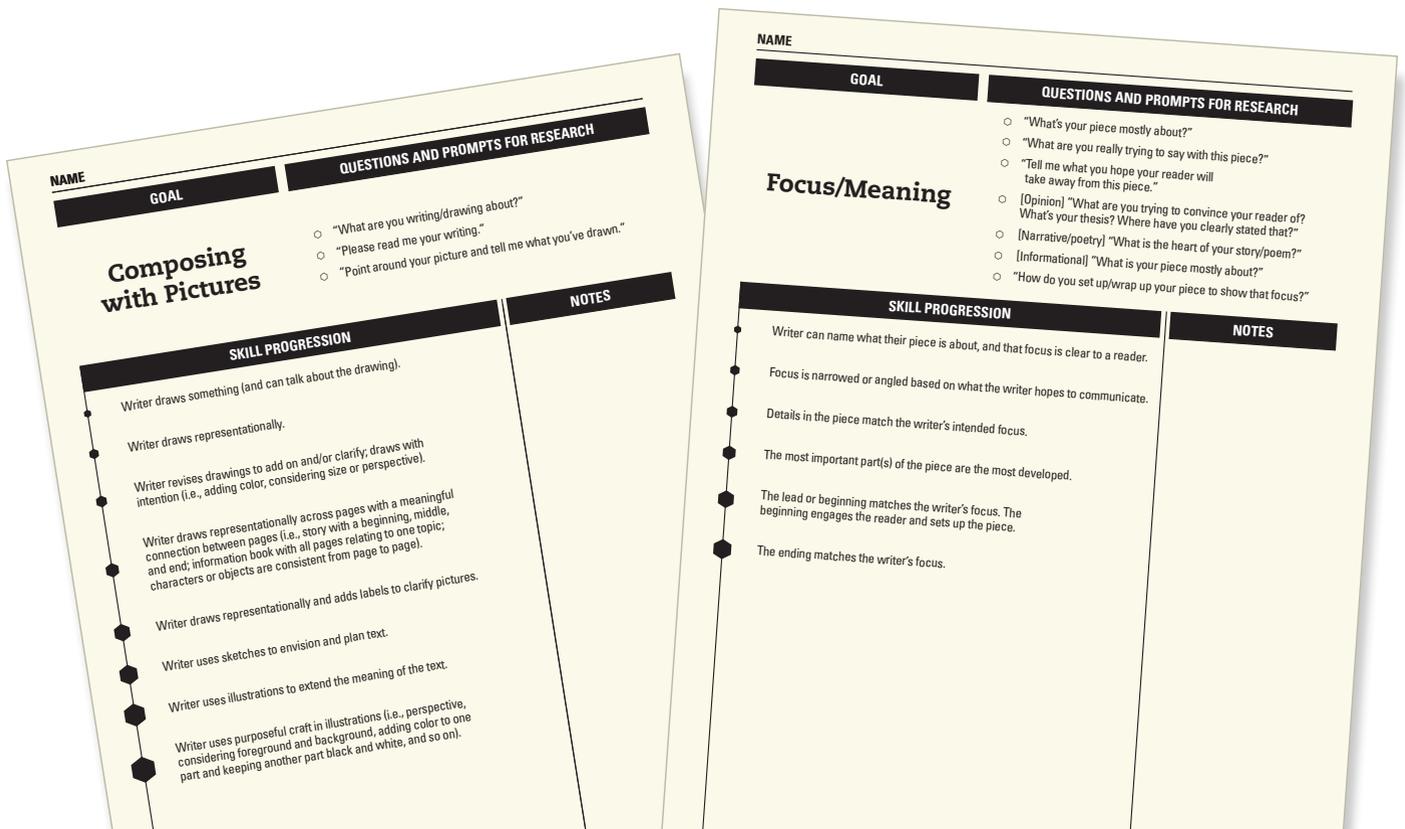
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About the Online Resources for This Book

In the online resources for this book you will find a variety of note-taking forms and videos that will help you get started with implementing—or refining—small-group writing instruction right away.

Skill-progression note-taking forms can help you identify goals for students, track progress, make in-the-moment decisions during small groups, and remind you of questions and prompts you can ask to learn more from your students. You can read more about how to use them in Chapter 2, and you'll see examples of them in use throughout the book.



The videos I selected for this book were captured during a few different moments in time. Some of them were filmed before I had envisioned this book—they are examples of me teaching in first- and fourth-grade classrooms. I've used them in professional development with teachers over the past couple of years, and some of them appear in my Heinemann online course, *Strategies in Action*. About half of the videos were filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic using video-conferencing software. These were filmed with neighbors' children, friends of my daughters, and the children of friends across the country. I'm not their regular teacher, but they graciously agreed to be part of filming these examples.

An important note: *the teaching I describe in this book works whether you're in person in a physical classroom with children or you are working with them in an online "classroom."* Every video example you see that was filmed online could be conducted in person, and vice versa. As we get beyond this pandemic, I hope to get into a classroom or two with a video crew, film some additional examples, and upload the video to the online resources.

The one-on-one conferences and small groups feature students in grades K–8. I included individual conferences because they form a foundation for the types of small-group work described in the book. When you come upon a "Watch and Read" section (within Chapters 4–10) I encourage you to pause your reading and watch the video referenced, regardless of whether the age of students you teach matches the ages of the students in the video. The teaching moves you'll be invited to study are universal, and the video is meant to provide a key example of what's being described in the main text.



Below is a list of the conferences and small groups you'll be invited to view. In addition to these full-length lessons, there are also some short excerpts referenced in Chapter 3.

VIDEO CLIPS

CHAPTER	GRADE	LESSON TYPE	DESCRIPTION—GENRE AND GOAL(S)
4	1	Coaching conference	All-about books (informational), elaboration
4	4	Strategy lesson	Personal narrative, generating ideas
4	5	Student-led strategy lesson	Essay, elaboration
5	3	Guided writing	Persuasive letter, organization and structure
6	1	Shared writing	Poetry, elaboration
7	K	Interactive writing	Thank-you note, conventions
8	4	Inquiry conference	Narrative, conventions
8	7	Inquiry group	Narrative; elaboration, conventions, structure
9	4	Goal-setting conference	Narrative, elaboration
9	6	Reflection group	Poetry
10	1	Partnership conference	Narrative, giving feedback
10	4	Partnership conference	Narrative, oral storytelling/rehearsing



How to Access Online Resources

To access online resources for *Teaching Writing in Small Groups*:

1. Go to **<http://hein.pub/WritingSmallGroups-login>**.
2. Log in with your username and password. If you do not already have an account with Heinemann, you will need to create an account.
3. On the Welcome page, choose “Click here to register an Online Resource.”
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PART I

Writing
Small-Group
Fundamentals





THE CASE FOR Small-Group Instruction in Writing

When and how do students write in school? What are the purposes for writing, and what procedures and processes do students follow when they write? Where does small-group instruction fit?

Consider Mr. Rivera's, Mr. De La Fuente's, and Ms. Walker's classrooms. As you read, notice how small-group instruction benefits students and teachers in every case, no matter the approach to writing instruction or grade level.

FROM CONFERRING TO SMALL GROUPS

Mr. Rivera describes himself as a "writing workshop teacher." He organizes his writing into monthlong units of study, each focused on a different genre. Every day, he teaches a very short whole-class lesson focused on one strategy, and then sends children off to write on topics they've self-selected. While children write, he makes his way around the classroom to confer with students one-on-one, something he's learned from studying Calkins, Graves, Murray, Atwell, and Anderson. He spends about five to seven minutes with each student checking to see

Continued on next page

FROM CONFERRING TO SMALL GROUPS

CONT.

Mr. Rivera *Continued from previous page*

how they are getting on with the class lessons and with strategies he's taught them in prior conferences, giving them targeted feedback on their writing, and offering them a strategy that will help them most today. He takes notes on each conference and follows up with students on past teaching. Some days children meet with writing partners, and most days the workshop ends with a gathering that he calls a "share" where students learn from each other.

Mr. Rivera loves the way he knows each of his writers. He feels confident that he's giving them support they need and he and his students enjoy the time they spend in conferences. What nags at him is how infrequently he's able to meet with students. In a class of twenty-eight fifth graders, with conferences averaging 5–7 minutes each plus a little time to travel from student to student and take some notes in between, it takes him seven class periods, or about a week and a half, to get back around to each student a second time. In that time, kids have often moved through multiple steps of the writing process, and many opportunities for individualized feedback have passed him by. Incorporating small groups, and balancing small groups with individual conferring, will help him to maintain the valuable individualized instruction he's able to accomplish with conferring, but double the number of children he's able to see each week. He might start with one type of small group that feels like a conference—a strategy lesson—and pull a few children together at a time.

FROM THE WHOLE CLASS WITH THE SAME GOALS TO BALANCING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Mr. De La Fuente is trying to prepare his eighth graders for the sorts of academic writing they'll need to engage with next year in high school, specifically literary analysis and essay writing. He's painstakingly crafted a detailed rubric detailing what each student's piece needs to have, and he has offered a list of three thesis statements to choose from that align to the novel the students have just studied as a class. Each day, he gives a short lecture on one criteria from the rubric, and students work on a portion of their piece at their seats. While they work, he responds to raised hands, answering questions and giving help as students ask for it.

After a week, he asks all students to leave their drafts on his desk at the end of the class period. During lunch, as he looks through the drafts, he sees their needs run the gamut, although every student heard the same lecture each day. There seem to be a few that could use work on their introduction paragraphs. Several students still need to properly cite sources. Some are going on for way more sentences than necessary in each body paragraph, and it's cluttering the writing. Some seem to be including

details from the text that aren't relevant, and it's muddying the focus of their piece.

He knows he's *taught* it all, but clearly they haven't all learned at the same pace. He offered to answer any questions that came up, but he realizes that it's likely that some didn't know enough about what issues they had in their writing to ask for help.

Incorporating small groups as students revise will allow him to target each area he's noticing students need support with, and go from having whole-class goals to finding individual goals for each student.

FROM WHOLE-CLASS SHARED PRACTICE TO SMALL-GROUP GUIDED PRACTICE

Ms. Walker believes in the power of writing instruction to help her first graders write better—and read better. She makes time every day for a whole-class lesson where her students help her compose a text. Some days they work on a new text; other days they return to previously written texts and make revisions and edits.

When teaching a writing lesson, she gathers her twenty-five first graders onto their classroom rug and directs their attention to the easel with chart paper. Sometimes she does all the writing, calling on children to give suggestions, or inviting them to turn and talk before sharing what a friend has said. Other times, she invites children up to write a letter or whole word on the chart. She feels that these shared and interactive writing lessons are very helpful in providing children with language models and examples of the genre they are practicing writing, and the students seem to enjoy them. But every day, she feels that although a portion of the children are completely with her, there are some who are bored (they know all the things she's pointing out and could just write it on their own) and others are confused (the lesson is moving too fast, or the sorts of strategies they are practicing aren't within their current grasp). When she sends children off to do some of their own writing, she sees her lessons stick for a portion of the class, but she knows many children need something else.

Incorporating small groups during the time when children are doing their own writing, and balancing these small groups with some of the whole-class lessons she has children engage in, will allow her to more carefully fine-tune and target what students need. They will get more support and specialized feedback on their specific pieces of writing and their strategies and processes. She can even use some of the same methods—shared writing and interactive writing—in small groups, and also try out some new methods for different purposes.

Small-Group Writing Instruction Allows Teachers and Students To . . .

Value Each Child’s Language and Literacy Practices

Most classrooms today are filled with children who have a rich diversity of language and literacy practices. When instruction is always whole class, it’s easy for that richness to become less visible as all children try to conform to a single standard. Working with children in small groups gives you the opportunity to tailor instruction to each child as a unique and competent learner, valuing and affirming the language and literacy practices of each (España and Herrera 2020; Ladson-Billings 2009; Souto-Manning and Martell 2016).

Develop Relationships

Positive relationships between teacher and students are a precursor for learning to happen (Howard, Milner-McCall, and Howard 2020; Hammond 2015; Minor 2018). When you work to build relationships, your small groups will be more beneficial for you and your students. Also, working with children in small groups (and one-on-one) can *help to strengthen* relationships.

Simply putting children into small groups does not automatically mean that a positive relationship will result, but working with children in groups in ways described in this book—ways that allow for two-way feedback with lots of listening on the part of the teacher, that offer support for strategies that are meaningful and appropriate, that invite true collaboration, and that show true caring from the teacher who communicates with body language and words “You’ve got this!”—can help move toward the goal.

Teach and Learn with Efficiency

There are only so many minutes in a day, and only so many minutes each week you can devote to writing instruction and writing practice for your students. Ideally, you’re able to find four or five class periods of forty-five to sixty minutes each week where children participate in some whole-class instruction followed by independent writing time with conferring and small-group instruction. Let’s say we have thirty minutes five times a week, or 150 minutes weekly, for conferring and small-group time. If you were to do only one-to-one conferring, assuming an average of five minutes per conference, that means you could do *thirty*

conferences. (My class sizes in New York City when I was an elementary teacher were a little over thirty students, so I wouldn't get to every student even once a week with only individual conferences.)

If instead you shifted to small-group instruction only, and you are able to see three children in a seven- to ten-minute small group (for the purposes of estimating, let's just say ten minutes per group), then you'd be able to do fifteen small groups times three children in a group—that's forty-five children a week (or twenty-two children twice a week) who receive targeted instruction and feedback.

In all likelihood, you'll use a *balance* of methods—sometimes groups, sometimes conferences. Sometimes your groups will be two children, sometimes four. But the point is this: using small-group instruction alongside conferring makes it possible for you to meet with *every student once or twice a week* to give individualized support about their writing during writing time.

Increase Engagement

When moving from mostly whole-class instruction to more small-group instruction, you'll notice an uptick in engagement and attentional focus on the part of the learners. Their physical proximity to you, and the amount of one-to-one interactions that are possible as you ask them questions, nudge their thinking, or prompt them as they try, increases dramatically. You'll read more about feedback in Chapter 3, but for now consider this tidbit from neuroscientist James Zull as cited in Hammond (2015): receiving feedback triggers the brain to release *dopamine*, which motivates a student to work harder and persevere. When students apply feedback, it stimulates the growth of neurons and dendrites and grows more gray matter. Moving from all whole-class to small-group instruction increases the number of times you are able to offer children specific, helpful, actionable feedback and will literally grow and change their brain and help them to be more engaged in their own learning (Hammond 2015). For those of you reading who already have lots of individualized instruction in the form of conferences, doing more small groups will help you see more children in a class period, increasing the number of moments across a week when children are engaged in the feedback cycle with you.

Improve Independence

It can be easy for children to get lost if lessons are only whole class—with a wide range of learners, the teaching in a whole-class setting can only be “just right” for a portion at any given time. This is true in any subject area! When you incorporate small-group instruction as a regular part of your schedule, you’re able to offer strategies in the context of student goals—what they *want* to and *need* to be working on. That alone makes the instruction meaningful and engaging. But in small groups you also can provide feedback in the moment, support students with practice, and make sure they “get it” (or at least get *closer* to “it”) before they continue independently with their work. They will take on new learning more quickly and better be able to continue independently.

Develop Social Support Among Students

Both within and during the small groups you lead, and then during classroom time as children continue to write independently, students can look to peers as other learners who are working on the same goals, skills, and strategies. Within groups, they might overhear you giving feedback to a friend, which they can then apply to their work. They might hear a child share an example of a place in their writing where they successfully applied a strategy, which becomes another model for them as they work on their own writing. This is built-in support for learners. In addition, as children begin to get the hang of strategies and accomplish goals, they can be class experts on topics and can be leaders of their own small groups (see more about student-led small groups in Chapters 4 and 8).

Give and Receive Feedback

Grouping children allows us to *give* more feedback, but just as importantly it allows us to *get* feedback. The feedback we receive from students about our teaching is crucial to be able to revise, adapt, pivot, and change to positively impact learning outcomes (Hattie 2008). When we group kids, it can blur the line between teacher and student in the best of ways—you become a researcher as you learn about your students and they learn from you, and you cocreate knowledge alongside your students (Morrell 2012; Freire 1998). You can read more about what to watch for, and how to ask for feedback from your students, in Chapter 3.

So What Is the Rest of the Class Doing?

By now I hope you're convinced that small-group work can enhance any classroom, whether the intention is to move from strictly whole-class instruction to groups or to balance groups with one-to-one conferring, whether you teach kindergarten or seventh grade. When looking at your packed schedule, you might wonder "How do I fit this in?" and "What is the rest of the class doing?"

The short answer is: the rest of the class is writing, and you fit your groups in during a time when they write. As Stephen King writes, "You cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot. It's not just a question of how-to, you see; it's a question of how much to. Reading will help you answer how much, and only reams of writing will help you with the how. You can learn only by doing" (2000, 173).

This writing time might be its own class period or a portion of an English language arts block or could even happen during content areas (science, social studies) when children are independently writing about a topic under study. Children need to be engaged independently in their work or working with a partner or small group in collaboration without the need for teacher involvement for you to be freed up to work with them in groups; importantly, they also need independent work time when you're not meeting with them to have plenty of time to practice and apply what you've taught during the group and other lessons.

How much time? It depends on your schedule, but remember that for you to meet with children regularly, they need regular blocks of time to write. In my elementary classroom, I taught writing four days a week and usually blocked out about an hour: forty-five minutes of which was used for conferring and small-group instruction with some time spent in whole-class instruction (minilessons or studying a mentor text). As a consultant, I work with middle school teachers who have under an hour for English language arts, which must include both reading *and* writing, so they either choose to split their class time each day, teach reading or writing every other day, or focus on each for a mini-unit: reading for a week (or longer), then switching to writing for a week (or longer).

When you look at your overall schedule, my advice is to go for balance. Balance of reading and writing. Balance of a (small amount) of whole-class instruction followed by a large chunk of time when kids can write and you can confer and work with small groups.

TAKE IT TO YOUR CLASSROOM

- ✓ Reflect on how you currently balance whole-class lessons with small-group or one-on-one instruction.
- ✓ Consider your students' level of engagement and the amount of and frequency of individual feedback. How might your students and you benefit from small-group instruction?
- ✓ To make time and space for small-group instruction in your classroom, reflect on what you might need to adjust or change in your daily or weekly schedule.



“Working with children in small groups gives you the opportunity to tailor instruction to each child as a unique and competent learner, valuing and affirming the language and literacy practices of each.”



PART II

Types of
Small
Groups



4

Strategy Lessons



Picture It: Seventh Graders Consider Word Choice

Three students settle at a table in the center of the classroom with laptops opened to their most recent historical fiction drafts. Mr. Cantor begins, “Writers, you’re all working on a goal of considering your word choices. Today, I’m going to guide you to look for repetition in your draft. When we find a word that shows up again and again, you can highlight or underline it each time it appears, generate a list of synonyms for that word, then reread each sentence and consider if you’d like to make changes, swapping out a synonym for the repeated word.”

After a quick example with his demonstration piece, Mr. Cantor starts working with students one-on-one. They each have different topics and their own original stories, and the words they tend to repeat are unique to each of them. But the strategy will work for them all.

When Mr. Cantor leans over to Malaika, she tells him, “I see I’ve used *goes* twice already and it’s only the second sentence.” He tells her to do a “find all” search in her document to see if the word is repeated as much throughout, and sure enough *goes* lights up with a yellow highlight in almost every paragraph. “So do you remember your next step? Generate some synonyms.”

After leaving her with that tip, he checks in with Jack. Jack seems to be repeating character names often, instead of using pronouns. He gives Jack a slight spin on this strategy, “So for you, it’s not so much that you’ll need to come up with synonyms. Instead, consider alternating the character’s name and a pronoun, throughout the draft. Just make sure it’s always clear who the pronoun refers to; you don’t want your reader to get lost.”

STRATEGY
7.18

Mr. Cantor then moves his chair to the third writer. “I’m not finding any repetition,” Rosie tells him. “Mind if I take a look?” he replies, and they look at the screen together. “Sometimes it can be overwhelming to scan the whole draft. Let’s just compare sentence number 1 with number 2 and see if there is any overlap. Then we’ll look at just one more after that. Sentence by sentence.” Helping her study a smaller amount of text at a time allows Rosie to see the repetition. “*Went!* I use *went* a lot.” “Yes, I see that too,” he says, “I’m going to give you the same tip I taught Malaika—use your ‘find all’ tool now to see where else it appears, so you can get to the next step of the strategy and start generating synonyms and making revisions. Just make sure any synonym you select makes sense with the context of your sentence.”

After the first round of coaching, Mr. Cantor checks back in quickly with each writer. Jack seems to be on a roll replacing proper names with pronouns. He reminds Jack to read the sentence and make sure it’s clear who the pronoun refers to. Malaika has generated a list of five synonyms for *goes* and is already making

appropriate replacements. When he comes back around to Rosie, he sees that she’s struggling with the synonyms. “Another helpful tool in your word processing software is the thesaurus. Feel free to look up *went* there to see if it gives you some options for synonyms that will work in your piece,” he offers, reminding her also to check to make sure any swap-outs make sense.

After about six minutes, all three writers are in process with the strategy. They haven’t finished, and each writer may not have caught every instance of repetition, but Mr. Cantor is confident that they understand the strategy enough to continue on their own, so he sends them back to their regular work spots and gets ready to pull his next group.

When she entered her room she went to her dresser to put on her favorite outfit: jeans with awesome patches on them, fancy lace lined shirt with the same color to match then she went in her closet to get her new black high tops then she put her hair in pigtails and went down the stairs and into the kitchen to eat a delicious breakfast of pancakes with syrup, butter on top, and a side of fruit salad! It tasted like happiness! Then she went out the door to her mom waiting in the car, excited and ready to start the fun filled day! Amy started to sing this song "i'm not going to school! I'm not going to school! Over and over for the full 45 minute drive to new york city.

When they got there Amy saw makenzie walking and went over to her " hi bestie!"

"hi bestie" makenzie replied.

Then Amy and makenzie went into a conversation about who knows what, while Jon and Jen discussed things about their work project and how unfair the deadline was. Then something caught the corner of Amy's eye "look." she whispered to Makenzie their eyes widened and their mouths dropped as they looked up up up!

"Look at those towers!"makenzie and Amy said in unison

" that's where we work," Jon said, sounding proud

"well not in both only the one on the left" Jen added

Rosie's historical fiction draft with word choice revisions for *went*.



What Is a Strategy Lesson?

Strategy lessons are versatile: they are a great choice in any grade level, and they can be used to teach strategies to support just about any skill or goal. Strategy lessons even work well across subjects including reading, math, science, art—whatever!

In a strategy lesson, children are grouped because they would all benefit from instruction and guided practice around the same strategy. In essence, a strategy lesson is a coaching conference (see box below), but with two to four children at a time. Lessons often begin with a very short period of explicit teaching where you introduce a strategy and then explain, model, or involve children in inquiry or guided practice, followed by individualized coaching and feedback. During this coaching, each child works on their own piece—on their own paper or tablet or in their own notebook—as you support their practice one by one. Since the practice is individual and the lesson focus is about a strategy, you can easily manage supporting individual children who may be working on different topics (and in some cases even different genres!).

Work your way up to small-group strategy lessons by practicing coaching conferences first. A coaching conference is a one-on-one meeting between you and a student where you come prepared with a strategy to teach (or reteach) and offer the student strategy-focused feedback and support as they practice. It can be helpful for you to practice this type of one-on-one meeting before strategy lessons because you can give your undivided attention to the student and work on providing strategy-focused responsive feedback; later in a small group you'll be skipping around among two to four students. Watch an example of a coaching conference with a first grader working on organizing his non-fiction writing.



Video 4.1

See page xiii to access the online video.

conference

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5.14

Who is this for? When do I choose strategy lessons?

Grade levels	Goals
✓ Pre-K	✓ Composing with pictures
✓ K	✓ Engagement
✓ 1	✓ Generating ideas
✓ 2	✓ Focus
✓ 3	✓ Organization/structure
✓ 4	✓ Elaboration
✓ 5	✓ Word choice
✓ 6	✓ Conventions: spelling
✓ 7	✓ Conventions: grammar and punctuation
✓ 8	✓ Partnerships and clubs

Strategy lessons offer efficiency (why repeat yourself and do the same lesson with three children separately when you could teach them all at once?) while still offering individual support (through one-on-one coaching, as in a conference). The bulk of time in a strategy lesson is often spent on the guided, supported practice: you set children up to do the work, and you're there as a support, nudging them from approximation toward independence.





FAQ: But what if children have different topics? How can I manage them all in one small group?

The most exciting moments in my writing classroom have always been when children have a choice about the writing project(s) they are working on. Even when genre is assigned (i.e., we're in a unit of study learning how to write fictional short stories), students still have a choice of topic. And a few times a year, I pause genre studies to spend time helping children pursue their own independent writing projects, meaning I might have the thirty children in my class writing in fifteen different genres, all at once (Cruz 2004). There are many ways to pull children in groups around a common need, even when they are writing about different topics or in different genres. Here are two examples:

- You could convene a group to help students with a step of the writing process, for example, how to get ideas for a piece of writing. Many strategies apply well across genres. For example, walking to an important place—in reality or in your mind's eye—(such as the beach) can help you think of memories that happened there (to help a writer with personal narrative—“the time I built a sandcastle and a wave knocked it down”), think of topics that you could teach about the place (information writing—“all about different seashells you can find at the beach”), or consider ideas or opinions about the place (opinion writing—“we need to curb our plastic use to protect marine life”) (Serravallo 2017).
- You could convene a group to teach a strategy that aligns to a quality of good writing that transcends genre or topic, such as making good word choices. A strategy such as “Think about the audience you expect to read your piece and the words and phrases that will help them understand what you are trying to say. Make decisions about what words to keep, to cut, or to change” works no matter the genre or topic (Serravallo 2017).



STRATEGY
3.8



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Tip

If you have a copy of *The Writing Strategies Book*, you'll notice that there is a margin on every strategy page that indicates what genre(s) the strategy will work for. Anything marked "any" is flexible to work across any and all genres.

An added benefit of working with a group of writers, each with a different topic or writing in a different genre, is that it forces you, the writing teacher, to keep the focus on the *strategy* rather than the *child's specific piece of writing or specific topic*. This is also important in one-on-one conferences but can admittedly be more challenging to do. The conversation and coaching is then about *how* rather than *what*—for example, how to hear more sounds in a word and get those sounds down rather than just fixing the spellings of words. The power here is that the teaching is then stickier and more transferrable; you've helped the child learn something they will carry with them from piece to piece, rather than just making this one sentence in this one piece better.





Structure and Timing

Strategy lessons allow for the “I do, we do, and you do” of gradual release to all happen within a seven- to ten-minute span of time. The balance of time you spend showing and explaining the strategy versus having students practice can vary based on the needs of the students within the group, though in general I like to think of these groups as more like a conference (with the bulk of time spent on guided practice) rather than a minilesson (where often the bulk of time is spent demonstrating).

When I’ve written about strategy lessons in reading, I liken the role of the teacher during the guided practice/coaching portion of the lesson to a plate spinner (Serravallo 2010). At the start of the strategy lesson, you’ll get all the plates spinning, and as you notice a plate wobble (in this case, a student who is in need of a prompt, redirection, or nudge), you’ll work with that student one-on-one, briefly, until they are back “spinning” again, and you’ll move on to another in the group. This coaching portion offers students in the group some breathing room to practice and approximate with you nearby, while one student at a time gets individualized attention.

HOW MUCH SUPPORT?

Strategy lessons are designed to be focused opportunities for a small group of students to practice one strategy. With most of the time spent with children independently practicing the strategy as the teacher moves from student to student, the amount of support in this type of small group is generally on the *light to moderate* side. It is possible to increase the amount of support by providing a demonstration or shared practice before setting children up to practice on their own writing. It’s also possible to vary how much support you offer each student within the group, since the coaching you do will be individualized.

Strategy Lessons Go Like This:

- 1. Connect:** Gather students with you at a spot on the floor or at a small table. Ask them to bring the writing they are currently working on. Tell them the focus of the lesson and why you've pulled them together.
- 2. Teach:** Share a strategy. It can be helpful to jot the steps of the strategy down on a simple chart, piece of paper, or small whiteboard for easy reference. Depending on the support students need, you could give an explanation of the strategy, demonstrate it quickly in your own writing, show an example from a published piece or piece of student writing, or practice it quickly together by doing some shared writing. In most cases, try to keep this portion of the lesson to two minutes max.
- 3. Coach:** This is the longest and most important part. As students practice the strategy on their own and in their own piece of writing, you will spend about thirty seconds with each one providing feedback, offering prompts, and lending support. To keep the lesson focused, be sure to coach students with trying only one strategy.
- 4. Link:** Once students have had a chance to practice and have gotten some feedback (whether or not they've mastered the strategy) and time is up, repeat the strategy and send them off with a reminder of when and how/why to use the strategy. Many students will benefit from a visual reminder of what they've practiced to take with them—either a quick note they write themselves in their notebook or on a sticky note, or a mini-chart you've created for them.

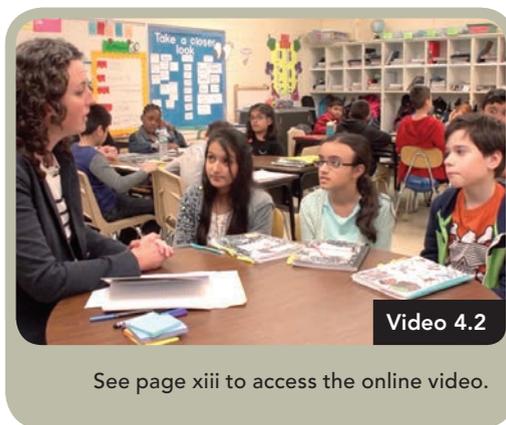


Pause and Watch

Take a moment to pause your reading now and watch a video of a strategy lesson with a group of three fourth graders on the goal of “generating ideas.”

Here are some important teaching moves to notice as you watch the lesson:

- ✓ The demonstration/example is super short so I can turn over the practice to the students quickly. I carry my notebook with me during small groups for quick reference and authentic modeling.
- ✓ I give wait time before offering suggestions, prompts, feedback, or nudges. I want to see what each student can do with a low amount of support before offering more.
- ✓ I tweak/modify the strategy in response to the student’s practice. For example, when one student had an idea that started “I would always . . .” I suggested she focus on a “one time” story. I prompted another student to consider whether she’d come up with many ideas connected to one place or brainstorm many places and one or more ideas for each place.
- ✓ When David’s idea is very close to his peer’s idea, I don’t insist that he come up with a completely original topic. Children can be inspired by and learn from their peers when they are sitting in close proximity during strategy lessons! Those who need this support can use it.
- ✓ After checking in briefly with each student, I circle back around for a second check. I spend a small amount of time coaching each student.
- ✓ I redirect students who are waiting on me to practice on their own. Their time is best spent if they are actively working with the strategy while I move from student to student to coach.



See page xiii to access the online video.



FAQ: What considerations should I make for writing process?

The truth is, there is no such thing as *the* writing process; most writers have a process that works for them, and that process varies from writer to writer. Although in general most spend some time planning before drafting and then spend time making changes, the amount of time writers spend on each, and microsteps within each, might vary from person to person. Some might go slowly through a draft, making sure each word is just right before moving on, revising while drafting. Others spill it all onto the page, knowing they'll spend a great deal of time with clean-up later. Others meticulously outline before trying to draft. Still others allow the act of writing to show them the way and use writing to discover what they want to say.

In the classroom, it is helpful and important to encourage children to work at their own pace through the process to maintain authenticity and engagement.

When pulling them together for groups, you can consider the different kinds of writing work they are doing. For example, if the strategy you plan to teach really works best in revision (i.e., "Reread your draft to find words that repeat. Circle the words. Reread each sentence to consider if there is a more precise word that would fit."), then you'll want all of your writers to have a draft (or at least a portion of one). If you

This writing process shows one pathway from prewriting to finished piece. You may choose to hang an enlarged version of this (or something like it) in your classroom, and ask children to indicate where they are in their process by moving a clothespin, thumbtack, or sticky note as they go, to allow you to see the class at a glance. You could also give a copy to each student to keep in their writing folder.



Download your own copy of the graphic below. See page xiii for instructions.



want to teach a strategy for editing, such as checking to ensure they used capital letters correctly, it can be jarring for a writer to think about conventions before they've gotten their ideas down.

Therefore, in addition to asking the essential question, “Do all the children I intend to pull for this group need the same strategy?” you will also want to make sure that they all are able to practice the strategy—meaning they are at a place in their writing process that will allow them to do so.

Another way to ensure that the teaching you'll offer in a small group is something that all the students can try, today, is to have children keep other in-progress writing and/or past pieces on-hand and also bring a notebook or folder with blank paper to the meeting. That way, if the strategy requires they have a finished draft, for example, they can always go back to a previous piece to practice and then try the strategy again on their current, in-process piece. Or, if the strategy helps them generate ideas to get started, the ideas they come up with during the small group can be used for their next piece of writing, and the strategy is one they can return to any time they find themselves stuck in the future. Having more writing to work with just gives them more options for practice, and after the group is over, students can go back to working on the piece they were in the midst of when you called them over.





Spin It: Sign-Up Groups: Students Choose the Strategy to Learn

Sometimes, a writer just knows what they need. Rather than waiting to be invited to join a strategy group, you could set up a sign-up in your classroom so children can volunteer to join a group that interests them. I started sign-up groups after reading about them in *Independent Writing* (Cruz 2004). It is every bit as empowering and motivating as Colleen describes to put children in charge of deciding what they want to learn and improve on, and the strategy lesson format makes doing them quick and easy. To do this, make the small-group options visible by posting them on a bulletin board, or if you're teaching online, you can create a shared document or whiteboard such as a Jamboard (see one example in Chapter 8, page 132). Students are invited to add their name throughout the day, and the teacher schedules the groups during writing time.

I love using these sign-up groups for any genre or at any point in the writing process. Here are a couple of examples of ways you might use them:

- Imagine you teach a whole-class lesson offering a strategy to help students organize their writing by planning out a story using a story mountain. You could then offer sign-up groups that are variations or spins on that lesson, based on how the writer feels their story could go. For example, one group might offer a strategy for building tension. Another might offer a strategy for controlling time. Another might offer a masterclass in powerful endings (Serravallo 2017).
- During certain phases of the writing process, students will have very different needs. Take editing, for instance. As you work with children to polish their work, you might present them with a multi-item checklist including reminders about capitalization, spelling, complete sentences, and subject-verb agreement. Students might reflect using the checklist and rereading their drafts, thinking about



which they can do on their own and which they might need a strategy and support for. Rather than you reading through all the drafts to put kids into groups (which would take a lot of planning time!), students can sign up right after the minilesson when you introduce the checklist, to get help with what they need that same day.

The idea of students self-selecting their groups is one that would also work with other small-group types. As you read about other types of small groups in the coming chapters, you can imagine spinning them into sign-up groups just like the strategy lessons described in this chapter.





Spin It: Student-Led Small Groups

As students work on their own goals and learn strategies over time, they will develop expertise. A great way to showcase their learning, empower them, and celebrate their knowledge is to give children the option to lead small-group lessons. Once students become regular members of strategy groups with you, they will start to internalize the simple, predictable structure enough that they can use it to teach their peers.

To get student-led small groups up and running in your classroom, you might decide to use the same sign-up sheet that you use for teacher-led student self-selected groups. Alternatively, you might notice a group of students who could use support from a strategy and invite a child to lead it: “Nakia, I know you just worked on learning different transition phrases to use during your essay writing, and there are a few students who could benefit from knowing what you know. Would you be up for teaching them the strategy I shared with you, and show them how you did it in your writing, and then help them try it in theirs?”

One of the things I notice from having watched many student-led strategy lessons over the years is that students will often rephrase things, or come up with analogies, that an adult may never have thought of, but that land perfectly with their same-age peers. I’ve often watched in awe thinking, “Wow. He taught that better than I did!” For example, in the video you’ll watch in a bit, the student directs his peers to *anticipate counterarguments*, but uses his own language: “Say something back before they say it to you.”

When students are new to leading small-group strategy lessons, you may choose to teach them how to write a lesson plan, as Jessica Lifschitz (2016) describes in her blog post “The Students Become the Teachers.” They may also need support while teaching. I often sit in on the group, ready to support the student teaching like an instructional coach would support me as I teach. I might give them a subtle signal when it’s time to stop talking and segue to giving the other students a chance to practice, or prompt the student teacher to speak up a bit, or hold up their writing so everyone in the group can see. Usually after one or two opportunities teaching with me as a coach, they are ready to lead groups without support. And of course, some children are natural-born teachers and

don't need me at all! Once children are comfortable teaching and learning from one another, you'll multiply the number of teachers and experts students can go to for support with their writing, which makes the classroom feel even more like a writing community.

One important note and word of caution: if you are going to try student-led groups in your classroom, take care to have not only the students who are most expected to be teachers as the teachers. Make sure to give all writers, of varying abilities and differing strengths, a chance to shine as experts early and often.





Pause and Watch

Pause your reading and watch an example of a student-led small group.

This fifth grader is teaching a group of his peers how to anticipate counter-arguments and talk back to them in persuasive writing. As you watch the video, you might notice:



✓ I'm sitting beside the student teacher. This is the first time he's led a small group so I want to support him. For example, I nudge him to offer his friends an example from his own writing after he's laid out steps, and I encourage him to peek at his friends' writing as they get started to see who he'll support first. (Also note: this was filmed during a lab site where I was teaching other teachers how to set children up to do this, so you'll hear and maybe see those other teachers in the background, too!)

- ✓ The student understands the structure of a small-group lesson because he's participated often with his teacher.
- ✓ The student is able to give clear strategy steps to his peers, which shows he's used to hearing strategies in steps from his teacher, and he's able to be metacognitive about how he's accomplished the work in his own piece.
- ✓ He puts things in his own words (i.e., "Say something before they say something back").
- ✓ He gives support to his peers in the form of coaching and positive feedback.

TAKE IT TO YOUR CLASSROOM

- ✓ New to strategy lessons? Try coaching conferences first to get the feel for brief strategy-focused lessons and to practice giving pointed feedback to one writer.
- ✓ When you first try out strategy lessons, consider keeping your group small (two or three students). You'll find that it takes a little added concentration to move from student to student during the coaching phase and to take notes on each of them as individuals. The fewer you're working with, the less there is to juggle.
- ✓ Once strategy lessons are a common practice in your classroom, open up student choice with sign-up seminars, and invite students to be teachers with student-led small groups.

