



Writing Today

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

JoAnn Wong-Kam and Vivian Vasquez, Coeditors

Contributors: Donald Graves, Penny Kittle, Monica McLaren, and Lisa Cleaveland

A Look at the Field of Writing in a Changing World

Our children are growing up in a world very different from the one we knew. They are exposed to more information in one year than their grandparents were exposed to in their entire lifetimes (Thornburg, 2002). Technological advances have brought new tools into the hands of our students—handheld computers, cell phones, video games, and digital cameras, to name a few. People can communicate easily with friends or family anywhere and anytime using cell phones, e-mail, or text messaging. But what effect are these new advances having on the way children think and write? How has writing workshop changed in response to today's world?

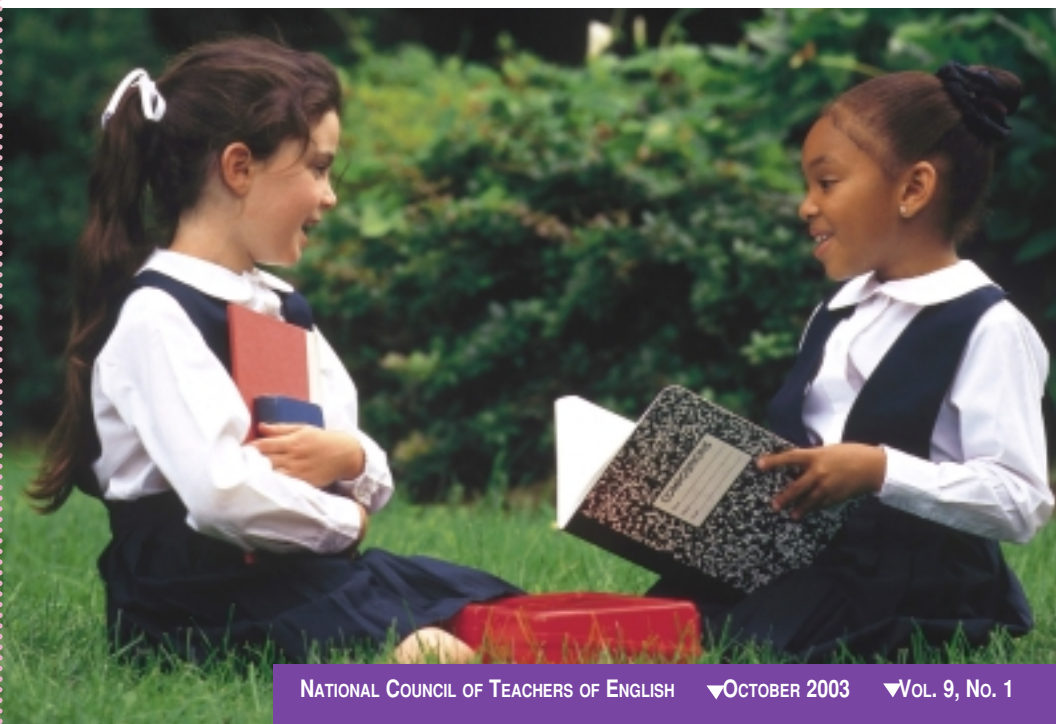
This issue of *School Talk* looks at how changes in our world have affected our work with children, specifically in the field of writing. Included is an interview with Donald Graves, who has helped many of us to understand children's writing. In the interview, Graves highlights what he has noticed about the teaching of writing today. His thoughtful comments are paired with teacher stories from classrooms where writing continues to thrive in spite of the challenges. The issue is made up of three sections, each focusing on a particular topic in the teaching of writing. Each section contains a brief interview with Graves, followed by a teacher story that reflects the topic being discussed.

Writing in Competition with Other Content Areas

With increased demands to show what our students know based on state standards and high-stakes tests, teachers are asked to allot more and more time to preparing for external assessments. By default, this means less real learning in the form of students' self-selected reading, writing, and personal inquiry studies. A recent article in the *New York Times* (Lewin 2003) reports that "writing in schools is found to be both dismal and

neglected." The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges found that most fourth graders spend less than three hours a week writing, and 75 percent of high school seniors never get a writing assignment from their history or social studies teachers. Given all these influences, what can teachers do to restore the importance of writing to the curriculum? We turned to

(Continued on next page)



(Continued from page 1)

Donald Graves for his thoughts on the subject.

JoAnn: Don, you have been a strong advocate for teacher and student rights; you wrote about the politics of education in *Testing Is Not Teaching* (2002). How have things changed since you first wrote about writing in the 1970s?



Donald Graves

Don: In my report to the Ford Foundation in 1976, I documented how the government funded no research in the teaching of writing. It was appalling how little opportunity there was to research

the second *R*. I actually got the first grant from the government in 1978 for my study in Atkinson, New Hampshire. There was also a cover story by *Newsweek* with the title, “Why Johnny Can’t.” That was around 1977, as I recall.

So there was a burst of energy for writing in the early 80s. The National Writing Project expanded dramatically, and there was more research money for studying writing. Even Ronald Reagan allowed funds to go to writing and its improvement; I was on his panel for excellence.

I’ve learned that American educators and the government can maintain focus on a subject area for only so long. In the early 90s and continuing to the present, testing and accountability have become a major focus. They have become almost like curricula in their own right. They steal the focus from learning and—more particularly—from writing.

JoAnn: What impact have federal mandates had on our schools? What has this meant for the teaching of writing?

Don: Testing and the emphasis on reading have stolen large blocks of time from writing. Writing requires human power and time to evaluate



[The federal mandates want us to believe that] it is much more important to find out if children are good receivers of information, rather than good senders of information. In short, we don’t want their ideas, but we do want to know if they can get the right answer about the information they should understand.

whatever is submitted. Reading, on the other hand, is much cheaper to assess.

The No Child Left Behind Act is all about reading. The authors of the bill didn’t realize just how much writing creates a different reader. Writing is the making of reading. People who construct things know far better how to take those things apart.

[The federal mandates want us to believe that] it is much more important to find out if children are good receivers of information, rather than good senders of information. In short, we don’t want their ideas, but we do want to know if they can get the right answer about the information they should understand.

In sum, from a political standpoint, we don’t really want to know if they

can write with a voice that has ideas and facts to support those ideas.

JoAnn: What can teachers do when they find they have less time for writing?

Don: Teachers should band together asking lots of questions, both orally and in writing. They need to ask questions like:

- How important is writing in relation to reading?
- Do you think it is equally important for children to know how to send information, as well as to receive it?
- Do you think writing is a medium for learning to think? Why or why not?
- Do we, in fact, want our children to be thinkers who come up with original ideas? If so, how can we assess that?
- Most professional writers read, interview, make outlines, take notes, and then write. Why is it that children are denied the very tools and opportunities that professional writers use when taking tests or following test prompts?

To show how important the medium of writing is, we should put our questions in writing, then call for an appointment to have good dialogue with administrators, and policy makers. Of course, we need to have dialogue among ourselves about these matters first.

A Response from the Classroom

We have invited **Penny Kittle**, a teacher educator in New Hampshire, to respond to the issue of how to do it all. She addresses the question, “How can teachers still find time for writing with their students despite the competing demands of curricula?”

How do elementary teachers maintain a place for writing workshop in a packed school day? I asked my colleagues this question in the schools I visited around the Mt. Washington Valley. I came to a sad certainty I could sum up in three words: many do not. The curriculum is indeed more onerous than ever, layer upon layer of expectations, standards, and accountability to people outside of the classroom, the school district, and even the state. The hours to teach disappear, and yet the difficult work of forming writers remains. Too many teachers have children write often during the school day to communicate something learned in a content area, but cannot find time for the focused teaching of writing. This strikes me as an elusive attempt to cover two bases with one throw; we can't develop writers with a double play.

Sonya teaches fifth grade in an elementary school where 51 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. She sees students who started school far behind their peers and don't begin to meet the expectations of our curriculum. She also sees those seated nearby who vacation in Europe and come from a family of readers; this is the power and the challenge of a public school. Sonya's students identify individual writing goals each quarter and document their progress in meeting them. They work from self-designed portfolios and pursue pieces that represent their individual curiosities or specialties. Sonya



blocks out an hour every day of the week for writing, and lets nothing get in the way. She has had to shorten the time she can spend on social studies, doing much of the teaching of a time period through historical fiction in literature circles, but she believes strongly in that trade.

Down the hall in a second-grade classroom, I find Jan curled on the carpet next to her students. She devotes an hour three days a week to writing time. Jan has that ideal combination of passion and knowledge that develops over time in exceptional teachers. She uses writing throughout the school day, but maintains that a writing workshop devoted to topics chosen by children is a necessity. She shared the story of Tonya, who entered her class barely forming her letters. Jan sat beside her one day and asked her to list six things she cared about. When Jan asked Tonya which she felt the strongest about, Tonya indicated the family reunion she had recently attended. Several days later when Tonya shared the story, it was by far her most richly developed piece of the year. Jan affirms that you must begin the teaching of writing with the passions children have

for their own topics. It struck me that this was in direct contrast to the teacher who said creative writing time had to go because her students needed preparation for the next grade level. “If I don't get to 1775,” she said, “the fifth-grade teacher will be mad. Something had to go.” Teachers, it seems, still face many choices.

Jill, a fourth-grade teacher and member of our after-school writing club, talked with me at length about the challenge to cover it all. She finds that the school day is increasingly fragmented and that students are not making connections between the sound bites of learning they accumulate. Her six special education students come and go, often missing large chunks of her teaching. She read *Wondrous Words* (by Katie Wood Ray) with a group of teachers in her school this year and longs to embrace the teaching described in that book. She could make excellent use of an hour a day for writing workshop, but she just can't carve it out from the curriculum rubble that buries her. She holds on to 30–60 minutes a day, three to four times a week. She also has her students write at home, but she admits it isn't enough. “I want the whole workshop thing,” she says. “I would love to teach writing the way I know it should be taught.”

The No Child Left Behind Act is continuing to refine the parameters of our school day. Teachers will need to make important choices about what to teach. How do we find time for writing? It is simply a force of will. It is up to us. “The challenge of helping children write well—and live well—is bigger than any of us and bigger than any of our theories. It's a challenge that's big enough to live for,” says Lucy Calkins. ▲

Writing in a Digital Age

Children today can tune in to over a hundred television channels if they have a satellite connection, and nearly everyone has a cell phone. Instant messenger services and e-mail keep lines of communication open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Students not only have greater access to computers, they are also able to do more with them. They can create text documents or slide shows, prepare PowerPoint presentations, and download information or images from a seemingly infinite number of sources. Thanks to digital technology, we are a global community reaching out to touch others across oceans and continents. What do these changes mean for the teaching of writing?

JoAnn: Don, how have all these technological advances affected our children's ability to write?

Don: What has happened in the digital age is that we have become that small village worldwide where oral communication has replaced the written. What is still missing is self-transcendence. That is, until I write and see myself on the page, I can't go one or a dozen steps farther to step outside of myself and become that new person emerging right before my eyes on the page.

Then there is the need to work and rework communication for others, and the oral [communication] just can't cut it because it isn't precise enough. Businesses lose millions because of poor memos. Governments are mired in the language of doublespeak. There is the dictum, "When all else fails try telling the truth and write it directly so the person on the other end knows you are there, a real human being."

So, we can live with the illusion of good thinking via quick communications. Long thinking through writing is another matter entirely. Unless children write daily they will not be aware of the high-quality thinking that writing can bring. Of course, they also need teachers who continually demonstrate the reason to use it, as well as its power with their own texts.

TEACHER'S RESPONSE

Using Technology to Support Student Enthusiasm and Growth in Writing

Monica McLaren's fourth-grade students at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii, use laptop computers daily. In her response, she shares how technology has the potential to help all students become better writers.

In September along with pencils, binders, and other school supplies, each of my fourth-grade students is given an iBook laptop to use for the school year. I have found this technological tool to be transformational in many areas of my teaching: collecting and organizing data from science experiments, Internet use and Web page creation, but especially in supporting my students' growth as writers. With computers and a software program called Inspiration, students can identify and work on elements of good writing. I can look at the webs and outlines they produce and see their thinking, allowing me to effectively coach them on improving their writing, and by extension, their thinking.

This technological approach supports students through many writing challenges. Take Kainoa, for example. He has an encyclopedic knowledge about animals. His spare time at school and home is spent reading about them, watching nature documentaries, and then writing pages of nonfiction or poetry about our planet's inhabitants—



bats, frogs, dinosaurs, birds, or other creatures. And he *loves* to share what he knows. His written pieces go on and on with numerous, mind-numbing details and facts. But what he needs to move his writing forward is to be able to identify and organize the important information, to find the gems of ideas buried beneath loads of gravel.

Our technological approach was ideal for Kainoa. His eyes lit up with excitement when we started a research project exploring the medieval period, and he quickly identified medieval hunting techniques as

(Continued on next page)

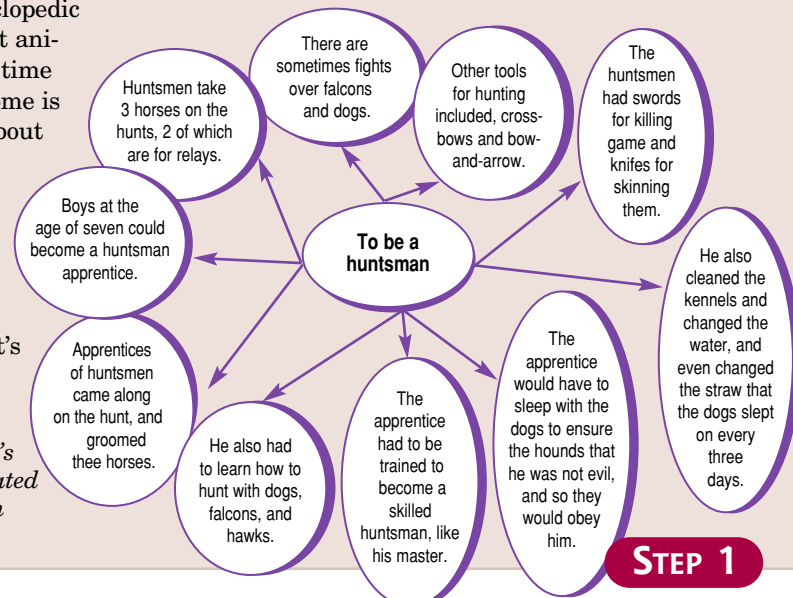


Figure 1: Kainoa's web of ideas, created with the program Inspiration.

STEP 1

To be a huntsman

- I. Boys at the age of seven could become a huntsman apprentice.
- II. The apprentice had to be trained to become a skilled huntsman, like his master.
- III. He also had to learn how to hunt with dogs, falcons, and hawks.
- IV. The apprentice would have to sleep with the dogs to ensure the hounds that he was not evil, and so they would obey him.
- V. He also cleaned the kennels and changed the water, and even changed the straw that the dogs slept on every three days.
- VI. Apprentices of huntsmen came along on the hunt, and groomed three horses.
- VII. Huntsmen take 3 horses on the hunts, 2 of which are for relays.
- VIII. The huntsmen had swords for killing game and knives for skinning them.
- IX. Other tools for hunting included, crossbows and bow-and- arrow.
- X. There are sometimes fights over falcons and dogs.

STEP 2

Figure 2: The program Inspiration turns Kainoa's web into an outline.

(Continued from previous page)

his topic. Using the software program Inspiration, he first recorded notes on everything he found through research that he thought was important. As he recorded those ideas in his web, he grouped the bubbles by linking them with the program's tool. As his screen filled up and he started to see the sheer enormity of his ideas, the need to be more selective became obvious. And so he started prioritizing and eliminating ideas.

Then, with the push of a key, Inspiration translated his web into an outline. The links and groupings he had made in the web held his ideas together in paragraph-like structures. Kainoa could easily click, drag, and move a whole group of ideas, or rearrange the ideas within a group. Strong paragraphs materialized before his eyes, and his huge collection of ideas gelled into a cohesive whole. After copying and pasting his outline into a word processing document, he added the transition sentences to form his ideas into a narrative rough draft.

Boys at the age of seven could become a huntsman's apprentice. The apprentice had to be trained to become a skilled huntsman, like his master. He also had to learn how to hunt with dogs, falcons, and hawks. The apprentice would have to sleep with the dogs to ensure the hounds that he was not evil, and so they would obey him. He also cleaned the kennels and changed the water, and even changed the straw that the dogs slept on every three days.

Apprentices of huntsmen came along on the hunt, and groomed three horses. Huntsmen took three horses on the hunts, two of which were for relays.

The huntsmen had swords for killing game and knives for skinning them. Other tools for hunting included crossbows and bow-and- arrow.

STEP 3

Figure 3: An excerpt from Kainoa's final essay.

I then sat down with Kainoa for a decidedly modern writing conference. A sweep of the pad highlighted a sentence about the hunt's prey, a key touch moved it, and the change could instantly be seen and evaluated. Did that change make the writing more effective? Why? We answered those questions together. In the end, Kainoa ended up with a piece that he was proud of, one that contained all of the important, interesting ideas that he wanted to include. Just as important, he was able to effectively communicate his ideas to others.

With each writing piece this year, Kainoa and his classmates are increasingly able to form ideas independently and translate them into good writing using this technological process. As a writing teacher, I feel more effective and efficient, and the hours we spend in writing workshop are fulfilling and fruitful. Not only are my students learning to write, they are learning to think, to organize their ideas, and to deliver them powerfully. At the age of ten, they already have a lot to say, and I'm hearing them loud and clear. ▲



Donald H. Graves Award for Excellence in Writing

Established in 2001 by Donald H. Graves, this award annually recognizes teachers in grades 1–6 who demonstrate an understanding of student improvement in the teaching of writing. Applicants for the award should submit the following by **June 1, 2004**:

- Three portfolios of student writing, each of which should contain three to five selections showing change over the year. Papers are to be dated, and the names of the children removed and coded as child A, B, and C. Where possible the three students' work should represent a broad range of ability.
- An essay of 2,000 words or less discussing what the applicant sees as significant improvements in the children's texts from the portfolio, as well as some insight into the reasons for those changes. (If appropriate and of sufficient merit, the essay may be published in the NCTE journal *Language Arts*, at the discretion of the editors.)

The award is presented at the Elementary Section Get-Together during the NCTE Annual Convention. The winner is briefly recognized and given a cash award of \$2,000 in U.S. funds. ▲

The Miracle of Writing, and Why Children Need It Today



Many of us remember our own elementary school writing experiences, in which lessons were often focused on handwriting, spelling, grammar, and other conventions. Little time was spent on teaching us how to compose pieces that were meaningful expressions of what we valued in our lives. Donald Graves's book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, as well as works by Donald Murray, Lucy Calkins, Ralph Fletcher, and others, began to change that. Writing workshops entered our classrooms and became places where children could tell their stories and write about their memories, good and bad. Students could practice crafting their words within a community of writers who were also learning to find their voice and their passions. We learned that children could—and

would—write if we let them. How has this insight transformed the teaching of writing?

JoAnn: Twenty years ago you wrote, “Children want to write.” Do you find that true today? What does writing do for our children and for us?

Don: Yes, children still want to write if they have the time to write. They should write at least three times in succession per week. The ideal, of course, is five days out of five. Children want to write if they have topic choice, which doesn't mean that assigned topics don't fit. It's just that for an assigned topic, preparation time in reading, interviewing, and discussion is a necessary condition. When children write and defend their choices with strong voices, they develop much confidence.

Writing, of course, is a thinking medium. I don't know what I think until I see what I say on the page.

Writing is a way to stop time, explore an idea, reconsider the idea, and share our ideas with people at another place and time. Writing allows us to transcend time.

Above all, it is important for teachers to write with their children. If we don't, children won't understand the function of writing for today's living.

TEACHER'S RESPONSE

Everyday Miracles in Writers' Workshop

Lisa Cleaveland, first-grade teacher from Jonathan Valley Elementary School in North Carolina and winner of the 2002 Donald H. Graves Award for Excellence in Writing, describes her story of how miracles happen every day in the classroom.

Writers' workshop is how our class starts each day. At 8:45 we settle into a good book, and my teaching begins. I choose particular books intentionally because they are the roots of my teaching of writing. I will read a book or books that go along with what our class is working on with our writing. Sometimes we study different authors' works and notice neat things they do in their writing; other times we look at a genre study like poetry, nonfiction, or memoirs. Often we study text struc-

tures and look at how authors use them in interesting ways.

After reading, we always talk about what we have noticed in the book and how we can use it in our own writing. Some of my strongest teaching comes from reading great literature and teaching a minilesson from it, in which the children talk about their own writing and the different things they can try. In our classroom, the writers' language we speak would make any author feel at home. We speak of Eric Carle, Donald Crews, and Frank Asche as though we know them personally!

When we leave our minilesson, it's time to write. The students pull out pieces they are already working on or they begin new pieces. From the first week of school I start writers' workshop, so my students are not afraid to try crafting their pieces as other published authors do. Each

child in the class makes his or her own choice of what to write about. If we are studying nonfiction, we write nonfiction pieces, but it is still their choice of subject. Even when deciding to use a specific text structure (e.g., repeating line, circular text), the children make their own decision of what to write about.

Last April, the class started a genre study of poetry. The first day that we jumped into poetry, I touched on a few things, such as where poets get their ideas, how we need to be wide awake for poetry (anytime and anywhere) in order to start writing it, what poetry looks like, and how it sounds. Of course, we also read lots of poems. One of my students, Forrest, wasn't in school the first two days when we kicked off our

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from previous page)

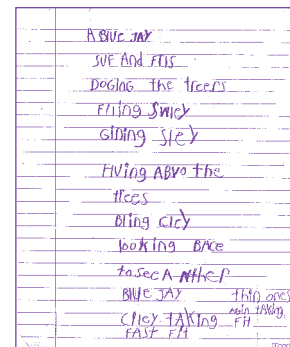
study of poetry. Upon his return, he was slightly shaken to see some students recording ideas for poems in their notebooks and other students writing poetry throughout the room and outside on the patio. We had just finished our “wow” nonfiction unit (writing nonfiction and making it WOW instead of just spitting out nonfiction facts) and Forrest had loved it; he wrote about lizards, army men, space, and the ocean. The nonfiction came very easy for Forrest. But poetry? Wait a minute!

After missing our introduction into poetry, jumping into the unit was not easy for Forrest. Every day we read new poems by different poets, such as Eloise Greenfield and Jane Yolen. We studied the look of poetry and the line breaks, but Forrest was still not comfortable with poetry writing. In a conference he said, “I’m not very good at this poetry stuff. I think I’m gonna stick with nonfiction.”

As the weeks passed, Forrest did start writing poetry and created quite a collection of poems about sports. However, he was not as

involved with his poetry as he was with his nonfiction. At the end of the school year when the students chose their favorite pieces to read at the authors’ celebration, Forrest chose to read his book about creatures of the sea, even though more than half the class chose to read published poems.

The summer after Forrest left my first-grade classroom, he became interested in birds; he enjoyed feeding them, reading about them, and identifying them. In August of his second-grade year, Forrest took his new nonfiction interest with him. In the writers’ workshop of his new class he wrote about birds. But he wasn’t writing nonfiction or even a personal narrative about his experience with birds, he was writing poems! He wrote poems about wrens, hawks, hummingbirds, cardinals, blue jays, and woodpeckers. The class was not studying poetry at the time; they were free to write about any topic and to use any structure they wanted. What is so amazing is that the boy who did not think he was good at “this poetry stuff” chose to write poems about his new passion.



A Blue Jay

Swift and fearless
Dodging the trees
Flying swiftly
Gliding swiftly
Hovering above the trees
Blinking clearly
looking back
to see another
Blue Jay
Clearly taking
fast flight
Then once
Again taking
flight

Forrest's poem written in second grade.

What a great feeling to know that this child could write about something meaningful to him because he was given the tools to make a choice in how to express himself. When children are given choices in topic and a vision of what they can do, anything is possible. ▲

Ways Forward

The National Commission on Writing has helped us to get focused on bringing writing back into our classrooms, but the ball is in our court. As classroom teachers we need to work to keep what matters in the teaching of writing. We don't want to face a narrowing of writing, as we saw with the federal reading mandates. We need to ensure that all our students have the opportunity to be guided by knowledgeable teachers to discover the writer within themselves. ▲



The NCTE Writing Initiative is a new public service campaign to support sound practices in the teaching of writing across all disciplines, to increase policymakers' and the public's knowledge about the teaching of writing, and to make available professional development for schools and educators. As part of this new initiative, NCTE will help support schools and districts in developing policies for promoting high-quality writing instruction. For more information, read “Planning a School-Wide Writing Policy” (a brochure in PDF form) at <http://www.ncte.org/presscenter/wipolicy.pdf>. Read about additional NCTE resources on writing at <http://www.ncte.org/presscenter/topics/writing.shtml>. ▲



Resource Bibliography

- Calkins, Lucy McCormick. 1990. *Living between the Lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Fletcher, Ralph, and JoAnn Portalupi. 1998. *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K-8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Fletcher, Ralph, and JoAnn Portalupi. 2001. *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, Donald H. 2001. *The Energy to Teach*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, Donald H. 2002. *Testing Is Not Teaching: What Should Count in Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, Donald H. 2003. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Twentieth-Anniversary Edition). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harwayne, Shelley. 2001. *Writing through Childhood: Rethinking Process and Product*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Inspiration Software, Inc. Available at <http://www.inspiration.com>.
- Lewin, Tamar. 2003. Writing in Schools Is Found Both Dismal and Neglected. *New York Times*, April 26.
- Portalupi, JoAnn, and Ralph Fletcher. 2001. *Nonfiction Craft Lessons: Teaching Information Writing K-8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Ray, Katie Wood. 1999. *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Ray, Katie Wood, and Lester Laminack. 2001. *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Thornburg, David D. 2002. *Shift Control: Reflections on Education, Technology, and the Lives of Today's Students*. Lake Barrington, IL: Starsong Publications.

Next Issue: The January issue of *School Talk* will focus on spelling.
NCTE Web site: www.ncte.org

School Talk (ISSN 1083-2939) is published quarterly in October, January, April, and July by the National Council of Teachers of English for the Elementary Section Steering Committee. Annual membership in NCTE is \$40 for individuals, and a subscription to *School Talk* is \$15 (membership is a prerequisite for individual subscriptions). Institutions may subscribe for \$30. Add \$4 per year for Canadian and all other international postage. Single copy: \$7.50 (member price, \$4). Copies of back issues can be purchased in bulk: 20 copies of a single issue for \$20 (includes shipping and handling). Remittances should be made payable to NCTE by credit card, check, money order, or bank draft in United States currency.

Communications regarding orders, subscriptions, single copies, and change of address should be addressed to *School Talk*, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096; phone: 1-877-369-6283; e-mail: jbartlett@ncte.org. Communications regarding permission to reprint should be addressed to Permissions, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *School Talk*, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096.

Coeditors: JoAnn Wong-Kam and Vivian Vasquez. NCTE Production Editor: Rona S. Smith. Designer: Pat Mayer.

2003 Elementary Section Steering Committee

Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, *Chair*
Curt Dudley-Marling, *Assistant Chair*
Ralph Cordova
Shari Frost
Isoke Titilayo Nia
Richard Thompson
JoAnn Wong-Kam
Katherine Bomer, *Elementary Level Representative-at-Large*
David Bloome, *Executive Committee Liaison*
Kathryn A. Egawa, *NCTE Staff Liaison*

Copyright © 2003 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Printed in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.



National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, IL 61801-1096