

Craft mini-lessons can be interactive and diverse. During craft lessons, the class should be actively involved in doing something that will improve their writing pieces. Role-playing allows students to witness the difference between “I went to the playground” and “I skipped to the playground.” Standing on a stool and shouting, “I am the king of the world!” sounds very different than whispering, “I am the king of the world.” Showing children how interchanging shouting and whispering paints a different picture in that one sentence.

Preparing a treat together and then reconstructing the event using specific verbs will allow students to hear good word choice. Kneading dough to make homemade bread is a specific action. Using the word “knead” in a piece about making bread is more specific than “mix.” Showing children the difference while actively engaged in the process is powerful. The essence of a craft lesson is showing not telling.

Content area pieces are a good place to practice craft lessons. Showing students how to compose one compare and contrast piece from two separate pieces about a butterfly and a moth would be a craft lesson that integrates science. Description is an important skill in science, math, and social studies. Practicing oral and written description during writer’s workshop will allow this skill to permeate other subject areas. Using attributes to describe shape, depiction of a specific period of history, or characteristics of a marine animal all lend themselves to authentic practice in description.

Let your favorite authors become your co-teachers in writing. Look at the picture books in your classrooms. There are thousands of craft lessons found in literature books. Which books have great examples of elaboration, varied sentences, or the use of details? Put those books aside to use as examples during a craft lesson. Teach your students to read as writers. If one of their favorite picture books uses beautiful similes then encourage them to try a simile in their own writing. Teach them to listen for writer-ly moves that they admire. Discuss what the author did and then show them what it might look like in their own writing. The literature list on page 127 will assist you in choosing books to address specific target skills.

Craft mini-lessons are lessons that elevate writing. They are an integral part of the revision process, and should be taught in kindergarten even if you are not having your students move their pieces through the entire writing process.

Common Questions Concerning Mini-Lessons

How will I know which mini-lesson to teach?

Knowing your students well is the essence of knowing which lesson to teach, and when. It is also important to know your district and state expectations in writing. These expectations will identify target skills and give you specifics in making writing goals for your students. Your district’s goals should guide your instruction.

Where do mini-lessons come from?

District expectations

Determine the skills that you should target by examining your district's writing expectations. These may include letter/sounds correspondence, focus, description, etc.

Students

No one knows your students better than you do. What do you notice in day-to-day writing? Look for gaps or trends. Address these areas in mini-lessons. If most of your students are writing multiple sentences, it may be time to teach them how to add specific details. Celebrate the positives and provide models and demonstrations for areas of need. Ask permission to use a student's actual writing piece to share with the class. Give feedback to one student publicly and the rest of the class will benefit. Use writings from previous years and from other grade levels. Allow students to help each other.

Your Own Writing

Many teachers are afraid of their own writing! Please don't be! So you're not a Cynthia Rylant or a Jane Yolen—you still have something to give to your community of writers. From time to time, share a piece of your writing and ask the class for suggestions. Compose on an easel in front of the class, thinking aloud as you write. Share your questions and decisions as you work through the piece. Express delight in sentences that work well and tell your students why. At the kindergarten level, simple sentences and lists can lead to extended pieces. Model this in front of your students, demonstrating how you turn a simple sentence such as "I like my cat" into a paragraph. Portray yourself as a learner in the workshop. Children need to know that the teacher doesn't always have all the answers and that we struggle in our writing as well. Being a part of a writing community demands that we are participants. Using your own writing as a resource for mini-lessons is a necessary activity for belonging to the group.

Literature

Children's literature provides a springboard to teach most any writing skill. Through literature students are able to see and hear quality writing. These authors are the masters of words and can provide models in every genre. However, a word of caution: when using literature students must first hear the book in its entirety. The author wrote the book to convey a message. Hearing the book piecemeal would do disservice to the reader and the listener. Once a class has enjoyed a book for the story, it can be used as a tool for instruction. Examining specific writing traits and techniques in literature make powerful mini-lessons.

Should there be a balance among different types of mini-lessons?

Yes, there should be a balance between different types of mini-lessons. You would be wasting your time trying to teach a lot of foundational and craft

lessons before processes are in place for managing materials, time, and behavior during writer's workshop, so at the beginning of the year we do many operational and print awareness lessons. As the school year progresses, you will begin to teach more foundational and craft lessons.

Will I need to teach a mini-lesson more than once?

Yes, there will be times when you will need to teach a string of mini-lessons on the same target skill. Most often students do not internalize a skill the first time it is introduced.

Thinking about your lessons in units of study is helpful in re-teaching a target skill. For example, a unit of study on revision will allow a week's worth of lessons on adding details to a piece of writing. Another example would be a unit of study on leads. You could teach a string of mini-lessons on various types of leads using literature, student writing, and your own compositions. However, even after a string of mini-lessons, target skills may have to be revisited!

What about publishing?

You should have your students move some of their pieces through all the steps of the writing process, including revisions and publishing. But publishing does not have to be the goal of your writing program. The majority of your students' pieces will be more valuable as models of instruction and as opportunities for authentic practice.

In which genres are kindergartners most comfortable?

Begin with expository genres such as personal narrative or descriptive writing. As Marcia Freeman notes, expository writing is the natural medium of emergent writers who are always striving to describe or explain their world. Expository genres (which teach kindergartners how to explain, describe, or inform) tend to engage the young writer.

Interestingly, while kindergartners love to tell narratives, they seem to gravitate away from fiction in our workshops.

What happens when a small percentage of the class is not ready to move on?

It is not a mystery that students learn at different rates, and that the task of meeting individual needs is difficult. Small-group instruction is an essential component of workshop. Small group can happen during the quiet-writing portion of writer's workshop. Pulling a homogeneous group that requires remediation on a specific skill or strategy allows the rest of the class to practice within their zone of proximal development while you are able to give the small group the added support that they need.

Small-group instruction can be supplemented by peer tutoring. For example, pair

a student who is having difficulty leaving spaces between words with a peer. Encourage them to have conversation regarding spaces. The student who has mastered this skill can verbalize strategies and assist her friend in doing the same. With the added support of a peer, mastery may occur.

Shared teaching is another suggestion for meeting the needs of students. Grouping students homogeneously for a short period of time will allow you to focus your instruction on specific needs of the group. We suggest dividing students into three groups based on writing mastery. When we implemented this strategy our groups consisted of a group that was not meeting district expectations, a group working on grade level, and a group that was working above grade level. We developed a specific lesson plan to ensure students were being instructed at their level. For example, the lower group worked specifically on segmenting sounds. The middle group practiced using details in sentences, and the top group engaged in writing paragraphs. The intervention lasted for two weeks.

Are students required to try the mini-lesson?

No. Regardless of their abilities, students should not be required to apply the mini-lesson during independent writing time. Some students may not be developmentally ready for the skill. They may attempt the skill at a later date when they are ready or after subsequent mini-lessons on the same skill have been presented. Other students may be in the middle of a piece that is not conducive to the lesson that was presented.

However, if the majority of your students are ready for a mini-lesson on elaboration, don't be afraid to present that lesson to the whole class. The students who are ready for elaboration will hopefully choose to apply it in their current writing. The students who are not ready to apply the skill still need to hear what elaboration sounds like. All students benefit from all mini-lessons regardless of their writing development. Specific individual needs will be met through conferencing and small group instruction.

Should I teach a mini-lesson every day?

Yes, there should be some type of direct instruction specific to writing every day. Some lessons may be operational and only take a few minutes. Others may be more involved. The predictable structure of writer's workshop allows for a mini-lesson daily. The children will come to expect this as a part of their writing routine.

Should students always write independently after a mini-lesson?

Yes. After the mini-lesson, students should always write independently. Even if your mini-lesson is operational, students need to move to the second part of writer's workshop, independent writing. Because students have their own journals and are responsible for choosing a writing topic, they are able to write independently after any type of mini-lesson.