

TWO WRITING TEACHERS

A Writing Teacher's Summer Project: Building a Teaching Toolkit

Wednesday June 25, 2014 *by Anna Gratz Cockerille*

I keep a pretty extensive to-do list. During the thick of the school year, many more items are added than deleted. Many items (more than I care to admit) get moved to the next day, then the next week, then the next month as more pressing items take precedence. Unfortunately, adding to my teaching toolkit always seems one of these items. So, this summer break, I am vowing to spruce up my toolkit.

The possibilities for what could go into a toolkit are endless. See this post for ideas. And of course, each year toolkits should change and grow depending on the needs of the class. However, there are some basic components that can be created in advance and used over and over for demonstrations in minilessons, conferring, and strategy lessons. Here are a few ideas for summer toolkit-making that will have a huge payoff next school year.

1. Demonstration writing, written at a few different levels of sophistication. One of my favorite writing assignments ever was working on the information writing demonstration pieces in *Writing Pathways* (a book that accompanies the Writing Units of Study by Lucy Calkins and colleagues). I had the privilege of working on those cute little pieces about Bulldogs. There is one piece for each grade level, and though they have the same topic and are similar in structure, each is written at a slightly higher level of sophistication to match the grade's checklist.

Writing those pieces not only provided me with demonstration writing for my teaching, it also provided me with incredible professional development. Creating writing in order to match the checklist for each grade helped me to understand the expectations for that grade in a way that simply reading the checklist never could. Also, having pieces at a few different levels in my toolkit guarantees I will have a piece of writing that best matches each writer with whom I confer, even if I am in a classroom with a huge range of writers.

2. Annotated student writing. Some in our community have long finished their school years, and some are just finishing their final weeks. Whether you said goodbye to your students ages ago or you are racking your brain to think of how to entertain them for a few more days, hopefully you have a stack of great (or even not so great) writing samples you collected here and there as the school year progressed. Instead of shoving the work in a file cabinet, passing it along to the teacher in the next grade up, or recycling it (temping, I know), consider flipping through it to search for pieces for next year's toolkit. You might collect some pieces that are simply lovely and fun and that will inspire other writers to take risks either in topic or craft. You might collect others that perfectly exemplify the kinds of things with which kids at your level typically struggle. Student pieces are great additions to a toolkit as it can feel much safer for students to discuss someone else's writing during a conference. You can pull alongside a student who is struggling with something, whip out a piece of work that has similar issues, and say, "Let's think together about how we could make this other student's work even better."

3. Marked up mentor texts. Just as forms of writing are changing from the traditional, so are mentor texts. And of course, mentor texts are everywhere. Many websites contain wonderful examples of information writing. Blogs are essays. Beautiful fiction comes in the form of song lyrics. Even snippets of

a favorite beach read could make good additions to a toolkit. Be on the lookout for turns of phrase, examples of powerful word choice, and bits of text that simply make you stop in your tracks. These are all worthy of being studied and emulated by your class. Mark them up with possible teaching points, or even just circle parts you love.

And as long as you are in toolkit-making mode, you could also consider a record keeping system to carry alongside your toolkit to help you keep track of your writing conferences. I know, I know. We all say we need to get better at record-keeping, yet finding time to really hone this crucial skill is tough while we are in the thick of things. Consider taking some time this summer to experiment with digital record keeping systems, such as Evernote, confer, or even excel. Or, perhaps a traditional hardcopy method works better for you. Here is a simple, tried and true conferring log to get you started.

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As we know, a teacher's summer is never "time off". As you take on the and professional reading, studying, and coursework, I hope you find some joy and relaxation in the reading and writing that toolkit making brings. I wish you the best of times this summer.

Category : student work, summer vacation, teaching tools

11 thoughts on "A Writing Teacher's Summer Project: Building a Teaching Toolkit "

Julie Johnson on Friday June 27, 2014 at 7:13 pm said:

Thanks for these great reminders. I have many of these things, but as I move into a coaching position, it will be nice to gather things for different grade levels.

Anna Gratz Cockerille on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 7:56 am said:

Oh yes, that's a great idea. I did the same when I moved into coaching. And congratulations on your role!

Linda Baie on Thursday June 26, 2014 at 9:53 am said:

Although I have all these, Anna, it's something to consider again, to add some 'fresh ideas' to the old ones. Thanks for a full and interesting post!

Anna Gratz Cockerille on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 7:58 am said:

I had the same thought – I could add new pieces to my toolkit, because every time I write to get ready for my teaching, I learn something new. Even when I write something I've done many many times before (like personal narratives!).

franmcveigh on Thursday June 26, 2014 at 5:42 am said:

Thanks, Anna! This is helping me focus on what I need for my toolkit! I am still struggling with how to organize it as I only had 4 sections last year (process, opinion / argument, information, narrative) and I felt like I struggled with finding examples quickly – maybe I just need to have some pages pre-tabbed for the day or use a Table of Contents!

Anna Gratz Cockerille on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 8:04 am said:

I hear you on organization and finding pieces quickly. Especially when you go into so many classrooms! I have those sections too, and within each genre I have a section for structure and one for development. I keep a few pieces for each category in page protectors so they are easy to find and take out. And then a I can write with a wet-erase marker on the page protector while teaching. So far this is working, but I'm sure I'll make even more tweaks!

franmcveigh on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 9:05 am said:

That makes so much sense...genre and some writing process tied together in the same section. Love that! So helpful!

Lisa on Wednesday June 25, 2014 at 10:15 pm said:

I've been working on re-doing my record keeping book too. I always feel like I have it just right, and then I think of another way to make it better.

Anna Gratz Cockerille on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 8:05 am said:

I am exactly the same. The next app comes out, and I just have to try it. Or I think of a better way to organize my notes for follow up. I often end up reverting back to the pen and paper grid anyway.

Jennifer Sniadecki on Wednesday June 25, 2014 at 9:16 pm said:

Thank you for your post! I will add to my list-I actually DID save some student work from last year and I am currently pouring through "Pathways" for ideas from each grade level. And...Carl Anderson ended our session today by talking about the importance of record-keeping notes! Timely!

Anna Gratz Cockerille on Saturday June 28, 2014 at 8:06 am said:

Oh that is perfect timing! I agree so much with Carl about record keeping. I have to force myself to do it, but otherwise I really don't remember all of my conferences, even though I think I will.

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