



Reasons to Write

Mini-Lessons, Prompts, and Inspiration for Teachers

The second piece of advice is this: Write. This may sound ridiculous, but you'd be surprised how many people talk about wanting to write without actually sitting down and doing it. A writer's notebook is a good way to start.

There are some very strict rules for having a writer's notebook. Here they are: Rule 1: Write in it. Rule 2: There are no other rules.

A writer's notebook can be a million things. Some people scribble a few lines at the top of every morning when they wake up. Some write throughout the day, at breakfast, in the grocery checkout line, waiting for the kids to get out of school. You can use a writer's notebook to journal, to scribble story ideas, to record snatches of conversation or names you like or the way the leaves make swishing sounds in the wind. You get the idea . . .

So if you don't already have one, choose a notebook. And write things in it.

kate messner



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*For Jennifer Vincent, Gae Polisner, Jo Knowles, and all the
members of our Teachers Write community: it is such a gift
to know you, write with you, and learn with you.*



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Acknowledgments

A

t the end of the day, this is a book meant to celebrate writing communities, and I am so very thankful for mine. This project wouldn't exist without the generosity of all of our Teachers Write guest authors and Q-and-A Wednesday guests whose words are featured throughout the book. Your willingness to share your time and talent is very much appreciated. Special thanks go to Gae Polisner, Jennifer Vincent, and Jo Knowles, who have led our online writing camp with me from the start.

My trade book publishers, Bloomsbury, Chronicle, and Scholastic, have been incredibly supportive of my work in mentoring teacher-writers through our online camp and resources for this book. Thanks to my editors, Anamika Bhatnagar, Mary Kate Castellani, Melissa Manlove, and Cassandra Pelham, and my agent, Jennifer Laughran, for all that you've shared for this project and for all that you've taught me about writing and revising.

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For this book, I owe the biggest debt of gratitude to the teachers and librarians who asked for the Teachers Write summer camp in the first place. You showed up in droves to participate and nurtured this online community as if every member were one of your beloved students or colleagues, even though we were spread all over the world. You shared your writing, your fears, your joys, and your hearts. Without you, this book wouldn't exist. Thank you for that—and more. I learned so very much from all of you and am thankful to call you colleagues and friends.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction



ake Champlain froze this week, and the ice outside my writing room window is perfectly midnight-blue clear. It's smooth and finally thick enough for skating. It's talking, too. Otherworldly gurgles and booms echo off the rocks, so loud I can hear them even at my desk. What I hear most is "Come outside. Come skate."

The glorious new lake ice pulls at me today, but if it weren't the ice, it would be something else—probably something far less enchanting, like grocery shopping or emails to answer or kitchen counters to clean. I can think of a thousand reasons not to write. You probably can, too. There are papers to grade, evaluations to fill out, kids to drive to soccer practice, cookies to bake, clothes to wash, and if all that gets done, two episodes of *Downton Abbey* are waiting on the DVR. So how could there be time to write?

I meet lots of teachers, librarians, and readers when I travel for conferences and school visits. Many of you confide that you have stories you need to tell, poems you hope to write, and ideas you want to share. And then, many of you say, "I really want to write, but . . ."

I really want to write, but I can't find the time.

I really want to write, but I don't know how to get started.

I really want to write, but teaching leaves me exhausted at the end of the day.

I really want to write, but I'm afraid it won't be good enough.

I really want to write, but . . .

Here is a secret about writing. If you really want to write, you can write. And now is the best time to begin.

If you're a teacher or librarian who feels guilty about time spent away from your professional obligations, it may help to look at writing as an essential part of your work in being a teacher of writing. Because it is.

Before I became a full-time writer, I taught middle school English for fifteen years—a career I chose because I had loved reading books and writing stories as a kid. As an adult, I loved teaching writing just as much. For every new piece I assigned my students, I'd create a model for them, a sample essay or story or poem to help them understand the expectations for the assignment.

But a few years into my teaching career, something changed. It started when I was looking for a work of historical fiction about a particular Revolutionary War battle on Lake Champlain and couldn't find one that would be accessible to my students. I asked around at the library and local museums but came up empty. "Maybe you should write it yourself," someone suggested, half joking. But that idea took hold, and I began scribbling ideas. Those ideas turned into research. I read piles of books and journals and letters, interviewed experts, and took part in a battle reenactment with a local maritime museum. After seven years of research, writing, revision, rejections, and more revision, a small regional publisher picked up my historical novel, and I finally had the story I'd wished for, to share with my students.

I also had a new outlook on teaching, because when I got serious about my own writing, everything changed. Suddenly, I wasn't the all-knowing expert any more. I was struggling sometimes, agonizing over characters whose motivations didn't ring true, details from history that completely derailed my plot, chapter endings that felt forced. I made the choice to bring all of those challenges into my classroom, to share my struggles with my students. It was huge, and I learned something important.

Writing *for* my students provided me with appropriate mentor texts to share.

Writing *with* my students made me a mentor and a far better teacher. Because I was in the middle of the messy process, just as they were, I understood the feeling of *wanting* to finish but being stuck. I could relate to their fear and their failures—and that made all of our successes so much more to celebrate.

That's why I took notice of a particular conversation on Twitter in the spring of 2012. Jennifer Vincent, a teacher I'd met at a conference, said that she really wanted to spend time on her own writing over the coming summer, and that she wished there were some kind of a support group. A few other educators chimed in, and I responded with an off-the-cuff offer to host an online summer writing camp for teachers and librarians. It would be fun, free, and super-casual—just a place where teachers and librarians who wanted to work on their writing could come together, get some inspiration and strategies from published authors, and share their progress.

The response was positive—"We'd love that!"—and the result was Teachers Write, a free, virtual summer writing camp for educators and librarians. I enlisted the help of a wonderful group of children's authors and set up a weekly schedule for our online workshop. Author Jo Knowles shared a warm-up exercise to start us off each week. Mini-Lesson Mondays featured workshops on craft that covered everything from brainstorming and outlining to researching nonfiction. Tuesdays and Thursdays were Quick-Write days, with writing prompts that could be used to generate new ideas or extend thinking for a work in progress. On Q-and-A Wednesdays, teachers and librarians could ask questions of me and guest authors who popped in to visit. And Fridays were . . . well . . . Fridays. We called it Writing Happy Hour, and used the last day of the week to celebrate the work we'd done together, passing around virtual lemonade, offering book giveaways, and sharing accomplishments and struggles from the week.

Young adult author Gae Polisner also hosted Friday Feedback on her blog, giving anyone the chance to share a few paragraphs they'd written and to give and receive feedback. We took weekends off, but Jennifer Vincent invited participants to stop by her blog on Sundays to talk about their writing and the impact that writing might have on their teaching.

When I first posted the news about Teachers Write on my blog, I expected maybe a dozen teachers and librarians to join. It would be fun, low-key, and cozy. But soon after I shared that invitation, it became clear that the program would be bigger than I'd thought. Sixty people signed up in the first hour, and within a few days, that number swelled to six hundred. The week after our virtual writing camp began, we were more than a thousand

writers strong. That's when I stopped keeping count and simply marveled at the enthusiasm, passion, talent, and courage showing up in the comments of my blog every day.

Our “cozy little online writing camp” was no longer small, but it was doing what I'd hoped it would do: encouraging and supporting teachers and librarians who wanted to be better writers. Our first summer was nothing short of inspirational. It renewed my belief that teachers are the most passionate lifelong learners of all and that even in the face of dwindling professional development funds, they'll seek out and create their own opportunities for growth.

More Reasons to Keep Writing

The purpose of this book is to extend that summer writing camp magic by sharing what we did, what we learned, and what we created, and to provide a framework for a writing program that can be run in any school district or community. The lessons and prompts in this book can be done in any order that works best for you. They can be used to run a writing group of any size, run by anyone who wants to support teachers and librarians as writers and as mentors for the young writers they serve. Really, this book isn't just for teachers and librarians. It's for anyone who's always wanted to write, but . . .

So here are fifty-nine reasons to write: lessons and writing prompts ranging from a character's flaws to the memory of a kitchen from your past. Write, because you have things to say—arguments to make, stories to tell, poems to share—and no one else in the world has your unique voice with which to say them. And do it for the young writers you hope to inspire. In making time for your own writing, you'll be crossing a barrier, joining them as real, vulnerable members of a community of writers.

There will always be a world tugging us away from our notebooks or laptops. There will always be hesitation about getting started, worries about whether it's good enough, and challenges when it comes to finding a quiet spot to put words on paper. But if you really want to write, you can write. And you should start today.

How to Use This Book

The mini-lessons, essays, and prompts in this book are organized in chapters by topic. Although you might organize your writing workshop that way, too, kicking off with a week of Getting Started lessons and then moving into organization, setting, character, and so on, you might also find that you'd rather have more variety each week, such as working

a bit with setting on Monday and Tuesday, then exploring poetry on Wednesday, and focusing on nonfiction for the rest of the week. Whether you're writing alone, with a small group of friends or colleagues, or with your whole school district, this reproducible chart will allow you to schedule ten weeks of writing workshop based on your interests and needs. See Figure 1.1 for a sample schedule.

FIGURE 1.1

Sample writing workshop schedule

WEEK/DAY	DATE	LESSON / ASSIGNMENT	PAGE #
Week 1-Monday			
Week 1-Tuesday			
Week 1-Wednesday			
Week 1-Thursday			
Week 1-Friday			
Week 2-Monday			
Week 2-Tuesday			
Week 2-Wednesday			
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Week 9-Tuesday			
Week 9-Wednesday			
Week 9-Thursday			
Week 9-Friday			
Week 10-Monday			
Week 10-Tuesday			
Week 10-Wednesday			
Week 10-Thursday			
Week 10-Friday			



Kate Messner is the award-winning author of more than two dozen current and forthcoming books for young readers, including picture books, nonfiction, chapter books, and novels. A former middle school English teacher, Kate earned National Board Certification in Early Adolescent English Language Arts in 2006. She honed her writing craft alongside her students and still loves visiting schools to conduct writing workshops with kids and teachers alike. Kate's first book for teachers and writers, *Real Revision: Authors' Strategies to Share with Student Writers* (Stenhouse 2011), focuses on making the revision process accessible and fun. Kate is a frequent keynote speaker at events for educators, librarians, and writers, and was a featured speaker at the 2012 TED conference. Her TED talk was later animated as a TED-Ed video on world building in fiction and has garnered close to a million views online as of this writing.

Kate lives on Lake Champlain with her family, and when she's not writing or reading, she loves spending time outside. Follow her on Twitter @KateMessner, and learn more at her website: www.katemessner.com.

KATE'S BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

Picture Books

How to Read a Story (Chronicle 2015)

Up in the Garden and Down in the Dirt (Chronicle 2015)

Tree of Wonder: The Many Marvelous Lives of a Rainforest Tree (Chronicle 2015)

Sea Monster and the Bossy Fish (Chronicle 2013)

Over and Under the Snow (Chronicle 2011)

Sea Monster's First Day (Chronicle 2011)

Chapter Books

Ranger in Time: Rescue on the Oregon Trail (Scholastic 2015)

Ranger in Time: Danger in Ancient Rome (Scholastic 2015)

Marty McGuire Has Too Many Pets! (Scholastic 2014)

Marty McGuire Digs Worms (Scholastic 2012)

Marty McGuire (Scholastic 2011)

Novels

All the Answers (Bloomsbury 2015)

Manhunt (Scholastic 2014)

Hide and Seek (Scholastic 2013)

Wake Up Missing (Bloomsbury 2013)

Capture the Flag (Scholastic 2012)

Eye of the Storm (Bloomsbury 2012)

Sugar and Ice (Bloomsbury 2010)

The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z. (Bloomsbury 2009)

The Best of Q-and-A Wednesday: Beginnings

Q-and-A Wednesday was a tradition in our summertime Teachers Write workshops. We had specific topics for mini-lessons and prompts on most days of the week, but every Wednesday, when published authors visited for Q and A, the floor was open for questions about almost anything that has to do with writing. That free-for-all led to some wonderful conversations, and I've included some of my favorite exchanges in this book, as they relate to the chapter themes.

You'll find these comments throughout the book; please feel free to share them with your writing groups and with your student writers. Some of the conversations include writing tips, strategies, and problem-solving ideas. Others share stories and challenges, and these are no less helpful to emerging writers. Sometimes, simply hearing that a professional has the same struggles is enough to keep a writer coming back to that imperfect page.

Q+A - THE BEST OF Q-AND-A WEDNESDAY: WRITING ROUTINES

What does a writer really do, anyway? What does a typical day look like? We asked our guest authors all about their writing lives, wondering what kinds of writing settings and habits are most likely to call the muse.

QUESTION: What environment do you write in? Music on? Shut in a closet? Lots of snacks handy? I'd love to share with my students to help them as writers.

ANSWERS:

Sometimes I need it to be completely quiet. Other times, the music is going (like right now—Jay Z), the television is on, and I have six or seven tabs open in my browser. I like to write in different places. I write in my apartment, on the subway (great for people-watching), and outside on the roof deck.

Finally, when I'm doing late-stage revisions, I need to read my work out loud. I'll even play dress-up when I do that!

~Phil Bildner, author of *The Soccer Fence*

Like Phil, I often write in different places. These days I'm usually outside near my pool with my big dog. I don't eat snacks while I'm writing, but I love to reward myself with a piece of chocolate when I'm finished. Rewards can be fun. I like to reward myself every step of the way—including when I finish a chapter or send off a proposal. The reward isn't always chocolate—sometimes it might be a hike in a nearby nature preserve or tea with a friend. I always believe that it's important to set goals and acknowledge those accomplished. Plus it adds fun to a solitary business!

~Nancy Castaldo, author of *Sniffer Dogs: How Dogs (and Their Noses) Save the World*

I tend to keep one CD in the player for months, if not years. Currently, I'm listening to Tab Benoit's *Fever for the Bayou*. I'll also listen to Bach, Vivaldi, or Doc Watson. Sometimes, I can only listen to instrumental music. (I think that the familiarity of a CD that I play repeatedly, like Tab Benoit's, helps keep the words from being a distraction.) I am constantly interrupted by cats. I am occasionally interrupted by the delivery of an unexpected but much appreciated snack.

However, I think it is important to also let your students know that each writer's process, as far as things that are removed from the actual mechanics and art of writing and revising, is an individual preference that should not be seen as a means to an end. Questions about personal habits as part of the process always make me think of the great Borges story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," about a man who tried to re-create the writing of that book.

~David Lubar, author of *Hidden Talents* and the *Weenies* short story collections

QUESTION: Can you tell us about your personal, daily writing schedule?

ANSWERS:

For about eight years, I wrote while also working full-time for an educational publisher. Back then, I scheduled my writing time religiously. I committed to at least ten hours per week. I kept a stack of blank grids in my study, and each Friday I planned the following week. I wrote down exercise time (at least three times a week) and also writing time. Then I posted it on my study door so my family could see it, too. The schedule varied from week to week. Sometimes I'd wake up at five or six to write until my son was up. Other times I'd "binge" with big blocks of time on the weekend. It all depended on what else was going on in my week.

Then, about a year ago, my employer very wonderfully agreed to let me transition to a part-

time schedule. Now I write every weekday morning for at least three hours, and then I work every weekday afternoon for about four and a half hours. I can't tell you how much I love this schedule, and how lucky I feel. My writing has transformed. Before, I was so tired, and I felt so rushed. Now I have these lovely long and predictable blocks when I can create.

~Pam Bachorz, author of *Candor and Drought*

It seems like it's never the same two days in a row. I started writing before my older son was born, so for eight years of writing, I had to work around babies/toddlers/preschoolers. I usually stayed up super-late or got up super-early and definitely wrote through naptimes and during the short hours they were at preschool.

But three years ago, two things happened. I finally got published, and my youngest went off to kindergarten, and I found myself with way too much time on my hands. My schedule was no longer dictated to me, and I was very unproductive that first year. Fortunately, I've had some time to work it out.

I am still a stay-at-home mom, first and foremost, so I never even try to write during a time that my kids need my attention (for example, I'm not writing much this summer; only in little spurts and fits when they're off at a camp or sleeping over at a friend's house, etc.). I find this to be the easiest way to keep from feeling pulled in too many directions.

I also lose at least one writing day per month (and sometimes—usually in October and May—several days per month) to school and library visits. I just accept that these things are an important part of the job, and I don't try to write on those days, either.

But on a day where I actually have all day to write, it kind of goes like this: I start by answering emails and filling out interviews for blogs and so forth. I update my Facebook and Twitter. Then I take a break for a workout. This is important, because it helps me clear my mind. I come back, grab some lunch, and get writing. I write for about four hours, but find that after much more than four hours, I start to get "stale." I need some pondering time in between scenes, and if I'm cranking away for longer than four hours, I just don't get that important pondering time. I try to have it all done and put away before the kids get out of school, and then I check emails and Facebook and Twitter and all that stuff again before bedtime.

~Jennifer Brown, author of *Hate List*

I work full-time, and because that takes up a good portion of my weekdays, I do most of my writing on weekends. I need fairly large uninterrupted chunks of time to draft, so most of that is done on weekends, but I am okay editing in the evenings after work.

~Joanne Levy, author of *Small Medium at Large*

Me? I get up, eat bon bons for breakfast, write a few bon mots, and then have my hunky cabana boy feed me grapes while I get a full-body massage.

And then I wake up to my real life. I've learned to write anytime, anywhere, anyplace. This is probably how I've developed tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome in my wrists. I've written parts of my novels in doctor's office waiting rooms. This morning I was writing (and answering some of these questions) while my daughter was having physiotherapy. My author bio includes the title "unpaid chauffeur," and as a single parent, that role has dominated my life for a very long time. I'm not sure who is more excited about my daughter training to get her license in the next few months—her or me!

I use the Freedom app to "turn off the Internet" for periods of time—sometimes fifteen minutes, sometimes thirty, sometimes an hour, depending on the day. I write like a fiend during the offline time, then allow myself a quick online break, then turn the Internet off again.

Although I don't have a "day job," I do political writing as well as novels. Sometimes it's hard to switch gears when I've got a column due.

I try to go to one retreat a year where I can be a hard-core writer. I get more done at that retreat in three days than in three weeks at home.

~Sarah Darer Littman, author of *Want to Go Private?* and *Backlash*

When I was teaching full-time, my writing schedule involved getting the kids to bed, writing from 9:00 to 11:00 p.m. or until I couldn't keep my eyes open any more, and then going to bed. Rinse and repeat. I did this on weekdays, and weekends were mixed: sometimes I'd take them off to relax and have family time, or if I really needed to get work done, I'd head out to a coffee shop for a few hours during the day.

Now that I'm no longer teaching, I write from about 10:30 to 2:30 every day, sometimes again at night. That's during the school year. During the summer, I'm incredibly sporadic and will go a few days without writing much but then put in a twelve-hour day if I'm on deadline.

~Kate Messner, author of *All the Answers*, *How to Read a Story*, and the *Ranger in Time* series

I think it's a good idea to schedule your "intense writing time" for the time of day that you, personally, are most productive. I am a morning person, so I get up at 4:30–5:00 or so, allow myself ten–fifteen minutes to check email and Facebook, walk the dog, accept the cup of coffee that my husband has lovingly brewed for me, and get to work. During the school year, I work until seven, when the kids get up, and then get back to work after the morning craziness for

another three or four hours. If I've met my writing quota for the day (which varies, depending on the project and my adrenaline level/freak-out mode about a deadline), I allow myself to do less structured stuff, like writing a blog post, answering emails, exercising, and life maintenance. If I'm lucky, I can squeeze in another chunk of writing time later in the day, but that's a bonus.

~Sarah Albee, author of *Poop Happened: A History of the World from the Bottom Up* and *Bugged: How Insects Changed History*

I don't have a real routine, but I try to write every day, even if I think what I'm writing isn't working. The next day, I go back and polish (or delete). If I'm really stuck, I keep on anyway but file the problem mentally until I'm in the car on a long drive or on a long walk. Movement seems to free my brain to work out problems. I used to drive my son to school forty-five minutes away, and that daily one and a half hours in the car was great for fixing my writing. If I can work it out mentally, then it flows onto paper (or computer). What's important—for me, anyway—is getting the words down. They can always be changed or improved (or deleted).

~Diane Zahler, author of *Sleeping Beauty's Daughters* and *The Black Death*

If I get really stuck and I hate what I'm doing, I try to still write something on it every day. If it's really bad, I might make a pretty modest goal, like three hundred words. Then when I've written three hundred words, I allow myself to work on something more fun or even just go do something else entirely. Sometimes you do have to step away and put a project on the back burner to work itself out in the subconscious, but it's also a fine line between putting something on the back burner and procrastinating forever or giving up. So if the project I'm stuck on is my number one project, I try not to let it go entirely. I've found that forcing myself to write even a little bit every day also forces me to keep thinking about how to solve the problem until I get a lightbulb moment.

I also find that certain activities trigger lightbulb moments more often, like taking a shower or reading a really good novel in a similar genre or a book that has some research-related pertinence to whatever I'm writing.

~Jaclyn Dolamore, author of *Magic Under Glass* and *Dark Metropolis*

During the school year (when all is quiet in the house), I have a routine that I stick to. It begins with getting the kids ready, and the rest of the schedule falls like dominoes. I have a set time that I must start writing. Sometimes, I am really dragging, working hard but gaining very little distance; other days, the words flow, and I hit word counts that shock me (not usually the case, though!). I find that having a routine keeps my mind primed, same as a regular exercise routine keeps the body primed.

Now, summer is different altogether! Activities, visitors (I live in Florida, an hour from Disney and Cocoa Beach), and vacations throw my writing schedule way off. I try not to feel bad about that. My kids are only young once, but I'll always be a writer.

~Danette Haworth, author of *A Whole Lot of Lucky* and *Violet Raines Almost Got Struck by Lightning*

Two Teachers Writing

When teachers come together as part of a writing community, magical things happen, not just for the teacher-writers but also for the student writers with whom they work. Two of the most active participants in our summer Teachers Write camp started the process as strangers but ended up forming an across-the-miles online critique and support group. Jennifer Vincent and Brian Wyzlic reflect on how writing together and writing regularly have transformed their teaching as well.

JEN

In two summers of Teachers Write, I grew remarkably as a writer. The community and camaraderie helped me be more motivated, focused, and confident in my own writing, and to understand more about writing in general. Kate, Gae, Jo, and the many other authors and bookish professionals who gave their time, energy, and ideas to Teachers Write are amazing. Thanks to their insights, I wrote more, tried new things in my writing, and asked questions I never thought to ask before. Not only did I benefit from the whole community, but I was lucky enough to connect with Brian as a mini-critique-writing-support-group partner (or Maquizga, as we call it now). I am more conscious of what I need to be a productive writer and what students might need in terms of support, advice, and feedback. It's amazing to look back on two summers of Teachers Write and realize the extent of the impact it has had on us.