

First Your Mouth, Then Your Hands: The Power of Write-Alouds

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The beginning of the school year is an exciting time! We work hard planning thoughtful curriculum that creates engaged, skillful, and independent writers. Writing workshop is the most important tool by far in reaching these goals, but even the most seasoned teachers wonder whether writing workshop is enough. Students have diverse strengths and needs. This diversity is part of what makes teaching writing both exciting and daunting. Many teachers ask me for ideas on how to supplement the typical writing workshop to meet the needs of these diverse learners. To that end, here's an exciting tool called write-aloud.

What Is Write-Aloud?

During a keynote at the Literacy For All Conference in Providence, Rhode Island, Lester Laminack, speaking about the importance of students' reading well-crafted picture books, said, "Students need to put it together with their mouths before they put it together with their hands." He could just as easily been speaking about write-aloud. Write-aloud gives all students the opportunity to put well-crafted pieces together with their mouth so that it's easier for them to create similar types of writing with their hands when they are writing independently.

During a write-aloud, you and your students compose a piece of writing together around a shared topic—a topic/story/idea about which the students have the same or almost the same knowledge as you do. It could be something that has recently happened in the classroom, a class field trip, or information about the school or class pet. What it shouldn't be is something only you know; if it is, the kids can't contribute in any meaningful way. And it doesn't need to be an exciting story or fancy information—the simplest topics are often best. One teacher I worked with had great results asking her students to help her recount how she spilled juice when they were eating their snack. The topic was focused, simple, and important to the kids.

The goal of write-aloud is not mechanics (that's the role of shared/interactive writing) but composition. Students listen to and watch you as you write aloud, noticing your thinking strategies. Most important, the students join you in the writing process.

They think about and then practice out loud sentence structures that are part of the genre they are composing. The hope, of course, is that doing this out loud becomes a stepping stone to doing similar work on their own.

Below is a snippet of a write-aloud I conducted in Trisha O'Brien's classroom in which the students and I plan and develop a main character named Samantha. Prior to this write-aloud, we had brainstormed different words to describe Samantha. Later, I reviewed our brainstormed list and made the following executive decisions: Samantha is eight (the same age as most of the students, so they can use their knowledge about being eight), and she is bossy but secretly yearns for friends. In the Explanation margin, notice what I do to ensure the write-aloud is successful.

A Write-Aloud Model

What Happens in the Classroom	Explanation
Me: Today we're going to begin developing Samantha. We're going to think of some of the things she might do if she truly is bossy but wants friends. For example, if she is bossy I can imagine this sentence in the story: "Samantha grabbed all of the pencils from the middle of the table." That shows she's bossy, doesn't it? I don't know if that exact sentence will end up in our story, but it makes sense, right?	I start by modeling a structurally complex sentence, so the students have an example of what they are about to try.
Now, I want you to try doing what I just did. Turn and talk to the person next to you and practice aloud some action sentences that would make sense in our story about bossy Samantha.	By asking for entire sentences rather than single words, I prompt students to practice saying more complex sentences out loud. This helps them write more complex sentences in the future. (Oral practice like this especially benefits English language learners.)
<i>[While the students turn and talk, I help various partnerships structure different types of action sentences.</i>	Who I confer with depends on what I know about each student and the type of scaffolding I believe they need.
<i>Then I get everyone's attention.</i>] Okay, let's share some of your action sentences. Bill: "Samantha pushed kids out of the way because she wanted a pony poster." Me: That sentence would really make sense in a chapter called "The Book Fair." Perhaps Samantha and her class could be attending a book fair and Samantha sees a poster and being the bossy girl she is, pushes her friends Emily and Katie out of the way because she thinks she should have the poster. Listen to the	To make sure not just one or two of my best students participate, I ask the rest of the kids to turn to a partner and practice someone's exact suggestion or a similar one.

sentence again: “Samantha pushed kids out of the way to try and get to the poster first.” Is that a good way to say your sentence, Bill?

Bill: Yes

Me: Would that make sense? Does that show she’s a bit bossy? [*Kids yell yes.*] Turn to a neighbor and let’s practice this part of the story using some action words. Perhaps the story could start something like this: “One fall morning Ms. Miller’s class was very excited. They could not stop looking at the clock, because they knew that at 10:15 they were going to the book fair. Finally the time came and Samantha and her class walked down the hall to the book fair. When they walked in, there was a big, beautiful pony poster.” What kinds of actions might happen next with our character Samantha? Practice the exact words aloud as you imagine they might sound in that chapter. You can try out Bill’s action sentence or you can invent your own action sentence.

[*Students turn and talk, and I again scaffold various attempts.*]

Now, who’d like to say their action sentences out loud?

Peter: “Samantha pushes Emma and Katie away and runs towards the poster with money in her hand to buy it.”

Me: Would that make sense? Say Peter’s idea to a partner. Does it make sense? [*I jot notes in my notebook as kids practice Peter’s sentence.*] Anyone else?

Kara: “Samantha sees a beautiful pony poster. She doesn’t want anyone else to have it so she pushes her friends Emma and Katie out of the way so that she can be the first in line to buy it.”

Paul: “Samantha sees a pony poster she’s always wanted. She pushes her friends Emma and Katie out of the way and says, ‘Get out of my way! That pony poster has my name written on it.’” [*I jot notes in my notebook so that I don’t forge Kara’s and Paul’s sentences.*]

Interesting, Paul. You practiced not only what Samantha might do if she is bossy but also what she might say. Some of these sentences could very well end up in our class story. I’m writing all of your ideas in my notebook and will later put them on our planning page.

I take notes on what the students say and chart their responses later. That way, I can focus on getting every student to practice new and varied sentence structures. (Making the chart during the write-aloud session isn’t necessarily wrong, but it can distract you from the more important job of helping all students practice different types of sentences aloud. If you have a co-teacher or an assistant, one of you can make the chart while the other helps students practice literary language.)

How Can I Incorporate Write-Aloud Into My Instruction?

There are a number of options for using write-aloud in the classroom:

- Separate it from the writing workshop. Many teachers have a time each day when they read aloud with their kids in order to practice the comprehension strategies they’ll need while reading independently during reading workshop. It’s equally valid to have kids practice the composing strategies they’ll use when writing independently during writing workshop.

- Use it to introduce a writing unit of study. Many teachers begin writing genre studies by immersing their students in lots of examples of the genre being studied. One way to do this is to conduct a write-aloud. Writing in a particular genre with their classmates before trying it on their own gives students the confidence and skills they need when they attempt the genre independently. For kids who are really struggling, being able to mirror the write-aloud may be the starting point they need. Also, the class chart based on the write-aloud can be referred to throughout the study.
- Use a previous write-aloud piece to teach important concepts in minilessons and conferences. In a minilesson on revising beginnings, for example, you could have the kids try out new beginnings for a piece the class has previously created together. In conferences, the previous piece is an even more powerful mentor text than one written by a published author (it's more childlike and less intimidating).
- Use it during small-group instruction. We choose a text for a guided reading group, introduce it, and ask all the kids in the group to read it, our intention being to give kids a challenging but successful reading experience. In this same way, write-aloud is the perfect model to use with a guided writing group. Gather the group together and remind the kids of the work the class has done on an earlier write-aloud piece. Then ask each member of the group to write her or his own version in order to prompt a challenging but successful writing experience.

Write-aloud is an exciting way to help all your students, especially English language learners, say it well in order to be able to write it well. It is incredibly transformative teaching, especially when paired with a strong writing workshop. Try it and watch your students' speaking, writing, and confidence soar.

About the Author

Leah Mermelstein taught both in Massachusetts and in New York City before becoming a staff developer at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. An internationally recognized literacy consultant who specializes in K-5 reading and writing, Leah is the coauthor of *Launching the Writing Workshop* (with Lucy Calkins), *Reading/Writing Connections in the K-2 Classroom: Find the Clarity and Then Blur the Lines*, and *Don't Forget to Share: The Crucial Last Step in the Writing Workshop*. Leah will be presenting at the November Literacy for All conference in Providence, RI.