

# Literacy Leads

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## #6 From Workbook to Working Book: Using Daybooks In the Classroom --- Topics

My first objective is to help children enjoy writing again. Kindergarteners think they are writers. When I ask my fourth graders who are writers, usually only a couple hands go up. So in the upper grades, I need to re-establish their confidence. Therefore, we write leisurely the first month of school. Right after lunch this year, we have writing class. We begin by reading what we wrote for homework to our writing partner, a trusted companion the students *select and keep all year*. Then I model. Then we write. We build sustained writing time in school by keeping a graph showing how long we were able to write each day --- to prove to my students that they can write! Very quickly, the students move from just a couple minutes to 30-40. In addition, I assign homework, writing on a topic of their choosing for a minimum of 10 minutes every night, to build writing fluency!

I like daybooks because you can feel passionet about what you write about and dosen't matter if it's a good story or a bad story it matters if you care and if you put your best effort to it. It's like my own diary. My own space where I can feel free to write.  
---Destiny, 4<sup>th</sup>-grader

Since most writers need topics, most of my modeling this first month is in how to collect ideas for stories. Author Mem Fox challenged me to grow at the NCTE conference in Charlotte MANY years ago when she said, "I'm lucky if I find one or two topics a year! And, we ask students to write on a new topic every day?!#?" So, just as kindergarteners play with periods until they learn how to use them correctly, my students play with finding ideas about which to write. My goal? Wean them from asking me for writing ideas.

In fact, I devote the first half of the quarter to teaching my students how to find writing ideas. What could be more important than finding what you want to write? Since students have to write every day IN school on a topic they choose, they search for ideas, think about them at other times during the day, and write ideas in their topic lists so they will always have something to write about. Since they know they will be sharing, they create entertaining stories, a friendly competition of sorts.

To start the year, we freewrite to find topics; we write down everything we can think of for 3-5 minutes without censoring ideas. No fair lifting the pencil as we put pen to paper the whole time! Students write lists, ramblings, and stories. We make lists of things that bug us, things we love, books we've read, lists of questions and people we know and so on. Nothing is wrong. The students generate stories by looking at their lists. We record on the last page in our daybook, jotting down ideas

It helps me calm down. I write my thoughts and my questions. My storys my poems. I like to write my settings my writing entrys. My daybook helps me think.  
--- Sam, 4<sup>th</sup>-grader

we know *enough* about...to *write* about...on our "Topic Page" or "Story Ideas Page." We go back to our freewriting, circle topics and write the ideas that came to us into our topic list.

We tell stories. One of my favorite series of lessons is to share my family stories. (They pay me to do this?) From my telling, students beg to explain something they thought of while I was entertaining them. From listening to others, we think about

similar experiences, and record the ideas on our topic lists as well. I teach students to make their topic lists specific. Just yesterday, I showed the students that I recorded the word “connections” on my topic list. I have absolutely no recollection of what I was going to write when I recorded that in my daybook. But the next line says, “Michael --- 3 yrs old --- flowers.” I remember that story! I’d written enough to jog my memory and now I can write it.

We write our own Writing Territories (Nancie Atwell); we list what we’ve already written (letters, emails, stories --- all the kinds of writing we do) and who or what we write about (all the topics we’ve already tried). From these lists we search for our favorite topics and our “fallback” topic – a topic we feel very confident writing about over and over again (like Mem Fox). I explain that they can learn just as much about writing from creating a story, then a poem, then a biography, then a letter to, and an imaginative story about the same friend as they can by changing topics every day. As a matter of fact, all their stories can be about the same person or idea and over time, they’ll have a book.

We look at what other people have written, books, titles of books, others’ daybook stories, in hopes of spring boarding off their ideas into our own. We read poems and stories and try to imitate the structure innovating our own texts. I create my handouts I give the children in landscape mode so that I can cut the paper in half and the students can glue them in the daybooks easily. Within a couple weeks, I’ve launched students into writing chapter books, nonfiction books, poetry, stories and letters to the editor and the like. They have days of poems, stories, freewriting, letters *and* direction sheets to help them remember.

From here the children are on their own to develop and organize their daybooks. They work on several projects at once. They read a group-book and prepare for discussion with a group by recording what they noticed and what they questioned. Students select books to read independently. They write nightly in their daybook, carefully dating each page so they can get credit. We build sustained writing time in school as well. Sometimes they must write to a prompt to practice for our state test. The children design and create inquiry projects for social studies and science. In addition, they have math problems to explain, research to do, interviews to conduct, and stories to write. They need to carry out experiments and record data in their daybooks. In other words, they have plenty to do! If I give them time to keep up the Table of Contents, they can find their work no matter the order or how many pages it takes to write. Using daybooks, therefore, is an effective and authentic way to differentiate for my diverse student population.

It feels good to have a daybook because you're not forced to use one topic. You can make up your own topic and use your own words. My daybook helps me learn because I like to look back and read my stories.

If you do daybooks, you should have a share time. Reading stories from my daybook to friends also helps me find mistakes. A daybook is something you can keep forever! When I'm 28 years old, I'll probably still have my daybook.

---Angel, 3<sup>rd</sup>-grader

Daybooks have inspired me to write more and more.

Daybooks have also helped me enjoy writing. I think that all new teachers should know that you can always keep your ideas of topics that you want to write about in your daybooks. And you can write funny, sad, happy, or silly or any kind of writing in your daybooks. I have mostly stories I made up in my daybook but I have other things, too like stories that I glued in and lots of main topics and little topics that are specific. And I also keep a topic list where I keep the ideas for things I'd like to write about.

--- Anna, 3<sup>rd</sup>-grader