

WHWN 2018

Authors at All Ages

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Tips for Middle School Implementation

- Writing groups in the middle school classroom require commitment and planning. Writing groups should meet weekly.
- Ideally, students will remain in the same assigned writing group for the entire year.
- Students must consistently generate writing in order to have material to workshop in writing groups every week. This success of this requirement will rely on several planned periods of sustained silent writing every week.
- Writing notebooks are an important part of the process. My students chose material from their notebooks to turn into longer pieces.
- Middle school students will need plenty of direct instruction, teacher modeling, and role play when initially implementing author's notes and writing groups. They LOVE teacher role play.
- Make sure to tell students questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" will not provide helpful feedback from other groups members. Role play this scenario with students. Give them lists of possible author's notes questions.
- Initially, tell students it is perfectly acceptable for them to use questions directly from these lists for their author's notes. Seventh and eighth graders should gradually be able to move away from these lists.
- My writing groups met on Fridays. During SSW on Thursdays, students wrote their author's notes for the next day's workshop.

Post The Regular Procedures (from Dr. Ball's Handout) and Strictly Enforce Them:

1. **Divide the time equally.** My groups met every Friday and usually required thirty minutes. Groups were three to four students each. Depending upon group size, each student had the floor for seven to nine minutes each.

2. **The writer distributes copies, then reads her work aloud without apologizing for it.** Some students do not want to read outloud. This is non-negotiable. Groups are carefully chosen to give each student the highest likelihood of feeling comfortable. Students will try to apologize when first beginning groups. I began with students distributing paper copies and then switched to digital copies shared via Google docs.
3. **Before or after reading (writer's choice), the writer should give an author's note.** For middle school students, it is probably beneficial to read author's notes before reading the piece. This will help other group members focus on the portions of the piece for which the writer is requesting feedback.
4. **The writer guides response talk, dictating what is allowable and what is off limits.** This procedure is very important for middle school students!! To begin with, it is difficult for some middle schoolers to listen to a group member read an entire piece without interrupting and sharing a thought that has popped into their own head during the reading. **DO NOT ALLOW STUDENTS TO INTERRUPT READERS.** Interruptions lower the confidence and comfort level of the entire group. Simply remind the student that the writer did not ask for that interruption.
5. **Sometime after group, write to yourself about what happened and what to try next.** I have probably failed the most at implementing this procedure. I did periodically ask students to evaluate the feedback they were receiving from their group (see handout). I really hope to more effectively implement this procedure in the upcoming school year.

Some overall reflections:

- Once students understand the procedures, have practiced the procedures, and realize the procedures will be enforced, students can function completely independently in their writing groups. **STUDENTS THRIVE ON THIS INDEPENDENCE.**
- Students prefer if I stay away from their groups. For this reason, I only interrupt a student group to give feedback if absolutely necessary.
- There are few if any behavior issues during writing groups.

- Very few students come to me asking me to “fix” problems in their writing. To begin with, I did give students a “Teacher Checklist” to use in writing groups. Students were instructed to use this checklist in their groups as well as responding to individual member’s author’s notes. This checklist helped move students away from the idea that the teacher is the only writing authority in the classroom.