

## EPISODE #3

# 10 Tips for Teaching Writing in Kindergarten

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You are listening to Episode 3: Ten tips for teaching writing in kindergarten.

This episode is sponsored by Teaching Every Writer, my online course for teaching writing in K-2. To learn more, please visit [teachingeverywriter.com](http://teachingeverywriter.com). Now we're ready to dive into one of my very favorite topics. That is: teaching writing. Let's take a look at ten things you can do to help your kindergarten students become strong writers.

**Tip number one is to have a regular writing workshop.**

We need to move beyond the writing center in kindergarten. A writing center is still important. It's a place where you keep the supplies, such as different types of writing paper, stapler, sticky notes, types of writing tools--all kinds of things that your students can use as they write. But, we don't want it just to be this place in the side of the classroom that students visit during free choice time. We want it to be a place where they get the supplies that they need when you are having a whole-class writing time.

I recommend doing writing workshop every day if you can, but, at minimum, three days a week. You want it to be probably for twenty to forty minutes, if you can schedule that. The longer, the better. Writing workshop consists of a short mini-lesson, given by you, a longer period of time in which students are drawing or writing on their own, and then sharing time when you come together again and you select students to share what they're doing in their writing.

During that independent writing time, when students are writing on their own, you are moving among the class giving conferences. In kindergarten, that may just mean quickly checking in with writers to help them as they get started, or, if they're stuck, it can also

mean eventually sitting down with them for longer periods, maybe three to five minutes, to help move students forward in their writing.

I believe that this ongoing, routine, personalized nature of the workshop really makes it the best choice for any classroom from K-8 in terms of structure for teaching writing.

**Tip number two is to make management a priority.**

That's because writing workshop will quickly fall apart if you don't have a strong management plan. That's because writing workshop is so individualized.

You have a lot of different things going on at one time, and it's really important that your students understand what is expected of them. Before you get started with your writing workshop, you really need to slow down and think exactly how you want your writing workshop to look and how you want it to sound. Here are some types of things you need to think through before you start your writing workshop.

What supplies do your students need to write? Maybe you're going to have them write on loose paper, or something else--maybe little mini books. Where are those supplies going to be? How are they going to get them? Are they going to use pencils? Will you let them use colors? Those things have to be decided in advance.

Where will you meet for mini-lessons and sharing time? Hopefully, you have some type of corner in the classroom with a rug that all the students can come together.

How will you meet with individual students for writing conferences? Are they going to come to you, or are you going to come to them? Where will you sit if you come to them? Are you going to pull up a chair? Are you going to have a bag of all your conferring supplies that you're going to need?

Will your students write at their seats or will you let them choose where to write? How will you keep track of what the students are doing and the progress they've made? Will you create a table on a piece of paper with all the students' names on the left side where you can keep track of all the students that you've met with?

How will you monitor noise? Will you have a system for helping students know when the noise has gotten too loud? Will you let them talk with peers about their writing? Maybe you'll have a set two to five minutes at the beginning of the workshop where everyone works on their own without talking to you or to someone else.

What about when your students need help (because they will)? What do you want them to do before they come to you? What if you're busy? What if you're meeting with a student or a small group for a conference--what can they do to help themselves?

This may feel like a lot, and that's because it is a lot, but I promise you that thinking through all these things and working through them with your students is going to be 100% worth it. October is going to come and your writing workshop is going to be off to a great start as long as you take the time to teach all these procedures in advance.

**Tip number three is to let your students choose their own topics.**

I'm not going to tell you that sentence stems and journal prompts can never be present in a writing workshop, but I also believe that if you don't use them ever that's a good thing.

We want to teach our students to come up with their own topics, because that's what writers do. Just like we teach our students to find books that interest them as readers because that's what real readers do, we're teaching our students to be real writers. We don't want them just to be good at school writing and which is to write about whatever the teachers says. We want them to learn how to think of their own things to write about. This is certainly something they're able to do as long as you teach them how. You'll be doing a lot of modeling of topic selection and supporting them as they find their own topics.

I won't tell you this is always easy. You will have students who will push against you for this and want you to feed them topics. But, you have to not give them topics, because if you do, you'll be doing that every day, and you'll be doing an important piece of the writing process for them. You'll be doing everyone a favor, yourself included, when you teach your students how to find their own topics for writing about.

**Tip number four: Let your students create books.**

I've seen a lot of writing journals in kindergarten where a teacher staples a bunch of papers together and the students write on one page each day. That's certainly one approach, but I'm a fan of making books because it just makes sense. Our students know what books are and they like to make things. Making books connects those two things: books and making stuff. Making books is not complicated. We're just talking about maybe stapling three pieces of paper together and students tell the story on each page with drawing or words, and then they have a book. The cool thing about this is it automatically builds in that idea of beginning, middle, and end. So often with one single piece of paper, students draw something and maybe there's a couple words and it's not really teaching or communicating much. It's just a picture about something, instead of telling a story. That structure of a book can help teach your students how to tell something across the pages.

**Tip number five is to accept what your students can do.**

This honestly comes down to definitions. When we think about the word "writing" we have to remember that it doesn't just mean writing letters. There are two parts to writing. Writing is composing and writing is transcribing. Composing is this idea of communicating a story or information, whereas transcribing is using letters, words, sentences to write it down. Even though many of our students, perhaps most, sometimes all of them, cannot transcribe at the beginning of kindergarten, they can compose. They can tell stories. They can draw to their own ability to communicate something. You need to remember, of course, that at the beginning of the year writing workshop may be most of your students just drawing. Some of them might draw and write a few random letters that don't go with the picture but they want to write, and that's how they do it. Or, you may have some students who already start the year writing sentences, spelling them the best they can.

Remember to take students where they are--whether that's from just drawing scribbles, letter-like forms, actual writing of some letters, a smattering of sight words, or even writing fluently--and move them forward. They won't be all at the same starting point and they won't all be at the same ending point. Your job is to take them where they are and move them forward.

The nice thing about writing workshop, since you're meeting with students individually for conferences during that writing time, you have the ability to personalize it according to what each student can do.

As long as we're talking about accepting what students can do, I think we should talk a little bit about dictation. In this context, dictation is when your students write something or draw something and then they tell you what they want it to say, and you actually write the words on the paper. I do think dictation can be really beneficial, especially when you're doing modeling in front of the group. Let's say all the students are looking up at you and you have some big paper on an easel and you're writing a story together about something the class has done. They tell you what they want it to say and they watch you write the sentences. They are seeing proper spacing, they are seeing letter formation, capital letters, punctuation. That's all very important. They need to see that the words they can be represented by words on the paper. However, I don't think that dictation belongs in independent writing time. I would discourage you from using it during that time. One of the best quotes I have about why dictation is not a good idea during independent writing time is from Katie Wood Ray and Matt Glover in their book *Already Ready*. Here's what they had to say:

"If a young writer decides she wants to write, does what she can, and then takes it to an adult to write the words for her, the message is clear: adults, not children, are the ones who really know how to write. This is the opposite of the message we want to send: 'You're a writer and you're five, and you're writing just like someone who is five should be writing, and we think that's amazing.'"

I understand that there are times when you're going to want to use dictation, especially when a student has written in their own way, usually without actual words, and they have a beautiful picture and they tell you the story, and it's really wonderful. You want to remember it because you know that tomorrow they're not going to remember it exactly and you're not going to remember it. If that's important to you to preserve those words, I would ask the child's permission to write the words down on a sticky note and put it on the back of the paper. What you could say is: "This is just so I remember your wonderful story." I would not put it on the writing itself because that is the place for the student to do their own form of writing.

**Tip number six is to teach developmentally appropriate mini-lessons.**

You have to be careful if you're using a packaged curriculum, that the lessons listed there make sense for your students. There are many programs that advance too quickly or are too simple. You may find a mini-lesson that teaches your students "this is a pencil. This is how you hold a pencil and we write on paper, not on walls." And you might think, "That's ridiculous, my students know this." Or, you may have a good handful of students who need that lesson.

On the other hand, you might have a lesson that is all about teaching students how to write a complete sentence with a capital and period and most of your students are still using capital letters in all of their writing. You have to decide what makes sense for the majority of your class. You can then extend that lesson either by taking it back a step in your conferences with someone who needs you to go back a little bit. Or, you may have students who are ready for the next step and you can teach that to them in their conferences.

Small group conferences are a really good idea, too. If you have three or four advanced writers in your class, you could meet with them after the mini-lesson to take it a step farther. The same thing goes for when you are meeting with students who are not as advanced as the rest of the group and you want to do a little remedial work with them. You can put them together for a small group writing conference while everyone else is getting started on their writing.

Just for a few examples of the types of writing lessons you could give. At the beginning of the year it might just be "this is how you get your paper." Or, if you're making books with your students, "this is how you staple a piece of paper to the end of your book if you want to tell more." Maybe a writing lesson could be "this is how you label your pictures." Or, "this is how you use the word wall to find spellings" and, as the year advances, "we use sound words when we write" or "this is how a poem looks."

As you can see, the lessons will advance in complexity as the year goes by

I actually have a blog post with a list of writing skills for K-2. I'm going to link to that in the show notes. You can go to that blog post and pull directly from those ideas as you plan your mini-lessons.

**Tip number seven is to vary how you teach your mini-lessons.**

I know kindergartners don't have a long attention span, which is why we call these mini-lessons, although, honestly, they're mini no matter what grade you teach. In kindergarten, they're especially mini. You're going to need to mix up how you teach it to keep your students' attention.

Sometimes, you're just going to tell them something. Like, when you want to add paper, this is how you do it.

Other times you might do shared writing or interactive writing where they are dictating to you or someone is coming up and doing some of the writing for you or with you.

You can do a lot of modeling, certainly, where you're showing them how to write.

You could do something where you have students contribute ideas for your mini-lesson. Maybe your mini-lesson is "what to do when you can't think of an idea" and you could have students share how they find their own writing ideas.

There are many different ways to present a mini-lesson, it's just important to mix it up so you can keep your students' attention.

**Tip number eight is to teach the writing process.**

You probably remember what that is: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, but we need to remember that those stages are going to look different in

kindergarten than they look in older grades. Pre-writing is so quick that if you blink, you'll miss it. In kindergarten, it may simply be students talking about their drawing before they write it, which honestly is a pretty great thing if they actually think about what they're going to say before they do it. You can count that as a win if your students are thinking before they draw instead of just drawing the first thing that comes into their heads. That is enough of pre-writing in kindergarten.

As for writing, or drafting, that's going to be letting them sit wherever you're having them sit and they're doing their drawing or drawing accompanied by letters and words and sentences, and then revising is when they go back and make changes. We don't do a lot of revising in kindergarten, that's pretty tough for little kids. What you could do is ask them to add a detail to the picture. So, if they're telling you about something, you say, "Oh, I don't see that in your picture, where could you add that part?" That's revising. It's nothing complicated. It may include having students notice that in a book they made they left something out, so they pull it apart and add a page in the middle. That's revising.

Editing is when students make corrections to their work. Again, not something you're going to do a lot of in kindergarten, especially at the beginning of the year. As the year progresses and they start to learn more conventions, like capital letters in the right places and periods at the ends of sentences, you can start giving them a really simple, basic editor's checklist where you help them go through it and make the changes to their writing. But, this may not be true for every student, and it's not going to come until much later in the year.

As for publishing, don't let that scare you. I know sometimes we think of publishing as this really fancy publishing house right in our kindergarten classroom and we have to do all this fancy work and we have to type all their stories and they have to work together to recopy their pictures--you can just let all that go. Publishing in kindergarten could just mean putting a cover on a book, stapling it, and putting it in the reading center for other children to enjoy. This does not have to be complicated.

When you put those writing projects up in the hall, please put them up *as is*. You certainly want your students to be doing their best work, because we want them from them all the time. But, we don't expect perfection. It always makes my heart hurt a little bit when I walk through a hallway and see student writing and it's all spelled perfectly in kindergarten, because what that tells me is they just copied it from something. That's not what we want.

We want our students to show that they are doing the best work that they can do. This way, those of us who are enjoying the hallway writing can celebrate what they're learning throughout the year and know that this is representative of what kindergarteners can do. It's not a bad idea to have a note from you posted alongside the writing to talk about the things you're learning and pointing out the good things your students are doing in their writing.

**This brings me to tip number nine, which is to let your students use invented spelling.**

That's a word that's gotten a really bad rap, "invented" spelling. You don't have to call it that, you can call it "developmental spelling," you can call it "kid spelling." The point is, you don't want to give your students every spelling for every word they write. They're not going to remember them, that's not going to teach them anything about spelling, it's just going to make their writing look good.

Invented spelling is a way to help young writers write everything they want to say before they're developmentally ready to use conventional spelling. The bonus is it actually helps them build phonemic awareness and phonics skills, because when they're saying a word slowly, listening for each sound (that's the phonemic awareness part) and then writing the letter that makes the sound (that's the phonics part). Then, they can even read it back to you which gives them *more* phonics practice.

Another benefit of invented spelling is that, as the teacher, it shows you what your know and are starting to learn and could benefit from learning next. It's actually an assessment tool. You see that if we hand children spellings, they're really missing out on a lot of learning opportunities.

This is actually something we talk a lot about in our course, Teaching Every Writer. One of the teachers who took the course teaches kindergarten and this is what she had to say to us after she finished it. She said, “This year, I really tried hard not to spell words for them at the start of the year. I taught them how to stretch out a word and write the sounds they hear but I did not sit and do it with them 1-1 as I have often done in the past. It’s paying off now, as most of my students are now confident at doing this independently and don’t ask me how to spell a word for them anymore. Hooray!!” And I am cheering with her because that is awesome! You will find, as you expect more of your students, they will become more independent. That allows them to grow, and that allows you time to meet with individual student without a trail behind you asking you how to spell words.

Can you ever give spellings to students? Of course you can. I don’t want to say that it’s always wrong to give spellings. There may be times that it’s beneficial. For example, if someone is writing a three-letter word and they have the vowel wrong, you might help them understand the correct vowel because you know this is something they can remember and use moving forward. On the other hand, if I have a kindergartener who wants to spell elephant and I know that this particular child is not going to remember the spelling at all, there’s really no point in me giving them every single letter.

If you are doing some kind of writing activity, where you’re all kind of writing about the same general topic, which is not something I typically recommend, but I understand there may be situations for it, you could perhaps come up with a few words that everyone’s probably going to be using in their writing. For example, if the whole class is writing thank you notes to the firefighters who came to visit, you might write the word “thank you” or you might write the word “fire” or “firefighter.” That would be an instance where they’re all going to be using the same word and that is helping them develop some vocabulary and word recognition, but it is not something you want to do often.

One more exception, especially when giving spellings to students is when they’re writing about members of their family. It’s a good thing to help them learn to spell their family members’ names.

**We are on tip number ten: Don't skip sharing time.**

I've got to say, this was really something I struggled with as a teacher. I taught first and second grade for most of my teaching career and sharing time, to me, was often painful because I didn't understand something important that I want you to know: sharing time is an ideal teaching time. It's not just about calling on children who are raising their hand to share their writing, because many students are going to want to do that, but the fact is, many of them aren't going to remember what they wrote. Or, they're going to be reading so softly no one can hear them. Or, the other kids are going to be squirming and it's not really going to be very beneficial to anyone.

My tip for you is to plan in advance who is going to share based on things you see happening during the workshop. Maybe you gave a writing mini-lesson about putting spaces between words and you notice someone is doing that for the first time. Or maybe later in the year you gave a mini-lesson about using sound words in our writing and you noticed someone has done that. Or maybe you have a student who, for the first time, found their own topic and wrote pretty independently during independent writing time and you want to share that and rejoice with the rest of the class. The point is, find something that you can celebrate or use to teach the rest of the students. Then, of course, you'll want to keep track of who has shared because you want everyone to have a turn.

Those were my top tips for teaching writing in kindergarten. Let's do a quick recap:

- Have a regular writing workshop.
- Make management a priority.
- Let students choose their own topics.
- Have them make books.
- Accept what they can do.
- Teach developmentally appropriate mini-lessons.
- Vary how you teach your mini-lessons.
- Teach the writing process.
- Let your students use invented spelling.
- Don't skip sharing time.

PODCAST  TRANSCRIPT

If you would like to learn more about teaching writing in K-2 and get over two hundred ready-to-use writing mini-lessons, I recommend my online course, Teaching Every Writer. I created it with my colleague, Becky Spence, of This Reading Mama. We put together our top tips for teaching writing in the classroom or at home in Teaching Every Writer. You can learn more about that and get pricing details at [teachingeverywriter.com](http://teachingeverywriter.com).

Also, in the show notes today, I'll list some other links that will help you as you teach your kindergarten, or first, or second grade writers. You can find those show notes at [themeasuredmom.com/episode3](http://themeasuredmom.com/episode3).

Thank you so much for listening, and I'll talk to you again soon!