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Writing About Fiction

Writing is the means through which students are able to articulate complex fictional themes and synthesize concepts. Writing is a tool that students can use to understand and dissect common themes and characteristics of fiction, allowing them to express their understanding through writing. It is a tool that allows students to translate complex ideas into words and language they understand.

There is an overemphasis on writing mechanics instead of using writing to assist comprehension and understanding (Fisher and Frey 2004). Evidence shows academic achievement increases when students are actively engaged in reading, thinking, and writing about what they are learning.

Research shows that there are two forms of writing that need to take place across all subject matters being taught. One form is called *writing to learn*, and the other form is *learning to write*. Anne Walker (1988) explains that the two forms are parts of a virtual circle. Writing allows students to become active in their learning. Active learning requires active thinking. In order to write, students need to be actively thinking (Steffens 1988; Walker 1988). A teacher who works as a facilitator of knowledge will encourage deeper thinking, therefore increasing student understanding (Self 1987; Hamilton-Wieler 1989).

Does Writing About Fiction Improve Student Achievement?

Mary Barr and Mary Healy (1988) state that “schools succeed when the emphasis by both teachers and students is on writing and thinking about relevant and significant ideas within the subject areas,” including language arts. Encouraging students to write about literature is crucial to their literacy development, especially in consideration of the fact that “colleges are consistently reporting that incoming students have weaker reading and writing skills than the freshman classes before them...and findings also show that our children are not demonstrating writing skills that will allow them to eventually perform well in the workplace” (Allyn 2013, 10). Writing about fiction will aid students in developing the literacy skills they need to communicate their understanding for college and beyond. And with the evolving needs of today’s learners and the variety of multigenre, multimodal texts they will encounter—many of which may include informational texts about fiction—“the ability and propensity to read and understand nonfiction is a necessary skill for students involved in inquiry and research,” marking the act of writing across the curriculum as a necessity to students’ success outside the classroom (Harvey 1998, 69).



Writing About Fiction *(cont.)*

Is there enough time to write and cover all the objectives and demands of the curriculum? Research shows that writing can help meet those objectives and demands. Here are three time-saving advantages to consider (Worsley and Mayer 1989; Hightshue et al. 1988; Self 1987):

- Teachers find that they need less review time if students write about the concepts.
- Teachers spend less time reteaching content after testing if they have incorporated writing strategies in the curriculum.
- Most writing does not need to be heavily graded, so the teacher’s workload is decreased.

Ideas and Questions to Consider

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2004) explain that learning is language-based. Telling students information is not sufficient. Students must think about, read about, talk about, and write about information in order to synthesize it and to retain it. Reading and writing are critical to all learning. Questions to ask about how to incorporate reading and writing into all areas of learning are suggested by Hefflin and Hartman (2002):

- How do you determine what to write about?
- What is the goal and the purpose of the writing?
- How will the writing be assessed?
- What is being activated or constructed by the writing?
- What supports the bridge between what students write and read?
- What role does discussion play in preparing to write?
- What role does discussion play during writing?
- How will you know the writing activity or assignment is successful?
- How will you know when to use which writing strategy?

Writing to Learn

Writing helps create the bridge between the content knowledge and understanding. Reading from the textbook and answering the questions is a very passive way to learn and not engaging for today’s learners. A wide variety of writing assignments and activities can help students become actively engaged in fictional texts and fictional writing. Examples include fiction journals, free writes, vocabulary journals, topic analyses, diagrams, and charts. All of these writing formats encourage students to think about fiction and connect prior knowledge or experiences with new learning.



Writing About Fiction *(cont.)*

Writing to learn is expressive writing that encourages students to write about what they are thinking and learning. Examples of this type of writing are journal entries, reflections, reading responses, question-answering, personal notations, etc.

Not all writing-to-learn activities must be graded. Teachers should offer feedback and comments but should not feel compelled to grade the spelling, grammar, organization, and content of these writing activities. The purpose of writing-to-learn activities is to promote active learning, encourage discussion, engage all students, and encourage thinking. There is usually a required time set aside to complete the writing. These less formal writing assignments may be expanded into more formal assignments.

Writing to Apply

When students use their new knowledge of fiction and the themes and ideas within fictional texts to write in a more formal manner, they are writing to apply. In these activities, students are asked to analyze and synthesize information and then communicate their thoughts in a coherent, organized manner. This type of writing can be more challenging for students because they need to not only understand the content and be able to process it at a higher level but also communicate it using the strategies of the writing process, the features of the chosen genre, and the conventions of the grade level. Teachers are most likely comfortable with this type of writing as it may have been what they were exposed to in school.

One familiar example of this type of writing is a research report. However, there are many other options to consider: microthemes, friendly letters, business letters, fictional stories, and more.

Unlike writing-to-learn activities, writing-to-apply activities are meant to be graded. With these assignments, students are showing what they have learned, demonstrating their capability to communicate in a formal writing format. A variety of assessment options are described in Part 3 of this book.

Assessing Student Writing

To be effective in communicating their learning through writing, students need ongoing feedback throughout the writing process in order to develop their ideas and revise their written work. And in the same way that the writing process occurs in phases, assessment of written work should similarly occur in phases as an ongoing, collaborative process with students. Assessment of student writing can take many different shapes, including providing students with clear, straightforward rubrics to assess and guide their final work, and more informal feedback in the form of conferring with students and comments on written work.



Writing About Fiction *(cont.)*

Rubrics

Students' writing should be formally assessed at the end of the writing process as students submit final, polished pieces that demonstrate their understanding of concepts and topics related to fiction. Providing students with straightforward rubrics that clearly lay out your expectations is effective in sharing which components of students' writing will be evaluated and each component's quantifiable importance. In doing so, you inform students which pieces of their writing hold the greatest significance for that particular assignment and which skills they should focus on most. However, in order to create a well-crafted rubric, you must first identify the learning objectives of the assignment and how much weight to give to each component on the rubric.

Consider evaluating students' mastery of content knowledge and students' writing skills in different categories, allowing for you to both evaluate how well they understand the concept being investigated through writing and how well they articulate their understanding through their written work. As appropriate to the assignment, assign each category (e.g., Ideas, Audience, Structure, Thematic Understanding) a quantifiable value (e.g., 1–10 or A–F) that students understand and skills that students are prepared to demonstrate (e.g., *Strong audience awareness; Engages the reader throughout*). Distribute rubrics to students to support them as they set out to begin a writing task, continuing to refer to your expectations throughout the writing process as they work toward completing the assignment. This way, you reiterate your expectations and support students' growth as writers in a very clear and straightforward manner in which skills and expectations are both attainable and quantifiable.

Informal Feedback

After distributing rubrics and thoroughly discussing your expectations for a particular assignment, confer with your student writers during the writing process to provide them with an informal setting to workshop their writing and to improve their written communication prior to evaluating their final work.

Conferring

Conferring with students is a form of assessment that is interactive, and the immediacy of your verbal feedback is invaluable to students' development as writers. Ask students about their work, their ideas, their understanding of fiction-related concepts, and their grasp of the conventions of writing, among other questions. Model for students the best strategies for editing and revising their work. Whether conferring with students individually or in small groups, constructively critique students' writing by acknowledging areas in which students have met or are working toward meeting your expectations and areas that need improvement, being mindful to not overload students with excessive, unfocused comments. Your informal feedback should guide students in the direction of meeting the criteria for the assignment but not to the point where revising their work seems like an impossible task. Allow students to maintain ownership of their work by suggesting "options or open-ended alternatives students can choose for their revision path" (University of Nebraska–Lincoln Writing Center 2013). In doing so, students learn both to assess their own writing and to revise accordingly. Conferring with the young writers in your classroom is crucial to their development and growth as writers.



Writing About Fiction *(cont.)*

Written Comments

As students work toward meeting the expectations for a particular writing assignment, reviewing their drafts and providing them with specific and focused feedback is vital to their success in conveying their fictional knowledge through writing. When reviewing students' drafts, making notes on their work may prove effective in identifying specific areas in need of improvement (e.g., marking misspelled words, grammatical errors, or unclear and unfinished thoughts). Identifying these areas of improvement will inform your instruction, allowing you to modify your explicit teaching of the writing strategies in order to help students become better writers. Apart from specific feedback, you can evaluate the written work as a whole (e.g., writing comments at the end of a paper), with less focus on particulars and more emphasis on the overall success of the written piece in meeting the expectations identified in the rubric.

Spotlight Reading

Providing students with informal feedback can be an enjoyable moment, as well, one in which students are excited to share their work with the class. Set aside a time each week for students to read aloud and share the writing they have accomplished or are working on. These writings may be less formal pieces such as journals, free writes, or feature analyses, or they may be formal writing pieces like essays. This practice keeps students focused and aware of an audience as they write, and it allows them the opportunity to give and receive feedback. It is an effective way to validate the hard work and effort of students and may even eliminate the need for the teacher to formally assess a piece of writing. Finally, this spotlight reading also provides an opportunity for students to hear their writing aloud. They will automatically think of things they are learning about, and they will become more aware of what they need to change to improve their writing.

How to Use This Book

The focus of this research-based book is to demonstrate how to incorporate more writing into your classroom. Increasing the use of writing is a key way to promote stronger literacy in students. Research shows that using writing is the best way to help students understand the complex concepts and terms introduced in fictional texts. This book provides teachers with the information needed to implement writing activities and assignments that correlate with objectives and goals. The strong research connection in this book helps tie together what teachers actually do in the classroom with the most current research available.

Each section opens with an overview of research in that area to emphasize the importance of that particular writing strategy. Following each skill overview is a variety of instructional writing strategies to improve students' written abilities. Each strategy includes a description and the purpose of the strategy and the research basis. Following the strategy descriptions are grade-level examples of how the strategy applies to fiction. The grade level spans for which the strategy is most appropriate (1–2, 3–5, 6–8, or 9–12) and the language arts standards that are addressed are included. Suggestions for differentiating instruction are provided for English language learners, below- and above-level students. A blank template of the activity sheet is included as a reproducible where applicable as well as on the accompanying Digital Resource CD. Reproducibles are available on the Digital Resource CD in PDF form and often as Word documents to allow for customization of content and text for students of diverse abilities and needs.

Part 1: Writing to Learn

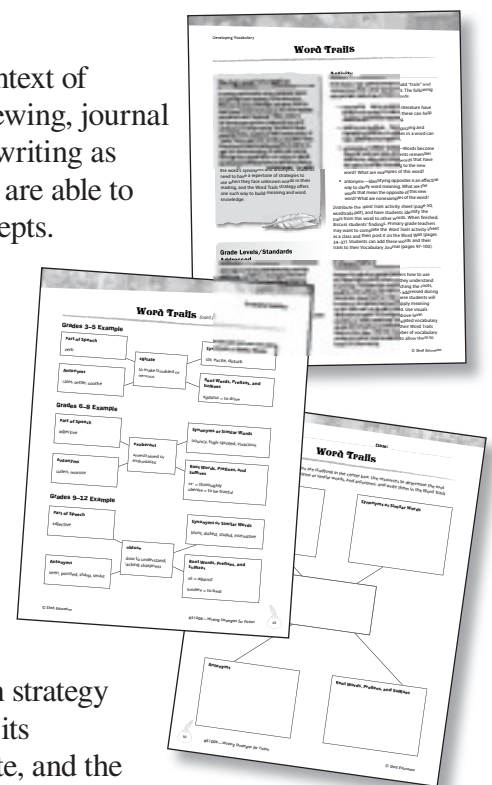
This section is composed of strategies for using writing to learn in the context of fictional texts. These include developing vocabulary, previewing and reviewing, journal writing, note-taking, and using diagrams and maps. These strategies use writing as a tool for students to process and personalize what they learn so that they are able to synthesize and break down the complex fictional characteristics and concepts.

Part 2: Writing to Apply

This section offers strategies for using writing to apply new knowledge: authoring, summarizing, and applying knowledge in all genres. These strategies provide opportunities to utilize the entire writing process to compose a piece of writing that incorporates their knowledge of fiction-related concepts. Teachers may wish to use strategies from Part 1 as building blocks for working toward these application assignments.

Part 3: Assessing Writing

This section describes several holistic assessment options for writing. Each strategy listed in the book includes the purpose for and benefits of the strategy and its connection to writing and fiction, the grade levels for which it is appropriate, and the McREL and Common Core standards that it meets. A step-by-step activity description follows, along with variations, if appropriate, and differentiated instruction to accommodate all types of students. These alterations and suggestions are written for English language learners, above-level students, and students who are reading and writing below grade level.



Note-Taking Overview

Note-taking is a crucial skill for students in upper-elementary grades and beyond. High school and college students do a significant amount of note-taking during classes and while reading, so it makes sense for this skill to be taught to our younger students, as well. Teachers often ask students to take notes or copy modeled notes during a lecture. Some ask for notes as evidence of completing assigned independent reading. Additionally, notes can be useful as a review tool before an assessment.

Note-taking is also an important research skill, as it provides a system for organizing information. As students read various research sources, they must extract the larger overarching ideas and the supporting details. If students are to apply this information in a meaningful way, they must arrange the information in such a way that makes sense. Otherwise, the notes are simply a laundry list of random information. By providing instruction on effective note-taking systems, teachers can help their students become more efficient researchers.

It is important to note that this skill needs to be taught with a clear explanation, teacher modeling, guided practice, and explicit feedback. As with any other strategy, students must reach a level of proficiency before they are expected to use the strategy independently. Teachers can employ the same instructional strategies that are effective when teaching other skills: display the selection with a document camera, conduct a think-aloud as the main ideas and details are identified, model how to use the designated note-taking strategy on chart paper or with a document camera, and ask for student assistance to complete the notes. Upper-elementary students may need the notes scaffolded for them, with some of the information filled in, in order to develop a useful set of notes.

Teachers can make the connection between reading and writing explicit by discussing how text structures are mirrored between the two. Students who are familiar with various text structures will be better able to learn and use the note-taking strategies. For example, a narrative text with several prominent themes may lend itself well to a strategy such as a T-List, where main ideas are listed in one column and the corresponding details are listed in the other. Additionally, a fictional text that describes a series of events may be better suited to the Note-Taking System for Learning, where each event has a section within the outline. Teachers may want to introduce one of these strategies immediately following a reading lesson on main idea or plot sequence. In this way, teachers can provide an authentic opportunity for students to apply that “reading” skill to a “writing” strategy.

To extend the value of note-taking, teachers can show students how to use their notes to apply new knowledge to a writing activity. Well-organized notes are an excellent foundation for a well-written assignment. Teachers can remind students to make use of their notes to begin a piece of writing, as they serve as an effective prewriting strategy. Again, this can show students the connection between reading and writing.



Note-Taking Overview *(cont.)*

Standards Addressed

The following chart shows the correlating standards for each strategy in this section. Refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Strategy	McREL Standards	Common Core State Standards
Cornell Note-Taking System	Grades 3–5 (4.7) Grades 6–8 (4.5) Grades 9–12 (4.6)	Grade 3 (W.3.8) Grade 4 (W.4.8) Grade 5 (W.5.8) Grade 6 (W.6.8) Grade 7 (W.7.8) Grade 8 (W.8.8) Grades 9–10 (W.9–10.8) Grades 11–12 (W.11–12.8)
Note-Taking System for Learning	Grades 3–5 (4.7) Grades 6–8 (4.5) Grades 9–12 (4.6)	Grade 3 (W.3.8) Grade 4 (W.4.8) Grade 5 (W.5.8) Grade 6 (W.6.8) Grade 7 (W.7.8) Grade 8 (W.8.8) Grades 9–10 (W.9–10.8) Grades 11–12 (W.11–12.8)
T-List	Grades 3–5 (4.7) Grades 6–8 (4.5) Grades 9–12 (4.6)	Grade 3 (W.3.8) Grade 4 (W.4.8) Grade 5 (W.5.8) Grade 6 (W.6.8) Grade 7 (W.7.8) Grade 8 (W.8.8) Grades 9–10 (W.9–10.8) Grades 11–12 (W.11–12.8)
Sticky Note Annotation System	Grades 3–5 (4.7) Grades 6–8 (4.5) Grades 9–12 (4.6)	Grade 3 (CCRA.W.9, W.3.8) Grade 4 (W.4.8, W.4.9) Grade 5 (W.5.8, W.5.9) Grade 6 (W.6.8, W.6.9) Grade 7 (W.7.8, W.7.9) Grade 8 (W.8.8, W.8.9) Grades 9–10 (W.9–10.8, W.9–10.9) Grades 11–12 (W.11–12.8, W.11–12.9)



Cornell Note-Taking System

Background Information

The Cornell Note-Taking System (Pauk 1988) strategy teaches students how to effectively take notes during a language arts lecture. This strategy teaches students to take clean notes and to organize the notes for the best study options later. The Cornell Note-Taking Strategy encourages students to summarize important points while they take notes and then categorize this information into main ideas and details. It requires a lot of practice time for students. Teach the Cornell Note-Taking System by modeling or practicing each day and slowly incorporating the different stages of the system.



are recorded. Before beginning a lecture, explain that students should focus on the Notes column. Remind students that they should paraphrase the information and not try to write down their notes verbatim. Encourage them to use abbreviations or phrases and to write down the big ideas when taking notes. Students may need to skip lines to leave room for adding information later. Discuss the notes from the lecture and the different ways that students can record this information. Remind students to focus on the main ideas and key terms of the content and to not get bogged down with too many details. After the lecture, instruct students to read through their Notes and write down key points or terms in the Recall column. These key words or phrases will help them recall the main idea of each section of notes without having to read through the whole Notes section. Remind students to review their notes each day to place the information into long-term memory.

Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 119 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Variation

When students are finished, have them use their Notes to write questions about the material that might be asked on future tests. Or instruct students to cover up the Notes side and use the cue words on the Recall side to describe the details of each concept. Students can verify what they have recited by uncovering the Notes column and checking their work.

Stage of Writing Process

Prewrite

Activity

Create or designate a notebook for the *Cornell Note-Taking System* activity sheet (page 122, [cornellsystem.pdf](#)) so that sheets can be added or removed. Instruct students to write on only one side of the paper. The right-hand side is the Notes column for notes taken during the lecture. The left-hand side is the Recall column, where key words or phrases that summarize the notes

Differentiation

When working with English language learners, scaffold the Notes page by providing some of the main ideas to help these students preview the information and shape their focus for the lecture. Challenge above-level students to add diagrams, maps, and charts in the notes column to visually portray important concepts. For below-level students, preview the main ideas of the lecture and explain how to identify important as well as extraneous information. This discussion will help these students organize and understand their notes and cement information taught during the lecture.



Gornell Note-Taking System *(cont.)*

Grades 3–5 Example

Topic: inferences

Recall	Notes
<p>Inferences are conclusions drawn from the text.</p> <p>Inferences are not obvious or stated in the text.</p> <p>Inferences help the reader understand the text better.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • readers make inferences by combining information in the text with personal background knowledge or experiences • readers have to make inferences to understand main ideas or themes • inferences are not ideas or facts stated outright in a text • readers make inferences about characters' thoughts, opinions, and actions • inferences can also be thought of as conclusions drawn from the text

Grades 6–8 Example

Topic: Greek or Latin root words

Recall	Notes
<p>Greek and Latin root words can help the reader understand the meaning of new vocabulary words.</p> <p>Words that share common roots often have similar definitions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • many of our words in the English language come from Greek or Latin • Greek and Latin roots help the reader understand the meaning of new words • words that share common Greek or Latin roots often share similar meanings • learning about root words helps you understand the origin of the word and how it came to have its present-day meaning • root words can be combined with knowledge about prefixes and suffixes to determine meaning

Grades 9–12 Example

Topic: hyperbole

Recall	Notes
<p>Hyperboles are figures of speech that use exaggeration to communicate a point.</p> <p>Hyperboles are often used for emphasis but can also be used to add humor to writing.</p> <p>Hyperboles help the reader visualize or imagine a certain aspect of the story.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an exaggerated figure of speech • not meant to be taken literally • can be used to add humor to the text • makes writing more engaging for the reader • used to communicate a point indirectly • used to create imagery • helps the reader visualize the character, setting, or situation • often used with similes and metaphors when comparing two unlike things



Name: _____ Date: _____

Gornell Note-Taking System

Directions: During a lecture, take notes in the Notes column, using short phrases and abbreviations. After the lecture, review your notes and write the key points in the Recall column.

Topic: _____

Recall	Notes



Author's Chair

Background Information

The Author's Chair strategy (Karelitz 1982; Boutwell 1983; Calkins 1983; Graves 1983; Graves and Hansen 1983) provides student writers with feedback on their writing. It has also been called *peer conferencing*. Researchers and educators continue to confirm the strong connections between reading and writing and between authors and readers. The focus of the Author's Chair strategy is to provide feedback to students on their writing: acknowledging its good qualities, making specific suggestions for improvement, and asking thought-provoking questions of the student authors. This strategy provides the guidance necessary for students to strengthen their writing through the integration of thoughts, suggestions, and criticisms provided by their peers and other adults in a supportive environment.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 164 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Revise

Activity

Ask students to select a writing piece, and place them in groups of no more than four. Give each group the following tasks:

- Students take turns reading their pieces of writing aloud.
- Group members listen intently and share their feedback.
- Once all members of the group have shared their writing and received feedback, instruct students to compare their work to other published texts. How does their writing compare with professional writers? What can be learned about writing from professional writers? What can be learned about how the authors structure and organize their writing?
- Allow time for students to edit and revise their writing. Students can use this time to incorporate into their writing suggestions from peers as well as ideas from professional writers. If time permits, allow small groups to meet again and repeat the strategy.

Variation

With primary grade students, conduct the strategy as a whole class. Choose one or two students to read their writing pieces to the class, and then ask the class to provide feedback. Remind students to offer specific comments.



Author's Chair *(cont.)*

Differentiation

Hold individual writing conferences with English language learners and below-level students to provide direct instruction and specific feedback. Consider using a lower-level text as a model so that the reading level does not hinder their abilities to analyze writing qualities. These students can join groups when it is time to peruse language arts materials and texts. Group above-level students with others who will challenge their writing skills. Ask them to share the techniques they learned from reviewing the professional writing and how they plan to incorporate these techniques into their own writing.

Grades 1–2 Example

Student Writing Sample:

Once upon a time, a mean old witch lived in a hidden cave. She slept all day. She only came out at night to scare little kids. One day, a small girl found the witch sleeping in her cave. She was not afraid at all. She walked into the cave and yelled, "Hello!" This scared the sleeping witch and she jumped. The witch learned that it was not fun to be scared like that. So she decided she would not scare little kids anymore. Then she was a nice witch.

Class Comments:

- Student 1:** I think it is good that you started with "Once upon a time" because the story reminds me of a fairy tale.
- Student 2:** I think you could find a more interesting word to describe the witch than mean. What about evil or mischievous?
- Student 3:** I think you should add a little more detail to the last sentence. How did she act as a nice witch?
- Student 4:** I like how it was a young girl that taught the witch the lesson.

Author's Chair *(cont.)*

Grades 3–5 Example

Student Writing Sample:

In the small town of Yuka, a little boy named Sam lived with his mother, father, and older sister. They lived in a little log cabin in the woods because they did not have very much money. Sam's mother, father, and sister worked hard all day planting vegetables, cutting trees for firewood, and hunting birds and squirrels. Sam did not like to work, though. He just liked to climb up into a tree and daydream about imaginary people and places.

Class Comments:

- Student 1:** I like the way you start your story by introducing the setting and characters.
- Student 2:** I think the second sentence needs clarification. Where would they rather live if they had more money? Some people choose to live in log cabins in the woods even if they do have lots of money.
- Student 3:** You did a good job setting up the conflict. I can tell that Sam's tendency to daydream and not helping with the work will be a big problem in the story. The way you structured the opening paragraph makes me want to keep reading and find out what happens next.

Grades 6–8 Example

Student Writing Sample:

The lights dimmed in the theater, and the movie flickered to life on the screen. I could smell the popcorn and hear the rustling of many people in the seats around me. A young girl giggled in the row behind me, and someone coughed quietly up in front. My friend Sarah sat beside me, contentedly popping candy into her mouth and humming along with the opening music. I had never felt so alone in my entire life.

Class Comments:

- Student 1:** You did a great job describing the setting for the opening of your story. I like all the details you included about the movie theater. Your description was very realistic.
- Student 2:** I loved your opening paragraph! The imagery you used to describe the movie theater was very realistic; I felt like I was actually sitting there with the narrator. I also like the irony of the last sentence. I definitely want to read the rest of your story!
- Student 3:** I like the way you started this paragraph, but I think you could add even more details and examples to make of the last sentence more sarcastic. Maybe you could mention something about the sense of touch, like the close proximity of the people around you.



Author's Chair *(cont.)*

Grades 9–12 Example

Student Writing Sample:

I have always lived in the shadow of my older sister. My first memory is of following her around the yard, picking up the flower petals she dropped as she pretended to be a flower girl in a wedding. Now, 30 years later, things haven't changed very much. Just last week I found myself at her house, picking up her jacket and shoes as she casually discarded them on the floor upon arriving home from work. This is how things have always been with us and probably always will be. At least that is what I thought when I woke up this morning. After the events of today though, I'm not so sure.

Class Comments:

Student 1: I think your paragraph is well organized because you start with a broad statement and then give examples to support it.

Student 2: I like how your opening paragraph leads the reader to go down one train of thought (you've always lived in your sister's shadow) and then, right at the end, you make the reader reevaluate this belief.

Student 3: I like the structure of your paragraph, but I think your opening sentence could be a little stronger. Is there a way that you could rephrase it without using the passive voice?



Portfolio Assessment

Background Information

The Portfolio Assessment strategy is a longitudinal tool used to assess the development of students' writing skills over a period of time. When using this assessment strategy, students compile a collection of personal writing samples from a specific period of learning (e.g., grading period, literature unit) and then choose the pieces that they want to include in their portfolio. Students complete written reflections for each piece, outlining the purpose the piece plays in the portfolio, and then the teacher assesses the portfolio using students' writing samples and reflections. This assessment technique gives students the decision-making power to choose which pieces will be included in the portfolio, thereby fostering student ownership over their writing (Genesee and Upshur 1996). Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of this assessment strategy allows students to demonstrate how their writing skills have grown over time and understand that they are assessed on their progress rather than the final writing product.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 226 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Reflection



Activity

In order to use the Portfolio Assessment strategy, students must first compile a collection of writing samples over the course of a designated time period. For younger students, it may be easier for the teacher to keep these collections in student folders in the classroom while older students compile their own collections. Once students have collected a series of writing samples, explain that they need to choose a set number of pieces (e.g., five) upon which they will be assessed. Encourage students to choose the pieces that they feel showcase their best writing samples. If students have samples that include multiple drafts, ask them to include all of the drafts as evidence of their writing improvement and progress. The teacher may also choose to add other guidelines for selecting writing samples (e.g., students must choose one piece of writing from each genre). Once students have chosen the pieces to include, they complete the *Student Writing Sample Reflection* activity sheet (page 241, writingreflection.pdf) for each piece, explaining their reasoning behind choosing this particular piece. The portfolio is then assessed by the teacher using the *Portfolio Assessment* activity sheet (page 242, portfolioassessment.pdf). If possible, provide students with the opportunity to share their portfolios with their peers, teachers, and parents through student-led conferences.

Differentiation

Make sure that English language learners understand the guidelines for choosing portfolio writing samples, and provide them with samples of the type of work that they should include. It may also be helpful for these students to work with a partner to choose the pieces for their portfolio so they can practice discussing their reasoning before they complete the reflections. Above-level students should be challenged to critically evaluate their own work and to provide evidence of learning and improvement through their portfolio. Below-level students may need assistance in choosing pieces for their portfolio and completing the written reflections. Individual or small-group conferences with the teacher will help guide these students through the process.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Student Writing Sample Reflection

Author's Name: _____

Writing Assignment: _____

1. I chose this writing assignment because...

2. Two things I want others to notice about my writing include...

3. This piece of writing shows improvement or progress because...

4. I have/have not chosen to revise this piece because...

5. The next time I complete a similar writing assignment, my goal will be to...

Name: _____ Date: _____

Portfolio Assessment

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Teacher Name: _____

Criteria	Improvement Needed	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Excellent
1. The portfolio includes the correct number and type of writing samples.				
2. The portfolio includes a reflection for each writing sample.				
3. The portfolio is well organized/well presented.				
4. The student consistently strives to improve writing.				
5. The portfolio reveals student improvement and progress in writing.				
6. The portfolio shows evidence of personal reflection.				
7. The student demonstrates awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses.				

Teacher Comments:

