



Literacy Leads

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Exit Circles

My writing- or reading-lesson time consists of 3 parts: (1) minilesson; (2) writing (or reading) time; (3) closure (exit circles). Without all 3 parts, students write (or read) more, but the writing (reading) doesn't get better.

When I get in a rush, the first thing I cut out is closure. It's a decision I ALWAYS regret. I now promise to take at least a couple minutes to share something that happened in the room that will move the youngsters' writing forward. (Also, I've learned if I really don't have time to fit in final reflection, I start the next writing block with it. In other words, I do not skip the step any more.)

Sometimes closure is open ended. I ask students to share what they learned and how they will use what they learned the next time they write.

What I find to be even better is to pick students during writing time to highlight at the end of the period, during closure time. For example, the other day I moved from table to table mini-conferencing with students in kindergarten. The first 3 students I came across busily buried their heads in their writing. I recorded what they were writing, asked them if they needed help to which they replied a quick, No. I'm fine, and I moved on.

I came across "William." He was writing a 5-page booklet. He had drawn a beautiful picture on each page. The first picture was of a lion and it he had written JLIINS. The second page was of polar bears, POLR BARS. The third, TIGR; the fourth, ELUFIT; and the fifth, DUEUK. When I asked him what he was writing, he said he was done. Wanting to challenge him a little, I asked him to find a book about animals in the classroom. He reached behind him and grabbed one off the

shelf in just a couple seconds. I asked him to look at the book with me.

I led him to understand that there was a lot of writing on each page in the book he had selected. In his writing, he had written a label or title on each page. We glanced back at the mentor text together. I grabbed the opportunity to ask, what would you write on each page if you had the chance? "Well," William said. "I could write lions have manes." I encouraged him to do just that. I said, "Ahhhh. So you're going to tell me what you know about each animal? That would be great."

I sat with him as he wrote the first sentence. I left him writing polar bears live in Antarctica. "I can't wait to see how you spell Antarctica." I said. "Many adults have a hard time with that word but you're taking on the challenge." He smiled.

Later, during closure, I asked William if I could share this experience he had in writing time and he agreed. He explained what he learned perfectly. I added a little teaching to go with his story; writing a title on each page like William had done was something that many authors do. However, they often write more than a title and I thanked William for being open to that possibility. I explained how any one could look at books to help us when we didn't know what to do. And also I mentioned that William was willing to risk writing a tough, tough word, Antarctica, and asked him to tell us what letters he tried: ANT ARKA.

Sometimes I forget to ask the "Williams" to share what they learned during writing time. As a result, I've gotten in the habit of writing "share" in pencil (with permission) on specific writing I want to feature, or I write the child's

name on a clipboard. That way if I forget what I wanted to teach, then the papers I noticed during the hectic writing time are not forgotten and I can access them easily. For example, on another day in second grade, we were trying to divide our stories into parts. Then, we were going back to add to each part to make a more detailed, fuller story.

Luckily, when I pulled the students together on the floor to reflect on what they'd learned that day, I had marked 3 papers. One child discovered that she had a single sentence buried within her writing without any details to support it: I fried an egg. Because she had 6 or 7 other, more-detailed parts to her story, I asked her if she wanted to develop frying the egg into a whole part or if she wanted to drop it. I thought she was wise to realize that frying the egg was not an important detail. Since it really was not critical to the telling, she took it out of her story! Later, because of our conversation, "Alicia" told her classmates what she had done – what she kept and what she subtracted. I taught the others that taking out details is sometimes a hard decision for writers to make but Alicia had done just that. In this case, we all agreed; frying an egg did not an interesting part make this time.

That same day, another child found that she had 2 stories in one story in our conference. She was proud that she had written 2 pages, front and back and stapled together. I encouraged her to try dividing her story into parts, like paragraphs. She agreed even though at first she told me she didn't want to throw out any of her writing. When she came back, she was stunned to report that she'd found 7 or 8 parts in just the first page of her story. If she were to work with the second page as well, she would have maybe 16 parts to develop! I looked at the story and assured her that the second page was a whole story all by itself. She was relieved. She liked her first story and liked the idea of writing the second one when she had time.

The third child found that dividing his story into parts was easy. The first part was his

introduction. The second part started, at first; the third part, later that day; the fourth part, the next morning; and the ending, now. I explained to him that often stories divide up easily around time. I explained to him and he explained to the class.

So, in a matter of minutes, in that all-valuable closure time, that time that I often cut out, my students and I were able to highlight several habits that authors use: (1) Writers take out parts when they don't want to write about them; (2) Writers often find one, two and even several stories within one story. They choose one to focus during revision time and they save the others for another time; (3) Stories can be divided into parts by time-transition words. That's one way to organize a story.

What's powerful is that these discoveries came from the writers in the room! At least those 3 children are less likely to forget. Their friends probably paid close attention. I can build on what they taught their classmates if I record the revelations in my daybook and revisit the ideas.

So make this your this-month resolution: I will not squeeze out closure time! It's one type of relevant teaching we do. Closure time gives us time to think through what we taught and make it explicit for the students before we move in a rush to other things. It's absolutely essential if the 3-legged stool is to stand on its own: (1) minilesson, (2) writing/reading time, and (3) closure.

