

**THANK YOU** for downloading *Finding Topics*  
that I created **FREE** for you.

In return, I ask that you...

(1) Have fun!

(2) Give me credit for my work if you share.

(3) Refer others to my websites [www.LikeToRead.com](http://www.LikeToRead.com),  
[www.LikeToWrite.com](http://www.LikeToWrite.com), and [www.Facebook.com/LikeToWrite](http://www.Facebook.com/LikeToWrite)

I also ask that if you see any editing or content errors  
that you let me know

by emailing me at

[khaag@liketowrite.com](mailto:khaag@liketowrite.com)



I give permission to classroom teachers to use  
my materials with their students.  
For all other uses, please contact me.

Please feel free  
to email with questions ☺

Sincerely,  
Karen Haag

**Note:** Overhead = overhead, SmartBoard, Doc Cam, or chart paper. Choose what you have to make copies visible to all.

### **Lesson One: Why We Write**

- Ask class to tell how their lives would be different if they lived their lives as authors. Ask them to get with partners and brainstorm a list of everything they would do if they had to pay for everything --- rent, food, clothes, fun --- with money earned from selling their writing.
- Merge lists together on chart paper: *buy a computer, or favorite pen, or pencil; write a lot, read a lot!; find out who buys writing, who my audiences will be; talk to authors about writing; get a writing buddy or two, get a writing group; make a place in my home where I'm comfortable writing, keep a notebook of ideas, etc.*
- Bring in articles or tell stories that show how important writing is. I like to tell about my son who wrote, what we call the \$50,000 essay. His college gave him \$12,000 per year in scholarship based on the essay he wrote. I just cut an article out of the paper and glued it in my daybook: "More and More Jobs Value Writing." Explain how writing is used in so many jobs.
- Point out the relationship between the chart the students brainstormed and success in writing. Even though students will not get "paid" in cash, they will be rewarded in other ways: good grades, self-esteem, personal enjoyment, higher testing scores, longer lives (I have an article from the paper that says people who journal live longer!), etc. The ideas they listed on the charts will help them be successful writers.
- Keep the charts up as a reminder.

### **Lesson Two: Freewriting**

- Tell the class that they will spend several weeks learning how to find topics to write about. Finding topics is always a problem for every writer so writers need to have some strategies for finding them.
- Model one such strategy called "Freewriting". Tell the class that freewriting is like going up in the attic and seeing what boxes are up there, opening the boxes, looking through everything and making a list. Instead, they are going to walk up into their minds and find out what's on their minds today and write it down. What are they thinking about? In a period of 3 minutes or so, the students should write any thing that comes to mind. Stress that they can't be wrong! Tell them they don't even have to stay on topic. They can write in lists or phrases or complete sentences. They just have to keep writing to discover what they're thinking about. If they get stuck, have them write, "*I am thinking*" over and over again. However, caution them that if they write a whole page of "*I am thinking*" you will know they are not thinking.
- Use the overhead to model your freewriting.
- Ask a student to watch the time for you or set a timer.

*Here's a freewrite of mine:*

*Today is writing time again - I'm thinking – about what I did yesterday. One thing is driving to school – widening I-85 – all kinds of machines – dry red soil – back up of traffic. Paul & Grace came over yesterday!!!! I love when they visit © Brought new dog – Watson – crazy Watson. Drooling. Jumping. Won't stop moving. Won't go outside – whines like he's been abandoned. Pushed paw through the screen door. Try to remains calm.*

- Model going back and circling all potential topics that could become stories: *driving to school, widening I-85, describing the road machines, Watson, pushing paw through the screen door story, Grace and Paul's visit*
- Ask the class to write for 3 minutes.
- Ask your students to circle potential topics, too.

- Suggest that they write on one topic they circled tonight for their 10 minutes of choice writing homework.

*(Let me say this about homework. Homework is a gift each child gives himself. If he wanted to really learn something he would practice. I think that, as teachers, we need to assign homework and we need to keep track of homework. However, it should be one more piece of evidence that a child is not doing well at school. Children should not start their day with a reprimand for not doing homework. If you are providing plenty of opportunities to practice the same skill, then homework should be for practicing responsibility. In some cases, children clearly fail at taking on responsibility. Punishing them is not going to make them change. My rule of thumb is --- after 3 times, if I do not get the desired result, then I need to change my strategy. If a child stays in from recess 3 times and does not bring homework on the fourth day, then recess doesn't matter to him. Teachers need to find other consequences. In the case of daybooks, anyone who writes gets privileges for the day. Rewarding, not punishing, has produced the results I want.)*

#### Partner Share

- Tell the students to select a partner that they can work with at least one quarter and potentially all year. It should be someone who will encourage them, listen to them and offer suggestions. It needs to be someone they can stay on task with. *I find that allowing children to choose their own partners works for me. They usually make good choices. If the partnership works, I say keep it all year. The children certainly are motivated to stay with one another when they've made the choice.*
- Tell them that once they find a partner, they need to find a space to work. Lay out your parameters for what a space looks like – away from others, not hidden, sitting looking at one another or side-by-side or maybe you want them to select 2 desks side-by-side or 2 chairs. If possible, you need them to be in triads because if someone is absent, the students still have a partner. Allow time for sharing.

#### (Other Ideas to Get Started:

Freewriting about a poster, magazine picture, post card, greeting card picture.)

#### ***Lesson Three: Getting Ideas From Book Titles and Books***

- Tell students that sometimes we come up with ideas for writing by looking at book titles or books. Have several titles gathered together that may make for interesting stories. Examples of good book titles are: *The Relatives Came, Night Noises, and Pet Show*. There's plenty in the library, but you do have to spend some time selecting.
- This is a good time to talk about how sharing ideas is a good thing. Copying is not. However, using someone's title is O.K. as long as when you publish it, you change the title.
- Reading books helps you come up with ideas, as well. *More Than Anything Else* is one of my favorites because children then can write about the thing they most wanted in the world and the time they got it. *Song and Dance Man* is another because it's about a special person in the child's life and a memorable time with that person. Pick your favorite picture book to share.
- If possible, share a piece of writing you did in response to a title or a book topic. If you can, it will impress the students greatly.
- If not, tell them you are looking forward to writing time today because you can't wait to write about a topic you've been thinking about. You don't have to get finished.

#### Sustained Writing Time

- Tell the children that they have several choices to write on today. They could write about an idea they've been thinking about. They can turn to their freewriting page and pick a topic to write about. They can write about something that they remembered when you read the story today or shared a topic.

- Challenge them to write more today without getting up, without asking questions, no sharpening of pencils, no going the bathroom – sustained writing time.
- Challenge your class to get into writing time within 30 seconds once they thought of a topic.
- Tell them to tell a partner what they will write about after they think a minute. As a topic comes to them, tell them to feel free to go to their seat and start writing. If not, they can stay in the gathering space with you until they think of a topic.
- When everyone who can think of a topic is writing, tell the children still with you that they can choose a topic or you will ask them a lot of questions to help them think of a topic. Once students see that staying with you doesn't mean you will tell them a topic, they will begin to choose one. Also, they will build confidence if you hold to your word that anything is okay.
- Take your place where you can see everyone and write. Scan the room periodically to see if anyone is having trouble. Resist the urge to solve problems for them. Note it in your daybook. Talk with the class about solutions later. Stop children from interrupting the sustained writing time by walking over to them and quietly reminding them to write or moving them to a better writing place.
- Stop the class when you feel it's appropriate. Give the students a minute to finish up the sentence or thought they were working on.
- Praise them! Be specific about what worked. For example, *I'm so proud of the way that Table 1 was writing right away or I liked the way I could see ----thinking. Thinking is an important part of writing.*

#### Partner Share

- Share what you wrote during writing time, if appropriate.
- Record the number of minutes students wrote in a prominent place.
- Remind children that every day they will get together with the same partner and share a part of or all of their work. If they have extra time, they can share more entries from their notebook. They can help each other number their pages or make their table of contents. The most important thing is to talk about writing.
- Walk around and listen in. Take notes.

#### ***Lesson Four: Clustering***

##### Author Share

- Ask the children who wrote last night to share what they wrote about. Ask them to tell how they came up with the idea. Remind the children that you are continuing to search for topic ideas. Listening to each other share is a great way to get new ideas.
- Ask children with notebooks to share their topic idea *and how they came upon that topic*. Where appropriate, ask them to share their favorite lines, surprises, endings, words, or even the whole piece if you think you can use it to make a point. Remind students everyone will get to share in Partner Share. *As you explore how your students thought of their topic, record their names, topics and their finding-a-topic strategy in your notebook or on a clipboard to use later with your class.*

##### Teacher Share

- Remind the class that they will spend several weeks learning how to find topics .
- Tell your students that another strategy to try is “clustering.” Explain the strategy: *In clustering, the writer chooses a topic and then writes on that topic, exploring all aspects of that topic. Put your topic in the middle of the page. As you think about your topic, record your thoughts and associations. Follow the stream of associations until you reach a block. Begin again with another idea and follow that idea to its end. Continue clustering for 2-3 minutes. Clustering is different than brainstorming in that it shows how your ideas are connected.*

- Ask a student to watch the time for you or set a timer for 4-5 minutes.
- Use the overhead to model your clustering.

*My clustering actually looks like a wheel with the topic in the middle and the ideas written around like spokes. Here's a sample of the words in my clustering. Picture the words coming out as spokes on a wheel. Refer to the questions on the left, start writing, then write the next thing and follow that thought until it runs out of steam. See the left box below.*

<p><i>Asking yourself questions can help you get started:</i></p> <p><i>Who? What? When? Where?</i>  <i>Why? How?</i>  <i>Describe it.</i>  <i>What experiences have you had with your topic?</i>  <i>What do you remember about it?</i>  <i>What are the parts or sections of it?</i>  <i>Can you give instructions for making it or doing it?</i>  <i>Feelings?</i>  <i>Why is it valuable or important?</i>  <i>What causes it?</i>  <i>What results from it?</i>  <i>Are you for or against it? Why?</i>  <i>What are its strengths? Weaknesses?</i>  <i>What do you associate with it? Songs, words, poems?</i>  <i>How is it important or valuable?</i></p>	<p><i>Bright-colored-reds-blues-yellows-oranges</i></p> <p><i>Cooler temperatures – fresh air</i></p> <p><i>Anticipation – school – schedules again</i></p> <p><i>Earlier nights- dusk earlier – longer</i></p> <p><i>October, Rich's birthday, Sept., Michael's birthday, Halloween</i></p> <p><i>New friends – what's next?</i></p> <p><b>FALL</b></p> <p><i>Happy, enjoying the relief, birthday celebrations, Christmas coming, winter</i></p> <p><i>Valuable, wouldn't like the same season all the time</i></p> <p><i>Changes – leaves die, birds fly, color truer but dying</i></p> <p><i>Halloween – Michael's stories</i></p>
---	--

- To get started, ask the children to pick a word to cluster – a person, friend, pet, or a season like I did. They need to choose quickly for the purpose of demonstration.
- Directions: Write your topic word in the middle of your page. Then think of a word, what comes to mind next, then next, following the thought until you have no more associations.
- Call out questions quietly to help some as you get started. Start another string of words and another. Cluster for 4-5 minutes.
- Part TWO of clustering is writing. Model, looking at your cluster and writing what comes to mind in sentence form. *Here's what I wrote after I clustered:*

*I'm always hopeful in the fall. Unlike other seasons, it's a teacher's new year. With a renewed promise and strength from summer's rest, I re-enter the classroom bubbling with fresh ideas. I'm anxious to see what new friends I'll make and which faces are back.*

*Even as nature begins to die, turn brown and leaves whither, little by little, I begin to build my schoolhouse. Brick by brick, I put my schemes in place. I start to know each student. I sketch out my plans for the year hoping that this year I will get to it all. I take my first steps towards learning new strategies, new programs, new lessons and new schedules.*

*My summer life fades slowly away – summer friends, shows, books, late nights, late mornings, rhythmic schedules, sandals. The memories become vague. With promise, I face a new year. A room of expectant eyes waiting for me to be a great teacher.*

- Ask students to begin writing in paragraph form. Take your place where you can see everyone and write. Scan the room periodically to see if anyone is having trouble. Resist the urge to solve problems for them. Note problems in your daybook to discuss later. Stop

children from interrupting the sustained writing time by walking over to them and quietly reminding them to write or moving them to a better writing place.

- Stop the class when you feel it's appropriate. Give the students a minute to finish up the sentence or thought they were working on.
- If they were able to build their sustained writing time, praise them! Be specific about what worked. *For example, we really are making quick transitions today.*
- Write the sustained time in a prominent place.

#### Partner Share

- Remind children that every day they will get together with the same partner and share a part of or all of their work. They can share their cluster, their writing, last night's writing or anything in their writer's notebook. They can share something they're proud of from last year even if they brought it today. They can talk about their feelings about today's' strategy, or what they learned to get ready for commitment contracts.

#### **Lesson Five: Telling Stories**

*Note: You can spend several days on telling stories. I recommend at least 2. I prefer 3 and I've spent weeks if I felt my class needed to spend time there. If they can't tell stories, I've backed up to reading a story and then having them retell a story. I believe, if you can't tell a story, you certainly can't write one! If you need to, spend your time working orally before putting pencil to paper.*

#### Author Share

Ask children with notebooks to share their topic idea and how they came upon that topic. Where appropriate, ask them to share their favorite lines, surprises, endings, words, or even the whole piece if you think you can use it to make a point. Remind students everyone will get to share in Partner Share. *As you explore how your students thought of their ideas, record their names, topics and their finding-a-topic idea in your notebook or on a clipboard to use later with your class.*

#### Teacher Share (need one small sticky note per child)

- Review all the ways the class has learned to find a topic.
- Explain that today they will learn another way. Listening to other people TELL stories is a great way to get ideas. Recording the ideas on a topic list helps immensely.
- Tell the class that authors keep topic lists for when they get stuck. Tell them that if they are fast writers they probably can write all these topics down. If they write slower, they may want to pick the most important ideas that they think they might write about. The more topics recorded, the more ideas when they get stuck.
- To get started the children need to pick a page in their notebook where they are going to keep this list. I usually ask the students to use the last page because you can find it so quickly.
- Write the words TOPIC LIST on the board. Under it write the ideas that the students who have been doing writing at home have shared so far. Examples: *dead fish, the tiny people, animals, etc.*
- Now, tell a story. Here's a story I love to tell:

### A Daring Experience

By Karen Haag

My younger brother was always daring me to do crazy things. Usually, one or the other of us got in some kind of trouble.

One day in the dead of winter in Rochester, New York, we were bored playing in the basement. My 6 year-old brother Tom got the idea to dare me to jump off the third step of the basement stairs. Since I was his older sister, I said, "No problem!" I made the jump easily. That made Tom mad.

Tom dared me to jump off the fifth step. "Just like this!" he exclaimed as he showed me how he wanted me to jump. I gracefully jumped off the fifth step to the concrete floor below.

Now, Tom was really mad. He was determined to beat me! He dared me to jump off the top step. I knew this idea was not a good one and so I said, "Go ahead, fool!"

Tom was steaming! He had dared me and he had to go through with it. He sailed into the air. He hit the wall at the bottom of the stairs. He slid down the wall to the floor and brought the shelves with him. Down came the boots, the hats, the scarves, the winter coats and the shelves.

Tom laid in a heap covered in stuff at the bottom of the stairs. I walked over to him and stared down at my dizzy brother. He looked pretty pale and weak. With barely a whisper he groaned, "Get mom!"

Mom, who was used to these scenes with my brother by now, walked down the stairs. She carefully looked him over and asked him where he hurt. She slid her hand across the bone at the base of his throat. She gathered him up and took him to the hospital.

Tom's collarbone was broken. Doctors can't put a cast on a collarbone. Tom's doctor told him to sit still for one month! Eventually, he healed and was back pulling more crazy stunts. Even so, he did learn not to dare his sister on a cold, winter day.

- Loosely classify the stories people tell. My story could be a family story or an accident story. Family stories and accidents sometimes make good stories.
- Ask the students to add to their topic list in their notebook. They must write these down.

Topic List

family stories

accident stories

daring stories
- Tell another story or ask a student to tell one. Ask, does my story remind anyone of a story they'd like to tell? Ask one child to come to the front of the room and remind everyone should use their best listening skills. This child should be the model of how you want telling

stories to go. Take a minute after the child shares to compliment the class on what they did well or what they need to work on.

- Add to the topic list.

<u>Topic List</u>
family stories
accident stories
animal stories
daring stories
pet stories
winning stories

- CHOOSE one:

1. If you have about 4-5 volunteers who want to tell stories at this point, group the kids so that each “story teller” now has 4-5 kids to listen to him/her. Ask the listeners to be able to tell you an idea for the topic list.  
OR
2. If you have a whole bunch of hands in the air volunteering to tell stories, then they are ready to write. Invite them to write their story down - - - sustained writing time. Keep the kids with you who are not yet ready. Tell them to write about one of the things you have on the board.

#### Closure

- If the students spent their time telling stories (#1 above), then ask them to volunteer story ideas that every one can add to the topic list. Write them on the board as the students add them to their topic list.

OR

#### Partner Share

- If the children spent their time writing (#2 above), then remind them that today they can share the stories they wrote or what they wrote last night or anything they wrote they brought to share with their partner.
- Give them the signal to take their places. Don’t forget to make provisions for absent children or children who are not in your classroom every day.
- Walk around and listen in. Take notes.

**Lesson Six: Story Structures***(Depending on how much time you spent on storytelling.)*Author Share

Follow the same steps.

Ask students to add topic ideas to their lists that they got from their peers in author share today.

Teacher Share

*Note: For this lesson, you will need a book that has a structure that can easily be imitated. I like to use The Most important Book, but many books lend themselves to the same idea. Here's an example from a fairy tale you could put on the overhead after you read The Twelve Dancing Princesses. The point is to provide a structure for your struggling writers, and yet let the confident writers and the strugglers make it their own. Don't hold them back. It's just a jumping off point. They can change anything.*

*Example:*

Once upon a time, a \_\_\_\_\_ had 12 \_\_\_\_\_, each one more \_\_\_\_\_ than the last. The 12 \_\_\_\_\_ slept in \_\_\_\_\_ all in one enormous \_\_\_\_\_. When they went to bed, their \_\_\_\_\_ was locked with \_\_\_\_\_. Every morning though, their \_\_\_\_\_ were found to be \_\_\_\_\_.

The \_\_\_\_\_ made an announcement that \_\_\_\_\_ . . .

The \_\_\_\_\_ meets the magic \_\_\_\_\_ . . .

The \_\_\_\_\_ go to their secret place . . .

The \_\_\_\_\_ follows the \_\_\_\_\_ and takes \_\_\_\_\_ as evidence . . .

The \_\_\_\_\_ saves the \_\_\_\_\_ . . .

The wedding was held the very next day and the \_\_\_\_\_ declared that when he died, \_\_\_\_\_ would inherit the kingdom. The \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_ lived happily ever after.

- As soon as students begin finishing, invite them to come to the floor to share with you and others who are done. Send them back to write another if they so desire or listen to their classmates: (CHOICE!)

Partner Share ----Follow the routine.

For more information about using story structures, consult *Wondrous Words* by Katie Wood Ray, "Envisioning Text Possibilities," NCTE publisher.

## ***Lesson Seven: Topic Expert***

**Teacher Share (Each child needs a small sticky note.)**

- Tell students *that sometimes when you are stuck it helps to think about what you like to write about. Make a list of topics you have already written and know a lot about. It's easier to write about things you know.*
- Model making this list on the overhead. *Try not to think of it ahead of time because your modeling will look too easy. Make it look real.*

*For example, my list would look like this . . .  
stories about . . .*

Michael and Paul and now, Lissa and Grace  
 my dog Dakota  
 travel  
 my grandmother  
 my father  
 things that are funny  
 letters  
     to my family  
     to the editor  
 lesson plans  
 ideas about writing, reading, spelling  
 convincing arguments about  
     schools and how to make them better  
     how to spend money  
     children  
     children with special needs  
 I know a lot about  
     camping  
     music  
     piano  
     flute  
     writing  
     reading

- Encourage children to explore what they have already written. They may want to look through their notebook to help them. They may want to think about years past. They may need to talk with their partner aloud. Make a list in their daybook.
- Sticky note this page: Expert List

**Sustained Writing Time** – Follow the routine.

**Partner Share (Routine)**

**Commitment Contract (Routine)**

### ***Other Ideas I've Found to Be Motivating for Finding Topics***

(Each idea needs to be modeled!)

8. Retell stories. Read a story. Students try to retell it or retell a new version of the story.
9. Talking with others to see what they're writing and how they came up with their topic. Students walk around and ask others what they're writing. Usually by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, the student has discovered a topic he/she can write about, too.
10. Drawing. Draw - and label the drawing (optional). From the drawing, an idea should spark. Students write the story they discovered while drawing.
11. Observe your world. Take a look around the room. Take a walk around the school. Or, draw a map of a favorite house or apartment. From this experience, think about a story that comes to mind and write it down!