

Literacy Leads

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From Workbook to Working Book: Using Daybooks In the Classroom --- First Day

I begin my first writing lesson the first day of school by asking, “What if you had to make a living off the writing you do? How would you live life differently if you had to pay for your shelter, your food, your clothes and your fun from the writing you sold each month?” When I encourage my students to talk to one another, they realize I really do want an answer.

What Authors Do: Sample List Created by Fourth Graders

1. Read a lot! (daily)
2. Write a lot!
3. Buy a journal, a favorite pen and pencil, and colored pens and pencils.
4. Find out who will publish my writing --- who my audience will be.
5. Create a writing space where ideas flow.
6. Share my writing with a trusted writing buddy or two.
7. Make changes in my writing based on suggestions or rereading.
8. Read like an author. Collect samples of good writing.
9. Learn to spell and use correct grammar.
10. Keep a list of ideas to write about.
11. Watch less television.

I record their suggestions on chart paper: write every day, study others’ writings, collect good writing and tips, and read! The list develops slowly at first, but then the ideas start flowing: find out who would buy the work, ask other people to read and edit the pieces, and keep troublesome-word spelling lists. Buy journals to write in and favorite pens and pencils. Purchase computers, a thesaurus and a good dictionary. Create a space at home to write in and find a trusted, writing buddy.

After the brainstorming session, I explain the relationship between the behaviors they have just proposed and success in writing class this year. Because they put energy into creating the list, they see the relationship between their jobs as students and writers’ jobs as writers. The chart stays up all year as a reminder.

Finally, I ask, “If you knew there was a tool to help people have fun and succeed at school, you would want to know about it, right?” Of course, by now my students are intrigued.

The tool is a daybook and together we discover how to use one.

To introduce the daybook, I bring my own to school. They notice its bulk and messiness. I show the students how it is a container, more like a drawer than a notebook to me. I show them my chicken-scratched notes, drafting, freewriting, prewriting, revisions, and drawings. I pass it around so they can look closely at the “stuff” I’ve glued in: examples of good writing or ideas for writing (see sidebar below). They see my lists that help me find topics.

I write badly sometimes, but I don’t mind showing my false starts. Any writing helps me exercise my writing muscles privately, I explain. Showing them my daybook-difficulties and breakthroughs emphasizes

that figuring out how to use one may not go as perfectly as they think it will. It also dispels the notion that keeping a daybook is easy for me. I let them tell me it's hard because I know it can be at times.

However, while keeping daybooks may seem awkward at first, eventually students create their notebooks to reflect their personalities. *The secret to making daybooks work is allowing children to make the book their own.* By making decisions about what goes in the notebook and (as much as possible) how it is arranged, students construct their understanding of what a daybook is *for them* just like I did.

**Some "Stuff" in My
Daybook I Can't Live
Without**

labeled pictures
photos
letters and notes
cut-outs from the newspaper
handouts
sticky notes
parts of stories
others' stories
poems
pictures
ticket stubs
comics
post cards
topic ideas
wonderful words
phrases
favorite lines
advice
settings
character sketches
books I've read
notes

I explain that once they start keeping a daybook, they're going to want to ask me, "Can I put 'this' in my notebook?" The answer to their question is, "Will putting 'this' in your notebook help you be a better reader or writer?" If the answer is "yes" then write it or glue it in! After the first few days, we joke with one another, "Will that help you be a better reader or writer?" Eventually they stop asking me the question and begin shouldering the responsibility for creating their own working book.

My daybook still looks very neat to my students. It looks too perfect, I think. Even though I tell my students that their writing and drawings will not look like mine, when they see adult daybooks some children feel they don't quite measure up. So, this year I shared videotapes of former students explaining their daybooks. The videos make the daybook seem even more accessible for children. The videos have served a couple purposes: the students watch them with pleasure plotting their ideas for keeping their own notebooks and working hard to create daybooks to videotape for others.

To further encourage them to make the books their own, I bring writers into my classroom with their daybooks. They have shown us teeny-tiny notebooks and big, beautifully bound, handmade ones. There are notebooks with lined paper and others with drawing paper. We've seen cheap, cloth or plastic notebooks and expensive, leather ones, even notebooks with locks or cases.

Most of us have composition, "cow" notebooks that are black and white and can be bought at any office supply or drug store. Some writers keep several notebooks going at once and write a little in each one each day. Some write in one notebook and date them by year. My friend John Moran titles every daybook to reflect the mood he's in when he starts his new book. With the help of my writer friends, I shape my students' vision of what a daybook can be.

After the students see so many possibilities, they beg to start their own.

Next Week: Students start their daybooks.