Shared Writing

What Is It?

As in writing aloud, using the shared writing strategy enables teachers to make the writing process concrete and visible to students. In shared writing, the teacher and students compose text together, with both contributing their thoughts and ideas to the process, while the teacher acts as scribe, writing the text as it is composed.

Similar to writing aloud, shared writing can cover a wide variety of forms, purposes, and genres. The text can serve a specific purpose governed by what is going on currently in the classroom, or the teacher and students can brainstorm and negotiate these decisions together. Some possible topics and forms include a narrative describing a recent event in the class, a retelling of a favorite story, process writing describing how a project unfolded and what was learned, a summary or reflection on a book read as a class, a list of types of entries that could go into a writer's notebook, and so forth. Compositions can be short and completed in one session, or they can be longer and extend over several sessions.

The purpose of shared writing is to model the thought process involved in writing and allow students to engage in and focus on the process. The teacher, acting as scribe, frees students from that aspect of the writing process so that they can focus exclusively on the thinking involved in writing. Shared writing is also a powerful method for direct teaching of key skills and concepts needed in the writing process.

Why Is It Important?

Regie Routman (1994) lists several benefits of utilizing the shared writing strategy with students. Some of these include the recognition that shared writing:

- Reinforces and supports reading as well as writing
- Makes it possible for all students to participate
- Encourages close examination of texts, words, and options of authors
- Demonstrates the conventions of writing-spelling, punctuation, and grammar
- Focuses on composing and leaves transcribing to the teacher

Shared writing, along with writing aloud, is a step in the process of moving students toward independent writing. It is another level in the scaffold that gives students support as they learn the mechanics, conventions, and processes of writing. The strategy allows students to gain competence and confidence in their writing skills while it allows the teacher to demonstrate the usually internal thinking process that takes place as writers write.

When Should It Be Used?

Shared writing is a useful tool at any grade level and can be used throughout the school year with the whole class or with smaller groups who may need a little more support. It will be used more often at early grade levels and early in the year when developing writers are in more need of support and modeling. Don Graves (1994) discusses these and other demonstrations related to the writing process and states that students need this kind of instruction not once but at least once a week in short, focused lessons.

What Does It Look Like?

The point of using this strategy is to make the writing process a shared experience, making it visible and concrete while inviting students into the writer's world in a safe, supportive environment. Simultaneously, it gives teachers the opportunity for direct teaching of key skills, concepts, and processes. All aspects of the writing process are modeled, although not always all at once. At the lower grade levels especially, teachers concentrate on one or two key aspects of writing in short, focused lessons.
Garnering student input, the teacher guides the group in brainstorming ideas and selecting a topic. As a group, they talk about topics, audience, purpose, details they will include, and other considerations. As the group composes, the teacher will ask probing questions to elicit more detail and to help children make their writing more meaningful. The tone of this discussion should be collaborative rather than directive. The teacher might say something like, "I wonder if we should add more detail here. How might we do that?" rather than "We need to add more detail here."

For the youngest students, the teacher will sound each word slowly and carefully, being sure to articulate each sound in the word. While transcribing the student's words, the teacher asks students for suggestions on what letter or sound comes next. The content and complexity of the writing will vary according to grade level, and the teacher should guide students in producing appropriate text for their level. In addition to those discussed above, teachers will touch upon skills and concepts including sentence structure, word choice, adjectives, spelling, and capitalization. Students should work with every genre in the shared writing lesson, including narrative, list, poetry, nonfiction, instructional, and correspondence.

While some pieces will be short and completed in one lesson, others are longer and may continue through several days' lessons. This allows students to see that writing can be an extended, ongoing process, and it also allows the teacher to teach critical writing strategies such as rereading what you've written before you continue to write. As in writing aloud, some teachers include a few well-chosen, purposeful errors during drafting to facilitate the later editing stage.

Writing with the class or group, the teacher also has an opportunity to highlight and model the revision process, helping students add to or take away from their text. The group may also decide to change words, text order, or other aspects of the writing to get at their intended meaning. Often, the teacher asks questions to help students focus on clearly and concisely communicating their message. If needed, the teacher helps guide the group to add detail, take away unneeded and confusing words or passages, or change the structure of the text to clarify meaning.

The teacher also uses the shared writing strategy for editing text and focusing on mechanics and conventions such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar. The structure of text is also a focus in this stage, as it is in the drafting and revising stages.

**How Can You Make It Happen?**

Shared writing can occur with the entire class or with smaller groups, as with writing workshops. In either case, students should be arranged so that they are as close to the writing as possible. Many teachers set up a comfortable area with a rug in a quiet corner of the room for just such purposes. Teachers should work on an easily visible writing surface such as an easel or an overhead projector and screen. Generally, the lesson is quick and should focus on one or two key elements of the writing process.

**How Can You Measure Success?**

As in the writing aloud strategy, teachers can determine the effectiveness of shared writing by checking to see if students are successfully adopting techniques and strategies featured in the lesson during their independent writing time. For example, if the teacher stresses a convention such as capitalizing words at the beginning of sentences, students should show evidence of correct use of that convention in their writing. Over time, with lessons based on students' identified needs, student writing should communicate the intended message with depth, clarity, and the proper use of conventions.