

Personal Narrative in Being a Writer: Telling the Stories of Our Lives

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Expert Voices, Writing, From the Field

Renowned writing teacher and author Nancie Atwell said, “I only have to write a little bit better than my students for them to learn from my demonstrations” (Atwell, 1998).

Although I have learned much from Atwell about writing, I disagree with this tenet. To enhance my point, please read the following excerpt from a sixth-grader’s personal narrative about her disabled mother titled “Anxiously Waiting.”

On the day of the arrival my mom and I would get BIG glasses of ice cold tea and anxiously wait for my grandparents to appear. Every now and then I would set my tea down, bolt to the curb, lean over far to see if I could spot the big gold truck rumbling down the solid black road. When I turned around I wouldn't have to say a single word because by the look on my face, my mom could tell they were nowhere to be found.

Eventually I would get up the courage one last time and hop over to the curb and I would spring so far back I seemed like a cat being scared by a large black figure. I would turn around and whisper, “They’re here!” I can still picture my mom’s reaction; she would slowly blink and smile in relief that they had made it okay. She would rise up and decrease the wrinkles in her worn out shirt and tug on her faded pants to make them look brand new. I remember how my mom would bend over to fix her pant leg to make sure that the seam was covering the gap to her shoe. Step by step she would inch her way off the porch like a young turtle just learning how to walk, and she’d stand there waiting for her mom to approach her.

As this personal narrative—beautifully observed and skillfully crafted—demonstrates, my sixth-grade student is a wonderful writer. I am certainly not a better writer than she is. And yet, with the right knowledge and tools in hand, I was able to successfully guide this student to further develop her writing.

“How Can I Teach Children to Write Well, When I Was Never Taught Myself?”

One reason I taught primary grades for so many years is that I believed Atwell; my narrative writing was slightly better than the writing produced by my second graders, which gave me the confidence I needed to teach them to write well.

When I shakily ventured out of that K–2 comfort zone to teach upper elementary and middle school, I feared my weak narrative writing, along with questionable grammar skills, would cause the children to stumble. I know I wasn’t alone in my fears. I have seen hundreds of teachers around our country struggle with the teaching of writing, often hearing this lament: “I can’t write well; I was never taught to teach writing well, so how can I teach children to write well?”

However, despite my fears, my upper elementary and middle school students thrived, winning writing awards and receiving accolades on state-mandated testing, even though I could not write as well as many of them.

I finally came to understand that although we DO need to write alongside our students; we do NOT need to be better writers than they. What we MUST do is know how to instruct them in writing.

Many teachers who lack confidence in their own writing and who have not been taught to teach writing well have simply chosen to avoid teaching writing at all. What teachers need is a strong program that guides them in the teaching of writing craft and skills within various genres. What students need is a strong program that guides them to become proficient writers.

Not just any program will do. A strong program follows the best practices found in writing instruction: it honors the tenets of time, choice, and response; teaches the writer's craft, as well as grammar and skills; motivates children; and, last but not least, follows the standards.

In my last year of public school teaching, I found all of these best practices in *Being a Writer*. I loved it so much that after 32 years as a classroom teacher I retired earlier than I had planned and became a consultant for Collaborative Classroom in order to share this amazing resource around our country.

In my work facilitating professional learning over this past decade, I have been delighted to watch as this program has led students to become proficient writers who love to put pen to paper, guided by teachers who feel confident in their facilitation of learning.

How Being a Writer Teaches Personal Narrative Writing

Now let's take a deep dive into how *Being a Writer* can lead to powerful personal narrative writing. I'll focus on how the instruction unfolds in kindergarten and third grade.

Looking at the *Being a Writer* scope and sequence, I especially appreciate how the personal narrative unit falls relatively early in the year. I like to ask children during that first quarter to tell me about their lives in order for us to become a community of writers who know about and care for one another.

In exploring personal narrative, we are saying to our students, "I am interested in your life; I appreciate what matters to you." We ask them to put the stories of their lives down on paper as we learn to live, love, laugh, and cry together in a community of writers.

Sometimes students struggle with the importance of examining their lives in the deep and powerful manner it takes to write effective narrative. One of my students, Laura, exclaimed in frustration one afternoon, "Mrs. D., you have 50+ years of memories. I only have 11. How can I reflect like you do?" However, during the personal narrative unit, Laura was gently guided to see that although she had only been on this earth for a decade, she could use this genre to explore, learn from, and celebrate her life.

This unit begins—like all units in *Being a Writer*—by examining well-written anchor texts within the genre. As these models of writing are examined, students explore the process of putting the stories of their lives on paper, trying on the moves they see accomplished writers making within the anchor text.

The personal narrative lessons in the kindergarten *Telling More* unit focus on:

- Thinking and discussing what students want to say to support planning;
- Revising by adding on in both illustrations as well as writing;
- Writing shared stories to see good writing modeled;
- Choosing their own topics to write about;
- Sharing in author's chair; and
- Approximating spelling and using a word wall in order to spell sight words correctly.

As always in any Collaborative Classroom program, social skills are taught seamlessly within the program. During this unit, these young writers learn the beginning steps of conferring with partners using the prompts “I found out...” and “I want to know...” in order to show interest in their partner’s writing.

In looking at the third-grade personal narrative unit, we continue to dig deeper into this genre by focusing on:

- Significant topics and events from students’ lives;
- Sensory details;
- Temporal words and phrases; and
- Engaging openings and effective endings.

Socially, we work on giving total attention to anyone who is speaking, expressing interest in and appreciating others’ writing, and giving feedback in supportive and thoughtful ways.

During the immersion and drafting arc of the third-grade unit, students are encouraged to write about experiences with loved ones, their homes, single incidents, first days of school, persevering through challenges, and learning from experiences. These writing lessons help steer students away from the oft written “bed to bed” story where students retell something that happened in their lives by beginning with getting out of bed the day of the event and finishing with going to sleep the night of the important event, giving equal, undifferentiated weight to the routines of waking up and falling asleep, rather than prioritizing the important moments of the main event. In the proofreading section of the unit, we focus on correcting commonly misused words, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments.

I believe one of the strongest aspects of our personal narrative unit is how it develops voice in writers at such a young age. During the early years of teaching writing, we were told to teach students to develop their voices; how to do so often confused me. Being a Writer does this so simply yet clearly. Lessons on sensory and descriptive details as well as engaging openings and effective endings show students how to put their own voices in their pieces. Voice is a serious consideration in the sixth-grade unit.

Voice is a challenging aspect of writing for writers of any age to perceive clearly and to deliberately cultivate. In grade 6 of this program, the students begin to explore voice by thinking about how an author’s personality and way of writing comes through in her words and sentences, and they think about how to express their own personality in their writing. This is the foundation for further study of voice in the middle and high school years.

—From Being a Writer Grade 6, Personal Narrative Genre, Week 1, Day 4

In Conclusion

Because my students’ writing is a more eloquent testimonial than anything else, I will close with another wonderful piece by a sixth-grade student of mine.

Even though I might not be a better writer than Kristian, nonetheless I can successfully instruct him, thanks to Being a Writer.

I sit silently on the soft leather airport chairs listening quietly to the silent chit-chat of passengers waiting to board. After a little while I see a sleek Southwest plane roll over to the loading dock. I sigh sadly in defeat. I have been hoping that perhaps the flight will delay, or a storm will come in that will not let any more planes leave. But no, all my hopes are in vain. They have done nothing to stop this plane and now here it is, ready to take away someone I wish would never leave.

References

Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning* (2nd ed., p. 26). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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