

**WRITERS ON WRITING INSTRUCTION:  
EXPERIENCES AND ADVICE  
FROM PROFESSIONAL WRITERS**

**A Thesis**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>What We Know about How Children Learn to Write .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>How We Should Teach Children to Write.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3 RESEARCH METHODS .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Procedures .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Participants.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Writers' Experiences in Developing as Writers.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Writers' Advice for Teachers of Writing.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Writers' Experiences in Developing as Writers.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Writers' Advice for Teachers of Writing.....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>APPENDIX: WRITERS' SURVEY .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>VITA.....</b>	<b>73</b>

## **ABSTRACT**

In examining the childhood experiences of professional authors, this qualitative research found some similarities: voracious reading, writing for pleasure, early awards and publishing, mentors, meaningful lessons from teachers, and journal writing. Common areas were found among the participants' advice for writing teachers as well, and the suggestions were organized into six general themes: teaching the fundamentals, getting ideas down before revising, focusing on creativity, teaching the reading-writing relationship, providing rewards like positive feedback, and being a writing role model. Suggestions were offered on how to bring this advice into the classroom.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An enthusiastic girl of 11, after voraciously reading mysteries, spends her summer vacation time writing plays that involve Nancy Drew solving neighborhood crimes. She convinces her friends and cousins to perform them for family and neighbors. An adolescent laments the passing of boyfriends by composing sappy love poems in her journals. An eager student, new to her college campus, becomes overjoyed when she wins a spot as a staff writer on her college newspaper. A teacher, who loves to travel, carefully attempts to record the cultural quirks and magnificent architecture, the exotic meals and the amusing anecdotes that make each of her vacations memorable in a travel log. This person receives a great deal of enjoyment and fulfillment from writing.

While enjoyment keeps her writing, she also finds it a necessary skill. The teacher corresponds with parents through narrative reports about her students, she writes grants to help get equipment for her classroom, and she writes articles and case studies for her classes in pursuit of a master's degree. I am this person, and these experiences solidify for me the importance of writing and lead me to explore new avenues in teaching writing.

I consider myself to be a lifelong writer just as many people describe themselves as lifelong readers. Writing has always been my chosen form of self-expression. As an undergraduate I studied journalism and English literature, and then earned a degree in communication. Eventually I began teaching. In my 17 years in this chosen field, I have taught writing to students in first through fifth grades, and my own writing has grown and evolved along with my teaching. I consider writing to be a craft that is cultivated by personal experience and creativity, and encouraged by fellow writers. I acknowledge that I come into this research from the viewpoint not only of a teacher seeking out information from professional writers, but also from that of a trained writer and educator who has developed ideas through her own experiences about how writing should be taught.

As I have considered the craft of writing, I have noticed marked differences in attitudes. Children I teach often say that they cannot write. I have found myself coercing them, cajoling them, compelling them. I am a believer in constructivist learning, which I define as learning through the process of doing with guidance from teachers, other adults, or capable peers. This kind of learning suggests that students have not only a level at which their actual development lies, but also a level for potential development with guidance – the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Another essential ingredient in this writing recipe is motivation. Just as children are born with the natural inclination to communicate verbally, they also have a natural inclination to communicate through writing. In the words of researcher and writer Donald Graves:

The child's marks say, "I am." "No you aren't," say most school approaches to the teaching of writing. We ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead we take the control away from the children and place unnecessary roadblocks in the way of their intentions. Then we say, "They don't want to write. How can we motivate them?" (Graves, 1983, p.3)

This inclination to communicate lasts. In an age of technology, everyone can be a playwright through U Tube, a news writer or editor through Wikipedia, or an author through web blogs. In his book *Writing without Teachers*, scholar Peter Elbow noted,

I was surprised that so many people told me.... 'I've always wanted to write a book,' or, 'Someday I'm going to write the story of my life,' or, 'find words for what it's like to be me and put those words on paper.' These were strangers I happened to meet who never did any writing. Till then I had thought writing was just something that we all had to do in school and a few special people loved doing. How amazing to learn that everyone seems to harbor the wish. (Elbow, 1998, p. xi)

Many people young and old, in all occupations including professional writing, recall painful and embarrassing experiences from school. According to Graves (1991), most people he asked couldn't cite a teacher who helped them to express themselves and offered them encouragement, and no one he asked cited more than two people. "Few of the people we interviewed currently wrote unless writing was required in their occupation. These people had personal histories that not only made them feel inadequate as writers but prevented them from choosing writing as an important medium of thought and expression," ( p.57) he wrote in his book *Build a Literate Classroom*.

This summer, as I anticipated beginning a thesis project, I decided to conduct my own informal research about the attitudes of teachers toward teaching writing. I asked seven of my colleagues how they felt about teaching writing, and I had them fill in a chart which asked them to recall books, writing assignments or projects, and impressions about their teachers at each grade level. Only one of these people had a positive attitude, which she attributes to the fact that she had parents who were teachers as well as elementary and secondary teachers who encouraged her. The other six people all recalled negative experiences with writing in school and said they felt uncomfortable teaching writing. This intrigued me.

As I began to look further, I found that this was a common experience. Chris Street studied the writing experiences of five pre-service teachers to see how this related to their classroom instruction. Four of the five participants had a negative outlook on writing based on school experiences. One participant stated, "I don't see myself as a writer." She felt some people have a natural talent for writing, and others do not. "Like me," she stated. "I can do grammar, but I'm not a good writer." (Street, 2003)

Other researchers have found that negative attitudes about writing are shifting. In a 1995 study to advance the findings from previous studies, Knudson found that students during an interview said more frequently than in previous studies that they enjoyed writing, and liked

writing stories and reports. Previous findings were much different. In addition, the author reported a high correlation between writing competency – as based on a writing sample scored with a rubric – and positive attitude about writing (Knudson, 1995). This led me to wonder what can contribute to writing competency and confidence among students and their teachers.

Some research shows that we repress students' ability to be successful in meeting national writing standards. An evaluation by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that only half of the students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in the United States are able to write adequate responses to informative, persuasive, or narrative writing tasks (Chambliss & Bass, 1995). The NAEP report also reveals that students generally receive little writing instruction.

The 2002 NAEP results in writing showed that the percentage of students achieving at the proficient level or better was only 28 percent in grade 4, 31 percent in grade 8, and 24 percent in grade 12 (Kozlow & Bellamy, 2004). The National Commission on Writing (2003) reported that writing is the most neglected of the three *R*'s in the American classroom. The commission also stated that writing needs to be placed "squarely in the center of the school agenda" (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 3) and indicated that many models for effectively teaching writing exist but are not being utilized in classrooms. Because writing is a critical life skill necessary to students' school success as well as their potential to be productive adults, the commission findings are of great concern.

I wondered what happens in school that separates students into categories – those who love to write and those who detest writing. Those who are proficient writers and those who are not. More important than what has happened is what can we do about it? How should we be teaching students to write so that they can be proficient, confident writers who will be able to use their knowledge in their future careers?

In beginning to study this topic, my motivating premise was that to teach children to become proficient writers, I should look to the experiences of those who are professional writers for guidance. Before considering how to improve the teaching of writing, I needed to explore the research on writing, from how children begin to understand the concepts of sound-meaning relationships, the written word, and the purpose of writing through adolescent writing development and attitudes. This will ensure that the writing pedagogy suggested by professional writers is appropriate for each stage of child development.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO WRITE

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, adults generally considered children to be miniature adults. They worked to help their families, and many were uneducated. Those who were educated were exposed to adult-style texts and teaching methodologies. What this meant for writing instruction was that handwriting and correct copying of previously written texts were the emphasis. Children were rarely if ever asked to compose writing (Schultz, 1999).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new ideas emerged. There was a realization that children are developmentally different from adults, and must be taught at their level of understanding, that learning is based on personal observation and experience, and occurs spontaneously when students have direct contact with the object being studied – object teaching. Johann Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator with new ideas who started several schools during the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said in a letter to a friend written in 1819 as noted in the book *The Young Composers*, “Let the child not only be acted upon but let him be an agent in intellectual education.” (Schultz, 1999, p. 58) Eventually his ideas caught on, and trickled into all areas of education including writing. Students began to experience events and explore objects around them, then create their own ideas about the world. This led naturally to writing about things that were relevant to them. All of this learning and writing was aimed mainly toward older children, as there was no formal early childhood education at this point in history (Schultz, 1999).

After working with Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel developed the concept of specialized instruction aimed at very young children in Germany. In 1840, he coined the term “kindergarten,” and developed the first kindergarten programs. These slowly spread through Europe and into America, but were not met with enthusiasm by everyone. Just as teaching had been modeled after the metacognition of adults in earlier education models, many still believed that teaching of young children should be book oriented. Froebel felt that children needed to be

exposed to spirituality, nature, and play to enhance their development. This learning through experience approach was part of what was known as the “progressive movement,” beginning as early as the 1850’s in some places, and spreading throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as different theories of education cycled from popularity to obscurity (Allen, 1988).

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, theorized that social interaction shapes intellectual development and stressed the importance of language in the development of thought. Sociocognitive theory suggests that social interaction is the primary means by which children arrive at new understanding. He also believed that children spontaneously acquire “everyday concepts,” those that are observed in the course of interactions. Vygotsky spoke of the “zone of proximal development,” the zone from a child’s independent problem-solving ability, including and beyond their capability to solve problems with the guidance of an adult (Vygotsky, 1978). His theories were retested and written about by scores of educators and researchers, leading to new ways of thinking about language and literacy acquisition.

In 1971, Charles Read made an important discovery about how children convey their ideas through “invented spelling.” During a study of preschool children, Read found many children had developed their own way of spelling English words. From the children’s writing he concluded that they had made an analysis of the sounds of English based on speech before encountering reading or starting their formal schooling. In the phrase HOO LICS HANE! – which Read interpreted as “Who likes honey?” based on the accompanying picture of a bear -- the child recognized that the words had segments that needed to be represented and that there were three separate words (Read, 1975). The child’s spelling is not standard English, but there is a definite recognizable pattern in the “invented spelling.”

Carol Chomsky would expand this research. She felt that invented spelling, being a constructivist process, leads children to take an active role in their literacy development as well

as engage in literacy behaviors for their own purposes. “In this the spelling appears to share some aspects of the activity of drawing a picture. The child who draws a person, for example, is not trying to match an arbitrary pattern, or to represent what someone else will deem correct or accurate. He works from his own perceptions and chooses to put down on paper those features which in some sense strike him as worthy of representation.” (Chomsky, 1975, p. 17)

Chomsky took these findings a step further by examining also the syntactic development of young writers. Chomsky’s research showed that children have innate abilities to learn the syntax of language and develop their own complex system of rules that govern writing through literacy experiences. As a child has developed the ability to speak according to the rules that govern language, that child will develop these skills in writing. She believed that based on their assumptions about language as well as their new experiences, children build upon and shift their language concepts to better match what is consistent with conventional syntax. They make a hypothesis about how language should be used and when this hypothesis proves incorrect, they develop a new hypothesis that is aligned to their new knowledge (Chomsky, 1971).

Other theories opposed these constructivist ideas. A Russian psychologist was researching how children recognize sound segments in words. Daniel Elkonin stated that no matter how the written word is perceived visually, whether as a whole, in syllables, or letter-by-letter, the understanding is based on the sound formation of the word. He recommended that students be introduced to letter-sound relationships before introducing them to words in print (Elkonin, 1973). Jeanne Chall, in her book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967), also claimed explicit instruction of sound-letter relationships, in other words phonics instruction, was a more effective method of literacy teaching than other methods emphasizing whole-to-part learning, in other words meaning-centered learning, of language.

These opposing theories are still being argued today. Don Richgels more recently expanded upon the ideas of Read, stating that “what Read is describing in inventive spellers is

conscious work with phonemes. Invented spelling involves phonemic awareness. Read writes about inventive spellers' making phonological judgments, categorizing, using principles and performing phonological analysis." (Richgels, 2001, p. 146) Richgels can see that in constructing meaningful writing the children in Read's study are actually exercising their tacit knowledge of phonological symbols without direct instruction.

Since this research about how children learn to write by learning the "rules" of spelling, whether they are taught by direct instruction or learned through child-centered activities, studies have been conducted to analyze the developmental process children go through as they become aware of printed symbols. According to Schickedanz and Casbergue (2009) young children, perhaps even as early as two years old, discover that the marks they make convey meaning to others. As children experiment with the shape, line and repetition of their "scribble," it occurs to them that these marks might be a name or a phone number. With continued attention and experimentation, they discover that drawing and writing look different, and their marks become more intentionally like writing. Their writing moves from scribble writing, to mock letter writing (where letter approximations are being made using lines, loops and zigzags.) Eventually children will begin making real letters.

An important discovery by young children is the fact that there are a limited number of real letters and these letters are representational of meaningful information. Preschool and kindergarten children must still realize the importance of letter order and orientation as well as the fact that there are both uppercase and lowercase forms for each letter. Once students have acquired this knowledge, they often string together letters into "mock words," which look like words but are not actual words. Children will both receive instruction and naturally acquire phonemic awareness, which will influence their writing. The next step toward conventional spelling of words is using single letters or perhaps a few letters to represent the sounds they hear in words, known as semi-phonemic spelling. Eventually children will begin to recognize spelling

patterns and recall the spelling of words they read, and become more conventional spellers of English words (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009).

Marie Clay classifies the nature of spelling development as the alphabetic principle. She also has several other principles that are fundamental to understanding children's writing development. About her flexibility principle:

Children experiment with a variety of letter forms creating a variety of new symbols by repositioning them. They explore the limits within which each letter form may be varied and yet still maintain its identity. When is a sign not a language sign? When is a sign a new sign? Can you turn a letter around? The answer is usually no. Can you change the letter order around? Again the answer is usually no. Can you begin at the right-hand side of the page or at the bottom? (Clay, 1977, p.337)

While children conduct these experiments, they sometimes forget to attend to the rules that have already been established. These established patterns again become flexible, which is critical to the establishment of the complexities involved in writing. Another of her assertions is the importance of the recurring principle, which states that the recurrence of patterns in our language is helpful in establishing language rules, and the generating principle, which is that children can use what they know as well as rules they have established to generate original ideas on print (Clay, 1977).

Also important in the development of writing is the concept of a written word, the distinction between words and the understanding that words represent meaningful events and ideas, even those ideas that cannot be seen. In a study on this topic, Beth Roberts (1992) explains that research has shown children become aware that their speech can be recorded into written words, and eventually that the space between the written words represents a break between spoken words. This awareness represents tacit learning, which means that the child knows the information without conscious thought on the subject. These same children may not use this

information to facilitate their own writing until later developmental stages. Once application of the knowledge of concept of word occurs in a child's own writing, they have developed an explicit knowledge. The explicit knowledge is characterized by a reflective understanding, or an ability to explain the subject. Roberts also relates Piaget's theory of development to understanding the concept of word. Preoperational subjects are characterized by having a functional use of language but not having the capability to analyze the language itself; transitional subjects are between the two stages and have some aspects of both; and concrete operational subjects are able to "decenter", which allows them to look beyond the communicative functions of language to consider it as separate pieces and to analyze its parts.

Roberts found that children generally develop an understanding of the relationship of written and spoken language that they see before they can produce their own written products that are representational of their spoken words. She found that this happened between transitional and concrete stages, and generally coincided with the stages of early reading.

An interesting finding in the children who were in the preoperational to transitional stages was their understanding of *wordness*. Roberts states:

Young children appear to consistently relate referential words to what they signify. The younger subjects in this study seldom admitted that *and* and *the* were words saying, 'It's not something.' (Amanda, transitional) This idea that *wordness* is related to the object signified persisted for most of the children well into the concrete operational stage.

Melanie is typical of such concrete operational children: *table* is a word because 'it's a thing'; *took* is a word because it's 'something you can do.' (Roberts, 1992, p.132)

She and other researchers have also examined how this concept of word is related to reading development, and how writing is related to reading development in general.

Marie Clay observed many children in New Zealand schools, and postulated that writing "provides a complementary and corrective experience for a reading program which focuses on

the messages of continuous text and depends less on learning words and letter-sound relationships.” (Clay, 1977, p.338) She states that a measure of writing vocabulary was equally as good an indicator of reading progress during a 6-month time span as letter identification in young children. Clay details how children build letters into words, words into sentences, and sentences into stories. Not only are children enhancing their concept of word, they are also practicing left-to-right orientation, and the connection between meaningful ideas and the printed word, important reading skills (Clay, 1977).

During the 1980’s and 1990’s, more data were gathered on the personal and social contexts involved in writing. Children first develop the notion that the marks they put on paper mean something, and that they can convey that meaning to someone else. Nearly every bit of research I read supports this idea, but I will cite only a few.

Marie Clay (1977) illustrates the meaning-print connection in an anecdote about Penny, who is 4 years old. Upon receiving an invitation to her friend’s party, she decided to respond with a note of affirmation. She wanted to write, “I will come to your party,” so she asked her mother how to write *come*. Her mother asked why she didn’t want to know how to write the other words, and Penny responded with irritation, “But I will have to write *come*.” With additional help and prompting from her mother, Penny wrote the message, put it in an envelope and had her mother address the envelope. Penny was a non-reader, yet she could read the message back to her mother with one-to-one correspondence. Penny did not express a feeling of achieving a milestone in literacy, but rather she felt that she had responded appropriately in a social situation.

Clay speaks of the many concepts of literacy that Penny clearly has: messages can be written; messages can be constructed with speech; she can copy the message; letters follow one another in a linear fashion with spacing; errors can be checked for and corrected (Clay, 1977).

Through play, young children of even 2 or 3 years old, exhibit the understanding that print holds meaning. Whether it is a phone message in a dramatic play center at their daycare facility or a message to tell mommy and daddy “I love you,” many children use context and model their play after adult activities, even those that include writing (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009).

Anne Dyson, whose research echoes that of Vygotsky’s early ideas about social construction of meaning, has extensively researched the role of social and cultural contexts in children’s writings. She asserts that children make meaning through social interactions and discourse with others. One of many examples in Dyson’s research (2002) is Jake, a first grade writer. He was a lively and adventurous child who drew detailed drawings, and discussed these with his peers. Through these discussions Jake developed a plot to his story that involved a robot with a bomb head that might explode soon and blow up the school. Jake wrote: “Once upon a time there were two men. One was flying up to the clouds. The other man was staying on the ground. The end.” Jake’s story through discourse was more rich and detailed, capturing a sequence of suspenseful events. Over time Jake’s writings grew to incorporate more of his orally presented social stories. The next year, after a discussion of his evolving ideas with a friend, he playfully wrote a lengthy story about himself and his friend surviving a jet attack. Dyson states:

Children began to attend to each others’ evolving texts, their playful and critical talk engulfed their writing and helped it become a legitimate object of attention separate from their pictures. They began to consider critically the relationship between their pictures and their texts. Gradually the children began to assume more deliberate control of the kind of information they would include in each medium. Further they began to use writing to engage their friends and to solidify or change their social identity. Thus their words became worlds, in part at least because they began to serve multiple functions within their social lives. (Dyson, 1990, p.9)

Glenda Bissex (1980) attempted to examine the growth in form of writing through a study of Paul. His writing growth over 5 years began with what is typically seen in young children – labels and signs. He soon wrote stories, books and even his own newspapers. Later he began to write not only stories and newspapers, but also organizers and planners, school oriented writing like quizzes, and informational writing about the world around him. Paul’s writings grew, demonstrating both differentiation of style and audience and decentration, being able to take on another’s point of view. Bissex states:

Decentration goes hand in hand with differentiation. Not only did Paul come to differentiate writer and audience, but various kinds of audiences: peers, teachers, parents, unknown clerks (in business letters) and self (in diaries). He was polite and business like in business letters, could sound quite bookish in school writings, and teasing and humorous with parents and friends. (Bissex, 1980, p.201)

Donald Graves, himself a writer, described writing as the process that occurs from the time the writer first contemplates a topic until the final moment the writer finishes the paper. For example, a three-year old writer has a writing process lasting around thirty seconds: grasping a pen, making lines and circular marks on a paper, and announcing, “This is a dog.” (Graves, 1983, p.250) In contrast, the process for a six-year old might take ten minutes: A drawing rehearsal, spelling and sounding, rereading for orientation in the sentence, erasing, changing the drawing, discussing with a neighbor, ready to publish. This child describes writing as “draw good and get the words down slowly.” (Graves, 1983, p.251) A nine-year old approaches writing from a different perspective, as they have new developmental understanding of time and space. Most writers have now mastered the motor and spelling issues, and can concentrate more on meaning. Rehearsal is done inwardly, and there is no need for drawing to clarify ideas. This writer rereads to confirm meaning, not to find their place. Blocks of information can be moved around, added to, and changed to improve communication. This writer might say, “It’s good if it’s long.”

(Graves, 1983, p. 254) Graves knew all of this about writers from many years of keen observation, and he believed this observation and discourse between writers and their teachers is what allows children to produce meaningful writing.

As students move into adolescence, social context continues to play a vital role in their learning and development. John Goodlad, in his book *A Place Called School*, examined the middle school student and typical middle school environments. He states that middle school students value friendships and peer relationships far more than school subjects and teachers. In a survey of students, he found that two-thirds appreciated school as a meeting place to socialize with friends. When asked the best thing about school, eight percent responded “nothing,” seven percent chose “the classes I am taking,” and only five percent answered “teachers.” (Goodlad, 1984)

This time of confusion and vulnerability transfers into the area of writing. Lucy Calkins, who worked among adolescents teaching writing for seventeen years as well as conducting research and writing about it, said that it is important at this age for students to build relationships with adults who love reading and writing and convey their interest to students. She states, “...[I]t is during adolescence that young people construct a sense of personal identity, deciding, ‘This is who I am,’ and ‘This is who I want to be.’ These decisions are based on a large degree, on relationships with people who act as role models.” Calkins also states that writing allows students to make meaning of their lives, “to find a plot line in the complexity of events, to see coordinates of continuity in the midst of all the discontinuity. Writing can play a crucial part in the task of identity formation.” (Calkins, 1986, p.105)

Calkins notes that students at this age are still developing many of the skills needed to become writers like attention to spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. This author emphasizes the importance of accepting their errors in conventions just as we would accept these errors in first grade students because of their developmental stage. Students must feel

comfortable with exploration and discovery in their writing rather than “envisioning red marks taunting them from the margin sidelines.” (Calkins, 1986, p. 106)

Nancie Atwell, in her book *In the Middle: Writing, Reading and Learning with Adolescents*, says that adolescents want to learn, but they long for input and cooperation with their teachers. Atwell says that students want teachers who are involved and excited about writing so that they can feel involved and excited (Atwell, 1987). Unfortunately, Goodlad’s survey of student interest in learning ranked English as students’ least favorite subject (Goodlad, 1984). In short, students in their adolescent years need to feel safe to explore new ideas in writing, to have a social aspect to their writing, and to have mentors who encourage them to read and write.

## **HOW WE SHOULD TEACH CHILDREN TO WRITE**

Not only has there been a wide body of research about how children’s writing develops, but there have also been many studies that show what kinds of educational environments support children’s writing.

Susan Neuman and Kathy Roskos have studied how literacy rich play encourages children to engage in and develop literacy. In one of many studies (1992), these researchers conducted an experiment in two daycare centers, considering the amount of literacy behaviors in which children engaged. At one center, the environment was specifically designed to enhance literacy, while the other remained the same. Some of the changes included defining the play areas to highlight literacy, designing familiar play spaces so that children were comfortable in their play, and providing literacy props in the play spaces. The findings were remarkable – there were 10 times more literacy demonstrations in the enriched environment. Teachers must provide a context, materials and extended time for children to engage in literacy related activities. Some examples are: set up a library in the classroom that includes check-out slips, bookmarks, signs, magazines and stamps; turn a dramatic play area into an office including notebooks, pens and

pencils, appointment books, telephone directories, calendars and other writing materials; and include literacy materials in the manipulative center like maps, labels, magazines, paper and pencils (Neuman & Roskos, 1992).

Evidence shows that reading and writing are closely related processes that develop as a result of one another. “Through the regular process of encoding and decoding, students recognize the organic connection between speaking and listening, and writing and reading,” stated researcher Timothy Rasinski in his book *The Fluent Reader* (2003). Because there is such a strong connection between reading and writing, teachers must provide a literature rich environment that fosters a love for books if they want children to develop a love for and a skill at writing. Tierney and his associates (1988) gave several examples of how children tie together meaningful literature and their own expression of ideas, including an episode where a young girl heard a story about a dog that ran away to join the theatre, which sparked her to write about how her cat ran away. (Tierney, Kaplan, Ehri, Heany, & Hurdalov, 1998) Lesley Morrow (1992) conducted a study where minority students were placed in either a literature-based reading-writing program or a basal-driven program. Her findings were that the students in the literature-based program scored higher than those in the basal-only program in writing original stories. Research suggests that genuine quality literature sparks the interest of children and leads to their understanding and application of writing (Morrow, 1992).

Teacher dictations of children's ideas help develop word awareness, spelling, and the conventions of written language. Dorothy Strickland and Lesley Morrow (1990) detail the use of language experience approach techniques to take dictation from children, an adult putting the children's words onto paper. The researchers suggest taking this a step further, including independent journal writing as a component. The steps they suggest are: experiencing, group writing, independent writing and sharing. Children dictate to the adult during the group sharing time, and then are encouraged to focus on specific skills on writing like high frequency words,

beginning sounds, and punctuation marks. Children are then asked to continue writing independently, and then given the opportunity to share their work with one another.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, a shift began in the pedagogy of teaching composition. Ideas about teaching students to write by having them write, which had been developed much earlier but fallen out of fashion, began to cycle around again. Donald Murray was one author, with the help of many teachers, who was behind pushing this shift. He wrote a pivotal book in 1968 that attempted to integrate the real-life experiences of authors and the teaching of composition in secondary classrooms. But the ideas he had were universal – “we must observe the act of writing itself to expose to our students the process of writing as it is performed by the successful writer.” (Murray, 1968, p.1) He suggested seven skills essential to successful writers: discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design, writing, developing a critical eye, and rewriting.

Donald Graves (1983) refined the idea of process writing in teaching elementary age children. Graves, a groundbreaker in the teaching of writing to young children, looked at writing as a craft. He believed that the craft of writing is developed in children by the craft of teaching. He says of these two crafts:

We don't find many teachers of oil painting, piano, ceramics or drama who are not experts in their fields. Their students see them in action in the studio. They can't teach without showing what they mean. There is a process to follow. There is a process to learn. That's the way it is with a craft, whether it be teaching or writing. There is a road, a journey to travel, and there is someone to travel with us, someone who has already made the trip. (Graves, 1983, p.6)

Graves was one of the first to write about giving control of writing to children themselves, and allowing them to construct their own meaning through teacher guidance.

He structured the teaching of writing into five categories: brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Graves also defined key areas for teachers to help children hone their skills: conduct group meetings where children learn and share their writing; immerse children in quality literature; show the children that the teacher is also a writer, conference with children at various stages of the writing process; keep discussions of the mechanics of writing, like usage, punctuation, and handwriting, separate from discussions of the content of writing; and keep records of the children's growth through teacher journaling and portfolios (Graves, 1994).

Graves acted as mentor to many other researchers in the area of writing, among them Lucy Calkins. Calkins (1986) agrees with Graves that writing is a process through which writers share ideas with an audience, and that teacher observation and building upon what they already know are key features in a good writing program. She speaks of the historical foundations of the teaching of writing and debunks these antiquated ideas. She states:

We now realize it was misleading to have elevated form over content. Writers do not begin a piece, as many curricula suggest, saying, "I want to write a three-paragraph persuasive essay." They begin, instead, with something to say: "I need to convince people to take care of the salt marshes," or, "I want to explore the relationship between critical reading skills and revision." Then, too, in real life there are no clear distinctions between modes. The writer may begin with the idea of reading a descriptive journal entry and end up writing a poem, an essay, or a newspaper article. Descriptive writing is often woven into a narrative; persuasive writing is often built out of stories; and so on. (Calkins, 1986, p.14)

Two main points were emphasized by Calkins within her curriculum: after a period of time in a writing workshop environment, the student internalizes methods facilitated by the teacher, such as revision, as well as processes in the other writing stages; and conferencing, or the method of communication between teacher and child during writing workshop, can be

effectively accomplished through peer conferencing, communication between children (Calkins, 1986).

James Britton, who was affiliated with the same university as the previously discussed group, states:

It is in the course of conversational exchanges that young children learn, little by little, both to listen and to interpret what people say to them and, at the same time, to put into words their own messages. It would be a perverse regime that attempted to prevail on them to separate those two achievements – focusing on listening in one context and on speaking in another. Yet precisely that disassociation marks the prevailing methods by which schoolchildren today are taught to write and read. (Britton, 1987, p.2)

He is a proponent of collaborative teaching, a method that integrates the teaching of speaking, reading and writing simultaneously with other subject material. He suggests that this be done through literacy-focused projects like the publishing of books on scientific or socially related materials, the use of learning logs in multiple subjects, and other “real-world” reading-writing experiences.

Another successful system of writing instruction came from the dire need to assess students’ work in a valid and constructive manner. Researchers have determined that this method has been effective in raising the scores of students in several states on standardized writing tests (Kozlow & Bellamy, 2004; Dappen, Isernhagen & Anderson, 2008). In the early 1980's, teachers in school districts across the country decided there must be a better way to gather useful information about student writing performance than with single scores or standardized tests. After an exhaustive search that produced no such tool, researchers at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory began creating an analytic scoring system that would be valid, honest, and practical.

After evaluating thousands of papers at all grade levels, the teachers working with them identified common characteristics of good writing. These qualities became the framework for the six-trait analytical model. The model uses common language to identify the traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The extra trait is presentation. Each of these traits is assessed on a 5-point rubric with specific characteristics given for improvement. The model suggests that students practice scoring the work of others, then use the rubrics to improve their writing by one point using the desired trait (Culham, 2003).

George Hillocks conducted a meta analysis of major writing research results for students at all levels, and found that the teaching of writing fell into six major categories: grammar, models, sentence combining, scales, inquiry and free writing (Hillocks, 1987). He then examined the effectiveness of each teaching method according to the data collected across studies pertaining to the teaching method. Hillocks found that the teaching of grammar, which is a widely used and accepted method of approaching writing, is the least effective of all other methods. He stated that, "...no researchers reported that writers make use of even a peremptory grammatical analysis of what they are doing." Models of writing presented to students as examples and free writing were more useful than grammar, but fell short of the other teaching methods. Hillocks stated that "the process of building complex sentences from simpler ones has been shown to be effective in a large number of experimental studies" and that "scales, criteria and specific questions that students apply to their own or others' writing have a powerful effect on enhancing quality." This seems to support the six-trait analytical model of writing. By far the most effective category, according to the studies in Hillocks' analysis, was inquiry, a method that presents students with data and a task related to the data as well as teacher guidance to complete the task. He ranked the teaching methods in his study as follows for effectiveness: inquiry, scales, sentence combining, models, free writing and grammar (Hillocks, 1987).

Steven Graham and Delores Perin reexamined and updated the meta-analysis with a focus on teaching adolescents. These researchers added many more methods for teaching writing into their meta-analysis, including process writing, summarization, explicit strategy instruction, pre-writing activities, collaboration, and product goals (Graham & Perin, 2007). Again they found that grammar was not effective in any of the research studies, although they noted that the grammar focus was in the control group in all of the studies examined. Graham and Perin stated that methods having a “strong impact on writing quality” were explicit instruction, summarization, collaboration and product goals. They define explicit instruction as “explicitly and systematically teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and/or editing text. Instruction designed to teach students to use these strategies independently falls into this category. Writing strategies range from processes, such as brainstorming, to strategies designed for specific types of writing, such as stories or persuasive essays.” (Graham & Perin, 2007) Product goals “involve assigning students specific goals for the written product they are to complete.” (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Both research and common sense tell us that there are many effective ways to teach writing to children at all developmental levels. I now plan to examine published literature about professional writers to learn what they have to say about their school experiences and advice for writing teachers, and I will also conduct research myself on the experiences and advice of professional writers.

### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

After an extensive look at writing from both a developmental standpoint and an educational standpoint, I was anxious to find some common ground where the predictive behaviors and the advice from professionals could be used to better prepare teachers as well as influence the writing curriculum.

Guiding my investigation were several questions:

1. What common factors are there in the childhood experiences of writers that led them to be successful writers? Can we influence these factors in a school setting to better prepare students as writers?
2. What advice and guidance can professional writers provide to teachers so that they are more prepared to teach their students?

I have learned about the childhood experiences, meaning their experiences related to reading and writing development in primary and secondary school, of people who have careers in writing. By successful writers and professional writers, I mean adults who now or in the past have earned their living through writing. There are many writing-driven careers including but not limited to authors, poets, journalists, technical writers, advertising professionals, public relations professionals, publicists, historians and professors of creative writing. The teachers I refer to are those who work with students at all grade levels and are responsible for developing writing skills and a love for writing.

In considering the opinions and experiences of professional writers, I have made an important assumption, that writers are qualified to offer advice to teachers of writing about what can help prepare students to become writers. As practitioners of the art of writing, they may be a good source of valuable information about what aspects of teaching are both motivating to students to interest them in writing as well as which are important for students for a future as competent writers.

Some of the limitations in my research are related to my quest to find participants in my survey, as many of the 50 people that I solicited did not respond. While I had originally set as a goal a sampling of 30 professional writers, the depth of information that I received from the 15 people I surveyed led to data saturation. That is, I was able to see patterns in their responses with repetition of ideas across participants. These 15 participants provided enough information for me to draw conclusions about the similarities among their experiences and their advice. As a writer, I am also limited by my own preconceptions and experiences, often referred to as “investigator bias.” I have developed ideas from teaching as well as from research about how writing should be taught and what kind of experiences lead to confident, competent writers. In this research pursuit, I have strived to limit my input to those topics that are directly related to the research I have conducted. Another limitation was related to the finite process of research. As I delved further into my research and found more answers to my questions, I was led to ask more questions. Because at some point the research must stop and the conclusions must be drawn, I will have to leave some questions to be answered in other research studies.

My self-imposed delimitations include the narrow scope of people who could participate in my research: only those who now write, or have engaged in writing as a career. I was also interested only in the experiences these people had related to their elementary and secondary educations. Responses that spoke of college professors, professional mentors and adult experiences were disregarded.

## **PROCEDURES**

Guided by my research questions, I designed a survey to distribute to professional writers. Questions on this instrument are of a qualitative nature. I chose qualitative research for this project because its characteristics most closely match those of the subject itself – writing. According to Mertler and Charles (2008), qualitative research meets several criteria. The research is naturalistic in nature, with data and results taking the form of words and pictures

rather than numbers. In this mode of research the process is just as important of a concern as the product. In qualitative research, the data collection and analysis are not fashioned in a linear process but rather in a more roundabout method that requires the researcher to consider what has been established, develop new possibilities and then collect and analyze more data. This is an inductive rather than a deductive process. And finally qualitative research is about people's perspectives on events and on their own lives (Mertler & Charles, 2008).

I believe that writing correlates closely to this research process. Writing is a naturalistic, word-oriented process that certainly happens in a non-linear fashion. Writers – and this researcher – are concerned with the process of writing as well as the product. And most importantly writing is a means of making sense of life and the sometimes senseless world.

The purpose of my research is to establish or reinforce theories for effective practices in teaching writing to students based on the experiences and observations of writers. The principles of grounded-theory research guided my research. Mertler and Charles said, "...the goal of grounded theory research is not to begin with a theory and then set out to collect data to prove it. In contrast, the goal is to begin with a particular educational phenomenon in mind, and those aspects that are relevant to the phenomenon are permitted to emerge during the study." (Mertler & Charles, 2008, p. 196) While my research does not meet all of the criteria for this type of research – I have only two data sources – there are also many similarities. I began with the idea that writers can be an important source of information to teachers of writing, and explored the aspects of this idea in my research.

On my survey, I asked open-ended questions about writing experiences, both negative and positive, as well as soliciting advice from the participants about how teachers could better prepare students as writers. I also asked participants to fill out a grid that detailed specific information related to their school experiences. This survey was piloted with three professional writers as well as one non-professional writer, and then with feedback, some modifications were

made. I amended the grid to group grades together, left preschool out, and reworded several questions for clarity. (Appendix)

## **PARTICIPANTS**

As part of this organic process, which occurred naturally without being contrived, I changed my participant list several times. As I started, I meant to strictly focus on published authors, but upon further consideration I decided that including other types of writers would add more depth to my conclusions. I once again distributed the survey to people in a wider range of writing professions, including journalists, public relations people, and those who were just beginning to pursue their writing careers. After I received some of the surveys and began to review them, I wondered if the information I received would vary greatly for those people who did not write. Once again I distributed surveys to a small group of people who do not write as part of their profession so that I would have a comparison group. For these people, I considered only their educational experiences. The questions related to advice for teachers of writing were omitted from the version of the survey distributed to this group of people.

I selected the subjects using a snowball, or network sampling, where the initial participants suggested others who would also be willing and qualified to participate in this research. The surveys were distributed and completed over a period of three months. As shown in the table, there were 15 professional writer participants, each with a pseudonym assigned to him or her. There was an additional distribution to five non-writer participants. Among the professional writers were four people who write in the business world, two children's authors, two poets, a graduate student and aspiring fiction writer, three writing instructors, and three journalists. While these descriptions give an idea about the genre of writing professions, the experiences and responsibilities of each of these people vary greatly.

Table 1

## Writer Participants

Area of writing	Job Titles	Names
Business/Public Relations	Technical writer	Whitney
	Media representative	Alison
	Public relations director	Robin
	Technical writer	Charlie
Creative Writing	Poet	Missy
	Poet	Cora
	Children's author	Alene
	Children's author	Madge
	Fiction/screenplay writer	Andy
Writing Instructor	Community college instructor	Carol
	University instructor/author	Dan
	High school instructor/graphic novelist	Mike
Journalism	Business writer	Eric
	Entertainment writer/editor	Ann
	News writer/editor	Trish

Because there are many avenues for writing in the business world, those of my participants who work in this area have different backgrounds and different careers. Whitney is a young woman who has been working as a technical writer for a pharmaceutical company for three years. Alison is another research participant from the business world who has worked as a media representative for a large chemical producer for more than 10 years, and Robin is a public relations official for a nationally known healthcare provider. Charlie is a 25-year veteran technical writer with a major oil and chemical company who now does freelance work writing brochures and newsletters for several hotels and resorts.

Several of the writer participants were from the world of creative writing. Missy, who recently returned from a fellowship grant at an Italian university, is a poet with her master's degree in creative writing. Cora is also a poet whose target audience is children. Alene now writes children's literature, but she was formerly a marketing manager for a Fortune 500 company and a writing instructor. Two aspiring writers, Madge and Andy, who are creative

writing graduate students at a Louisiana university hoping to have work published soon, also participated in my research.

Three of the participants are currently writing instructors. Carol teaches writing courses at a local community college, and she writes press releases for several businesses and organizations in her city. Dan is a writing instructor at a small Illinois university. He has also published two works of fiction and several writing texts. Mike is a high school writing instructor who also writes graphic novels.

The final three writer participants come from a journalistic writing background. Eric is a writer for a business newspaper in North Carolina as well as freelancing for a nationally published magazine and writing book reviews for several publications. Ann is a former magazine editor and newspaper features writer. Former newspaper writer and editor Trish now works as the assistant director of student media at a major university.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The procedure used in my analysis of the collected data was based upon the constant comparative method of qualitative research. Categorizing is used in this method to group data that are related to the same content. It is then important to "devise rules that describe category properties and that can, ultimately, be used to justify the inclusion of each data bit that remains assigned to the category as well as to provide a basis for later tests of replicability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 347). The researcher must also examine the data within each category for consistency once firm categories have been set.

As I began my research, I examined published work about authors, critics, news writers and others who have pursued writing careers. Just as my participants were selected using a snowball sampling, my review of published literature about writers followed much the same procedure. Beginning with a book called *My Teeming Brain: Understanding Creative Writers* (Piiro, 1998) I began to learn about the childhood experiences of writers. Once I realized that

this information was available, I searched for more about childhood experiences that led professional writers toward their careers. Writers often mentioned the works of others in the work, which led me down further research paths. Both at the library and on the internet I found many interviews, articles, biographies and autobiographies that told about the childhoods of people in writing professions, particularly authors. Other types of writers featured in the literature I read included poets, journalists and writers of non-fiction works. While most of the information I gathered from published material pertained to the childhood experiences of writers, there was also some advice given by these professionals about how writing should be taught. Of particular help to me were the websites for The Academy of Achievement, TED.com, and Gale group's Biography Resource Center. After collecting this information, themes were noted about their experiences.

This interim analysis provided me with a starting point for analyzing my own survey data. As I analyzed the data collected on my surveys, I looked for themes among the participants' responses and correlated these themes with the information previously collected during readings concerning what writers have said about their experiences. Beginning with these aspects, I added to them other themes that emerged among the participants in my research. I compared these themes to the information I gathered from the non-writer participants looking for experiences that were either more common for or unique to professional writers.

I also correlated information that was similar in the advice from professionals. Beginning with suggestions related to teaching methods that are standard practice and proved helpful to professional writers, I then moved toward new and innovative suggestions that may not yet be accepted practices in the classroom.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### WRITERS' EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPING AS WRITERS

The very nature of writers is to communicate their feelings and ideas to others. Many enjoy sharing details of their early writing lives.

In her study of creative people, Jane Piiro interviewed many writers about early influences. Interestingly, very few spoke of school experiences, and those who did mainly had negative experiences. Jane Smiley, in answer to a questionnaire sent to women writers by Piiro, said that “No teachers. None” helped her (Piiro, 2004). Some in Piiro’s research spoke of mentors who guided them, but not at the elementary or high school level. Some other writers in my additional readings – Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates and David Halberstam – also claimed that they could not recall any special teachers who had an impact on their decision to become writers. In contrast, among the participants in my research survey, all 15 of the writers recalled teachers or experiences they had in school that influenced them to become writers. Some common themes were evident in the statements of authors in both the research literature and my survey. Those themes include the influence of mentor teachers, particular lessons or teaching methods, reading which led to writing, writing for pleasure outside of school, writing in personal journals, and early publication or awards for writing. The following table summarizes these themes.

#### **Mentor Teachers**

Among those writers quoted in the research literature who spoke about their teachers, there was evidence of both positive and negative influences. Joseph Bruchac, a burly native American man who was a talented athlete in childhood, was told by his creative writing instructor based on his persona, “Give it up. You’ll never be a poet.” (Bruchac, 2002) At times, writers’ positive experiences were more consequential than other experiences, and they became writers in spite of discouragement. Frank McCourt, noted author and Pulitzer Prize

Table 2

## Themes in the Experiences of Writers

	Mentor teachers in school	Particular school lessons or methods	Reading which led to writing	Writing for pleasure outside of school	Writing in personal journals	Early publication or awards for writing
From research literature:	Ushida Cather Alan Shapiro Hosseini McCourt	Ushida: story writing from pictures Bernays: isolating elements of the craft, prompt writing Dove: poetry analysis Wolfe: parsing sentences Updike: parsing sentences	Eliot Greene Cole Ushida George Cather Paolini Morrison Wharton Walker Peck Christie Hinton Sontag Tan Halberstam Michener Hosseini Albee Wolfe Ephron Irving Merwin Dove Wiesel	Ushida George Lowry White Cather Shannon Wharton Walker King Bruchac Hoberman Singer Hinton Mailer, Halberstam McCourt Rowling Albee Shields Merwin Dove Wiesel	Godwin Ushida Lowry White Kingsolver Irving	King Russ White Hinton Paolini Farley Tan Updike
From research surveys:	Robin Carol Mike Madge Cora Alene Trish Missy	Alison: relating classical and pop music Carol: made poetry book Dan: organizing and completing an assignment in one class period Madge: letter to President about stopping Gulf War Alene: class newspaper Trish: class newspaper Missy: creative writing based on reading Charlie: class newspaper	Alison Robin Ann Andy Dan Whitney Cora Alene Trish Missy Charlie Eric	Robin Ann Carol Andy Whitney Cora Alene Trish Missy Charlie Eric	Ann Carol Andy Cora	Robin Ann Carol Andy Alene Trish

winner, had many negative experiences with teachers, but one teacher did make an impact on him. His final teacher in primary school told him he was “a literary genius,” and while this encouragement brought him grief on the playground, the attitude of this teacher brought to him and his peers a sense that they were “unique, distinct individuals who had a right to think for ourselves.” (Academy of Achievement & McCourt, 1999)

Khaled Hosseini, author of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, spoke of a teacher with whom he had “a strong connection.” (Academy of Achievement & Hosseini, 2008) Other authors shared this connection. Some authors spoke of teachers whose enthusiasm and praise introduced them to the pleasures of writing. Tom Wolfe experienced this in his kindergarten class, where his teacher “took a special interest in me very early, which made me feel very special. Maybe I can really do things with these words, and so on,” he thought (Academy of Achievement & Wolfe, 2005). Edward Albee, Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright, said his teachers “sensed that maybe I had a mind worth cultivating, and pointed me in the right direction to a lot of things.” (Academy of Achievement & Albee, 2005) James Michener, an author who grew up in poverty, was asked what helped him rise above his situation, and he responded, “I had very good teachers -- teachers who wanted to make kids learn. Wanted to help them learn.” (Academy of Achievement & Michener, 1991) Willa Cather, who wrote many books about life on the prairie, developed strong relationships with three of her teachers. In Cather’s biography, Beverly Bonham stated that Cather “felt that she owed to them the early ideals of scholarship and art that gave direction to her own life and work.” (Bonham, 1970, p. 15)

Two of the survey participants had negative experiences. Technical writer Whitney was forced to share writing aloud, and writing instructor Mike was discouraged from writing because he was considered to be a poor reader. “I got a ‘D’ in English due to my poor reading skills. I was discouraged because I was told, in order to write well, I needed to read well,” he remembered.

Among the other writers who participated in my research survey, there were several whose teachers gave them the notion that writing was a special talent they should cultivate. Many of the participants' memories of school experiences were positive. Eight of the 15 writer participants recalled specific teachers whose attitudes and actions were inspiring. Sometimes it is convincing the child that he or she is a writer that makes the difference. Whether the message was clearly spoken or inferred, these experiences influenced them to pursue writing. Four participants had teachers enter their writing in contests, which led them to believe that they were gifted writers. Others received less direct accolades from teachers. One of the survey participants, former newspaper writer and editor Trish, wrote, "In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I wrote a little play and the teacher suggested the class produce it. What a rush!" Another participant, graphic novelist and instructor Mike, had his story read aloud to the class in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and then the teacher told his parents he should be a writer. Public relations person Robin, who also contributed in my research, recalled, "My 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing teacher and her husband both encouraged me to publish my writing. I had always loved to write, but they made me realize that I could actually do it for a living."

### **Particular School Lessons or Methods**

Some authors learned specific aspects of writing from their teachers that have served them in their careers as well as sparking their interest in a writing career. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove learned about the essence of poetry from a high school teacher. She said, "She just opened up to me, how language – how the written word – can also sing." (Academy of Achievement & Dove, 1994) Pulitzer-Prize winning author John Updike spoke of valuable writing lessons learned from an English teacher: "I remember one English teacher in the eighth grade, Florence Schrack, whose husband also taught at the high school. I thought what she said made sense." This teacher taught him about "parsing" sentences, also referred to as diagramming sentences, which taught Updike to "treat the English language with respect as a kind of intricate

tool.” (Academy of Achievement & Updike, 2004) Children’s author Yoshiko Uchida wrote stories for pleasure after a teacher helped her discover this idea in sixth grade. Uchida’s teacher showed the class pictures cut from magazines, asking them to imagine what was happening and write stories. “That might well have been the day I discovered how much fun it was to write stories of my own,” she recalled (Uchida, 1991, p. 31).

Screenwriter and author Nora Ephron learned the point of writing from a high school journalism teacher. When told to write a lead for a story including the six elements of journalism, she and her classmates dutifully regurgitated the main facts from the details that he had given them: Teachers will be attending a discussion group in the coming week. The teacher responded with irritation that they had missed the story: There will be no school next Thursday! This was to Ephron a “great epiphany moment for me. It was this, ‘Oh my God, it is about the point! It is about figuring out what the point is.’” (Academy of Achievement & Ephron, 1994)

Of the eight participants previously discussed whose experiences with their teachers were positive, seven could remember specific lessons that were formative in their enthusiasm for writing. Children’s author and research participant Alene said of her fourth grade creative writing assignments, “this is when I found such joy in creative writing. I remember the stories about being an object... in one, I chose to be a thermometer (I broke at the end) and in one, I was a pencil. It was exhilarating to write these stories.” Madge, another research contributor and an aspiring writer, recalled during middle school writing a letter to the President about how to stop the Gulf War. This assignment that connected writing to real life made an impact on her. Dan, one of the participants who has written several books and is currently a writing instructor, said that his 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher had each student publish an original poetry book, which introduced him to a love for language. Three contributors spoke of writing for school newspapers. A children’s author, Alene, wrote, “I loved being a reporter and interviewing the crossing guard (named Mr. Cross) and uncovering the fact that he’d had polio.”

## **Reading Which Led to Writing**

In her research on creative writers, Piirto states that the most common predictive behavior for writers is their constant reading. Many other studies, articles, interviews, and biographies about writers also point this out. “The childhood reading was often indiscriminate and compulsive, and reading was used both to escape and to learn about the world,” she stated (Piirto 2004, p.225).

In her research, she found many examples of voracious reading among young writers. There was C.S. Lewis spending his time in the family library where “books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents’ interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not” were available to him (Piirto 2004, p.244). There was Mary Ann Evans (known as George Eliot) who “read everything she could lay hands on.” (Piirto, 2004, p.240) There was Graham Greene who recalled “the missed heartbeat, the appalled glee he experienced when he first read Dracula: ‘the memory is salt with the taste of blood, for I had picked my lip while reading and it wouldn’t stop bleeding.’”(Piirto, 2004, p. 245) Other writers cited by Piirto for their love of reading at an early age include Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Tennessee Williams, and Dylan Thomas.

Beyond Piirto’s research, the statement that constant reading is a predictive behavior for future writing is evident in many other published works. Author Richard Peck said of the relationship between reading and writers: “This isn’t to say that people can’t be taught to write better. But nobody but a reader ever became a writer.”(Peck, 2002, p. 9)

There was Ben Franklin, who said, “I cannot remember when I could not read.” Gordon Wood, a Franklin biographer wrote, “He even befriended the apprentices of booksellers in order to gain access to more books.” (Wood, 2005, p. 3) There was Frank McCourt who “wanted to be Tom Sawyer. I wanted to go down to the river Shannon and stand at the banks of the river, and did, and dreamed it might be the Mississippi, and I’d get a raft and off I’d go 60 miles out to sea.”

(Academy of Achievement & McCourt, 1999) There was young author Christopher Paolini, still with the perspective of a teenager, who wrote, “Instead of toys, my room is filled with books. They’re piled under my bed, on the floor, by my pillow, and overflow into the rest of the house. When we go into town, the only places I want to visit are the libraries, bookstores, and occasionally an art museum.” (Paolini, 2003) Nearly every author I read during this research has a worthy quotation that reiterates this point. Susan Sontag stated:

Reading usually precedes writing. And the impulse to write is nearly always fired by reading. Reading, the love of reading, is what makes you dream of becoming a writer. And long after you’ve become a writer, reading books others write – and rereading the beloved books of the past – constitutes an irresistible distraction from writing.

Distraction. Consolation. Torment. And, yes, inspiration. (Sontag 2001, p. 265)

Amy Tan found reading to be a refuge. She said, “I could escape from everything that was miserable in my life and I could be anyone I wanted to be in a story, through a character. It was almost sinful how much I liked it.” (Academy of Achievement & Tan, 1996) David Halberstam said of the importance of books in his childhood, “Books are the first vehicle -- particularly in an age like the one I grew up in which we had no television -- which can transport you and take you from where you are and give you a sense that there is something more out there.” (Academy of Achievement & Halberstam, 1994)

Many authors and journalists in my review of published works also recalled that the library played an important role in their love for books. Joan Didion’s mother signed an agreement that her daughter could check out books from the adult section after she had read all of the children’s books (Academy of Achievement & Didion, 2006). Joyce Carol Oates discovered her love for Faulkner at 14 when she was on one of many library visits (Academy of Achievement & Oates, 1997). John Grisham also fondly recalled library visits and said that this helped shape him into a lover of reading, although he never considered writing as a career

(Academy of Achievement & Grisham, 1995). Amy Tan won an essay contest whose theme was about the importance of the library. She recalled:

I tried to be very sincere, sort of go for the emotion, you know, about how the library is a friend. And this really all was very sincere, but at the end (this is why I think I won this essay contest), I made a pitch for money, which, of course, is what ministers do at the end of their talks. And I said how I had given (I think it was) 17 cents, which was my entire life savings at age eight, to the Citizens for Santa Rosa Library, and that I hoped that others would do the same. And so they decided to give me the award. They published my little essay and they gave me a transistor radio and, at that moment, there was a little gleam in my mind that maybe writing could be lucrative. (Academy of Achievement & Tan, 1996)

Only one of the writer participants from my survey recalled the library as important in her childhood. However, 12 of the 15 writers who filled out my survey could recall books they read as children, and most of them stressed the importance of reading to young children. Many of the writers named books that made an impression on them – Trish loved Nancy Drew books, *The Pearl* was a favorite of Eric, Ann remembered reading *A Bear Called Paddington*, *Catcher in the Rye* was mentioned as an inspiration to Charlie. A few of the participants felt that reading was more than just a pleasure; it was a formative experience that led them to writing. Recalled aspiring writer Madge, who contributed in my research, “My 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Becky Sotile, read Shel Silverstein’s poetry to us. I remember her expressions, her enthusiasm and how enthralled we were! This experience played an important role in my love for literacy.” Another author and survey contributor, Alene, recalled a similar pleasure when her teacher read to the class, “The teacher would read us a chapter a day from *Charlotte’s Web* or another story...it was simply delicious...nothing was required, there was no comprehension tests or anything...just delicious, relaxed listening after lunch or recess. Ah!”

Two of the survey contributors spoke of their love for biographies, which was also a common experience with several of the published authors. Business reporter Eric said, “I vividly remember reading a series of biographies aimed at young students. They were on Abe Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and others.” He said that the most valuable lesson he learned about writing in school was “the relationship between reading and writing – and how one feeds off the other.” A public relations officer, Robin, enthusiastically recalled, “I read 132 books in kindergarten! I won the ribbon!”

### **Writing for Pleasure Outside of School**

Another common factor among professional writers’ childhoods is the pleasure from and desire to write outside of school settings. David Halberstam started his own family newspaper when he was eight years old, using a mimeograph machine, reporting about the productivity of fishing trips to the local pond with his brother (Academy of Achievement & Halberstam, 1994). Stephen King, in his book *On Writing* (2000), told of his desire to make money from writing by publishing his own school newspaper called the Village Vomit as well as his original fiction, beginning with *The Invasion of the Star Creatures*. Interestingly his teachers, rather than offering praise and encouragement, offered criticism. He was punished for derogatory comments in his newspaper, and King said of his attempt at science fiction: “I kept hearing Miss Hisler ask why I wanted to waste my talent, why I wanted to waste my time, why I wanted to write junk.” (King, 2000, p. 50)

Children’s author Yoshiko Uchida wrote a story for comfort after the death of her beloved dog as a child. Of this experience she wrote: “I had found a way to give Brownie a proper ending to his brief life. I had also discovered that writing in the booklet was a means, not only of holding on to the special magic of joyous moments, but of finding comfort and solace from pain as well.” (Uchida 1991, p. 30) Jean Craighead George had a similar experience following the loss of Nod, a pet turkey vulture. She found solace in remembering how at times

he was awkward and at times majestic; soon she was writing about Nod. She was in sixth grade then and would go on to write many books about nature for adolescents (Cary, 1996).

Elie Wiesel, who wrote the book *Night*, said he began writing commentaries about the Bible at the age of ten. Children's author Lois Lowry began writing down stories she had enjoyed recounting aloud when she was in fourth grade (Markham, 1995). Both Joyce Carol Oates and J.K. Rowling began writing fiction at an early age. Oates expressed her love for animals by writing stories about cats and horses (Academy of Achievement & Oates, 1997), and Rowling began writing about her townspeople at the age of six (Fraser, 2001).

Frank McCourt wrote both fiction and plays during childhood. Beginning at age nine, he wrote English detective novels that took place in London, although he states that he had never visited London so this was difficult for him. He also wrote a play about his brother. Of this event, he states: "Alfie was lost. He was only one, and there was a nail on the wall, and we hung him on that nail by the back of his shirt, and then we forgot about him. My mother came home and she says, "Where's the child?" And we couldn't remember. "Where did you put him?" We couldn't remember and we found him hanging on the wall. I think he's been damaged by that ever since."(Academy of Achievement & McCourt, 1999)

From the age of 10 or 11 years old, James Michener liked to bring a sense of justice to the stories he read, changing the ending to better suit himself. He stated:

I would suppose I learned how to write when I was very young indeed. When I read a child's book about the Trojan War and decided that the Greeks were really a bunch of frauds with their tricky horses and the terrible things they did, stealing one another's wives, and so on, so at that very early age, I rewrote the ending of the Iliad so that the Trojans won. And boy, Achilles and Ajax got what they wanted, believe me. And thereafter, at frequent intervals, I would write something. It was really quite

extraordinary. Never of very high merit, but the daringness of it was. (Academy of Achievement & Michener, 1991)

Almost an equal number of the professional writers who filled out my research survey claimed to read voraciously and claimed to write for pleasure. Just like the published authors in my review of literature, the writing was prolific and diverse. Several survey participants enjoyed writing stories. Trish, one of the contributors who is a former magazine editor, said, “I loved to read a story and then use the characters to make up my own story. It was like the characters had become my friends, so I wrote them into my world.” Another survey participant and writer, Eric, recalled incorporating a love for football into his stories, writing newspaper style reports about his favorite teams playing one another. Four of the survey participants enjoyed writing plays. Whether the inspiration was interpreting stories they had read (Robin), an experience I also had, skits for talent shows (Charlie), or a production for her class (Trish), the pleasure of seeing their words brought to life sparked an interest in writing.

### **Writing in Personal Journals**

Among the writers whom I read about in my review of literature several spoke of keeping a journal, including Barbara Kingsolver and John Le Carre. E.B. White started his journal when he was eight, recording thoughts that he was afraid to speak aloud. He wrote about his fears of the dark cellar under his house, the damp bathroom in his school basement, and the unknown thoughts of girls he knew (Gherman, 1992). Four of the writers who participated in my research survey also kept journals – Ann, Carol, Andy and Cora.

### **Awards for Early Writing**

Piirto also listed as a common thread among talented writers that many of them had their work published or received awards at an early age (Piirto, 2004). Some well-known children’s authors actually had their full-length novels published by major publishing companies during their teen years. S.E. Hinton wrote *The Outsiders* at the age of 15 while she was a high school

student. She admitted that while writing the book she received a D in creative writing class (Wilson, 2003). Christopher Paolini, author of *Eragon*, was 15 when he wrote the book after graduating from high school and needing a challenge to occupy himself (Paolini, 2003).

Others received accolades and awards for their writing while still in childhood. E.B. White, who won a silver medal in a *St. Nicholas* children's magazine contest at the age of 11, again submitted a story three years later and this time won gold (Gherman, 1992). John Updike stated, "I actually sold a few poems in my teens to marginal magazines. I remember one poem, "The Boy Who Makes the Blackboard Squeak," meaning the sort of naughty boy who makes the chalk squeak deliberately. I was paid maybe \$5 or \$10 for it, but my hope was to get into *The New Yorker* magazine, which began to come into the house when I was about 11 or 12." (Academy of Achievement & Updike, 2004)

My research survey confirmed that this was also a predictive element for many of the writers who participated. Six of the 15 writer participants received some sort of formal award or prize for their writing during school, whether it was from a local or school contest or a published school assignment in a magazine or newspaper. Many of the writers who participated in my survey said this was a proud moment and an influencing factor for them. Children's author and survey contributor Alene recalled, "I also loved our elementary school writing contests. I loved the acclaim and the encouragement..." Ann, a former magazine editor who provided data for my research, noted, "The hug I received after winning a second place award at the state high school writing competition for writing a poetry criticism made me feel like I had made my teacher proud."

## **WRITERS' ADVICE FOR TEACHERS OF WRITING**

Scores of books have been written to help people break into writing, hone their craft, and refine skills in specific genres of writing. In addition, much information is available from authors for children about how they can become better writers. Not many authors or other types of

writers have addressed how the teaching of writing should be approached. While several writers mentioned specific techniques and methodologies that were helpful to them as writers, most of the comments made were about the attitudes and characteristics of the teachers. Many made reference to personality traits that they found helpful and inspiring rather than to the specific lessons that were taught. Among the biographies, interviews, and articles previously published, however, there were a few bits of advice to writing teachers.

### **Teach the Rules**

Several authors refer to the need for teachers to cover the “rules” for writing, which they refer to as grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. This is a traditional teaching method found in many classrooms today. Christopher Paolini said: “Doing is the best way to learn, but it helps to read the rules first. In my case, I wish I had learned more about grammar before writing *Eragon*—it would have saved me an enormous amount of time spent fixing easily avoidable mistakes throughout a gigantic manuscript!” (Paolini, 2003) John Updike and Tom Wolfe also recalled lessons on grammar, punctuation rules, and sentence structure as helpful. Updike recalled that the lessons “gave me, I’d like to think, some sense of English grammar and that there is a grammar, that those commas serve a purpose and that a sentence has a logic, that you can break it down.” (Academy of Achievement & Updike, 2004) Wolfe stated, “I don’t think any of this happens any longer. Parsing sentences, which is a fading art. These diagrams of sentences, so you find out how all the different parts fit together. This was amazingly good training.” (Academy of Achievement & Wolfe, 2005) Stephen King also speaks about the importance of “mastering the fundamentals” which he says are vocabulary, grammar and the elements of style (King, 2000).

Perhaps parsing sentences is a lost art, but there is still a focus in many classrooms on the fundamentals of grammar and the conventions of writing – punctuation, capitalization, agreement and sentence structure. Several of the writers who participated in my research found

this helpful and recommended it for older students. One contributor, Robin, recommended teachers “refresh their grounding in the basic grammar and punctuation rules” and another writer, Whitney, suggested focusing on vocabulary development by having students “use a certain number of vocabulary words in each work of writing. This will help them to remember the words since they are putting them to use.”

### **Focus on Ideas**

Other authors disagree. John Dufresne, in his book *The Lie that Tells a Truth: A Guide to Writing Fiction*, said that to write well one must first unlearn what has been ingrained about writing since elementary school. He feels that rather than beginning with the rules for marks and labels for words, a writer must begin with an idea. “Sometimes you need to unlearn what you know because what you know is keeping you from discovery and creativity. I was taught that first you thought and then you wrote. If you were smart and deliberate and organized, you’d only have to write the thing the one time. Revision was punishment for sloppy thinking.”(Dufresne, 2003, p.31)

Many of my survey participants concur with Dufresne. While not directly stated by all of the participants, their main emphasis was not on the fundamentals but rather on the style and the substance of the writing. Four participants spoke directly against an emphasis on the “rules” of writing. Poet and research participant Missy said that lessons involving grammar and “proper English” must be balanced with more fun activities that don’t require “perfect spelling, etc.” Too much focus on these rules results in “many children learn(ing) early that they aren’t ‘good’ at writing and are averse to it ever after.” Another contributor to my research, former journalist Ann stated, “Don’t sweat the small stuff – split infinitives, dangling modifiers – concentrate on creative use of language and clarity.” Another comment made by writing instructor and participant Carol was, “NO RED INK!” She stated that a teacher must give three positive comments for each negative comment about a student’s paper, even if it concerns grammatical

errors. Advice recorded in the survey from poet Cora, included, “Allow them to run with their thoughts and don’t let the rules of grammar be their measuring stick. They are important, yes, but not nearly as important as what they have to SAY – the words, the thoughts, are everything.”

### **Encourage Revision**

Among the writer participants in my survey, there was also a large focus on the importance of revision in writing. Like Dufresne, many feel that we do not teach students that writers often make several drafts with many changes before arriving at a final product. Participant Madge said, “The best advice that writing teachers can give is to ‘write your worst first!’ If we allow ourselves to just get our thoughts down, we can edit and improve our writing afterwards. We can edit, and edit, and edit to make it better!” Former news reporter and student advisor Trish said, “Have them rewrite! This is a crucial skill, to learn how to improve their writing.” Four other survey participants used either “revise” or “revision” among their suggestions to help older students become proficient writers.

### **Foster Creativity**

One of the most common themes among the survey participants, which has already been touched upon previously, concerned encouraging students to be creative and innovative. Some of the language used by the writers in their advice was “break from conformity” (Eric), “think of writing as an imaginative exercise” (Missy), “think outside the box” (Robin), and “do fun things with words.” (Trish) The words “creative” or “creativity” were used in the advice of 11 out of the 15 writers surveyed. While many of the suggestions related to the freedom children need from constraints, one writer, Cora, summed it up, “Let there be an environment where they can dream on paper. They can fly. Tell them to write and write and write.”

### **Cultivate a Relationship between Reading and Writing**

Not only did authors read about in the review of published literature discuss the benefits they received from reading early and reading often, but they also made suggestions about the

importance of reading to children today. Elie Wiesel, who is both an author and a teacher, believed that creative writing stems from reading. He said:

I teach my students, not creative writing, but creative reading and it is still from my childhood. You take a text, you explore it, you enter it with all your heart and all your mind. And then you find clues that were left for you, really fore destined to be received by you from centuries ago. Generation after generation there were people who left clues, and you are there to collect them and, at one point, you understand something that you hadn't understood before. That is a reward, and as a teacher I do the same thing.

(Academy of Achievement & Wiesel, 1996)

Cultivating the relationship between reading and writing was a major theme in the advice given by writer participants in my research survey. Of the 15 people surveyed, 11 advised teachers to encourage reading. Some common language used in many of the surveys was “encourage them to read,” which was included in four surveys, and “reading and writing go hand in hand,” which was written in three surveys. “Read, read, read!” was written in two of the surveys, and four of the surveys referred to the use of “literature” in teaching writing. Several of the survey participants suggested that students model their writing after authors they admire. Poet Cora suggested, “Have them identify a book that they love. Either for the story or the language. Then, on a piece of paper, have them recreate this type of story or language but in their own way – with changes galore, but sticking to the type of story or the type of language.” Business news writer Eric suggested that students be exposed to as many styles of writing as possible so “that students can see there are many ways to write and write well.” A former technical writer, Charlie, recalled, “Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Mark Twain, reading all of these helped me understand how to write.”

Three of the research participants also suggested the importance for teachers to read. A business news writer said, “Read everything you can get your hands on. If you do that, you can

steer students to works you're familiar with and have enough variety to intrigue all types of students." Another participant (Missy) offered to teachers, "Read widely and read deeply. Find ways to excite yourself about what you teach and how you teach."

Poet Merwin stressed that not only should children be exposed to prose, but also poetry. He suggested that an appreciation for poetry should begin early while children are developing their language skills. "... the language of poetry is different from the language of prose, and children pick up that language. And if they can pick it up very early, it's really very, very important. They are likely to always love it if they do. I suspect that they really naturally do," he said (Merwin, 2008). This was also mentioned by two of the participants in my research survey – one about reading poetry and one about writing poetry – as I previously discussed.

### **Foster Apprenticeships in Small Classes**

Edward Albee felt that class size was a contributing factor to his teachers' ability to effectively reach students. He said, "They had small classes – seven or eight kids in a class – and they could spend time finding out who the kids were." (Academy of Achievement & Albee, 2005) This concept seems straightforward – smaller classes would lead to more effective teaching. While this issue is contentious, with many varying sets of data and results, there are studies that show Albee's assertion is true. In a Tennessee study, there were systematic findings of improvement in performance of pupils in small classes over those in regular-sized classes in grades kindergarten through third (Mosteller, 1995). In another study, Akerhielm (1995) also reexamined previous data using different statistical analyses and found that there are benefits to many students in reduced size classes. This suggestion was not included by any of the participants in my research survey.

## **Introduce Children to Writers**

Poet Rita Dove remembered a pivotal moment when she began to think that she could perhaps be a writer. This came to her when she met an author and she finally understood that regular people become authors.

Here was a living, breathing, walking, joking person, who wrote books. And for me, it was that I loved to read but I always thought that the dream was too far away. The person who had written the book was a god, it wasn't a person. To have someone actually in the same room with me, talking, and you realize he gets up and walks his dog the same as everybody else, was a way of saying, "It is possible. You can really walk through that door too." (Academy of Achievement & Dove, 1994)

For this reason, Dove stated that it is very important to introduce children to writers. This statement is an echo of what Donald Graves said about the craft of writing being developed in children from observation of practitioners just as painters and pianists learn in the studio. One of the survey participants who is an author, Alene, again echoed this sentiment, "Bring authors in to teach workshops!"

## **Be a Writing Role Model**

Exposing students to authors is a form of providing them with role models for writing, which was another theme talked about by writers and by survey contributors. Several people suggested that teachers should be writing role models for their students. Poet Cora said to teachers:

Write in front of, and with, the students. They won't be as self-conscious if you're doing it with them. Tell them the truth that sometimes a blank piece of paper frightens or threatens you, too. Get in there with them, dive in and experience and be joyful and creative with them.

Participant Ann said that writing for the students shows them the importance and relevance of writing. She stated, “Practice writing yourself. Being a role model will encourage children to write and show them that writing is meaningful.” The phrase “role model” was used in four of the surveys referring to how teachers can be more effective in teaching students to write.

Writers obviously have many ideas to share that may be helpful to teachers of writing. Those authors who have spoken about their early experiences and their recommendations as well as those writers who have participated in my research have the experience and knowledge to make suggestions to educators. There are some ideas that are current classroom practices while some of the ideas may be innovations. Many of the early influences that writers spoke about came from their environment, rather than directly from their schooling. All of these factors, however, can be part of a language arts curriculum, and can be infused into classrooms in many different ways.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In looking at the themes among the early experiences of writers as well as their advice, some of the predictive behaviors and the advice are already common knowledge and common practice. For me, this research reaffirms the use of some of my teaching practices but also brings to light some ideas that may be less common or perhaps controversial practice.

### **WRITERS' EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPING AS WRITERS**

The major themes among the experiences of children who become writers include:

1. Inspiration from mentor teachers.
2. Particular lessons or methods that sparked inspiration.
3. A voracious appetite for reading which led them to write.
4. Writing for pleasure – both inside of and outside of school.
5. Writing in personal journals.
6. Early awards or acclaim for writing.

### **Mentor Teachers and Inspiring Lessons**

Two of the themes dealt with teacher and lesson inspiration. While these were two separate categories, in examining the responses from my survey participants I believe that these are closely related.

Mentor teachers offer both guidance and affirmation to their student protégés. A teacher's affirmation is a valuable learning tool to students, and can sometimes provide great influence over the attitude and motivation of a student. I have received this powerful type of affirmation twice in my career. Several years after working with a mildly autistic, yet incredibly brilliant young man, I received an e-mail from his mother with an attached report he had written. The report was about a teacher who had made a difference for him, and that teacher was me. He gave several reasons that he thought I was a good teacher, but most meaningful was the statement that I had made him believe that he could do or be anything. A few years later, I received a five-page

letter from a parent the summer after her child had left my class. In the letter, she detailed the activities I had done with the children throughout the year, and the comments her child had made about each of these activities, ending with the statement that I had taught her son to love school and to love reading. The reason that I share these experiences is to illustrate the powerful impact that positive feedback provides. If I was moved greatly by the words and actions from these students and parents imagine how powerful the words and actions of teachers are to their students.

Teacher motivation and attitude is crucial, since the best lesson offered by an indifferent teacher will fall flat. On the other hand, the most enthusiastic teacher who has not prepared a lesson that is valid and appropriate will not successfully reach students. The two themes are dependent on one another, working together to excite and motivate students.

It is critical that teachers are both motivated and competent writers. Research shows that in many cases they are neither. As stated previously, Street (1990) studied the attitudes of pre-service teachers about writing and discovered that they are not confident in their abilities. This is an important issue since the feelings of inadequacy from a teacher could lead to similar feelings among students, as well as keep that teacher from providing adequate writing instruction. In addition, Ball and McDirmiad (1990) found teachers are themselves products of schools in which students rarely develop deep understanding of the subject matter they encounter, so the teachers are often inadequately prepared to teach subject matter. The aforementioned researchers suggest that new ideas must be developed to address this issue.

### **Reading Leads to Writing**

As I began the research process, I had only my own experiences as a writer to use in hypothesizing what themes would be influencing factors that led to careers in writing. This theme is the one area that I felt would be evident in the writer responses to my survey. There is much research devoted to the connection between reading and writing (Clay, 1977; Roberts,

1992; Morrow, 1992; Tierney, Kaplan, Ehri, Heany, & Hurdalow, 1998; Rasinski, 2003).

Success in one area can predict success in the other; it also seems from the research on writers' experiences that love for one can spark a love for the other. Many of the people who participated in this research, as well as authors researched in previously published materials, attributed their love for reading to factors outside of school. While there will certainly be influences beyond the classroom, it is a teacher's responsibility to garner a love for reading among students. This can have a profound impact on students' success in many areas, particularly in writing. How can this happen? There are several aspects of reading explored in this research that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms.

Since many childhood experiences of writers centered on the library, this should become a prime gathering place for classes. Several references were made about the freedom of choice at libraries. Often school library experiences are related only to gathering research for papers or to library instruction. Perhaps in addition to scheduled library time for teacher purposes, time should be scheduled for student exploration in libraries. In addition, all local libraries have special programs for children, and often librarians from these programs are willing to come to classrooms.

Almost all research participants recalled specific books that made an impression on them as children. As several of the writers noted, varied and diverse reading materials are important to reach many children. Students come in at many ability levels, with many interests and diverse previous experiences. Only in taking into account these differences and providing reading materials that touch the level and interest of each child can we attempt to make them passionate readers and writers.

### **Writing for Pleasure**

While the theme of this category originally referred to writing done outside of the regular classroom, I discovered through my research that many participants recalled writing for pleasure

both in and out of school. Some examples are plays written and performed in class as well as at home, which was an experience I shared with several of the participants. Other examples of writing for amusement include writing newspapers for the neighborhood as well as writing newspapers at school, writing stories about pets and family as well as writing stories prompted by teachers. Some children are just born with an inclination to write, but the motivation to write certainly can be ascertained inside a classroom too.

Just as it is a teacher's responsibility to instill a love of reading in students, this duty also applies to other areas of literacy like writing. Researchers have noted that there is a correlation between literacy learning and attitude toward reading and writing. When we have a positive attitude toward something, we are apt to derive pleasure from participating in the activity.

Students often become less motivated as they progress through school. Kear, Coffman, McKenna and Ambrosio (2000) attribute this phenomenon to several factors including tedium, lack of choice and negative feedback. They stated: "For these reasons, teachers face an uphill battle as they attempt to foster positive writing attitudes in their students. We believe that this battle can be won. Effective teaching strategies and engaging writing opportunities to write successfully can make real inroads in student perspectives." (Kear, Coffman, McKenna & Ambrosio, 2000)

Teachers must seek out appropriate teaching strategies to meet the specific needs of the students with whom they work rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all curriculum. All students are different, and the individual needs of writers must be addressed. Also important is engaging the students in learning, as Madge was excited about the power of writing a letter to the President, and Alene was thrilled by her story of becoming a thermometer. To engage, students must feel connected to the activity, find purpose and meaning in the assignment and want to do it well. Finally, the researchers spoke of "opportunities to write successfully." Students need not only to write, but they must be taught how to write through example. Writing is everywhere, so

finding examples of good writing is at the fingertips of all teachers – books, magazines, newspapers, successful students, and even their own personal compositions.

### **Writing in Journals**

Another of the themes among writers' early experiences was the likelihood that they kept journals. Journaling is not a new and innovative idea. This is a practice in many disciplines: psychologists suggest to patients they journal about their feelings and motivations to understand behavior, nutritionists suggest to clients that they keep a daily food journal when they are having difficulties with allergies or cravings, scientists log ideas and observations from their field studies. The kind of journal referred to in this research is the personal journal, which was defined by Maryann Manning as “similar to a personal diary in which students write daily happenings, reactions to situations, and any other content the writer deems appropriate.” (Manning, 1999)

I believe there are several valuable aspects to journal writing. First, journals are a safe place to record thoughts, work through ideas, and examine feelings and problems. Writing instructor Carol stated “writing is an effective and safe release of emotion.” This is exactly what personal journaling can do for students. Interestingly, upon further questioning, I discovered that this writer did, and still does, keep a personal journal.

Another important aspect of journaling is that ideas can be recorded without worry of having to share them in an open forum. Manning spoke of another kind of journal, which she called a “writer’s notebook...a holding tank for ideas and observations that a writer wants to remember for future use.” (Manning, 1999) This idea was an important part of the previously discussed writer’s workshop method used by Lucy Calkins (Calkins, 1986). Former writer participant Carol also said, “A non-threatening environment allowed me to write freely and without confines that might have been stifling.” Another participant, Alene, noted that all of the assignments done in high school were “timed writing and writing involving analyzing books.” She stated that “it would have been nice to have some creative writing assignments and some of

the writing not be graded.” The kind of writing described by the first writer and desired by the second writer could be discovered in classrooms using a writer’s notebook.

### **Early Awards and Acclaim for Writing**

The last theme is early acclaim or awards for writing. I was surprised by this theme. In considering the classroom applications, teacher must remember that students have a desire for praise and positive feedback about their writing. Many of the writer participants in my survey emphasized the importance of giving positive feedback, with examples that illustrate this does not always have to be something like a large trophy or medal. One aspiring writer, Andy, stated, “The worst feeling to a writer, no matter the age, is for someone to criticize their ideas.” Writer Alene recalled, “I loved smiley faces and cartoon stickers on my papers that indicated they liked my writing.” Participant Carol, who is a writing instructor, noted that she always gives three positive comments for each criticism in her students’ work.

Of course, specific feedback is imperative. According to Culham (2003), teachers must provide focused, detailed feedback and instruction. Often both teachers and students can recognize good writing, but cannot identify what about the writing makes it good. The key to helping students improve their writing and feel confident when they are successful is providing meaningful positive feedback by specifically identifying traits that are well done and those that need improvement. When teachers have identified problems, instruction must be provided so that students know how to improve.

At times the negative comments on student papers are related not to the content of their writing – which should always be the main focus – but rather to the conventions of their writing. It is imperative that teachers remain focused on the appropriate traits at each stage. The goal of the beginning stage of writing is to get down ideas and provide details. As writing progresses, organization and elaboration become the goals. And in the final stages of writing, focus on

conventions like spelling, grammar and punctuation is the goal. Donald Graves explained what teachers should look for as they assess student writing:

Teachers who use the process-conference approach do not see a composition as something that can be wrong. It can only be unfinished. The teacher leads the writer to discover new combinations of personal thought, to develop the sense of knowing and authority so valuable to any learner. Indeed, the main task of the teacher is to help students know what they know. (Graves, 1978, p. 24)

### **WRITERS' ADVICE FOR TEACHERS OF WRITING**

Themes also emerged from an analysis of the advice and suggestions given by the authors and other writers during this research. Many of the ideas that were given stem from the memories of writers' school experiences, what worked for them. Some of the ideas, though, are related to knowing what writing is about now, and offering ideas about how to bring that message to students. The themes among writers' advice were:

1. The writing fundamentals – grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary – have a place for older students, but should not be the focus for younger students.
2. Students must learn to get down ideas, and then revise.
3. Creativity and imagination must be encouraged and rewarded.
4. Students must understand the connection between reading and writing, and use the written word – in many genres – to improve their own writing.
5. Teachers must read to prepare themselves to help students read and write.
6. Teachers must expose students to writers and be competent writing role models for students.

Just as I have made the case that neither writing nor this qualitative research study I have undertaken are completed according to a linear process, the discussion of these themes also cannot take place in a linear fashion. The suggestions made by professional writers about how to

teach writing are interwoven throughout my discussion, but I have attempted to categorize the themes.

### **Fundamentals, Ideas, and Revision**

I feel that the first several themes tie together. The purpose of learning all of the fundamental skills is to facilitate writing, so it is logical that these fundamentals should be taught within the context of writing. Writing down ideas is many times an act of creativity and imagination, while the process of revision requires more focus on the fundamentals – grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary. Editing for correct capitalization, punctuation, spelling and acceptable handwriting are the last steps in writing before the final product. Richard Gentry, a well-known researcher on teaching spelling, said:

Spelling is a tool for writing. The purpose of learning to spell is so that writing may become easier, more fluent, more expressive, and more easily read and understood by others. Without writing, there would be little purpose in learning to spell. Thus, the proper place for spelling instruction is within the writing program. Active daily writing, for real purposes and real audiences, is necessary for spelling development in all grades. (Gentry & Gillet, 1992, p. 57)

I believe that not only is a writing program the proper place for spelling instruction, but also for grammar and other conventions like agreement, capitalization and punctuation. Many researchers and participants in my survey confirmed this belief. Donald Murray said of the “rules” of writing, “The writer should not follow rules, but follow language toward meaning, always seeking to understand what is appearing on the page, to see it clearly, to evaluate it clearly, for clear thinking will produce clear writing.”(Murray, 1968, p.78)

The process writing model is widely accepted among researchers as effective. Donald Graves described it as “a workable way to reverse the decline of writing in our schools.” (Graves, 1978) Graves laid out the method for using process writing:

Teachers using this method help students by initiating brief individual conferences during the process of writing rather than by assigning topics in advance of writing and making extensive corrections after the writing is finished. Emphasis is given to the student's reasons for writing a particular composition. The teacher works with the student through a series of drafts, giving guidance that is appropriate to the stage through which the writer is passing. By putting ideas on paper the student first discovers what he or she knows and then is guided through repeated drafts that amplify or clarify until the topic is fully expressed. (Graves, 1978, p.19)

### **Encourage Creativity and Imagination**

Allowing students to have the freedom and creativity to choose topics that are important to them, to explore different genres of writing, to work on writing in stages, and to focus on meaning and clarity before mechanics and conventions will improve the quality of their work.

Amabile (1992) conducted a study on creativity and motivation. She asked creative writers to fill out surveys that were either loaded with reflections on intrinsic motivations for writing or extrinsic motivations for writing. After completing one of these surveys, the participants were asked to write a Haiku style poem about laughter. Those who were focused on extrinsic motivations – rewards, pleasing others, making good grades – were found to be much less creative than those who were focused on intrinsic motivations – reflecting, self expression, a sense of joy about writing. Amabile stated:

A person's creativity can be killed in an atmosphere fraught with evaluation pressures, reward systems, competition, restriction of choice, and anything else that takes the focus off of the intrinsic motivation of the task itself. But a person's creativity may be kept alive in an atmosphere with minimal extrinsic constraint and maximal support of skill training, talent development, and intrinsic enjoyment of the work. (Amabile, 1992, p.16)

Creativity plays an important part in writing development, as the writers in my research made abundantly clear. This study is further evidence of the importance of choice and guidance in encouraging creative writing rather than restriction and assessment.

### **Read to Write, For Students and Teachers**

Not only was reading the most prevalent predictive behavior for writers (National Institute for Literacy, 2008), but the connection between reading and writing was one of the main offerings of advice among the research participants. This was the piece of advice that I would have emphasized had I been a research participant. Much research has been reviewed about early reading and writing behaviors, their interconnectedness, and the developmentally appropriate way to encourage literacy; however, there are still many more ways to accomplish this task.

Donald Graves said of the relationship between these two disciplines:

One of the most common complaints of reading teachers is that children fail in the higher forms of comprehension: inferential and critical questions. It is difficult for many readers to separate their own thinking from that of the author, to stand far enough back from the material to see the author's point of view as distinct from their own. On the other hand, children who are used to writing for others achieve more easily the necessary objectivity for reading the work of others. (Graves, 1978, p. 30)

To integrate reading and writing in the classroom, teachers must view the two activities as extensions of one another. Reading is an attempt to understand the writing of another person. Writing is an attempt to have others understand your message when they read it. There are many ways to accomplish this. For young children, as early as preschool, teacher writing modeled and shared aloud with the class is a powerful tool (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009). This comes in many forms such as a morning message, interactive journaling – where teachers correspond with students in their journals, composing stories and poems together, and language experiences – where teachers write down students words, phrases and sentences just as they are said. This

connection is an important milestone of development for young children and must be encouraged often.

As students mature and become more confident with reading and writing, the connection between the two disciplines can help them use one to improve the other. As stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children in their position statement on developmentally appropriate practices in literacy, “As children’s capabilities develop and become more fluent, instruction will turn from a central focus on helping children learn to read and write to helping them read and write to learn.” (NAEYC, 1998, p.8) Teachers can foster this connection between reading and writing through literature and integration of these subjects with the other disciplines. Some ways to do this are:

1. Responding to books in journals. Writing about the character’s changes as the story progresses, the surprises, the connections between the reader and the characters, the feelings the story evokes, or any other aspect of the story that the reader deems noteworthy.
2. Using stories, articles, and poems as a springboard to teach writing skills. The descriptive language about summertime at the beginning of *Charlotte’s Web* might lead to a lesson on using description. A story about the Obama children in the *Weekly Reader* might lead to imagining what it would be like to live at the White House, and a lesson on comparing and contrasting.
3. Appreciating good writing. As a teacher reads aloud to the class, simply stating “I love the way this author...” Will encourage students to reflect on the craft of writing as they enjoy a story.
4. Making writing a part of math, science, social studies, art, etc. Consciously integrate writing assignments into other subjects for the increased practice, the introduction to different genres, and the focus on writing for many purposes. Write story problems

about the class in math, write steps to conduct an experiment in science, write a narrative or script about an historical event in social studies, or write a description of your favorite painting in art. Just as reading becomes an important part of all subjects writing can be in all subjects, too.

As students become more critical readers and move toward adulthood, they must see that not only are reading and writing connected, but reading is an essential tool for becoming a proficient writer. Whether they are reading research for a paper, or participating in an author or genre study to better understand literature, these experiences can be used to improve writing. Studying the writing craft by reading and emulating the work of others can enhance writing skills. This can be done by recreating news stories after studying the style of news writing, providing new endings to classic stories after studying the writing styles of masterwork authors, or analyzing poetry forms then practicing the writing of these forms.

As with younger students who are in an integrated environment, older students must still experience writing integrated into all subject areas. There is sometimes the assumption among teachers of other subjects that it is not their responsibility to teach writing. Donald Graves recalled the comments of a young man in his paper *Balance the Basics*, "I learned to write in a chemistry course in high school. The chemistry teacher was a stickler for accuracy and economy. Writing up lab reports was really disciplined writing. I began to see things differently." (Graves, 1978, p.8) Not only is writing required for many subjects, writing can be taught as a part of how to communicate knowledge of many subjects.

### **Writing Role Models**

Writers need role models. Most of the writers studied, both in the literature and the research surveys, were inspired by the writing of others. Some of these people were even lucky enough to have writing role models in their childhoods whether it was a parent, as with David

Halberstam, or a teacher, as with Frank McCourt. Exposure to practitioners of writing can only strengthen and encourage young writers.

One essential piece of advice offered earlier in my research survey is that writing teachers must model good writing. In order to do so, teachers must be adequately prepared. Regie Routman wrote in *Invitations*, "We cannot be teachers of writing until we demonstrate the craft ourselves. We must become genuine users and risk takers before we can expect the same of our students." (Routman, 1991, p. 161)

Most people feel that they are confident, competent readers and derive pleasure from reading. Since literacy involves both reading and writing, we must also strive to make people confident, competent writers. I would suggest that teachers who feel inadequately prepared or uncertain of their writing capability seek out more information through professional development, literature on this subject, and consultation with writers.

Professional development opportunities are now widely available. One such opportunity is through the National Writing Project, which allows teachers to become writer consultants after completing a summer-long writing institute. This program, which is available at over 200 universities in all 50 states, is designed following the process writing model earlier discussed. There is also a website with research, resources and lesson ideas. Teachers and Writers Collaborative offers professional development as well as providing links between professional writers and educators. Many other excellent online resources are also available like Teaching That Makes Sense ([www.ttms.org](http://www.ttms.org)), a site that has downloadable guides on the process writing model, the traits of writing model, and many other relevant, research-based models for teaching writing.

Writing teachers may read this advice, think the ideas sound good, and decide to try some in their own classrooms. However, if someone has not experienced writing for themselves, they will not be able to teach it well.

Many teachers of writing have never been part of a writing conference, never used the writing process or revised their work, never kept a journal, never rewritten the ending of a story they have read, never composed a sonnet. These are experiences they should have themselves before they teach these methods to others. All writing teachers do not need to be experts to be effective, but they do need to be willing to share the experiences that the students will have.

Teachers are powerful role models – whether it is their attitude or their proficiency in a subject. To reach their students they must possess an attitude of authority, and to have some authority they must have experience. Research participant Trish recalled, “I got into writing poetry and my teachers affirmed that talent. For that to be meaningful it was important that I trust their judgment on the subject. I did have a teacher once who was not expert in the subject; she was affirming but I knew that was worthless.”

Dorothy Strickland (2001), after spending time researching the practices of teaching writing of several of her graduate students, noted that those who were active in doing their own action research and seeking out opportunities to set policies at their institutions considered themselves more effective in the classroom. Strickland referred to competent writing teachers as “informed decision makers” and “active participants” in writing instruction.

One problem is many writing teachers were themselves taught by teachers who were not experts in that particular area. In college course work, there are sometimes no classes required for teachers that address the writing discipline. Teachers need to have more training in writing to teach their students to write effectively, to offer valuable feedback and praise, and to feel comfortable modeling writing for students. They must seek out opportunities to write, share their writing with others and receive feedback, and hone their craft just as they expect this dedication from their students.

William Zinsser, who wrote the classic writing manual *On Writing Well*, recounted a story of a panel discussion with himself and a well-known doctor who had written a book on the

side. When asked about his practices and habits, his answers were opposite those of the amateur writing doctor, who never rewrote, used whatever words came to mind and went fishing when things were not coming easily to him. He stated, “At the end Dr. Brock (as I’ll call him) told me he was enormously interested in my answers – it had never occurred to him that writing could be hard. I told him that I was just as interested in his answers – it had never occurred to me that writing could be easy.” Zinsser clearly understood that writing is hard work that requires patience, dedication and fortitude. He said, “Writing is a craft, not an art, and the man who runs away from his craft because he lacks inspiration is fooling himself.” (Zinsser, 1980, p.4-5)

In preparing this research study about writing, I discovered many things about myself as a writer. One of the most important discoveries I made was about the level of dedication required to complete this major undertaking. I spent hours researching how writers develop, how writing should be taught, what writers have to say about their craft. I designed a survey, and then had to revise and rethink the content several times. I was led in several directions by the responses from the survey, but had to eventually bring the divergent advice and varied experiences together to form themes for the research to have cohesion. And finally I had to labor over language so that those of you who are now reading this could understand the purpose and the findings of my study. The same level of dedication is required of those who teach writing, as well as those who are writers.

The research confirmed some of my beliefs, that reading and writing are closely connected components of literacy, that emphasis should be placed on the ideas and content of composition, and that the conventional aspects of writing should be attended to after the content is in place. Several ideas were brought to my attention which I believe will reshape my teaching of writing. I was reminded that teachers must write in front of their students, and they must be open to sharing their work with the students. I also realized the importance of revision as an aspect of writing that must be taught and modeled.

We all have in common that we are inspired. Teachers are inspired by students; writers are inspired by words. Some of us are lucky enough to be inspired by both, and we will become teachers of writing. But in addition to our inspiration is a great deal of forethought, preparation, flexibility and hard work.

Donald Murray said in his book *A Writer Teaches Writing*, “The craft (of writing) is the calculation which turns inspiration into creation...The writer dreams of art, but he works at craft.” (Murray, 1968, p. 13)

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## APPENDIX: WRITERS' SURVEY

### **Research Project about Writers' Advice and Experiences in School**

Thank you for participating in a research project about writers' experiences in school and advice for teachers of writing. Please fill out the questionnaire below and the grid on the next page. Your candid responses are appreciated, as the purpose of this research is to help teachers work more effectively. I appreciate your cooperation. (If you need more space to answer these questions, please feel free to attach further comments.)

What is the most valuable thing you learned about writing in school?

What, if any, school experiences influenced you to become a writer?

What negative experiences did you have, if any, that discouraged you from writing?

What can teachers of young children do to enhance writing?

What can teachers of older students do to enhance writing?

What other advice can you offer writing teachers to do their jobs more effectively?

If you would be willing to participate in a short interview about this subject, please include your contact information here:

Please include as much information as you can recall about your teachers, the activities and

Grade	Teacher Names and Impressions	Reading Experiences	Writing Experiences
K -2			
3-5			
6-8			
9-12			

projects you recall and the books you read. Both negative and positive experiences should be included.

## VITA

Sheri Allen was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1969. She lived in many places during her childhood, including West Virginia, Florida, San Francisco, San Antonio, Chicago, and Louisiana. Moving around so often led her to seek solace in reading about the adventures of other children in more exotic places and writing down her thoughts about always being the new kid. This was the beginning of a lifelong love for words.

Ms. Allen graduated from Bogalusa High School, a small school in a tiny town located in the boot of Louisiana. She moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to attend Louisiana State University. After she graduated from LSU in 1991, she began teaching, her second great love.

Ms. Allen has been teaching students in grades one through five for the past 17 years, and for the past three years she has been a graduate student at Louisiana State University, pursuing her desire to become a better teacher along with her master's degree in education. Ms. Allen has learned from her students equally as much as she has from her professors what it takes to make them lifelong lovers of language – find pleasure in books!