

**Title of Session:** WriteTalk - Writing Challenges

**Moderator:** Sandra Shattuck

**Title of File:** 20040721writetalk

**Date:** July 21, 2004

Room: After School Online Room

**SandraS:** We'll do introductions when the session begins, but I already notice that we've got some language arts folks, social studies.

**SandraS:** And Oliver -- what's your discipline?

**OliverGst13:** language arts

**SandraS:** wonderful

**CandaceJaG:** Since the language arts teachers in my school only teach 'grammar', I teach a lot of writing

**SandraS:** aha!

**SummerP:** I am also language arts

**SandraS:** grammar only can make for some dry writing...

**CandaceJaG:** my goal is to publish student work this year, non fiction and fiction

**SandraS:** way cool, Candace

**CandaceJaG:** the students do not write except in my class

**SummerP:** wow, the rest of the time in their English classes they only do 'grammar'?

**SandraS:** I'm glad to hear they're doing writing in your class, Candace

**CandaceJaG:** yes, and the test questions, over and over- I would burst

**BJ:** Welcome to tonight's Festival session on WriteTalk!

**BJ:** Sandra Shattuck is the leader of this discussion

**BJ:** Sandy leads a monthly WriteTalk discussion in Tapped In. Watch your August calendar for the next WriteTalk

**BJ:** let's start with brief introductions so we know who's participating

**BJ:** I'm an art teacher in Pennsylvania

**SandraS:** I'm an English teacher in Alabama

**KarinEH:** I am Karin Hanson, fifth grade teacher in Moorpark, CA

**JenniferK2:** I teach dyslexic students in Louisiana

**SummerP:** Hello all. I am a high school English teacher in CA

**SusanSi:** howdy from Texas teaching math and art--writing in all

**HeatherN:** Hi. I'm an English teacher in CA

**CindyWC:** I teach 3rd grade in Atlanta

**SusanArt:** English/social studies/technology--Missouri

**KathyBu:** I am a library Prep teacher for 1st - 6th grades in Sacramento.

**CandaceJaG:** I teach 130 students daily in the Jewel of the Delta, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, economics history basically

**SandraS:** We have a wonderful group of people here, so let's get to it.

**SandraS:** I've got a bit of a spiel, and then we'll have time to talk.

**SandraS:** Here goes the spiel:

**KathyBu:** I finally made it too. I'm ready

**SandraS:** Yeah, Julie.

**SandraS:** OK, I want to tell you a bit about the National Writing project, which is federally funded

**SandraS:** it's been around for 30 years as a professional development model

**SandraS:** the NWP has 3 premises

**SandraS:** 1) teachers are the best teachers of other teachers

**SandraS:** 2) teachers are better teachers of writing if they write better

**SandraS:** 3) writing helps with learning across all subjects

**SandraS:** Currently, NWP has 185 sites, all housed at universities and all working mainly with K-12 teachers. The primary project for each site is the Summer Invitational Institute (an intensive four-week seminar -- participants are paid a stipend to attend) where teachers work across disciplines and grade levels to improve their own writing and to share ideas on the teaching of writing.

**JesseHo:** Agree, Agree, Agree

**SandraS:** Last summer, I attended the Summer Invitational Institute at the Alabama A&M University (AAMU) Writing Project

**SandraS:** <http://www.knology.net/aamuwritingproject>

**SandraS:** and became what is called a Teacher Consultant and a Teacher Leader -- I help with continuity programs, such as the Advanced Institute and our upcoming Writing Retreat. With the technology liaison, I set up the AAMU WP Group Room on Tapped In ideally so that our dispersed teachers could better communicate.

**SandraS:** However, I noticed that Tapped In could be an ideal place for a writing group, and I changed the title of our monthly meetings from AAMU Writing Project to WriteTalk, which now functions as an online writing group supporting the professional writing of Tapped In members. Another basic belief of the National Writing Project

**SandraS:** <http://www.writingproject.org>

**SandraS:** is that school reform needs to come from within the schools, and that teachers can best share their ideas through writing and publishing.

**SandraS:** The NWP has two publications: The Voice (newsletter for the NWP) and The Quarterly (scholarly publication on the teaching of writing). You can find out more about these publications through the main website. The Voice is available electronically. Both publications have given me ideas I've implemented in the classroom.

**SandraS:** OK, that's the NWP and WriteTalk spiel pretty much. Tonight we're talking about writing challenges and possible solutions. With the help of the last WriteTalk session, I identified about 8 writing challenges. Here they are:

**SandraS:** 1) time - specifically, lack thereof

**SandraS:** 2) fear of writing

**SandraS:** 3) getting started

**SandraS:** 4) organizing

**SandraS:** 5) finding the right words

**SandraS:** 6) perfectionism

**SandraS:** 7) comparing one's own writing to others'

**SandraS:** 8) getting feedback

**CindyWC:** time is a big issue in my classroom

**SandraS:** Some of you may even now be groaning in recognition...What I'd like to do tonight is to offer some solutions. I'll talk about each solution a bit, and then we can open up to discussion.

**JesseHo:** These all make sense, since I have struggled with them all. Is there a workshop held in Georgia?

**SandraS:** Jesse, you can check the sites at [www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)

**SandraS:** Alabama has about 5 sites

**SandraS:** Georgia will have several

**JesseHo:** Thank you

**KathyBu:** Jesse, sites in Georgia look sparse

**SandraS:** Here are the solutions I'll discuss:

**SandraS:** 1) timed writing practice

**SandraS:** 2) writing with students as a writer among other writers

**SandraS:** 3) read work aloud

**SandraS:** 4) graphic organizers

**SandraS:** 5) cross-sensory creativity -- walk and then write; make a collage and write...

**SandraS:** 6) join a writing group - check out NWP Summer Institutes in your area, bring your work to WriteTalk at Tapped In

**SandraS:** is everybody with me so far?

**SummerP:** yes!

**CindyWC:** oooh, I like #5

**HelenK:** yes

**KarinEH:** yes

**KathyBu:** Yes

**SusanArt:** excited

**JesseHo:** yes

**KathyBu:** With you!

**CindyWC:** yes

**HeatherN:** Yes

**SusanSi:** ready

**SandraS:** excellent...for those of you who are new, remember that you'll get a transcript of this session emailed to you, so you'll have a record of all urls and our talk

**CandaceJaG:** yes

**SandraS:** The timed writing practice is perhaps the single most helpful tool I've used to improve my own writing and that of my students'. Not only that...it's fun! None of us has any extra time, but we each could probably sit down for five minutes maybe twice a week and write. The timed writing practice is basically a kind of freewriting or brainstorming or prewriting exercise, although it can be used in other ways. I've adopted it from Natalie Goldberg's work in her books on writing: *\_Writing Down the Bones\_* and *\_Wild Mind\_*.

**SandraS:** Here are the guidelines: 1) Keep your hand moving. 2) Lose control. 3) Be specific. 4) Don't think. 5) Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar. 6) You are free to write the worst junk in the galaxy. 7) Go for the jugular. -- Determine that you (or you and your students) will write using a prompt for 5 minutes (or 10 or 20 or 40) and follow these guidelines. In class, if I'm using this exercise to help discussion, I ask for volunteers to read aloud. But everyone has the right to refuse, since timed writing practice is meant to be writing for one's eyes/ears only. No pressure, no editing, no restriction.

**JesseHo:** Free-writing is one of the hardest concepts for me because I hate to make mistakes and try to be perfect.

**SandraS:** The timed writing practice allows you to use little bits of time and still get some great ideas.

**SandraS:** Aha!

**SandraS:** the timed writing practice addresses several challenges

**SandraS:** time, perfectionism, comparing one's writing to others, getting started

**SandraS:** another way to use time for writing is to write with your students

**KathyBu:** I'm like Jesse, I need it to be creative but also perfect and this would be difficult under time pressure

**SandraS:** ah, ok, I'll back up

**SandraS:** the time is there not for pressure, but simply to allow you a certain time period to write

**SandraS:** if you sit down with a prompt - and there's a list of prompts in the AAMU WP group room -- also lists on the web --

**SandraS:** you'll be amazed at what you can write

**SandraS:** the guidelines are set up to get you past that internal editor we all have

**JesseHo:** I need to look at the site

**SandraS:** the one that wants us to write perfect sentences

**SandraS:** you don't have to time yourself

**SandraS:** but I find that I can commit to five minutes of writing

**SandraS:** even if I'm very rushed

**SandraS:** so can my students

**SandraS:** and I always point out to them how much they've written in just that short amount of time

**LisaEM:** The idea behind free writing is to get the creative juices flowing and make the student comfortable with writing. It works great when they don't have to worry about being perfect.

**SandraS:** absolutely, Lisa

**GilaT:** How do you find that this works with younger elementary students?

**SandraS:** freewriting is a kind of brainstorming or what's known as prewriting

**CindyWC:** Cool concept

**JesseHo:** But I want to write it once and be done with it!

**SandraS:** I don't have a lot of experience with younger elementary students

**SandraS:** but I'd love to see someone use it there

**CandaceJaG:** can there be a limitation sometimes, like using a particular vocab word, or concept?

**LisaEM:** The more freedom you give your students the better writers they become and the more confident they are in their writing.

**KathyBu:** I'm willing to buy it too! I think my fifth graders would love this freedom.

**SusanArt:** I allow lists, webs, images, doodling, etc...Middle school

**SandraS:** I agree, Lisa

**SandraS:** great, Susan

**HeatherN:** How much time do you set aside for this?

**CandaceJaG:** I have done it with elementary school kids, they love it

**SandraS:** I usually set aside 5-10 minutes

**SandraS:** in class

**SandraS:** less or more for myself, depending on what I'm doing

**CindyWC:** Do they write in a journal of some kind

**SandraS:** they can write in a journal

**HelenK:** it is great modeling if you write with them

**SandraS:** or in a notebook

**LisaEM:** I have used free writing with grades 6-8 for fifteen years and it has never failed my students. It is well worth the 5 minutes at the beginning of each class period.

**SandraS:** I never collect/grade

**KarinEH:** Do you do it every day?

**JesseHo:** Go guys go! Maybe I will be "Sandratized" by the end of the night. it is getting late:)

**AndreaNA:** do you suggest we model the topics based on what the students are reading for the class?

**SandraS:** I don't do it every day, although one could

**SummerP:** I just check to see that they have all been writing but that is all I base my assessment on

**SandraS** chuckles at Jesse

**SandraS:** I agree, Summer

**SandraS:** Andrea, I think there's a way to develop effective prompts

**SandraS:** depending on your objective

**SusanArt:** Sandra...do you encourage students to find writing projects within their draftbooks

**SandraS:** for instance, when we begin discussing Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, the prompt I give them is, "When I think of Africa, I think of..."

**SummerP:** my class this summer has been sharing inspirational quotes or poems, or whatever a student comes across that he/she wants to share with the class

**SandraS:** My objective is to reveal preconceptions, knowledge, ignorance...so that we start our discussion of the novel grounded there.

**SandraS:** excellent, Summer

**SummerP:** we briefly discuss it and then everyone takes five minutes to respond in their own journals

**SandraS:** making the prompts a collective project is a great idea

**SummerP:** the best part is I started it off and then the students had to select something and rotate each day

**SandraS:** that's great, Summer

**AndreaNA:** I've tried some of that with my students and it seems to work well, I just have a tough time coming up with prompts

**SandraS:** Andrea, you can check the prompts file in the AAMU WP room

**CindyWC:** Summer, what do you mean, rotate each day?

**SummerP:** you could also do a search online for writing prompts...I know there is a lot of information out there

**SandraS:** also, important to talk about cross discipline

**SandraS:** let's say you're in chemistry class

**SandraS:** you start with a freewrite

**SandraS:** one could have a prompt, "When I did my chemistry homework last night, I felt..."

**SummerP:** one student will present one day and then another will volunteer the next day  
Cindy

**CindyWC:** oh, I see. thanks

**SandraS:** I also want to get back to what someone mentioned about modeling writing

**KarinEH:** How frequent do you do the freewrites?

GilaT: Do you then take the freewrite and let them pick which one to elaborate on and turn into a narrative or expository piece?

**SandraS:** if we write with our students, we not only get writing time, we also become a writer among writers

**SandraS:** Karin, frequency is up to you

**SandraS:** again, depends on objective

**SandraS:** I do it almost every class period

**SandraS:** and yes, Gila, freewriting is an excellent way for students to generate topics for longer writings

**SummerP:** I do it every class period

**KathyBu:** My kids do their best writing when I model for them. I think that they see that it is not such a foreboding task.

**SandraS:** I agree, Julie

**SandraS:** Also, I get to feel the same nervousness they do when I read my writing.

**CandaceJaG:** Sandra, I have done this with my kids, we had a blast

**CindyWC:** yes, Julie, that makes sense

**SandraS:** Great, Candace.

**SandraS:** ok, so we're talking a lot about our students

**SandraS:** but what about our own writing?

**SummerP:** this all such great stuff I am so glad to be a part of this session!

**SandraS:** thanks, Summer

**BJ . o O ( remember Sandy does this every month in TI )**

**SandraS:** thanks, BJ

**SandraS:** I was just going to say...

**SandraS:** one of the challenges we talked about was getting feedback

**SandraS:** again, response groups, peer editing are all great ways to do writing in the classroom

**KathyBu:** I'm really interested in the writing institute. This would be very helpful before teachers attempt National Board certification

**SandraS:** but we often don't get that kind of attention for our own writing

**CandaceJaG:** I enjoy writing to my friends and family. I have a son in Iraq, and I am writing more and more to him as a writer

**SandraS:** I agree, Julie

**SandraS:** letter writing is still an art

**SandraS:** WriteTalk meets once a month

**SandraS:** but anyone can post any kind of writing to the Discussion

**SandraS:** and anyone can request feedback

**SandraS:** I'm talking about every kind of writing

**SandraS:** lesson plans, articles, progress reports

**MRobertGst17:** what do you think about setting up peer groups with you faculty groups

**SandraS:** I think getting feedback on writing is one of the most helpful things

**SandraS:** excellent, Robert

**KathyBu:** How does that work in terms of the writing staying private to the group?

**SusanArt:** good point Sandra: plans reports articles etc.

**SandraS:** again, time can be a problem with peer groups among faculty, but usually there are several folks willing to get together

**SandraS:** Kathy, can you elaborate?

**JesseHo:** I have found several faculty members who are willing to read things I have written for Grad. coursework

**SandraS:** ok, so joining a writing group is solution #6 and we've been talking about that

**KathyBu:** I write fiction with a particular slant which I eventually hope to publish. I'm not sure I would want it to be in an archive at this point.

**MRobertGst17:** is it ethical to let parents look at your work to get them involved

**SandraS:** ok, so Kathy -- if you posted work to the WriteTalk group it wouldn't get archived

**SandraS:** Robert, can you expand on that?

**SandraS:** students' parents?

**MRobertGst17:** if you are letting the students and faculty see your work is it ok to let parents and outside supporters view it to get them involved

**SandraS:** I think that would be up to the writer

**SandraS:** certainly a good way to get parents involved

**CandaceJaG:** Robert, a local poet sold his books at a career fair, and read to the classes

**SandraS:** some of the other solutions I mentioned - read work aloud

**SandraS:** this can be very time-consuming in class

**SummerP:** I think it's important for students to begin to understand the VALUE of their writing

**SummerP:** so I try and publish it when I can

**SandraS:** but many students catch their own mistakes or problem areas

**SummerP:** it seems to make them more accountable for their work

**JesseHo:** This definitely works for me

**SandraS:** excellent, Summer

**SandraS:** we had a session on WriteTalk about authentic audience

**SandraS:** powerful stuff -- important for writers to develop

**SummerP:** when they hand it in and get it back...it just disappears and along w/ it goes any meaning or worth. I think anyways....

**SandraS:** writing ceases to be an academic exercise

**HelenK:** there are many studies that say students value evaluation by their peers at a higher level than that of their teachers

**SusanArt:** Sandra..can you suggest some authentic audiences for us later

**SandraS:** yes, Susan, I was just about to say...

**JesseHo:** A lot of the faculty at my school simply use the check-off method when looking at small written work.

**KathyBu:** Reading aloud can be a partner task and many can do it at once. It is critical for students to see what they really wrote versus what they wanted to say.

**SandraS:** in the writing project, one teacher discussed using children's books in high school

**HelenK:** they will try harder to produce quality work when that is their audience

**CindyWC:** My kids love to read their work in front of the class. I do think it makes them feel better about what they have written.

**JesseHo:** Sorry, small samples of written work

**SandraS:** high school students wrote children's books, designed them, and then went to an elementary school and read them to students there

**MRobertGst17:** is it possible to have kids tape themselves reading their work so they keep it private but they can still evaluate their writing and work on public speaking

**SandraS:** I agree, Cindy

**SandraS:** that's the most basic level of feedback -- simply listening

**CandaceJaG:** so, authentic audience?

**SandraS:** Peter Elbow discusses a wide range of possible feedback in his Community of Writers book

**SandraS:** another way to get authentic audience is to use a blog

**CandaceJaG:** Elbow is wonderful

**SandraS:** and have students read each other's work

**SandraS:** school literary magazines

**SandraS:** often the local paper publishes work by students

**SandraS:** an online zine

**CindyWC:** My kids seem to find a lot of their own mistakes while reading aloud

**SandraS:** yes, Cindy, exactly

**CindyWC:** this seems to help with their editing skills as well

**SusanArt:** Zine?

**SandraS:** zine - online magazine

**SandraS:** reading aloud is a kind of automatic editing

**SandraS:** ok, organizers

**SandraS:** our last session, Susan talked about organizers

**SandraS:** Susan, the url for the organizers didn't come through on my transcript

**SandraS:** do you happen to have it handy?

**SandraS:** I did find another site

**JesseHo:** I despise organizers, but agree they are useful!

**SandraS:** <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/graphicorganizers/>

**SandraS:** aha!

**SandraS:** I'm not sure I'm an organizer fan, either

**SandraS:** but the point is that everyone has a singular style

**SandraS:** and some folks love outlines, organizers

**SandraS:** organizers can also help with that cross-creativity I was talking about

**AndreaNA:** I've used some when I'm working on a formal paper and it helped the students organize their thoughts

**SandraS:** the different modes of learning

**SandraS:** I find the traditional outline stultifying

**SandraS:** but others find it useful

**SandraS:** I like the visual organization in organizers

**AndreaNA:** I do too

**MRobertGst17:** I think flow charts are valuable because they are used a ton in higher sciences and social sciences

**SandraS:** excellent, Robert

**KarinEH:** Will you expand a little more on the cross sensory creativity writing at some point? I'm curious about it.

**SandraS:** a great way to cross-pollinate the disciplines

**JesseHo:** With practice, I think the scaffolding of organizers can be removed.

**SandraS:** ok, we've kind of discussed the solutions

**KathyBu:** <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/edis771/notes/graphicorganizers/graphic/> has great graphic organizers for those of you that are fans!

**SandraS:** Thank, you Julie.

**CindyWC:** I have my kids draw thought bubbles on their paper and put their ideas in them. That way they can have as many or as few ideas as they want in their writing

**SusanR:** [http://www.edhelper.com/teachers/graphic\\_organizers.htm](http://www.edhelper.com/teachers/graphic_organizers.htm)

**SandraS:** Thanks, Susan. You're an angel!

**SusanR:** These tools should be used to help students engage in rigorous thinking, organize complex ideas, and scaffold their interactions with texts. They should not be used simply as worksheets or activities for their own sake.

**KathyBu:** I love ed helper!

**SandraS:** good point, Susan

**SandraS:** contextualize

**SusanR:** There is a visual representation of each organizer

**CandaceJaG:** organizers help my students in non-fiction writing.

**SusanR:** for easy access

**SummerP:** this is great!

**SandraS:** yes, I like the websites where you can see what each organizer looks like quickly

**SandraS:** I think writers naturally gravitate towards the organizers that work for them

**SandraS:** one way to jumpstart writing is to try different things

**SusanArt:** if you utilize organizers...std. save a lot of time and energy on standardized tests

**SandraS:** so if I don't like organizers, maybe I try one and see what happens....

**CandaceJaG:** YES Susan Art!

**CindyWC:** I like that idea, Sandra

[Ed. Note: Connection conflicts brought this discussion to an abrupt end 10 minutes before the scheduled time. To continue the WriteTalk discussion, join Sandra Shattuck every second Thursday of the month at 6pm PT/9pm ET in Tapped In.]