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# Introduction

## *Deeper Writing With Quick Writes and Mentor Texts*

**H**ow 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.