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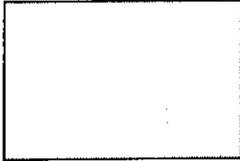
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CURRICULUM ARTICLE

Show-and-Tell:

Journal Writing Every Day: Teachers Say It Really Works!

One of the best things about daily journal writing is that it can take so many forms. Teachers can use journal writing to meet specific goals, or the purpose can be wide open. Some teachers check journal writing and work on polishing skills; others use journals as the one "uncorrected" form of writing that students produce. Some teachers provide prompts to help students begin their writing. Others leave decisions about the direction and flow of student journals up to the students. This week, Education World talked with teachers who use daily journal writing in their classrooms. Included: Writing motivators that work from teachers who use them!

"They have come such a long way in their writing," said teacher Laura Black.

Daily journal writing has helped Black's students at St. Mary Elementary School in Winchester, Massachusetts, progress to the point where "they answer questions in complete sentences, begin sentences with capital letters, and end sentences with periods."

"They are not afraid to take on any writing that may come their way," added Black, "because they have built up extreme confidence."

That's progress any teacher would be proud of -- and Laura Black teaches *first grade!* She credits her students' daily journal writing for their dramatic development.

Black is one of countless teachers who work journal writing into their daily lessons, often with unexpectedly profound results. Journal writing has proven a popular and valuable teaching tool across the grades and across the curriculum.

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Donalee Bowerman, a special-education teacher at Canajoharie Middle School, in Canajoharie, New York, starts each class with a journal writing activity. "It gives my students, who have great difficulty with written language, one time when spelling, punctuation, and grammar don't count," said Bowerman. "This lets them express themselves in writing without the pressure they typically have when doing assignments. It ensures they have one *positive* writing experience each day."

There's a funny thing about journal writing, though -- even when teachers don't check students' responses for spelling and grammar. "I have seen major growth in these children!" said Bowerman. "Many are now restating the questions and using complete sentences and punctuation. Those skills were definitely missing in September!"

"Daily journal writing also gets my students focused on language arts as soon as they walk in the classroom door," Bowerman added. "They know the routine is to get their journals out and start right in."

"They come in every day and immediately write in their journals for the first five minutes," junior-high English teacher Susie Scifres told Education World. "This really helps me get the class calm and ready to transition into that day's activities."

"I've noticed they write more fluently with less 'think' time as the year progresses," added Scifres. That makes sense to her! "I personally know that when I am journal writing on a regular basis, my academic writing tends to flow easier and be better."

SAFE WRITING

At St. Joseph School in Waipahu, Hawaii, JoAnn Jacobs has used journal writing for a number of years. Journal writing has been a real help in developing oral language and speaking skills in her first graders, said Jacobs, adding, "I find it to be a very safe structure for beginning writers. A number of my students begin the school year using illustrations only or illustrations plus a few words. Throughout the year, illustrations are replaced by words, and those who began with a word or two are now writing a page."

"Kids love to write if they feel safe with it," agreed Sharon Powell, a teacher at Northwestern High School in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Over the years, Powell has used journals in grades 4 through 12. "Students feel more free to write if their ideas are not being judged and if they are not afraid they will be marked down for their mistakes. As the year goes by, I see improved thinking and improved writing just from this *safe* practice."

Students can look back at journals written earlier in the year or in

previous years and see the tremendous progress they've made in spelling and writing, added Powell.

Alicia Merrifield uses journals with her eighth-grade reading students. "I often use what is called "Snapshot/Thoughtshot," she said. "I ask students to select the part they are reading at that very moment." Then Merrifield might prompt students' writing with questions such as *What is the most important word or phrase in the section you're reading?* *Why?* or *What are you thinking about at this moment in the book?*

"When reading something, many kids are not going to come out [in a classroom discussion] and say how they feel about what it is they are reading," said Merrifield. "In a journal, they know that it is theirs and that they can freely express themselves. I've learned a lot about my quieter kids through reading their journals."

JOURNALS HELP DEVELOP PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher Julie Kader's fourth-graders at Gibson Island Country School in Pasadena, Maryland, do journal writing every morning from the first day of school to the last. As with most teachers who use journals in the classroom, her students' journals are strictly confidential exercises between teacher and student. "Journal writing enables me to develop a personal relationship with each of my students," said Kader. "I respond to the journal entries every day, so we have sort of an ongoing dialogue.

"The journals provide so much growth in students' writing abilities and use of grammar mechanics while they don't even realize they're working on them," added Kader.

Confidentiality is key to the success of daily journal writing, agreed Robyn Brillman, a language arts teacher at Bennett Academy in Phoenix, Arizona. "I see a two-fold benefit to journal writing," she said. "It provides students an opportunity to improve writing skills and a chance to 'vent' in their writing. As long as the students know that what they write remains confidential, they will share with you amazing things."

"I think journal writing is one of the best ways around to get to know students," said Becky Duncan. She teaches both English and history at Washburn Rural Middle School in Topeka, Kansas. One of her favorite journal writing activities is constructed around her students' reading of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. She has students write about a favorite "Christmas past," about vacation plans for the "Christmas present," and about a "Christmas future."

Because Duncan uses journal writing with her English students, she

told Education World, "I know more about my English students than I ever will about my history students. [In their journals] students have told me things about themselves, their families, and their lives that they never would have said out loud to me."

Cindy Creedon, a computer teacher at World Harvest Christian Academy in Pennsauken, New Jersey, uses journal writing as a means of opening communication between teacher and students. "This is the students' opportunity to talk to an adult with no fear of reprisal," said Creedon. "If they have a problem, they can talk to me about it in total confidence."

"The journal is also a means of getting to know the students outside the school atmosphere -- their likes, dislikes, and dreams," added Creedon.

UNEXPECTED BENEFITS!

Kathy Thomson teaches at S. Bruce Smith School in Edmonton, Alberta. She uses journal writing with older students for novel studies and in math. "However," she told Education World, "the most striking rewards have been in math classes." At the end of each math unit, Thomson asks her students to respond to prompts such as "The hardest concept to learn in this unit was _____ because _____."

Thomson learns things from her students' journal responses that might never come up during class time. "The resulting responses help to make me a more careful teacher the next time," she added.

Kathy Thomson isn't the only teacher who uses journal writing in math class. Barbara Becker's special-needs students at John F. Kennedy High School in Tamuning, Guam (USA), use them too. Becker teaches a concept and then asks students to explain it in their own words (or drawings). Among the prompts she might use with her students:

- I am from another planet and although I now understand numbers, I do not understand (she fills in a concept they've worked on). Please explain it to me.
- You are helping your cousin (little sister, etc) with his or her math. How would you teach (she fills in a concept)?
- She provides a word problem and asks "How would you solve this problem? Tell all of the steps you would do in sequence."

"I feel that this is a great benefit to these particular students as it reinforces the learning and provides them with an opportunity to question their own understanding and that of others," said Becker. "I review the journals and ask the students to share their responses if they would like to. You would be surprised at the number of volunteers."

Sue Jones uses journal writing with her students at the Colorado County Juvenile Facility in Eagle Lake, Texas. One of the exercises she has used is one she calls "Composition Catharsis."

"First, I explain the idea of 'catharsis' to the students," Jones said. "Then I tell them to choose one thing from the past that they regret -- something that can't be changed but that they still worry about.... When they finish writing, I give them the opportunity to rip it up into tiny pieces, symbolically purging the problem from their past, *or* they can turn it in for me to read."

"Many choose to turn in their writing," Jones added, "and I get comments expressing thanks for letting them do such an assignment."

MOTIVATING KIDS TO WRITE

Wendy Townsend teaches at Miami State High School in Queensland, Australia. She uses a five-minute journal writing exercise to start all her Year 8 and 11 English classes. "I give students a range of topics that they can do in any order," said Townsend. "I have a few generic lists, but I often put a special topic on the board that might be linked to some news event or the principal's address to an assembly...."

Teachers can also use journals to cater to individual differences and interests, added Townsend. If a child has a keen interest in surfing, she might provide special prompts for that child, such as *Describe the best wave* or *Who is the better surfer, Mark Ochillupo or Kelly Slater?* or *If you could by any brand of surfboard, which would you buy?* Townsend always looks for students to explain and support their responses in well-organized paragraphs. She checks her students' journals several times each term.

"I don't give the whole class a prompt," said Laura Black. "We do more of a conversation journal; I write something personal to each child and the child responds."

Black might ask simple questions of her first-graders to get them writing -- for example, *What is your address and phone number?* *What did you eat for supper last night?* or *What is your favorite thing to do in school?*

"Some may ask me what to write about," added Black. "I might put stickers in the journal and ask kids to tell me what the sticker reminds them of. Once I put dinosaur stickers in the journals and asked students to tell me what they knew about that particular dinosaur."

Other teachers find that daily quotes are a great tool for getting kids to write!

MORE WRITING PROMPTS

Many teachers are more comfortable providing a daily prompt for students than they are letting them write freely. A prompt might be a

sentence to complete, a question to respond to, or a quote to explain. Below are some teacher-tested prompts guaranteed to motivate your young journal writers!

- If I were the teacher, I would...
- If I could give one piece of advice to any person in history, that advice would be...
- Describe a dream that you had recently. Provide as many details as possible.
- The best lesson my grandparent (or parent or any relative) ever taught me was...
- [on the day after the Grammy Awards are announced.] Do you think the right artists won? Why or why not?
- Tell five things you'd like to do on your next birthday.
- Imagine a friend of yours is considering whether to take steroids. What would you tell that friend to persuade him or her not to do that?
- In 20 years, I will be...
- Tell about an event in your life that has caused a change in you.
- I was most angry when...
- If you could design one room in a house to suit only your needs, what would it look like? (Challenge kids to be as fanciful as they like. For example, would someone have a desk made of chocolate?)
- Describe your perfect vacation.
- My worst mistake was...
- [for high-school students.] Do you believe in love at first sight?
- If you and your best friend could have a free limo for 24 hours, where would you go and what would you do?
- You have the freedom to travel to any city or country in the world. Where would you go and why?
- What would you do if you were president of the United States?
- You have an extra \$100,000 to give away; you cannot spend it on yourself. What would you do with the money?
- The qualities that make a best friend are...
- If you were an insect, what kind would you be and why?
- Describe your room at home in detail. What are you proudest of and why?
- [using a current local controversy] Do you agree with the decision? Why? Would you change if anything? What?

What is *your* favorite journal prompt?

**Education World would like to thank those teachers who shared their favorite journal writing prompts in response to our query on several popular listservs. THANKS! to Alicia Merrifield, Barbara Becker, Becky Duncan, Cindy Creedon, Donalee Bowerman, JoAnn Jacobs, Julie Kader, Kathy Thomson, Laura Black, Leighann M. Klug, Matt Price, Robyn Brillman, Sharon Powell, Sue Jones, Susie Scifres, and XOXO914@aol.com.

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