Wondrous Words

Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom

KATIE WOOD RAY
Chapter 1 - Reading Like Writers

1. Reflect on your writing experiences as a student in school. How were you taught to write? How do you feel about yourself as a writer? Share with the group or a partner.

2. Reflect and respond to the following quote, found on page 11.

"Like any other craftspeople, professional writers know that to learn their craft, they must stand on the shoulders of writers who have gone before them."

3. What does teaching “writer’s craft” mean to you?

4. Why do we need to have our students live with the expectation that they will be writers? How does this expectation impact our teaching and students’ reading?

5. What “habits of mind” are important for young writers to develop?

6. What does Katie Wood Ray mean when she speaks of writing being “individual but not unique”?

7. Reflect on the difference between a “prescriptive approach” to writing and a “descriptive approach” to writing. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Chapter 2. The Craft of Writing

Materials needed for this session:


1. Katie Wood Ray speaks of “the craft of a writer’s office work”. Think about how you write and your “office work”. How do you go about writing? What is the process you engage in as a writer? How do writers’ processes differ?

2. As a group define the term “writer’s craft”.

3. Divide sections of Gary Smith’s article, “Eyes of the Storm” between class members. Study the writing crafts used in this article. Find specific examples of the crafts mentioned in Wondrous Words and discuss them. Find examples of other crafts used in this article. Identify the crafts using one of Katie’s terms or invent your own name for the writing craft.

4. Discuss the difference between “structural crafts” and “ways with words crafts”.
Chapter 3. Envisioning Text Possibilities

Materials needed for this session:
- *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart*, Libba Gray Moore
- *For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me*, Eloise Greenfield
- *A Is for Africa*, Ifeoma Onyefulu

1. What does Katie mean by “envisioning the possibilities” for writing?

2. Discuss what Katie means on page 48 when she wrote, “Really good writers can imagine all kinds of things to do with text, and this imagination comes from their sense of craft, a sense garnered over time from reading like writers and writing themselves—trying out the crafts they have come to understand.”

   How do we assist children in imagining all kinds of things “to do with text”?

3. Compare Corry’s writing, “My Four Best Friends and Me” (page 53), to Libba Moore Gray’s, *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart*.


Chapter 4. Reading Aloud: Filling the Room with the Sound of Wondrous Words

Materials needed for this session:
- *Night in the Country*, Cynthia Rylant

1. On page 67 Katie says, “I remember the first time I realized students were gazing up at me while I was reading to them. I was overcome for a moment at how significant their gaze was, at how much trust I saw in their upturned faces. At how awesome my responsibility was to fill that space between them and me with words, wondrous words that would not disappoint them, words that would not let them down, words they and I could stand on, walk across and meet one another in a place the ordinary words of our days forbid us to go. It was a journey of words we could make together through reading aloud.”

   What is the significance of reading aloud to students? What influences your choice of books you read aloud to your students?

2. How do we give students the message that we expect read alouds to make a difference in their writing? What might be some factors to consider if our read alouds are not impacting student writing?

3. How can we make sure that we read aloud high quality texts to students every day? How might you facilitate this practice in your building?

5. Using Cynthia Rylant’s, *Night in the Country*, or another appropriate text, try the choral reading/performance poetry activity described on pages 81-83.
Chapter 5. Studying Writers’ Office Work:
Powerful Writing Begins Long Before the Draft

Materials needed for this session:
- *Books About Dogs*, Gary Paulsen
- *Out of the Ocean*, Debra Frasier
- *Mud Matters: Stories from a Mud Lover*, Jennifer Owings Dewey
- *Dog Heaven*, Cynthia Rylant
- *On the Day You Were Born*, Debra Frasier
- *Tell Me Again about the Night I Was Born*, Jamie Lee Curtis
- *Welcome to the Green House*, Jane Yolen
- *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past*, Jacqueline Woodson
- A favorite book of your own

1. Why is it so important to have students choose their own topics for writing? How do you feel about a student writing about the same topic over and over?

2. Discuss how writing can be a process of discovery rather than a recording of events.

3. On page 95 Katie Wood Ray states 4 reasons for writing. Think about yourself as a writer. When did you write for each of the following reasons? How did the reason impact your writing?
   - Passion or intrigue for a topic or an idea
   - Audience or an occasion
   - Purpose to fulfill
   - Pull of a genre

4. Review the following books, each written for a specific reason. Discuss the author’s intent as a writer. Imagine how the intent impacted writing the text.
   - Passion:
     - *Books About Dogs*, Gary Paulsen
     - *Out of the Ocean*, Debra Frasier
     - *Mud Matters: Stories from a Mud Lover*, Jennifer Owings Dewey
   - Audience or an occasion:
     - *Dog Heaven*, Cynthia Rylant
     - *On the Day You Were Born*, Debra Frasier
     - *Tell Me Again about the Night I Was Born*, Jamie Lee Curtis
   - Purpose to fulfill:
     - *Welcome to the Green House*, Jane Yolen
   - Pull of a genre:
     - *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past*, Jacqueline Woodson

5. Discuss the “office work” writers do between deciding to start a writing project and beginning the draft. How might you facilitate this work in your classroom? What is the purpose of studying office work? Make a list on chart paper.

6. Working with a partner and a favorite text, hypothesize where the text came from and how the author went about writing it. Where might the author have acquired the ideas for the text? What office work do you think the author did to develop the text? What do you imagine the author’s notebook looked like? What value is there in doing this activity for yourself and for your students?
Chapter 6. Organized Inquiry:  
Teaching Students to Read Like Writers

Materials needed for this session:
- Miz Berlin Walks, Jane Yolen
- My Mama Had a Dancing Heart, Libba Gray Moore
- On the Day You Were Born, Debra Frasier
- Night in the Country, Cynthia Rylant

Choose one or two of the above titles to use for an organized inquiry. Use the following steps to guide your organized inquiry.

1. Get to know the text as a reader. Read and discuss the text. What comprehension strategies are you aware of as you read and reread the text?

2. Make a list of “noticings” about how the text is written. Include noticings about structures and ways with words. Focus on “writerly noticings,” as opposed to “readerly noticings” that may have been discussed when you read the text as a reader (pages 120-122).
   - **Structural craft noticings** refers to ways in which the parts of the text or the entire text work together. The structure is often a single, crafted element or two.
   - **Ways with words craft noticings** refers to instances of crafting which stand alone. Ways with words crafts often run throughout the text and there may be many.

3. Talk about the noticings and make a theory about why the author might choose to have the text work in just this way.

4. Name the crafts, both structural and ways with words. Choose names that capture the essence of how each craft is used. If the technique has a common name (i.e. personification, simile, metaphor, alliteration), use the common name.

5. Connect the crafts to other texts or authors who use the same techniques.

6. Envision how a crafting technique would look in your own writing. Create a general statement about the crafting technique. Some version of the following may be useful:  
   
   **So if I am writing and I want to ______, then I can use this technique.**

   Envision your students using this crafting technique. Practice “writing in the air,” thinking about how this craft might be used in their writing.
Chapter 7. An Invitation to My Library: The Craft of Text Structure

Chapter 8. Another Invitation to My Library: Ways with Words

Materials needed for this session:
- Many titles from the Wondrous Words bibliography are needed for discussing chapters 7 and 8. Gather as many of the books as you can from your LMC, the public library, classroom libraries, or personal collections. Divide the list so that each person in your group is responsible for finding some books.

Chapters 7 & 8 are set up in a similar way. The following suggestions can be used with both chapters. It is recommended that 3 hours be used for this session. Use one half of the session to read several picture books and write using a structural craft and the other half to do the same with the ways with words crafts.

Katie Wood Ray offers a list of books to help us define structural and ways with words crafts. The list is meant to help define the craft but is by no means definitive.

1. Working with a partner, select a few books to read first as a reader and second as a writer. After reading the text as a writer, use Post-it notes to identify the craft(s) and find specific examples of the craft(s) within the text.

2. On page 144 Katie Wood Ray says, “If I can’t push my thinking to this point, if I can’t write some actual text using a structure I’ve seen, then I don’t really know for sure whether I own an understanding of that structure. I can see a structure used in several different texts, understand it as separate from any one of the topics in those texts, but until I write a bit of it myself, I only know it as a reader. I haven’t pushed myself to know it as a writer.”

Take time to push yourself as a writer using a craft that you envision teaching your students. After becoming familiar with the books as both a reader and writer, set aside 30 minutes to write. Keep in mind the good reasons to write that Katie talks about in chapter 5 (page 95).

3. Allow time for sharing after writing. Writers may want to share their writing or a reflection on the experience of writing. Describe how this experience will impact writer’s workshop in your classroom.

4. Discuss how you envision students using a particular craft within their writing. Discuss what texts you might use to model the craft and why you selected this particular craft.

5. Save your writing to be used for an activity in chapter 12.
Chapter 9. Selecting Books for Craft Study

Materials needed for this session:
- Each participant will need to bring picture books from their own collection that are useful in teaching writing.

1. On page 187, Katie Wood Ray says, “The ability to select texts effectively for teaching of writing comes from having a solid understanding of the craft of writing.”

Choose a text you may already use or select a text you would like to use to teach writing. Discuss why you selected a particular text and how you may use it to teach writing. Envision using the text within a writing conference to show a particular writing move. Practice the language you might use with a child within a writing conference using the text.

2. On page 200 there are 6 ways in which books can be selected to help you in the teaching of writing:
   - Texts that have background information included
   - Texts in which the concept of the writing is interesting
   - Texts that remind you of another text
   - Texts crafted with interesting structures
   - Texts full of crafted ways with words
   - Texts in which writers take risks with language

Looking through your collection of books, find books that fit the above categories. Looking through your books, are there other reasons for selecting books for craft study?

3. What do your students struggle with as writers? What texts might help them see their way through their struggles as writers? What texts might excite your students as writers?

Chapter 10. Growing Taller in Our Teaching

1. Katie Wood Ray wrote on page 208, “Really good learning messes with what we think we know, creating a tension in our lives that can be uncomfortable. When we begin to feel this discomfort our only choice seems to be to quit learning and wait for the ‘pain’ to go away, or to rethink what we know and muck around a bit in the stuff that’s really hard for us…there will always be some new hard thing for me to think about in my teaching. There will always be some part of my teaching that, when I think about it, causes me discomfort because I don’t feel so sure about it.”

How has Wondrous Words caused you to rethink what you thought you knew about teaching writing?”
Chapter 11. Planning for the Workshop: Writers Learn from Writers

1. Writing workshops need to be predictable so that unpredictable things can happen. Describe the structures and routines in your classroom that support student growth as writers. What structures and routines in your classroom need more thought?

2. Respond to the question as stated on page 212. “After spending a year in my writing workshop, how do I hope my students will be as writers?”

   Compare and contrast your reflections to the bulleted items on page 213.

3. Katie Wood Ray says, the best place to start (craft study) is, “with the most essential understanding first” (page 229).

   Where do you envision starting with the children you teach? Describe how that might look.

4. How have you planned for read alouds in the past? How might your read alouds be different since reading Wondrous Words?

Chapter 12. Focus Lessons: Filling the Writing Workshop with Craft Possibilities

Materials needed for this session:
- Many titles from the Wondrous Words bibliography

1. Katie Wood Ray believes we shouldn’t make students try out crafting techniques as we teach them, but allow students to choose them as they see a need for them. What do you think?

2. Discuss how you might “untie” the explanation of a craft from the topic of any book. Using several books that illustrate a craft, practice explaining the purpose, meaning or effect of the craft.

3. Using the piece of writing you did for chapter 7 or another piece of writing, envision your topic structured several different ways. Discuss what texts might be used to illustrate the range of possibilities. Try writing your piece using a structure different from the original structure used.

4. Using the piece of writing you did for chapter 8, or another piece of writing, envision the possibilities of using a different ways with words craft. Try using an out-of-place adjective in your text as described on page 242.

5. Discuss the importance of envisioning.
Chapter 13. Brave, Bold Teaching:  
The Power of Suggestive Writing Conferences

1. Katie Wood Ray states, “...professional writers have helped me to see what kinds of things I need to be teaching students how to do. The bottom line is that I couldn’t teach what I didn’t know, and now that I know so much more, my teaching has changed.”

How has your knowledge base as a writer and teacher changed over the course of this book study? How do you anticipate your teaching will change?

2. Why does Katie refer to writing conferences as the “backbone” of the writing workshop?

3. In reference to writing conferences, discuss the following quote on page 250. “I make sure the curriculum never drove the helping. The student’s intentions had to drive the helping.”

4. How can we make sure that the help we give a student with a piece of writing will outlive that piece of writing?

Chapter 14. Assessment That Focuses Our Eyes on Craft
Chapter 15. Never to Teach Alone Again

1. How does the study of craft change the way we look at children’s writing?

2. What do you value in children’s writing?

3. Reflect on Lucy Calkins words, “Teach the writer, not the writing”.

4. Describe the differences between assessment that is curriculum centered and assessment that is student centered. How does each type of assessment influence teaching decisions?

5. Katie Wood Ray feels that literary responses to our students’ writing are very important. Discuss some ways you might incorporate literary responses.

6. Reflect on all that you have learned from the study of Wondrous Words, visualize your ideal writing workshop. Write about your vision. Last of all, think about the next step in achieving your vision.