

What To Do When You Think You Don't Have Time To Write



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

In a *Writing For Pleasure* framework, teacher writing—*your* writing—is essential to success. When we assume identities as writers, actually writing with and for our children, we generate powerful learning. Among the benefits are that we:

- model topic finding and idea generation practices (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)),
- model important craft moves of writers—strategies and processes (Young et al. [2021](#)),
- prove to students that we actually value the activities that we expect them to engage in,
- help students take risks and explore, as we do the same,
- develop a trusting culture in which students are more willing to engage with you because you've shown your respect to them by writing and sharing.

Yes, the benefits are tremendous. But at one time or another we have all also felt that it is hard to actually live that writer's life on a daily basis (Kaufman [2002](#), [2009](#)). Some of this may be because of our fear of feeling vulnerable—opening our writing up to others' gazes. But another excuse that I regularly hear—and have often given, myself—is, “I don't have *time* to write!” It's understandable in today's school culture, where we are regularly asked to add some new task to our already bloated day or concentrate on the micro-level knowledge that targets standardised test requirements.

I feel your pain deeply. But I have also learned through time that there are several ways to set up your classroom, your schedule, and your life habits that will ensure you can be the epitome of the writer teacher, crafting, sharing, and mentoring daily from the perspective of the practising author (The Writing For Pleasure Centre [2022](#)). Keep these in mind, and then go in to school tomorrow and start writing!

1. You Should Write Every Day, But There Is A “However...”

The great Don Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and writing teacher, taped to his typewriter (and later to his computer) the Latin phrase, *Nulla Die Sine Linea*: “Never a Day Without a Line.” This was his reminder to write every single day of his life. This is important for most writers because it establishes habits, teaches us how to think as writers think, and generates a lot of writing. *However*, what most people don't know

is that Murray set a goal for himself of generating only 500 original words a day. For a professional writer whose entire day was defined by writing, 500 words is *not* a lot. Now, we are practising teachers with tremendous multi-tasking responsibilities daily. For us, 500 words *is* a lot. So, the key is to find a comfortable number we can commit to daily and then stick to it. Not 500? Well, then, maybe 250. Still too much? How about 100? Pushing the boundaries? Then 50 or even 25 original words a day. What we will find is that, over the days, we will reach our limit and then continue on because we are inspired by what we have just written. Murray strove for 500 but actually averaged over 700 a day (yes, he counted). You'll often write more than 25, but you can always be satisfied once that 25 is accomplished. Here, daily, habitual activity is much more important than volume.

Write every day, committing to a word count that is manageable, even if it seems low

2. You Don't Have To Write For Long Stretches At A Time

When we think “writer,” we often envision a quiet room where a patient genius devotedly scratches out prose from a quill pen, enjoying the uninterrupted solitude of the “artist at work.”

This is an impossibility during frenetic classroom days filled with schedule items and constant surprises. However, we don't need long chunks of time to write, and we can easily carve out smaller chunks during which no one can interrupt us. One of my former students, Sabrina Dziubek, wanting to write during class writing time but frustrated that her second-year pupils interrupted her with their questions and requests, brought in an egg timer to class and announced, “For the first five minutes of writing time, I am going to write for myself. You are not allowed to interrupt me until the bell goes off.” For two days, the students stood and stared at her anxiously, waiting for the bell, but Sabrina refused to look up, and she kept pen to paper. As soon as the bell went off they rushed at her, their own writing in hand, pressing her to read and respond. However, by the third day they got bored waiting. They started conferring with one another, and the precedent was set. Sabrina wrote with easy regularity at the beginning of each session, then went on to confer for the rest of writing time (Whittick [2021](#)).

Another student, Devon Tiani, did something I found both simple and brilliant in her year-one class: when writing time began, she placed her opened writer's notebook on a table and then went to confer with her pupils. However, in between conferences she would wander over to her notebook, stare at it intently, add or revise a few lines, and then move on to the next child. By the end of each class time, she had done some significant work through several very short sessions.

These are a couple of successful strategies for writing in class with students. At the beginning of the year you might even write for longer stretches of time with the kids in order to model how it should be working for them (Walker [2021](#); Hayden [2022](#)). Once they have established clearer identities as writers and greater proficiency at sustaining writing through time, you can shorten your own writing times and spend more time conferring with them (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)).

And, of course, you also look through your entire daily agenda, formally scheduling a few minutes of writing into appropriate places. It does not have to be long. You just have to be consistent, sticking to the schedule no matter what other demands present themselves. You will address the demands in a shorter, more efficient amount of time afterward.

Break your daily writing in school into short chunks that can fit into any schedule

3. You Don't Have To Produce "Lesson" Writing

We lose time when we force our writing into a topic or a form exclusively to meet a curriculum agenda or scheduled teaching point. Ideas we don't care about are hard to become invested in (Langer [1984](#); McCutchen [1996](#); Ackerman [1991](#); Benton et al. [1995](#); Kellogg [2001](#); Olinghouse et al. [2015](#); Graham [2018](#); Young & Ferguson [2022](#)). Yes, we often use our writing to model both strategy and product, but forced writing never feels authentic and is always less effective. Instead, daily, we should be writing about the things that are striking us at the time—ideas with which we care to engage. Some days it will fit the current *Class Writing Project*, on other days it won't. On days that it doesn't, our mentor texts will come from other sources: professional authors' writing or pupils' writing. Also know that authentically felt writing will give rise to lessons that you hadn't dreamed about yet—lessons that are usually better than the ones we originally planned.

Write about things you enjoy and care about, knowing that ideas will come more quickly and smoothly

4. You Don't Have To Produce "Good" Writing Or Feel That You Are A Writing "Expert"

When we are first draft perfectionists, we can get very frustrated and waste time, futilely struggling to find just the right word before it escapes our pen or lands on our computer screen. We all sometimes have this tendency, worrying that we will never write anything good again. However, when we remind ourselves that early writing is *ugly* writing, rarely meeting our final intentions, our writing flows more quickly and more easily. We produce greater volume more quickly, knowing that we can revise over time the way professional authors do.

Of course, there are many teachers who struggle to begin because they think that their writing is *never* good enough to share—that no matter how much time they put into it, only the naturally gifted can make words come alive. I don't have an answer that may satisfy you if you currently feel this way except to say that you are wrong (sorry for being harsh). Children are extraordinarily receptive to any teacher writing. They are the kindest readers you'll ever meet. Further, even if you feel your writing is poor now, as you continue to try to improve it publicly—in front of your children—you are modelling the very processes that will help children who feel uncomfortable about their own writing to become better and more confident. You may even be a better *teacher* of writing than a confident "good" writer-teacher because your public

attempts to overcome big challenges will be the authentic activity that young writers need to see.

5. “Writing” Doesn’t Always Mean “Drafting”

Getting new, original words down on the page is often the most difficult and time-consuming part of our tasks. Further, we sometimes erroneously count only *drafting* as the measure of daily success. Yes, we want new words every day, but authors are always doing so much more during their working days: brainstorming and generating new ideas, making lists, reading over previously composed writing, conferring with friends and colleagues, and revising and editing. If you are engaged in any of these practices at home or publicly in the classroom, you are doing what writers do. You are modelling how to be a writer in more comprehensive ways.

Conduct and share all aspects of your writing processes during the school day, with the confidence that it all counts as “writing”

So, in conclusion, cut yourself a break from thinking that your writing day has to look like an eight-hour-a-day job (Billy Bean [2021a](#), [2021b](#)). You can write in organic, authentic ways that look different than your traditional notions of writing. The important thing is to get in there and do it—enjoying it as a writer, not as a teacher—in the midst of your young writers. The changes you see will be profound.

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