

ROBIN W. HOLLAND

DEEPER WRITING

**Quick Writes and
Mentor Texts to
Illuminate New
Possibilities**



FOREWORD BY
FRANKI SIBBERSON

DEEPER WRITING

**Quick Writes and
Mentor Texts to
Illuminate New
Possibilities**

ROBIN W. HOLLAND

FOREWORD BY
FRANKI SIBBERSON





FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Carol Chambers Collins
Publisher: Lisa Luedeke
Associate Editor: Megan Bedell
Editorial Assistants: Sarah Bartlett and
Francesca Dutra Africano
Production Editor: Veronica Stapleton
Copy Editor: Daniel Gordon
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Scott Oney
Indexer: Molly Hall
Cover Designer: Glenn Vogel
Marketing Manager: Maura Sullivan

Copyright © 2013 by Corwin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

9781452229942

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

12 13 14 15 16 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Foreword	ix
<i>Franki Sibberson</i>	
Preface	xi
Introduction: Deeper Writing With Quick Writes and Mentor Texts	1
What Is Deeper Writing?	1
Why Is Engaging in Deeper Writing Important to You?	4
How Did We Get to Now?	5
What Are Quick Writes?	7
Teachers Writing	9
Why Use Mentor Texts?	9
What About Sharing?	10
Overview of the Quick Writes	13
Chapter 1 Knowledge and Memory: Writing Ourselves	17
What You Know First	17
What's in a Name?	23
Where Do You Live?	27
I Know What I Know	34
Stones in My Pocket	37
Whiting Stories and Boasting Poems	42
For Better or for Worse	46
When I Was Silent	49
It Was a Very Good Year	52
When I Was Magic	55
What Dreams May Come	58
Chapter 2 Art, Lenses, and Visions: Writing the World We See	63
Seeing Things and Having New Eyes	63
Who Wore the Hat?	67
Head Swivelers	71

Horizons	74
Artful Reading and Writing	77
Snapshots: Capture the Moment	82
Proverbially Speaking: Words to Live By	88
Opportunity Costs	91
The Things They Carried	93
The History We Know	97
The Remains of the Day	101
The Face of Reality	104
Metaphors: Seeing the World in Other Words	107
Chapter 3 Passion, Power, and Purpose: Writing to Change the World	111
Rites and Righteous Celebrations:	
Celebrating Events in Our Lives With Special Words	111
My Big Words	115
Encounters	120
Secrets	123
The Work of Our Hands	126
Numbering Our Village	130
Watering Our World	137
The Bill of Rights	140
Contingency Plans	144
Of Thee I Sing	147
We Are America	151
Chapter 4 Containers, Craft, and Conventions: Writing in Different Genres	157
If That's a Poem: Introducing Mentor Texts	157
What Container Will Hold My Words?	162
And I Heard Them Say	165
The Story of My Story	169
Cumulative Poems	171
Where the Action Is	175
Less Is Better	178
Comic Lives	182
Chapter 5 The Creation of a Quick Write: Developing Your Own	187
Context	188
Content	190
Container	192
Container Lining: Our Lenses	193
References	195
Literature Cited	197
Index	209

Acknowledgments

There are so many people that have supported and encouraged me throughout this process. I have been blessed to have teachers, guides, advisers, cheerleaders, family, and friends along each step of the way.

First and foremost, I must acknowledge my great debt to David Bloome, without whom this book would probably have remained simply a file on my computer full of individual quick writes used solely in my own teaching. I cannot express how much I appreciate his time and encouragement throughout this process, particularly during the initial proposal preparation and submission phase.

Likewise, I thank Melissa Wilson, David's doctoral student at the time, who also met with me along with David. She edited the original proposal, continues to use the prompts with her university students, and has been my colleague on many curriculum-writing teams, and my friend.

This book would also not exist without my involvement in the Columbus Area Writing Project (CAWP). This professional community has provided so many possibilities and opportunities for me. I am forever grateful to the codirectors, past and present, including Linda Kelly and Michele Winship, who facilitated the 2005 CAWP Summer Institute in which I participated, and to my current fellow codirectors: David Bloome, Kevin Cordi, George Newell, and Melissa Wilson.

I am grateful to all the teachers in the CAWP from 2005 to 2012 who have written to these quick writes during the summer institutes, during our writing happy hours, and in their own classrooms with their students, thus helping me weed out the junk and discover the gems.

The initial writing invitations were created for and piloted in the Salem Teacher Writing Project and the Salem Student After-School Writing Project, groups I facilitated in my building as a result of my initial involvement with the CAWP.

Thank you to the Salem teachers who participated in the Salem Teacher Writing Project each year it existed: Tina Carpenter, Cathy Patzer, and Michelle Weber. Additionally, I thank Caroline Egan, Celeste Guglielmi, Stephanie Hawking, Meg Lagucki, Lynn Markle, and Sheila Wilson, who

also participated. A huge thank-you is also due to my former principal, Gail Buick, for her participation in the teacher group and unwavering support of both groups.

Thank you to all the students whose work has inspired me and helped me to be a better writer and writing teacher, all of the students who participated in the Salem Student After-School Writing Project, and a special thanks to Ian Tran and Michael Lipster who graciously allowed me to use their pieces.

I thank Katie Brintlinger, Barb Keyes, and Steve Schack for our monthly conversations, continuing support, and most of all for holding me accountable.

I am indebted to those family members and friends who have encouraged me and understood the frustrations and elations of the writing (or not writing) process and listened to my constant updates, including my parents, Elizabeth and Robert Jackson, my sisters, Rhonda Abban and Renee Jackson, and my dear friend Diane Reavling. I also thank my mother for reading every quick write and proofreading both the initial proposal and the first draft.

I am deeply indebted to my husband, Ralph V. Holland Jr., who ignored the constant piles of books and papers on the dining room table, who would say “keep writing” and celebrate any positive feedback with me, and who would encourage me in times of waiting.

I thank Franki Sibberson for her encouragement after reading an early draft and for graciously agreeing to write the foreword.

Finally, I thank the Corwin family for all of their efforts on behalf of *Deeper Writing: Quick Writes and Mentor Texts to Illuminate New Possibilities*, with special appreciation for my editors, Carol Collins for initially seeing something in this book that was worthy of publication, Lisa Luedeke for her support, encouragement, and vision as we moved forward, and Dan Gordon for his meticulous copyediting of each page in preparing this book for publication.

PUBLISHER’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wanda Mangum, Language Arts Instructional Coach
Suwanee, Georgia

Peggy Semingson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Literacy Studies
College of Education, Curriculum and Instruction
University of Texas at Arlington

Sharon Kane, Professor, Literacy and English Methods
State University of New York at Oswego

Foreword

Franki Sibberson

Inviting students to write and to explore their world through writing is one of the most important things we can do as teachers, and *Deeper Writing: Quick Writes and Mentor Texts to Illuminate New Possibilities* is a gift to teachers of writing. No matter the age of your students, Robin Holland's book will help you support them in their growth as writers.

When I think of prompts, I think of the prompts of the past in which we asked children to respond to a fantastical situation or to fill in the page about an imaginary experience. But that is not what these quick writes are about. In *Deeper Writing*, Robin invites students to try new things as writers. The quick writes are not intended to inspire a final draft of writing. Instead, they are intended to stretch the writer in new directions.

The ideas in this book are based on sound theory about writing. As the codirector in the Columbus Area Writing Project (affiliate of the National Writing Project), Robin Holland is perfectly poised to share her insights and strategies for helping students of all ages to engage in deeper writing. Not only is she codirector of the project, but she has many years of classroom experience. The combination of the work she has done with students and adults has allowed her to develop quick writes that support students across various ages and levels.

There are no scripts or have-tos in this book. Instead, the book provides *possibilities*. In addition to an abundance of excellent quick writes, Robin Holland further supports our teaching efforts with booklists and mentor texts for each quick write that help reinforce and strengthen these important writing occasions. She understands the classroom setting and how writing workshops work. She knows the kinds of things that will help teachers move students forward. She gives us solid thinking along with resources that will help us support our students.

This book is organized around quick writes, but throughout the reading, we learn much more about being a teacher of writing. Robin

doesn't just share ideas. Instead, she shares ways to make these ideas your own—she shares her thinking, the reasons behind the ideas, and allows her thinking to act as a mentor; it is an invitation to think about how to best use them with your own students.

Robin places a high value on teachers as writers. This is demonstrated over and over again as she shares her own writing inspired by the quick writes. At one point, early in the book, she explicitly talks about the importance of this:

I rarely give a quick write to which I have not written except for the first time a prompt is ever used, and I write along beside my students or fellow writers. I have written to many of the quick writes numerous times—always producing something new and different from my previous writing to the same prompt. p. 9

The brilliant message of this book is that quick writes invite possibilities. Robin helps us see each of these invitations in a way that is not based on an end product but instead begins a new conversation. As she says, "These prompts are for playing with and practicing writing. For putting the pen on the paper and just going for it."

Preface

This book is about how to get writers engaged in meaningful and reflective writing—deeper writing. By deeper writing, I mean writing that challenges writers to engage in a thorough search of memory, a critical analysis of relationships and situations, and a powerful discovery of themselves and the world.

Deeper writing is writing that digs beneath the surface, underneath the obvious observations and topics, to reveal that which is in the background, unnoticed. It touches both the reader and writer with emotions we have buried or ignored and it surprises us with fresh perspectives of the familiar. The quick writes in this book lead to new writing possibilities, new content, contexts, and containers for our deepest thoughts and feelings.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While the idea of quick writes may be intriguing to you, you may be wondering how this fits in to your already busy daily schedule. Rather than complicating lesson planning, this book is designed to enhance the writing opportunities and instruction that you are already providing for your students and to expand the store of ideas you consider as possibilities for engaging your students in writing. If you and your students are well into the writing workshop process—selecting topics and drafting with ease—these quick writes will challenge you to dig below the surface, to reflect and remember and imagine—to write with deeper meaning.

If you are relatively new to teaching writing or unsure of where to go next with your writing instruction, this book is the perfect place for you to begin. You will find that the quick writes lend themselves easily to your current instructional focus and lead to or enhance mini-lessons in which you are already engaged as well as those you wish to provide, such as selecting topics, choosing appropriate genres, getting started writing, and using writing of other authors or mentor texts, as well as other areas of

focus. As you provide mini-lessons in your class to instruct students about necessary writing knowledge, strategies, and skills, consider which quick writes in this book will complement each lesson.

INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

The quick writes contained in this book are not limited to use in writing instruction alone. If you are responsible for content area instruction, informational texts, and nonfiction lessons, these quick writes can provide ways to introduce topics or foster further reflection on particular areas of study, including social justice issues and personal issues. Some of the quick writes can be used to invite students to write not as themselves, but as characters in history, science, or literature, and to deepen understanding of a particular area of study, time, and people. These quick writes can foster the thinking and talking that are so important in content-area studies that can lead to deeper levels of conversation, as well as deeper writing. We are reminded, however, that writing nonfiction or informational texts requires specific knowledge. It is recommended that students have time to engage in reading, discussion, inquiry, and research before being invited to write extended informational texts. Writing, particularly informational writing, does not occur in a vacuum, but relies on content and accurate information as a foundation.

This book is *not* intended to teach you as teachers how to implement a writing workshop or manage the writing classroom, nor is it designed to teach writing basics. Rather, it seeks to support teachers involved in these areas as they search for more authentic ways to engage their students and will complement texts already on your shelves and in your students' hands in these areas.

This book *will* enable you to challenge writers to engage in a thorough search of memory, a critical analysis of relationships and situations, and a powerful discovery of themselves and the world. It will complement your current process for writing workshops and encourage a deeper level of engagement.

Deeper Writing: Quick Writes and Mentor Texts to Illuminate New Possibilities provides a way for you and your students to engage in substantive thinking, critical reflection, and deeper, more meaningful writing.

Introduction

Deeper Writing With Quick Writes and Mentor Texts

How do we get students engaged in substantive, reflective, meaningful writing? The answer is deeper writing—writing which challenges us to engage in exploring our memories, our emotions, and our thoughts that lie below the surface. In the introduction, you will be introduced to what I mean when I say deeper writing, writing that challenges us to do the difficult yet satisfying work of remembering, reflecting upon, and reimagining ourselves, our relationships, situations, and issues in the world. I will also discuss how the quick writes came to be developed and how mentor texts are used to support writing.

You may have picked up this book with skepticism. A book of quick writes? You may be wondering if this is more of the test preparation or scripted writing instruction that we are seeing so much of lately. Although this book will help you and your students write better, which may lead to better test scores, this book is *not* about testing.

This book is for writers—both teachers and their students—to lead them into deeper writing.

WHAT IS DEEPER WRITING?

Deeper writing challenges us to engage in writing that explores ourselves and the memories, emotions, and thoughts that we usually ignore or let lie dormant. It challenges us to do the difficult yet satisfying work of remembering, reflecting upon, and reimagining ourselves, our relationships, and our experiences. It asks us to consider various issues and conditions in the world.

Deeper writing digs beneath the surface and peels back the layers of ordinary understandings and topics in order to look at the

underside—discovering truths, revealing an essence, or considering an alternative or multiple perspectives. It is reflecting with the pen and tackling the hard stuff—thinking and writing critically, pushing metaphors to the limit—and searching for relationship and relevance where they are not easily detected. Deeper writing is creating rich texts, leaving the writer as surprised as the reader to see where the writing has led.

Deeper writing and thinking forces us to ask again and again: What more? What else? Why? And so what? We create images and reveal ideas that make us reexamine our taken-for-granted beliefs and long-held mental images to notice connections that we didn't realize existed. In short, we write ourselves to deeper understanding and awareness, to deeper feelings and insights of ourselves, others, and the world.

We may not be able to define it clearly although we all recognize deeper writing when we hear it, when we read it. At the retreat that begins each year's Columbus Area Writing Project Summer Institute, I first experienced a response to deeper writing in the unnerving silence that resulted after reading my poem about a conversation that afternoon with the groundskeeper of the retreat center. I had waited until the end, quite nervous and unsure of how my fellow writers would respond. My poem ended with *I saw him again today because I was looking. He waved to me because I know his name.* I was met with absolute silence. Finally I could stand the silence no longer. Everyone else who had read had received comments and feedback. "Somebody say something," I ventured tentatively. Several retreat fellows explained that the poem had moved them and that they had also seen the man, now that they thought about it, but had taken no intentional notice of him. Deeper writing reveals that which is hidden or unnoticed in the background, forcing it to the foreground and our conscious attention.

At the first afterschool student writing project in my building, Bethany, the lone third grader among a group of fourth and fifth graders, also experienced that silence when she read her short poem about her grandmother who had recently died. She began to cry as she read, finally unable to finish the poem—unable to complete the line *They loved me a lot because I was the only baby around. They never put me down because I was the only baby around . . .* My co-teacher finished it for her. Again silence—and then immediately, students crowded around to hug her. *I loved your poem. My grandma died too. I felt the same way.* Deeper writing causes us to remember and reexperience what we have buried deep in our hearts or simply forgotten. It has power to touch us and free emotions heretofore kept in check or unshared for both the writer and the audience.

Deeper writing resonates in our souls with familiarity and truth but at the same time speaks to us of something previously not acknowledged or

recognized. When read aloud in my fifth-grade classroom, deeper writing is met with smiles and silence and sighs of delight—and then a burst of talk, as students rush to applaud a well-chosen word, a particular feeling instigated by the writing, or to confess a familiar chord struck. The response to deeper writing is the same whether the author is a seasoned writer or one of our own classmates.

This past winter, when James, our own “bad boy-class clown” who normally writes of war, blood, tanks, guns, and death, and routinely cheers for the bad guy in every story, read a true story about falling into the lake at his apartment complex and being rescued by an unidentified hand that turned out to be his older brother, the kids were surprised and respectfully impressed. We don’t usually see this smack-talking, tough guy as vulnerable and needing help from anybody. He is still wisecracking and shrugging his shoulders in keeping with his “I don’t care” attitude, but we all know a different James from the writing he shared that day. Deeper writing surprises us and lets us see a new side of the familiar.

The purpose of this book is to lead writers—you and your students—into deeper writing. The invitations or new writing possibilities offered here open doors, foster more thoughtfulness and reflectivity, and lead to powerful words.

These quick writes will open your eyes and the eyes of your students to new writing possibilities, to see the unlimited opportunities and the inexhaustible content available for writing. This book is about recognizing the myriad contexts in which we write and expanding the variety of containers we choose to hold our writing. It is also about the many lenses each of us wears as we both read and write.

These quick writes are for playing and practicing with writing, putting the pen on the paper and just going for it. Like a pianist practicing scales or noodling around with notes, like a dancer trying out new combinations of steps or rehearsing before the real performance, we can practice putting our thoughts and ideas on paper. We can explore those ideas and let them take shape, leading sometimes to new insights about writing, and other times to a satisfying, finished product. There is great value in writing regularly. Professional writers variously call their daily efforts free writing, diving, AM pages, or 10-minute write. It doesn’t matter what you call it. The important thing is doing it yourself and providing time for your students to write as well. Deeper writing is not afraid of authentic subjects. Writing below the obvious surface considerations sometimes fosters highly personal self-examination, discovery, and revelation. Some of these quick writes will undoubtedly lead you and your fellow writers to inner delight and exuberant public celebration, as achievements, goals, and happy events are explored, as well as to murky, dark places, as personal secrets, inner insecurities, relationships, and less happy events are explored.

As we consider our world and all that is right with it, we also consider serious social realities such as war, hunger, and poverty—real issues, real needs, real concerns. Your classroom and your writing groups must be safe places—places where risks can be taken, hearts can be shared, tears can be openly shed, laughter comes easily, and all efforts are supported and applauded by an intimate community.

And finally, these writing invitations are about demonstrating our power to define and change both our private and public worlds—about us personally reconstructing, rediscovering, and re-visioning our world and ourselves—seeing the possibilities not yet written, understanding and defining the worlds in which we live, and seeing new relationships and worlds that we, collectively and individually, have the power to create.

WHY IS ENGAGING IN DEEPER WRITING IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Carl Nagin indicates that “writing is a gateway for success in academia, the new workplace and the global economy, as well as for our collective success as a participatory democracy. . . .” And he further indicates that “learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice. Evidence shows that writing performance improves when a student writes often and across content areas” (*Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools* by the National Writing Project and Carl Nagin, 2006, pp. 2, 12).

In my teaching experience and in my own school, this was evident. In 2006, the year we introduced both a student afterschool writing group and a teacher afterschool writing group, our writing scores for the building increased from 78% to 96% on the OAT (Ohio Achievement Test) Writing Assessment, placing us the second highest in our large district in writing. My principal attributed this significant gain directly to the increased writing instruction and writing opportunities provided by teachers throughout the school day, by those engaged in the writing project and also to the additional opportunities and instruction provided by the after-school program for both students and teachers.

According to now-deceased writing researcher Donald Graves, “If you provide frequent occasions for writing, then students start to think about writing when they are not doing it. I call this a state of constant composition” (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p. 22).

Engaging in these and similar quick writes can lead students to this desired state of constant composition: a constant state of wonder and discovery, an ongoing consideration of new ideas, and variations on familiar ones—new possibilities of how responses to life may be written.

The New Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (adopted at the time of this writing by 45 of our 50 states), along with most currently adopted state standards, call for daily or regular opportunities to write for a variety of authentic purposes, using a variety of writing strategies and practicing different types of writing including narrative, argumentative, persuasive, and explanatory writing and literary forms.

Daily practice will build confidence, facility, and fluency. In addition, writing regularly will produce gems or kernels for future use in intentional, more formal pieces.

HOW DID WE GET TO NOW?

When I began teaching in 1975, there were two types of writing—there was writing, *real writing*, and there was *creative writing*. And I don't remember teaching or showing students how to write either type. I only remember *assigning* writing. We took pride in providing the most creative prompts for our students, leading them to produce that so-called creative writing. An excellent prompt back then might have been

A Martian just landed in your classroom and invites you to return to Mars with him in his spaceship. Write about your trip.

Or

Your mother ate too many tomatoes and turned red. What will you do?

Or

You suddenly become invisible. How do you feel?

The teacher stores sold books of similar prompts for what we called daily seatwork or board work. The creativity of the prompt itself, it seemed, was the point. The wilder and more illogical, the better.

Except for the most creative and gifted kids, who did not need my help to write, what the students produced was poor writing—as wild and illogical as the prompts and equally inadequate. Even those of us who wrote, usually unrelated to and outside of our school day, did not write to these prompts that we were asking students to use. These were simply part of the immense amount of work given daily to keep students busy during the morning while we conducted reading groups.

Our district had no set curriculum guide or course of study for writing at that time, although we required writing reports of all sorts: book reports, reports about countries, and elaborate unit projects. Some of us began experimenting with different prompts and other ways to get students to write, with sometimes surprisingly delightful results. But we were simply stabbing in the dark, unable to consistently produce the satisfactory results.

I began haunting the campus bookstores, buying college composition textbooks, scrutinizing the lessons and then modifying the ideas for my second-grade students. I still remember a lesson from one such college text (Augustine, 1975) requiring students to write “existential definitions”—concrete and active words to specify an abstraction, category, or concept. (For example: *Contentment is sitting on the deck with my husband having just eaten Chilean sea bass from Bonefish Grill and being so full that talking is out of the question and completely unnecessary*, or *Ecstasy is lying on a beach anywhere, knowing there are seven more days of sun and sand, snorkeling, and seashells before returning to the cold, ice, and snow of Ohio*.) I still love this existential definition activity and continue to use modified versions of it with both adults and children because it requires us to reexamine our ordinary views and definitions of the world.

In the bookstores around this same time, books about journal writing suddenly became popular. Having kept a diary or journal or some sort of writer’s notebook since I was a child, I now began the personal discipline, which I continue to this day, of working through books of writing exercises and in this way discovering writing techniques to share with my students. I also had my students keep journals as, together, we tried a variety of journal activities.

There was a stark absence of books about elementary writing. The focus at that time was on language acquisition and reading theory and reading instruction. But then several things happened that dramatically transformed the writing situation for elementary teachers and students.

First, in 1983, Donald Graves (*Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*) showed us a more satisfying way to invite students to write, freeing us from the false sense of creativity housed in an irrelevant prompt rather than a student’s own mind and experiences. *Write what you know* became the mantra of the day. Instead of fantastical topics, we now encouraged students to write about people, places, events, and feelings that were real. We encouraged them to plumb their daily lives for interesting, write-worthy topics—and we gave them time to write.

Next, close on the heels of Graves, Lucy Calkins’s notion of mini-lessons provided the necessary instructional scaffold to foster better writing (*The Art of Teaching Writing*). Short lessons could be developed

that addressed the needs of the students as they arose, presenting, modeling, and guiding the use of not only conventions, but all aspects of the writing process (topic selection, genre, craft, etc.).

And finally, as I continued to experiment, I discovered the power of intentionally linking literature with writing. As a Title I teacher working with struggling readers, I began to use writing as a way to deepen understanding of our read-aloud and guided reading texts. Through using graphic organizers and key language structures to guide thinking, talking, and writing in response to what we were reading, my students were able to comprehend text more effectively. But something else wonderful happened. As they reflected and wrote in response to literature and content-area reading that we were doing, they discovered connections to their own lives, feelings, and memories. They found their own personal stories and began to write powerful pieces. They were engaging in deeper writing.

As a result of these experiences, I began to develop what I now call *quick writes*, flexible writing invitations supported by mentor texts—literature or content-area texts that could teach us how to write, serving as models for our own writing or fostering new avenues of thinking that also led to writing possibilities.

WHAT ARE QUICK WRITES?

The quick writes or writing invitations gathered in this book are offered as ideas to spark thinking and initiate writing. They are unique in that each corresponds to carefully chosen mentor texts to model and stimulate writing. Unlike the prompts described earlier, these quick writes are not one-sentence story starters or fill-in-the-blank worksheets. Instead they invite writers to discover within their memories, feelings, and ideas the meaning they want to make, the story they need to tell. They cause students to analyze the world around them differently and write to define and affect situations, people, and relationships. Although when presented they seem to arise casually and conversationally, each quick write is intentionally and carefully designed to invite writers to challenge themselves to engage in deeper writing.

Each quick write in this book shares a basic framework:

Background for the Teacher

This is an introduction to the topic or concept that includes a context: a short anecdote, story, information, or comments to introduce the ideas in

the quick write. As you present the quick writes to your students, you also will want to share your personal connections and contexts.

The Quick Write Lesson

This section will in most cases include the following:

- Sharing Mentor Texts
- Writer's Notebook
- Quick Write Possibilities

Sharing Mentor Texts

Each quick write includes carefully chosen mentor texts to provide models of possible content and containers for writing. These include picture books, novels, essays, poems, and websites, commercial texts and texts written by the author, as well as students—any written texts that will help enlarge the vision of possibilities for the writers' own compositions.

Writer's Notebook (Not Included in All Lessons)

In some cases, brief instruction or prewriting may be necessary to successfully address the given quick write. In such cases, suggestions are provided to prepare for using the quick write. This may include a discussion along with listing, webbing, sharing, or other ways to engage in prethinking and prewriting.

Quick Write Possibilities

This is the heart of each quick write—the actual writing suggestions intended to foster deeper writing. But each quick write is a suggestion only and can be interpreted and modified in many ways by both the teacher and the writers.

The Mentor Texts

This provides a list of texts used in the model lesson.

Additional Resources

This final section identifies additional mentor texts, websites, films, and other resources that may be useful as you prepare for and work with the quick writes.

These quick writes suggest both new ideas and twists on familiar ones. And while they have proven successful with both children and adults, as noted above, they remain *merely suggestions*. It is hoped that as you work with the quick writes, you will make them your own—flexibly, yet judiciously, adjusting both subject and process as necessary for your audience.

I rarely give a quick write that I have not responded to myself. The exception is the first time I give a quick write, and then I write along beside my students or fellow writers. I have written to many of the quick writes numerous times—always producing something new and different from the previous time. If the writing strategies or suggestions are new or less familiar to my students, I may also write in front of them to model before asking them to work on their own.

The quick writes in this book have been tested not only by students over the years in my Title I groups, classrooms, and the Salem Student After-School Writing Project groups, but also by colleagues in the Columbus Area Writing Project and their students, and teachers at Salem School who participated in the Salem Teacher Writing Group and their students, as well as other fellow Columbus City Schools teachers. Together, we have all test-driven and helped determine the current shape of these still changing and growing quick writes.

TEACHERS WRITING

Teachers will find that these quick writes will work well in teacher groups, and I do encourage you to work through the quick writes you will introduce to your student writers. Write with a group of interested teachers, discussing the ways that you each used the quick write to foster writing and ways that it may be adapted, changed, or redesigned to use with your particular group of writers in the classroom.

The quick writes, with only a few exceptions, will work with all levels, Grade 4 through adult. There are several so marked that should only be used with middle and high school levels or above without changing the subject matter—yet even those can be adapted as needed to suit your needs. (See Chapter 5 for more on creating your own quick writes.)

WHY USE MENTOR TEXTS?

Reading is crucial for writers. And reading aloud became critical in my classroom and with adult writing groups, as well. It is through reading what others have written that we are able to visualize directions for our

own writing. It is through reading that we are able to learn about writing, to ask what words, structures, techniques, and strategies the writer has used to achieve her desired effect. As we begin to read like writers, deconstructing texts—*noticing, identifying, and naming* what authors have done, turning the texts inside out—we are able to then easily identify the same features in other books or texts and begin to use those moves in our own writing. We can try on the styles and strategies of the writers we are reading. In this way we are learning to write directly from those who write—the authors of the books and other texts we read.

When using mentor texts, it is helpful to chart with students the techniques and strategies they notice while reading in preparation for writing a particular piece. It is also useful to return to previously read books for strategic purposes. For example, when we are working on writing leads, we might pull out every book we have read so far during the school year to examine only the first sentence or first paragraph and then analyze and list the ways that we could begin, based on what we have discovered. In the case of leads, for example, after investigating multiple texts, our list of possibilities for leads in our own writing may include the following: quote, question, anecdote, surprising fact, memory, and so on.

A mentor text can be a sentence, a picture book, an article or essay, a poem, or a longer work, such as a novel or informational text. It can be any text that we imitate or use as a model for our own writing. These texts are intentionally and carefully chosen. I favor short texts or excerpts because they can easily be used in one sitting, leaving room for several texts to be shared with the feature(s) to be modeled easily identified and discussed, while still having time to write. An appropriate mentor text is well-written, with genre, topic, format, ideas, or structures that clearly model what you are challenging students to do. The ultimate goal is that student writers begin to choose their own mentor texts—that they begin to recognize which texts can help them do what they are trying to do in writing.

For an example of a clear, specific, and structured way to use a mentor text, see the quick write titled “If That’s a Poem: Introducing Mentor Text.” For using mentor texts in a less structured way, see the quick write titled “Where Do You Live?”

WHAT ABOUT SHARING?

Once your writers have begun to write, they will want to share what they have written. They are entitled to both an audience and feedback. Allowing students to share their work provides an affirmation of their ideas and

process, an opportunity to hear what is working in their piece, as well as suggestions for revisions. Allowing students to share also provides models of writing for other students. (You can read more about Read-Around in *Reading, Writing and Rising Up* by Linda Christensen, pp. 14–17.)

In my own classroom, we have several guidelines that serve us well:

- Time may not permit everyone to share, so if you shared the day before we ask you to wait until others have shared.
- You have the right to pass and not share.
- You have the right to receive no feedback or specify the type you would like to receive. (For example, *I would like to hear only what works, or I would like to know if the character description is clear.*)

Prior to our first read-around, I teach language that we can use to respond to writing, model that language extensively, and then guide students' practice. Helpful response language in our classroom includes

- *I like . . .* (words, phrases, sentences, ideas, metaphors, juxtapositions, connections, strategies, etc.)
- *I want to know more about . . .* (call for more details or specificity)
- *I don't understand . . .* (call for clarity)
- *I suggest . . .* (specific suggestion for the writer with examples)
- *I am wondering if . . .* or *I noticed . . .* (general reflection)

Students are encouraged to listen carefully and take brief notes to assist them as they respond to their fellow writers. The entire piece does not have to be shared, particularly with extremely long pieces and limited time. You may want to ask for the best sentence or most powerful sentence or paragraph, or the one that connects to or best follows what was just read by a fellow writer, and so on.

As I mention in my classroom guidelines above, you may want to assure your writers that the writing they produce during quick writes will not be seen by anyone but themselves, unless they choose to share. A technique I have used in the past with students is to fold and staple anything they do not want me to read when I collect their notebooks. This gives them a sense of security. Interestingly, even though it is offered, few students use this option. Most really want you to read everything.

As you begin to use the quick writes in this book, you will develop your own writing community, rules, and rites. The quick writes may be used in the given order or may be chosen based on topic or type of writing. You may find a suggested mentor text that correlates with something you

are working on in your classroom and want to use the accompanying quick write to enrich your current work. However you use them, the quick writes are designed to take you below the surface, beyond the ordinary, and into new writing possibilities. They are designed to lead you and your students into deeper writing.

Overview of the Quick Writes

Chapter	Prompt Title	Topic	Genre or Type of Writing	Levels
1	What you know first	Early memories	Memoir, narrative, essay, poetry	4–12
1	What's in a name?	Power and pain of our name	Narrative, poetry, essay, information report	4–12
1	Where do you live?	Home or important place	Description, memoir, personal essay, history	4–12
1	I know what I know	Ways of knowing	Essay, opinion, narrative	4–12
1	Stones in my pocket	Objects we collect	Personal or descriptive essay, poetry	4–12
1	Whiting stories and boasting poems	Family stories and tall tales	Narrative, research reports, essays, poetry	4–12
1	For better or for worse	Good and bad in life	Descriptive or personal essay	4–12
1	When I was silent	Being silent	Personal essay, memoir, poetry	8–12
1	It was a very good year	Judging a year or time period	Persuasive essay	4–12
1	When I was magic	Magic in our lives	Fictional narrative	4–12
1	What dreams may come	Our dreams	Personal essay, poetry, experimental forms	4–12
2	Seeing things and having new eyes	Seeing common objects in new ways	Description, poetry, personal essays	4–12
2	Who wore the hat?	Questioning object to discover the nature of its uses and its owner	Poetry	6–12 (adapts for 4–5)

(Continued)

(Continued)

Chapter	Prompt Title	Topic	Genre or Type of Writing	Levels
2	Head swivelers	Things we have said that have shocked others	Narrative, personal essay	4–12
2	Horizons	Limits and horizons in our lives	Personal or persuasive essays or letters	4–12
2	Artful reading and writing	Using paintings to inspire writing	Descriptive or reflective essays	4–12
2	Snapshots: Capture the moment	Using photographs to inspire writing	Descriptive, personal, or persuasive essay, poetry	4–12
2	Proverbially speaking: Words to live by	Examining traditional proverbs and sayings	Proverbs, essays, information reports	4–12
2	Opportunity costs	Effects of decisions we make	Poetry, personal essay	4–12
2	The things they carried	Essentials in our lives and the lives of others	Personal or persuasive essay	6–12 (adapts for 4–5)
2	The history we know	Misconceptions about history	Expository or personal essay	4–12
2	The remains of the day	Our common objects as viewed by archaeologists	Satire, scientific report, or article	4–12
2	The Face of reality	Reality TV programs	Persuasive essay, editorial columns, or letters to the editor	4–12
2	Metaphors: Seeing the world in other words	Metaphors	Personal or persuasive essay	4–12
3	Rites and righteous celebrations: Celebrating events in our lives with special words	Remembering and celebrating special events	Speech, poetry	4–12
3	My big words	Power of well-chosen words	Letter to the editor, editorial column, persuasive essay, poetry	4–12
3	Encounters	New people or groups coming together	Narrative, poetry	4–12

Chapter	Prompt Title	Topic	Genre or Type of Writing	Levels
3	Secrets	Secrets in our lives and the lives of others	Personal essay, narrative	4–12
3	The work of our hands	Our hands reveal who we are	Essays, poems	4–12
3	Numbering our village	People in our world	Expository or persuasive essays	4–12
3	Watering our world	Water availability and usage	Persuasive essays	4–12
3	The Bill of Rights	Knowing our constitutional rights	Petitions, editorials or letters to the editor, personal or persuasive essay	4–12
3	Contingency plans	Planning for the unexpected	Contingency plans	4–12
3	Of Thee I Sing	Recognizing noteworthy people and actions	Expository essays	4–12
3	We are America	Defining Americans	Personal and persuasive essays	4–12
4	If that's a poem: Introducing mentor texts	Using mentor texts to help us write	Poetry	4–12
4	What container will hold my words?	Choosing a genre	Revising a previous piece	4–12
4	And I heard them say	Conversations in our writing	Dialogue	4–12
4	The story of my story	Origins of a piece of writing	Reflective essay, multi-genre project	4–12
4	Cumulative poems	Improving our sentences	Sentences, poetry	4–12
4	Where the action is	Using verbs	Poems, narratives	4–12
4	Less is better	Writing using short forms	Short forms such as haiku, flash fiction, six-word memoirs	4–12
4	Comic lives	Creating comics and cartoons	Comics, cartoons	4–12

The act of putting pen to paper encourages pause for thought, this in turn makes us think more deeply about life, which helps us regain our equilibrium.

—Norbert Platt

The greatest part of a writer's time is spent reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book.

—Samuel Johnson

1

Knowledge and Memory

Writing Ourselves

What is your earliest memory?

How do you know what you know?

What objects carry your story?

The quick writes in this section challenge writers to examine themselves, their lives, and their beliefs and to discover the ever changing nature of both memory and knowledge. They can be the genesis of a variety of types of writing:

- memoir
- personal essays
- descriptive essays
- persuasive essays
- narratives
- tall tales
- poetry

What You Know First

Grades 4–12

Memoir, Narrative, Essay, Poetry

Early Memories