

01

Preheating the Oven



At the beginning of the year, it's recommended to set your table with some items and procedures that will prepare students for success during writing time.

Author Chair

You'd be surprised how easy it is to score an inexpensive chair to use for your author chair.

1. Go to garage sales, consignment shops, flea markets, or online sale sites, or ask friends and family for a wooden stool, bench, or chair.
2. Sand it down. Buy craft paints in various colors and some paintbrushes.
3. Spread out garbage bags or plastic under the chair in your classroom.
4. Put students in groups of three or four to take turns painting parts of the chair.
5. Allow the chair to dry overnight.
6. Once dry, write "Author's Chair" somewhere. Then allow students to put their names on the chair with a permanent marker all over the chair surface.
7. Voilà, you have an author chair! A place of honor to sit that shows anyone who comes into your room that writing is valued there.
8. During writing block, allow kids to share their writing from the author chair. Other students gather on the floor around the author chair to listen.
9. When someone is doing an amazing job on their writing, making great progress, using a creative spin, sharing a writing they did at home for fun, or any other thing worth celebrating, allow them to put their name in a drawing.
10. At the end of the year, draw out a name. That child gets to take the chair home to keep. Start all over the next summer with a different chair.

NOTE You can use other types of chairs besides wooden ones, of course. For example, you could get a director's-style chair and have kids sign their names on the canvas seat and back.

Writers' Notebooks

Having a writer's notebook can build anticipation for the writing that will happen in your room. It is a place where students can brainstorm, have sections for favorite words and phrases, take notes for various lessons, or practice techniques.

Kick off the year by bringing in a writing notebook of your own. Show the kids what you have in yours. If you don't have one, you can create one as a model or find examples online to show kids how authors use them.

On the day that you have kids painting the author chair, the other kids could be taking time to decorate their writing notebooks. You can provide magazines to cut pictures and words from, stickers, and other embellishments. Let them create a notebook that inspires them.

Writing Folders

Throughout this book, you will find lessons focused on specific skills. These are meant to continue to be built upon. When a student has practiced a skill, have them keep that page in their folder. There will be times they refer back to lessons in the folder. There will also be times that a lesson will be built upon and students can add onto a work in progress.

At times, you may have anchor papers, reference sheets, or tools that can be kept in their folders. For example, in the Generating Ideas section, students will have a ME Page and an Expert List to keep in their folders.

Procedures

Ideally, you want to make time for writing opportunities every day. One way to reduce wasted time is to create procedures. What have you noticed takes time away from the instruction and practice during your writing time? How will you handle access to writing folders and notebooks? Will kids have paper at their space or need to get some? How will you handle questions and spelling during practice time?

All of these items need to be considered and taught to allow for maximum productivity and minimal distraction. You'd be surprised how many minutes you gain daily by teaching procedures for all of the transition times, supply procurement, and expectations.

Spelling

I noticed students often got hung up on spelling their words correctly during writing. Although I never put an emphasis on having to spell everything correctly, some kids aren't happy with just "sounding out" a word. They want to know how to spell it. I found ways to help them spell words, with minimal fuss. For the lower grades, I created a "My Try" page. This saved lots of time and stress.

My Try	Correct Spelling

Students could get this out from their writing folders when they want help spelling a word. They simply try to spell it in the left column and when I see this, I come by and write in the correct spelling across from it. It's quick and painless.

For the older elementary grades, I allowed my students to look up spellings on their devices. (This is what real writers do, after all.)

Making the Most of Your Time

You have a lot of control over the transitions between hooking your students, modeling the focus skill, and releasing kids to practice because you are the one leading. When it comes to the time between practicing and sharing, though, if kids are engaged, it can be hard to get them to stop writing. (Really, I promise!)

I teach a procedure that seamlessly gets kids to stop writing and head back to the author chair for sharing time.

1. During the practice time, I am scouting out good examples of the skill we are practicing. I let a few students know that I'd like them to bring their work with them when we share that day.
2. Use a signal of your choosing for kids to stop writing. This signal means they need to put down their pencils and head back to the author chair.
3. The students who have been chosen for sharing are lined up by the author chair.

The way I practice this procedure is by letting kids know my signal. It can be a bell sound, a phrase, or a clapping sequence. Use whatever works for you. I simply say, "Okay, pencils down." To practice, I have kids start writing their first, middle, and last name. After a few seconds, I say, "Okay, pencils down." No matter how far they've gotten, they must stop writing and put down their pencils and head back to the author chair. I do this again by having them start writing the alphabet. Again, I say, "Okay, pencils down," and they stop on whatever letter they were on.

These may seem silly, but it gets them to understand and remember the signal. They get that it doesn't mean to stop writing after your last thought or sentence. It means stop writing on the letter in the middle of the word they are on. You'll be amazed at how quickly they are ready to share.