

## Helping Teacher-Writers Begin to Write

“I’ve had a few conversations recently with some colleagues,” Andrea wrote, “who’ve shared their frustrations about the lack of engagement they’re seeing with students in certain periods.” Students weren’t engaged with the material, and because of that disengagement, they seemed obnoxious to Andrea and her colleagues. In short, she and her fellow teachers were exhausted, drained of energy . . .

. . . and they wanted it to change.

Andrea Souden, a reading teacher for junior high students, wanted to create a space for her colleagues to move past complaining. She wanted to build on a commitment she knew they shared—a commitment to talk and to listen, to problem solve, to become a group that works together and learns from one another. She wrote to Jim for advice:

I wondered if you might have some suggestions of educational titles I could propose to my little group . . . I’m hoping for something that’s a little inspiring, a little pragmatic for those boots-on-the-ground strategies we could start implementing, and a little bit challenging for us to all try something new.

Andrea and her colleagues started to read professional titles together, and at the same time they began to write.

Writing made [us] focus on the moment and gave you some control over how you told your story, so it seemed like a good way to move beyond just complaining about students in a non-productive way. It was also kind of powerful to see myself as a “writer,” and any moment as teachers we can seize that can help us feel like we can take a more authoritative mental stance in our profession is a good thing.

But moving from *deciding* to write together to actually *writing* together was not so easy. Andrea had brought a writing prompt to her colleagues, but as she later put it, “that was a gigantically pathetic writing prompt.” She asked Jim to suggest a prompt that might work better.

But interestingly enough, the prompt Jim offered was the very one she had used earlier, without success. After some discussion, it became clear that the problem wasn’t with the prompt itself, it was in the way the prompt had been introduced to the group. Andrea reported that it felt more like an assignment than an invitation. Whom was it for? What was its purpose? And who was asking for it? Instead of feeling empowered, as Andrea had envisioned, the teachers (not unlike the students who were frustrating them) balked.

This chapter shares the strategies we use to catalyze writing among teachers. As in so many of life’s activities, often the most difficult step is simply to begin. However, as you can see in the story above, it takes more than a file of provocative prompts or writing exercises. We do use those, sure, but as the anecdote above reveals, prompting teacher-writers to begin also involves many more layers. These include not only the ideas found in the written texts themselves but also many more: individual identity, a group’s identity, published accounts of teachers, relationships with students, a desire to problem solve and to inspire self and others, a need to develop a sense of authority.

Some of these are the issues that all writers face—such as considering what slice of life to write about, for whom, and in what ways. Others of these are specific to the “teacher” part of the teacher-writer—such as considering our stance toward students, their learning, and particular teaching strategies. These issues can and do converge when the teacher-writer begins to write—as the teacher in the anecdote above reveals. Suddenly the teacher needs to think not only about stance toward students, learning, and teaching, but also about how to *represent* that stance by selecting what to share, with what audience, and in what manner.

## GETTING STARTED

Experienced writers know an essential truth about writing that stuns many beginning writers. They know that the ability to write well isn’t something that occurs simply through gift of birth. Writing isn’t natural. It’s hard work. Writers know that writing can be scary. They know

it's like walking through an unfamiliar cave with only a dim candle: There's no telling how long the route is, where it might take you, or what is lurking there in the darkness. Writers know, too, that fear is normal. That "shitty first drafts" (and second drafts, and third drafts . . . ) are a real and necessary part of the process, and Anne Lamott (1994) wasn't making up a catchy phrase, complete with a curse word to aid our memories. Yet they also know that there might be a great adventure around the next turn, and that to get anywhere—as a spelunker or as a writer—you have to get moving.

To be a writer, you have to write.

As a coach, what sets you apart is your ability to teach, coach, and facilitate—to help others understand and act on these writing realities. Too often, we see teacher-writers paralyzed by fear: waiting for inspiration, for an occasion important enough, an idea perfect enough. Our job isn't necessarily to help them conquer those fears. Instead, we help teachers to write past and through their fears.

### **Talk Leads to Writing: Creating Irresistible Conversations**

We find that to help teachers start writing, often the best guidance that facilitators can offer is something very simple. It takes just three steps and a few minutes. Here's our routine:

1. Invite teachers into a significant conversation where we listen with interest to what they have to say.
2. Frame writing as an opportunity to discover, think, or tell.
3. Get started writing, together.

As facilitators, our main moves are to *enter* the conversation (started either through our prompts or by the teacher), to *listen* with interest, to *draw out* more from the teacher through questions and comments, and to *show enthusiasm* for anything that sounds like it might be worth writing more about. At the moment where it seems the teacher is starting to get animated, we interrupt and ask him or her to stop talking: That's the time to start writing. Together. Whether we are talking with one teacher at a desk, meeting a small group at a coffee shop, or leading a larger group in a workshop or class, we start together. We've found that this model, which Nancie Atwell (1987) used with her young students, is also one that works for adults: When it's time to write, we pull out our pens or laptops and spend time side by side, all of us writing.

Here's a typical example from our experience. At a recent conference, Leah was co-leading a session for teachers interested in blogging. Her colleague, Kristen Hawley Turner, posed a question that immediately got the room talking: *Tell about a time when you saw kids harmed by a policy.* As soon as the words appeared on the screen, teachers at each table started sharing stories from their schools. The room was humming, the energy high. A teacher next to Leah started to tell about her school's ban on beverages (including water bottles), and how this caused stress for a chronically ill student who needed to stay hydrated. Teachers around the table responded immediately to this teacher's story with questions and commiserations: *"What?! Why? Whose idea was this anyway?"* and *"Sounds like what happened in my school. You should have seen it."* and *"What happened to the student?"*

Just as discussions at each table were really getting animated, Kristen spoke into the microphone: *"Let's take a little time to write about this."*

Leah turned to her neighbor: *"I hope you'll keep writing more about that story. We all want to know what happened, and it sounds important!"* The teacher reached for her pen, smiling. Leah grabbed for her own notebook, explaining, *"That made me think of something I'm going to write about. Do you all have ideas, too?"* Everyone nodded. *"Ok, let's write!"* Leah broke eye contact with the group and started writing, keeping her eyes on her page as she started her own teaching story. When she scanned the table a minute later, everyone was writing.

What's important to notice about this illustration is how the facilitators helped teachers to start writing without having them overthink it. We don't want them to worry or make writing a big thing, some kind of mountain that they have to gear up to climb. Instead, we find that teachers immediately can build high writing energy by entering an irresistible conversation.

To spark these ideas, we start discussions that help teachers think of things that are interesting and important.

- What surprised me at school was when . . .
- What do you wish "they" (parents, principals, politicians, or whoever else you have in mind) knew about your classroom or your day?
- What did you learn this week?

By getting teachers to focus on these anecdotes, we help them to attend to important moments and reflect on them in ways that

eventually might help to shape their understandings about teaching (Stock, 1993). Talking is simply the starting point. As teachers begin telling stories that are significant to them, we draw them in verbally for a few minutes, and then interrupt and suggest that we take a little time (often we start with 5–7 minutes), right then and there, to each get our ideas out on paper.

Through these start-up conversations, we work hard to convince teacher-writers that a ready audience of colleagues is eagerly waiting to read what they wrote: “I need you to write that article so I can assign it in my graduate course!” Or we share that “I was just talking to a teacher over at the high school who was wondering about the same thing. I wish I had your piece in my hand to give to her.” Or, drawing on our knowledge of the existing literature on a topic, we say, “You know, I don’t think anyone has written about that in that way. That would be an important contribution.” These invitations are not empty cheerleading. They genuinely underscore the relevance of a teacher’s purpose, and they offer visions of an audience that is friendly, interested, and *in need of* what the teacher-writer is working on. Sometimes, “I hope you’ll consider writing that!” spoken at the right time, and by a trusted mentor, can be more powerful than we know.

Our aim when we sit alongside teacher-writers who are getting started (either as writers or on a new piece) is to coach so that they will (1) begin writing about something important to them, (2) experience reactions from interested readers who want to know more, and (3) feel both motivated and equipped to keep writing when they leave. These moves are small, yet meaningful, and encourage teacher-writers to keep moving forward.

### **Framing Invitations to Write**

Helping teachers to start writing requires more than the right prompt, as we saw through Andrea’s interaction with Jim at the beginning of this chapter. But leading teachers from talk into writing does require important and interesting ideas to talk and write about. Prompts are essential tools for our work with teacher-writers. They help us to invite teachers into meaningful conversations and writing that matter to them, providing topical categories (*topoi*, as rhetoricians might say) that writers can turn to repeatedly to find ideas or for new inspiration (Crowley & Hawhee, 2012; Lindquist, 2002). What our prompts all have in common is that they draw from teachers’ own interests and from their teaching experiences, questions, and knowledge. We

already mentioned this in the Preface, but it is worth repeating here: We see value in all kinds of writing, but our focus in this book is on writing of the variety that helps teachers make meaning of their professional roles, interactions, and situations.

We do everything we can to frame writing prompts as invitations. It's much easier to speak when you know someone is interested; similarly, it's much easier to write when you have a sense of a ready audience awaiting the work. When you're invited, you feel welcome. Prompts framed as invitations create a hospitable place for teacher-writers to discover, to try on new perspectives and assumptions, and to better understand themselves and others. Our working understanding of "hospitality" comes from Henri Nouwen (1986), who writes, "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place" (p. 71). Our hope of creating hospitable places reflects our principles for supporting teachers—aim to understand, to create opportunities in order to write to discover, and to cultivate community where change and growth are possible.

In our coaching toolkits, our prompts are like a set of wrenches. There are some commonalities across the set—all are *important, interesting invitations* to help writers find *ideas*. But like the individual wrenches in a set, each unique prompt may be more (or less) handy in certain situations, and it is best if we understand when and how to use each one. While prompts help teacher-writers to find ideas, the conversations also matter—both before and after writing to the prompts. As we share some examples of prompts we use, we also share a few ideas about when and how we use them to invite teachers into writing.

**Beliefs—What matters to me?** In order for teacher-writers to begin with what is closest and most important to them, we often invite them to write about what matters. What do you believe about young people? About being a teacher? About your discipline? We sometimes ask them to make a list of beliefs, placing each belief on its own sticky note. Then they arrange those beliefs and notes on a larger piece of paper by placing the most central belief in the middle of the larger piece of paper and arranging the remaining beliefs in relationship to one another.

From there, we can make several moves.

First, we may have the group engage in a gallery walk, comparing one another's beliefs and looking for patterns and gaps among the

group. This move might be one we make if we're aiming to help a group become a group, finding connections and themes across one another's experiences. In so doing, we also invite them to identify specific stories that they could elaborate upon from their own teaching, stories that bring the belief into sharp focus or otherwise challenge the belief in a fundamental way. From there, they begin writing and connecting these ideas to broader themes that they want to explore as potential topics, also thinking about the rich sources of data that they can draw on from their classrooms, students, and colleagues.

Second, we may have teacher-writers pick beliefs and interview one another about them, asking about specific moments when those beliefs became important or when they were challenged or when they were refined. In this sense, the teacher-writers act just as a journalist or a researcher would, probing one another to talk about the beliefs in more detail. We might choose this move to help a group of teacher-writers practice extending and challenging one another's ideas. By probing one another to explain more about their beliefs, the group practices asking questions of one another in a structured way. For example, one gentle way to push this kind of thinking is to ask three kinds of questions:

- **"What?" questions:** What is your belief about teaching? Where did you first learn this belief? As a student? As a teacher? As a parent? As a mentor? What does this belief represent about your approach to working with students?
- **"So what?" questions:** In what ways have you had to defend your belief over time? How does this belief manifest itself in your day-to-day work with students? In what ways do you try to instantiate this belief in your students?
- **"Now what?" questions:** As you consider this belief and what you want to write about in the future, what topics, stories, students, and experiences are most salient? To what extent can you illustrate this belief with ideas and examples from your own teaching?

Third, we may ask teachers to look at the constellation of beliefs and write about how these beliefs work together to help them be the kind of teacher and person they hope to be. We might choose this move if we notice a teacher-writer who feels like her interest is scattered or if we notice a teacher-writer who feels like he is overwhelmed.

When we ask teacher-writers to look at their set of beliefs and ask, “How does being a teacher help you be the person you hope to be?” we often can help teacher-writers see a bigger and broader picture of themselves and their hopes. Doing so can help the teacher-writers name what matters to them and, in turn, notice how this is just one moment in time over their career. The prompt helps teacher-writers remember who they are and who they want to be.

**Principles—Why do I do what I do?** At times, naming beliefs explicitly and directly can be difficult for teachers. When we face this situation, we often ask teacher-writers to trace their assumptions back to their roots. To do this, we ask teacher-writers to consider various labels they use in their work, such as the following:

- **Labels for people:** colleagues, English language learner, gifted, smart, apathetic
- **Labels for practices:** writing workshop, whole-class discussion, conferring, reading strategies
- **Labels for performance:** good, bad, complete, rigorous

As we look together at the labels, we invite teacher-writers to write about moments when someone used or illustrated those labels. They might write a scene; they might write a list; they might write an explanation. Then we ask them to share with others and consider the boundaries of those labels: When or how is this label useful? For whom? When do the labels begin to get fuzzy or blur with other labels? Whom do the labels benefit? Who is included, and who is left out when the labels are used? What possibilities or constraints do these labels suggest or create?

Importantly, we also ask teacher-writers to consider where the term might have originated, either in general or in their own usage. We invite them to write about how the label limits possibilities and how it opens up possibilities. In doing so, we hope to create space for teacher-writers to link their concrete experiences with the labels educators use; our objective is to tap into where teacher-writers’ chain of reasoning begins and where it might lead.

**Dilemmas—What should I do?** Interesting challenges often arise in teaching when we realize that we have two or more principles or goals that seem to be in conflict with one another. Lampert (1985) describes a dilemma as



an argument between opposing tendencies within oneself in which neither side can come out the winner. From this perspective, my job [as teacher] would involve *maintaining the tension* between my own equally important but conflicting aims without choosing between them. (p. 182, emphasis added)

Lampert goes on to argue for a definition of dilemma that “focuses on the deliberation about one’s alternatives rather than on a choice between them” (p. 182). As teachers, we don’t approach dilemmas with the attitude that our jobs would be so much better if we could make them disappear; rather, we acknowledge that part of our on-going work—our role, our identity—is to find productive ways to respond, to maintain the tension.

So, we invite teacher-writers to look at when two or more beliefs, principles, goals, or commitments meet in a particular moment and create some doubt or perplexity. A common example we often raise is what we might call the Sunday night dilemma. Many teachers will relate to this dilemma, which houses the belief that we want to offer students timely, extensive, and helpful feedback and the belief that we would like to have healthy personal lives. Thus, on Sunday night, we face the dilemma of how much feedback to offer students on their work versus how much time we might spend with our families and outside interests.

To lead teachers into writing about dilemmas, we might start with a prompt that helps them notice a tension: *Write about a time when you were torn about what to do or how to think.*

From there (or if the teacher-writer has already identified a dilemma), we prompt writing as a way to think through the dilemma. We ask questions like, “What different directions, commitments, beliefs, or goals do you feel pulled toward, and when/how did that become apparent?” Or, “What happens, both helpful and not, when you choose one direction over the other?” Or, “What might be a creative way that you might honor each of your beliefs, principles, goals, or commitments?”

In writing about dilemmas, we invite teacher-writers to move between the concrete details of a moment and the more abstract idea of “opposing tendencies” within themselves (Lampert, 1985). By moving back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, teacher-writers can begin to see the tension they experience in a productive and generative way, rather than as a feeling to avoid at all costs. They can, in turn, use writing as a way to explore that tension.

**Practices—How do I do my work?** When we work with teacher-writers, we often ask them to consider what kind of moves they make as teachers: “What do you *do*?” we ask. We share with them the idea of teaching practices, which we might describe as their strategies, skills, and ways of accomplishing their work. We might attach other descriptors to “teaching practices,” prompts like, “What are your ‘signature’ teaching practices?” “What are your ‘high-leverage’ teaching practices?” or, “Which of your teaching practices are most significant for each of your students or classes?”

Other times, we might ask teacher-writers to think and write about critical moments when these teaching practices came into play (e.g., a moment when the teaching practice addressed an issue or concern; a moment when the teacher-writer felt like she made the teaching practice her own; a moment when the teacher-writer took a risk and tried the teaching practice for the first time). We turn to a familiar protocol for many, the “critical incidents protocol” described by Simon Hole and Grace Hall McEntee (1999) and by David Tripp (2012). While many might use this protocol to generate conversation and inquiry between teachers, we extend the dialogue into an invitation to write. Critical incidents, as the protocol argues, create a rich opportunity for a group to inquire together, drawing on one another’s expertise and experiences. By extending the protocol as an invitation to write, we invite teacher-writers to shift the conversation outside of the immediate group and toward a wider, larger professional conversation. The critical incidents protocol involves the following steps:

1. **Create a personal timeline.** We ask teacher-writers to create a timeline of critical moments in their teaching (e.g., critical moments in their career, critical moments in this school year, critical moments with one class, etc.).
2. **Write stories.** For 10 minutes, each group member writes briefly in response to the question, “What happened during one of those critical moments?”
3. **Choose a story.** After quickly sharing a synopsis of each story, the group decides which story to discuss for the next 5 minutes.
4. **Ask, “What happened?”** The presenting teacher-writer reads the written account of what happened and sets it within the context of his or her professional goals. The group takes up to 10 minutes to share the story and context.

5. **Ask, “Why did it happen?”** Colleagues ask clarifying questions for 5 minutes. Sometimes we ask the group to free write quickly—maybe for 2 or 3 minutes—in order to capture members’ initial thinking about why this incident occurred. It helps here for them to take on the different perspectives of the people involved in the incident.
6. **Ask, “What might it mean?”** After the group considers possibilities for why the incident occurred, we then ask them to interpret the moment. Sometimes groups are more comfortable writing to this prompt before discussing, and other times groups want to discuss and then write. We “read” the group or allow the group members to choose. We take about 15 minutes or so to write and discuss our interpretations.
7. **Ask, “What are the implications for practice?”** The presenting teacher-writer responds to the group’s ideas. After discussing these implications for 10 minutes or so, we invite each teacher-writer in the group to make connections to his or her own practice, critical incident, or teaching situation. We aim here for each member of the group to write about any new insights experienced during the protocol.
8. **Debrief the process.** An important step in helping a group become a group is to discuss the group’s experience with the protocol. What worked well? What might we want to refine? What did we miss? How might this process help you in your work? We take up to 10 minutes, and we see the debrief as a chance to talk not only about our discussion, but also about our teaching and writing process.

**Celebrations—What is going well? What can be?** Sometimes it helps teacher-writers to focus on things that have gone well. We hope to help teacher-writers name the features of the positive experience so that they can intentionally build on the experience in the future and in different contexts. Donald Graves (2001) writes about helping teachers find what feeds their energy as a way to help them have healthy and lasting careers. As coaches of teacher-writers, rather than focusing solely on what drains our energy as teachers, we hope to create a space where teacher-writers feel energized and fed. To do this, we often turn to an “appreciative inquiry” kind of protocol, eliciting stories from teacher-writers about what they can celebrate.

One appreciative inquiry heuristic we adapt comes from Cooperrider and Whitney (1999), who describe the “4Ds” of appreciative inquiry—discovery, dream, design, and destiny. Here’s how it works for us.

- **Discovery:** We invite teacher-writers to write and to name what they appreciate about their work through prompts like, “What gives you life?” “What brings you energy?” “What’s the best part of what you do?”
- **Dream:** We invite teacher-writers to envision their hopes for the future through prompts like, “What might be?” “What do you imagine your future students hope for with their time with you?” “What are your hopes for you, for students, for your school community?”
- **Design:** We invite teacher-writers to construct paths forward and toward their dreams through prompts like, “How can it be?” “Where might you find opportunities?” “Who shares in similar commitments?”
- **Destiny:** We invite teacher-writers to imagine next steps through prompts like, “What would you have to do in order to feel empowered to make this a reality?” “What would you have to learn?” “Who might be partners?” “What might be opportunities to improvise or adapt what you are already doing?”

**Drilling Deeper—Professional Loop Writing.** Tom Meyer, director of the Hudson Valley Writing Project and professor of education at the State University of New York at New Paltz, engages teachers in a process of “professional loop writing” (Meyer, Hesse, McCartney, & Quackenbush, 2015). Drawing on an invention and revision process proposed by Elbow (1981) known as “looping,” teachers first respond to a prompt. Then they choose one line from that response, and they write again in response to it. Again they choose a key line, and again they write. This looping process continues until deep and unexpected reflection is possible.

In Meyer and his colleagues’ take on loop writing, they begin by asking teachers to make a cluster or web on “all that you have inherited in some way, whether concrete or abstract.” They then read the poem “Twelve Fingers” by Lucille Clifton, in which she reflects on a unique family trait ([youtu.be/cAZ7GUuMw04](https://youtu.be/cAZ7GUuMw04)). They then choose one item from their webs and begin to write; they pause; they loop again.

Pausing again, they read Naomi Replansky's "An Inheritance" (featured on the radio program *Writer's Almanac* here: [writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2009/09/07](http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2009/09/07)). They then dive in again, choosing a line from the previous writing and building from there. Finally, they reflect: "Read over your loops. What are you writing about? How does your inheritance work in or play out in your teaching life and inform your identity?"

\* \* \*

What all of these invitation frames have in common is an emphasis on helping teachers to realize that they have ideas and stories worth sharing—and that they are *able* to write them, right now. We want to help teacher-writers reflect on dilemmas, name hopes, and think creatively about what's next. We try to call attention to the importance of what they already have to say, and to create playful opportunities and "just right/write" invitations that inspire their writing passions, courage, and joy.

### **CONTINUING: HELPING TEACHERS TO KEEP WRITING**

Teachers typically leave writing sessions or writing group meetings in a writing frame of mind. They've been invited hospitably into writing, they have started or made progress on a piece that matters to them, they feel eager and ready to keep writing, and their enthusiasm carries them through—for a while. But after a time, many teacher-writers face practical challenges. They may find that as much as they'd like to write, the time they set aside keeps getting filled with other things—overcome by "the tyranny of the urgent." Or, they begin writing and are continually interrupted or distracted. As facilitators, our role in working shoulder to shoulder with teachers is to help them secure a protected place for writing in their lives—physically or virtually as well as on their calendars.

Sometimes, providing a place means that we actually carve out time and space for writing; other times, our facilitator role is to help teachers with strategies so that they can independently find their own spaces and times for writing. As place-makers, we might help teachers create headspace, space in a busy calendar, space to take chances in what and how to write, and even physical space.

For this placemaking help, we realize that there is only so much we as facilitators can do. Our ability to affect teachers' calendars or to control what happens in their schools or homes is very, very limited. Even if we reserve spaces and times for writing and do everything we can to shape ideal environments for authors, it is still up to teachers to take advantage of them. For this reason, as we try to facilitate placemaking for teacher-writers, we tend to capitalize on approaches that reflect the influencer model for change-leadership, as described by Grenny et al. (2013). The research team that developed the model identified three key levers for influencing others:

- **Personal motivation and ability**—Influencers seek to change how individuals feel through experiences and stories, and to change what they will/can do by teaching new/improved skills and responses to emotions.
- **Social motivation and ability**—Influencers seek to change how groups feel through positive peer pressure and modeling by leaders, and to change what groups will/can do by providing strength in numbers at crucial moments.
- **Structural motivation and ability**—Influencers seek to reinforce personal and social changes in how people feel and behave—by rewarding vital behaviors, providing accountability, making success visible, and removing difficulties or disincentives.

Influencers are most successful when they help others use a set of strategies that move all three of these levers simultaneously. As we note in describing the strategies below, we as facilitators strive for ways to help move personal, social, and structural levers for teachers seeking a place for writing in their lives.

### **Facilitating Personal Motivation and Ability**

Back when he taught 8th-graders, Jim had a conversation with a district colleague, Tom, who also taught 8th-graders at one of the other middle schools. Jim and Tom swapped ideas: Jim spoke of writer's notebooks and writer's workshop; Tom spoke of a compelling unit where students wrote and applied philosophical concepts to their writing. Tom stopped the conversation mid-stream.

"You know what I'm figuring out?" he said.

"No. Tell me."

“I want my students to write,” Tom explained, “and you want them to be writers.”

Tom and Jim spent the rest of their conversation trying to work more with this insight, agreeing that there was something there in how they emphasized something different with their students.

As coaches of teacher-writers, we also have to discern where, when, and how the people we lead understand themselves. Do you want to write a particular piece? Do you want to be a writer who produces many pieces? Do you want to try on this identity of being a teacher-writer? We also have to recognize that their answers might change over time and situation. Perhaps in one moment a teacher-writer wants to compose an editorial for a local paper. Later, though, that same teacher-writer might be working on a more extended piece, like a memoir of her first year of teaching.

We want to help teacher-writers work toward their own goals—goals they have some control and power over. Sometimes we hear goals that focus solely on outcomes, which are usually beyond the control of the teacher-writer. “I want to publish in *English Journal*.” “I want my blog to reach 1,000 followers.” “I want to share my ideas at that conference.” These are goals that depend on the decisions of others, like editors, unknown readers, and those who judge the merits of a conference proposal. These kinds of outcome goals do not serve the teacher-writers well, largely because they cede their ideas of success to what others do, say, or think.

Instead of focusing on outcome goals, we turn teacher-writers’ goals more toward process goals. “What would you have to do to write the kind of piece you want to submit to that publication?” “How regularly would you have to write in order to work toward building the kind of community you want to create with your blog?” “Where might you read examples of accepted conference proposals so you could get a sense of what typically is deemed a successful submission?” These are manageable action steps teacher-writers can take, and they can track their progress along the way. While it matters what kind of goal teacher-writers consider, as people helping them think through the process, we have to consider both the immediate situation (the pieces they’re working on) and a longer trajectory (the way they see themselves as teacher-writers).

This movement between immediate situation and longer trajectory helps teacher-writers consider the tools we can use to tap into both. For instance, we often use the mantra of “touch the writing

every day” with ourselves and with the groups of teacher-writers we lead. Sometimes this simply means opening up a file and writing down an action step or a question we want to consider tomorrow. Other times it means we write furiously. If we’re working with a group, we might use shared folders online so all the members of the group can see that each person has touched the writing on that day. If a teacher-writer likes more personal accountability, we might suggest things like habit-forming apps or time management charts to record writing sessions, or simply sending another writer a text or email logging the number of words written that day.

In her classic book, *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande (1934) suggested that when becoming a writer, the goal is for a person to learn to be able to write at any time and in any place. To get there, she makes two suggestions. First, Brande suggests writers learn to write first thing in the morning in order to write freely and unself-consciously before the day’s business takes over. Second, she suggests writers learn to write at predetermined times. For example, she suggests putting a 15-minute appointment on the calendar to write at 4 P.M. and writing at this predictable time for a week or so, and then beginning to change when that writing time is scheduled, such as 11 A.M. on Tuesday, 6 P.M. on Wednesday, and noon on Thursday. The goal, here, is to give our attention to our writing each day and at the times when we have the opportunity. If we do this, then we begin to see our world as writers do—paying attention to particular kinds of details and moments throughout our day, turning our experiences into words, and taking time to listen to ourselves and to make something that is our own.

In short, our work to facilitate motivation and ability focuses largely on coaching teacher-writers to consider their personal goals and to shape the place of writing in their lives accordingly. Strategies include the following:

- **Conversations about writing motives:** Do you want merely to have written? Or also to write? To be a writer? Being a writer starts with priority and commitment to a way of being. We must remind teacher-writers, and ourselves, “It’s not a race.”
- **Goal setting:** Goals work when they are things the individual has more control over, such as being a writer versus getting something published in a particular place (or being famous, or anything else that is more outcome focused than process focused). “Touch the writing every day” is a process-focused goal.



- **Exercises for strength and conditioning, and for stretching and flexibility:** Writers need to work out, too. We teach and model Brande's (1934) advice to build stamina through a habit of regular writing time, as well as her advice for changing the times and places where writing happens in order to work different writing muscles.
- **Valuing short writing sessions:** When writing workout time is especially limited, we may recommend exercise sessions like those described in Kim Stafford's "Quilting Your Little Solitudes: How to Write When You Don't Have Time To" (1996): writing down ideas in a notebook, writing postcards or letters, filling a "gather page" of initial ideas, or doing a draft in 20 minutes. Research indicates that short, persistent bursts of writing can be the most effective way to make progress (Boice, 1990, 1994). Our view is that like a physical workout, some writing is better than none.

### Facilitating Social Motivation and Ability

Although many people imagine that writing is a solitary occupation, we have learned that, in fact, writing can be very social. We notice many potential advantages when writers connect with other writers, and as facilitators we seek to harness the energy that comes through peer encouragement, support, accountability, and celebrations. We are not referring here to collaborative writing or shared authorship. Instead, we have in mind the kinds of social and communal interactions that help teacher-writers build their motivation and abilities. We choose strategies that help teacher-writers to find strength in numbers, even when we are working with many individual writers who are all working on their own unique projects.

**Brainstorm Together About Place-Making for Writing.** When we bring a group of teacher-writers together, we are pooling together some of the most creative people we know. We find this a great opportunity to lead the group in inquiry about times and places for writing—and about the dilemmas (as described earlier in this chapter) that require creative problem solving. We ask questions together: *What writing times and spaces have you tried? What were the advantages and disadvantages? Where or when else might we try, and what could help that to go better?* During these conversations, we as facilitators look for opportunities to model and mentor the importance of letting go of the

absolute right time or space, since the goal of “the perfect place” can get in the way of progress. We have been known to come to writing groups with scraps of paper and scattered documents, giving a short mini-lesson where we model how getting organized is an ongoing project. An object lesson of this type lets us open conversations about the literal and metaphorical messiness of writing.

***Focus on Goals, Accountability, Strategies, and Celebration.***

Because of our human wiring as social creatures, it is a powerful thing to say aloud, “I will do this” (e.g., “I will write for at least 30 minutes, 4 days a week.”), and also to know that when the group reconvenes, we will be asked, “Tell us what you did.” We want to be people who keep their word! When we facilitate writing groups, we help teacher-writers with accountability for attainable goals. As a group, we make a schedule of writing, and in group meetings we follow up to report on progress—ideally, not just to tell what we did, but also to share our writing either by distributing documents for feedback or reading something short.

It’s important that we guide teacher-writers in setting goals that are attainable, yet will help them make progress. (After all, it’s true that most teachers can write more in summer, but you can’t wait until summer if you want to *be* a teacher-writer!) So, at meetings with teacher-writers, we ask people to open their calendars and book in some consistent writing time each week. This might be 10 minutes every day with a longer session on Saturday. For some, it’s half of their lunch time, or a 10-minute check-in before they leave the building. We heard of a teacher who wrote in the bathroom at home away from her kids.

The next time, we ask the accountability question: “Well, how’d you do?” We share and hear stories about what didn’t work, and we celebrate small victories. We lead the group with questions that help members troubleshoot: “Where could we move that time/place?” We find it important to recognize that these are real dilemmas—tensions that arise because of competing values, not because the teachers have failed. The objective is not to change their values, but to help them strategize creatively about new ways to work through these dilemmas. Lastly, we also talk about how we celebrate when we meet our writing goals—from the simple step of checking it off our daily to-do list, to purchasing a new pen or notebook after achieving a month’s writing goals, to a dinner with friends to celebrate a completed writing project.

**Write Together, and Talk About Writing Together.** Giving teachers opportunities to write and talk together is relatively simple, but it also can be significant. In his research on writing productivity, Boice (1994) found that “the most successful authors spend as much time socializing about writing as writing (and they spend moderate amounts of time at each)” (p. 208). In Chapter 7, we share more about how to start and maintain successful writing groups. But writing groups are not the only way to take advantage of the social possibilities of writing. We also expedite other ways for writers to take advantage of social opportunities—some that connect just a few teachers in a less structured format than a typical writing group, and some that are intermittent, like large-group write-ins or retreats (vs. sustained writing groups).

- **Weekly write-ins.** Frequent, regular sessions for writing together are chances to receive encouragement from peers about ideas and progress, as well as some accountability for continuing to press on when it feels difficult. Facilitators can set up these kinds of opportunities, too. Sometimes this is as simple as announcing drop-in sessions with no agenda other than writing: “I’ll be writing at the coffee shop on Saturday morning. Anyone else who has something they want to work on is welcome to write there with me!” Other times, this model works best with a regular pair or small group. Ryan, an experienced teacher-writer, set up regular writing times with his friend Nick, who was writing his dissertation for grad school. They met each week for a few hours of writing time in a shared office. Most of their time was focused on writing. They named a few goals before they started, and reported out at the end of their writing session. It gave both of them a quiet place to write, helped each of them to stay focused, and provided a system of mutual support. Similarly, the Centre Teacher-Writers, a group of teachers Anne works with who meet in a monthly writing group in Central Pennsylvania, reserve at least 30 minutes of every meeting just for silent writing. Focused time for writing is a rare treat in the life of a busy teacher.
- **Virtual write-ins.** In some cases, meeting virtually may be the best approach—and facilitators can help teachers to envision and set this up as well. One model to consider might be that used by Erica Hamilton (2015), who sets up virtual

appointments where she and her writing partner log in to Skype or another videoconferencing site. They set up an online meeting at the start of their scheduled writing time for the day (for accountability), tell their goals and progress for the day, and then use the typed chat tool as needed for support and encouragement during the writing session.

- **Summer write-ins.** During the summer, the teaching faculty at Skidmore College are encouraged to spend time on their writing and scholarly projects. Once a week, participating faculty spend 3 hours writing (either in their own space or in a reserved room in the college library), and then they gather at lunch for conversations about progress on their writing projects.
- **Retreat write-ins.** Regular writing time is important. But when there are opportunities for some extra writing, we like to take advantage of those as well. When we set up writing retreats, we keep the structure simple—the time is meant for writing, not a lot of other activities. There are rules: no online, no schoolwork. Just write. The point is to give teacher-writers time and space to get rid of the usual distractions. We have learned that teacher-writers may need help imagining that this really is a good fit for them. When Anne sends the invitation email or flier, she lists sample genres that teachers might work on (columns, letters, blogs, notes to friends, journal articles) so people can see themselves using the retreat for their kind of writing.

**Go with the Social Flow.** Perhaps the most important theme across these strategies is our belief that writing doesn't need to be lonely. Instead of fighting the desire to be social and isolating themselves when they write, teacher-writers can learn to use social situations to their advantage. When we notice a continuous threat to making time or space for writing—something that just won't go away—we look for ways to turn it into an opportunity.

As facilitators, we can help teachers to see a busy table or calendar as a good thing for their writing. For example, Leah shares a story with teacher-writers about how her own place for writing has changed over the years. She used to look forward to quiet writing time when her young children went to bed early in the evening. Now she has teenagers who stay up late—and who have homework most

evenings. For a while this created trouble for Leah—she felt as if she no longer had a good time to write.

Eventually, though, she decided to adjust. Her daughters do their homework at the table, and Leah does her writing there at the same time. They are all a little chatty for the first several minutes, but then they get into the groove and focus. Occasionally one of them groans or laughs or shares with everyone else at the table. Sometimes, when tuba music drifts up from the basement (because her husband is busy practicing), Leah puts in ear buds with some background music that helps her concentrate. But on the whole, the price of a few interruptions is worth it; Leah likes spending the time with her family instead of feeling as though she is missing out.

After she shares this story with teacher-writers, Leah poses a question to the group: “Instead of looking for complete silence and solitude, how might you combine your writing with your desire to spend time with others?” They use the ideas from their discussion to plan new ways to make a place for writing in their lives.

### **Facilitating Structural Motivation and Ability**

In their discussion of how to influence others’ motivation and ability, Grenny et al. (2013) note that well-designed structures and tools can affect people by rewarding vital behaviors, providing accountability, making success visible, and removing difficulties or disincentives. What might this look like when supporting teacher-writers?

***Acquainting Teacher-Writers with Influential Tools.*** Many of us who are facilitators have limited authority or opportunity to actually provide structural supports for teacher-writers. Yet we can still help teachers succeed in making a place for writing by introducing them to structural supports that they themselves can use to help reinforce their motivation and abilities. For the most part, this means introducing tools that add structure to teachers’ writing process—and offering modeling and mentoring in how to use them.

We use mentoring time with individual teachers or mini-lessons with teacher groups to introduce these tools. These are some that we find especially useful:

- ***Calendar appointments.*** Anne shows teachers her own calendar to illustrate how she sets writing time as an appointment. For

those who keep detailed calendars, complete with color-coded appointments, she advises, “If you colorize your calendar, like doctor appointments, do the same with your writing time. You wouldn’t blow off the doctor appointment because they charge you. Think the same way about your appointment with yourself.” Teachers have an ethic of always putting others first, but they need you as a facilitator to help them put on their oxygen mask first, before—as the adage goes—they try to help others. They need help taking care of themselves as teacher-writers, and an appointment on the calendar can be a tool that protects their time and gives them permission to write.

- **A timer for getting started.** Leah likes to ask teachers about their favorite writing tools. Many talk about favorite pens, or display well-worn notebooks, or point straight to their Mac or PC. They look surprised when Leah holds up her phone and swipes to the timer screen. She tells teachers about days where she needs a little extra motivation because she feels stuck on a project—so she persuades herself that she will write for 15 uninterrupted minutes. “Anybody can put up with about anything for 15 minutes.” She finds that 15 minutes is almost always enough time to get her absorbed back into whatever she is writing, and typically she writes for much, much longer. But if it’s only 15 minutes that day, she has met her goal and can feel good about it and put the writing away.
- **A timer for ending.** Often, teachers face the opposite problem: They have only 15 minutes before the next class, or before they have to go pick up their own children, or before something else they can’t miss. They are skeptical about writing during these short 15-minute sessions, because they worry they will waste most of the writing time checking the clock because they are worrying constantly that they will lose track of time. But 15 minutes is enough time to do some meaningful drafting, or revision of a short segment, or copyediting. We show teachers how setting a timer just short of the available time allows them to get lost in the writing, yet still have enough time to finish a sentence and pack up before moving on to the next thing.
- **“Writer at work” signs and signals.** Leah created a low-tech way to help instructors minimize interruptions and protect their writing time: Using an online template, color printer, and cardstock, she created a door-knob hanger in her school’s colors that says “Quiet

Writing Zone.” Teachers like the signs because their students and colleagues know to enter only in emergencies—and because there is nothing like a door sign that indicates you are writing to hold a person accountable for writing. We know there are other creative ways to send the same signals—at home, for example, a teacher-writer might choose a special coffee mug or writing spot that signals to everyone else that it is writing time.

- **Block online distractions.** We know writers who do their writing on old laptops on which they purposely have disconnected the Internet and all applications other than the word processing software. That’s one route that we sometimes suggest for those who constantly are meandering away from their writing and into their email or the web. Although we don’t think it is necessary for every teacher-writer, we do share suggestions for Internet lock-out services with those who are seeking this kind of help. Such apps can keep users out of particular websites that they find especially distracting (Facebook or Twitter, anyone?), or they can block the user from accessing email and the Internet for a set duration of time. There are distraction-free writing tools such as Calmly Writer ([www.calmlywriter.com](http://www.calmlywriter.com)) and Writebox ([www.writeboxapps.com](http://www.writeboxapps.com)), as well as apps that can be installed in your web browser such as StayFocusd, Strict Workflow, and Focus.me. A quick web search will help you find these tools.
- **Track habits.** A variety of apps can help teacher-writers set goals and track their progress. Tools like Habit List ([habitlist.com](http://habitlist.com)) allow users to set regular goals (such as writing on selected days of the week, or a certain number of times a week), and users can track their streaks of success. Another app that “gamifies” habits is ToDoist ([en.todoist.com](http://en.todoist.com)), which awards points as users complete their self-assigned tasks.

**Providing Resources and Recognition.** Facilitators who are also in administrative roles within schools may be able to provide structural supports directly in the school. For instance, a writing-friendly administrator may try some of the following ideas:

- Make time and space available for writing and talk about writing.
- Connect interested teachers to help them start write-in time or writing groups.

- Provide a place, collaborative tools, and a modest budget for writing groups to spend on a shared book or some snacks.
- Arrange for professional development related to writing.
- Recognize writing accomplishments—whether through a newsletter mention, a meet-the-author coffee, or a luncheon for teacher-writers and their mentors.
- Apply for (or support applications for) grants that provide teachers with time, space, and other resources for writing.
- Advocate for financial support for teacher-writers to attend writing-related professional development workshops and conferences.

The point is that motivation and ability are essential to writing, and invitations are important, too—but all of these together are not enough. Teachers also need the time and space to write, and to know that administrators understand that their writing is not a distraction, but a valuable enhancement to their work. We challenge those of you who are administrators to create a hospitable place for writing in your schools. And we challenge those of you who are not administrators to use your influence and status to advocate for writing-friendly places—in schools and out—for the teacher-writers you serve.

## BEYOND INVITATIONS AND PLACEMAKING

Writing is a continuous journey into the unknown, so it isn't surprising that even after teacher-writers have developed sustainable writing habits, they go through times where writing feels daunting. As facilitators, we find that one of our important contributions is to keep cheering teacher-writers on. It is fairly typical in our work with writing groups, class cohorts, and individuals to encounter writers who have taken up our invitations to write, but who later feel that they are stuck and unable to keep going.

David Premont, a teacher-writer in Virginia, describes his journey.

The truth of our work as teachers is that we cannot wake up each morning and write until our muses are satisfied. We wake up each morning and help aspiring writers struggle with the same decisions that authors struggle with, often helping them analyze and negotiate



a variety of texts. It's exhausting work, and after a full day it can be challenging to find the time—and energy—to write independently.

A demanding day of teaching necessitates that we must find our “superpowers” when we construct our own writing. Like the current literary giants, many found “superpowers” allowing them to be the prolific writers they are. Stephen King encourages writers to have their own room, “a place where you go to dream” (Currey, 2013, p. 224). Because of her demanding schedule raising her children and teaching, Toni Morrison constantly thinks about her writing as she drives to work or performs chores around her house. This enables her to produce when she sits down to write in her limited time (as cited in Currey, 2013). Joseph Heller came home every day from his day job and spent a few hours writing *Catch-22* for 8 years. He never felt guilty on the days he couldn't write, but noted that “writing a page or two a day for five days a week does add up” (as cited in Currey, 2013, p. 134).

Writing is demanding. It is no easy task. But I take heart in the “superpowers” that acclaimed writers have found for themselves. After a day's teaching, I find it necessary to have a plan for exercise, a chance to re-energize myself and burn off the unwanted stress of the day. This acts as a second chance to start the day refreshed and ready to write. It revitalizes me and removes the weariness from my body so that I can wrestle with my writing.

We all have superpowers, characteristics that empower us to perform the demanding task of writing. Discovering those superpowers demands that we self-reflect, and discover what enables us to write.

David Premont  
English teacher, Chantilly High School, Chantilly, Virginia

Our role is first of all to assure teacher-writers that the challenges they face, like David's, are normal and are a part of the writing process, not a reflection on their writing ability. Second, our role is to help teacher-writers see that the challenges are surmountable and to coach them into drawing on their strengths and skills in order to press forward successfully. Sometimes we share new invitations for writing that inspire. Sometimes we help teachers conquer practical issues and revisit strategies for finding writing times and spaces that work for them, such as leveraging personal, social, and structural approaches to making a place for writing in their lives.

But just as often, the teacher-writers we work with also face internal challenges: They may start to doubt the relevance of their ideas, or their ability to connect with their desired audience or to “get it right.” These are concerns related to audience, authority, and stance, and we describe our approach to these challenges in Chapter 4.