



To Teachers: Introduction to Neilia Solberg and Writing Essentials

Dear Teachers,

My specialty and part in this project is to write a number of writing lessons - lessons designed as learning extensions to the curriculum. I am a teacher's teacher with 20 some years of classroom experience. I have led involvement and effort in the area of writing instruction as a staff development leader for many schools and districts. In recent years, there has been much done in the area of writing instruction to help and support classroom teachers at all levels. The general consensus at one time was that there was a whole lot of *assigning* writing and not so much *teaching* writing. These writing minilessons are designed as stand alones, lessons intended to extend learning, teach writing and develop thinking in the process.

The writing minilessons include practical tips and moves professional writers use to improve the quality of their writing. Minilessons are presented with examples, coinciding with one particular lesson, but translate easily from lesson to lesson. For example, teaching students to identify different ways of using elaboration (descriptions, quotes, anecdotes and so forth) is a powerful tool many writers use regardless of topic and content.

Raising the level of writing instruction in the state of Washington matters because writing matters. I will use terms familiar to Washington teachers because it is our common vocabulary. Many of these terms will be terms you know but call something else based on where you live. I call this, "standards translation."

You'll find a range of minilessons, most of them I would consider prewrites and zero drafts, exercises to get you started. Once you teach a lesson, it's smart to follow it up with a number of practices using the same move. Students will just get better and better at whatever moves we teach if given sufficient time to practice. We'll get better and better, too.

The lessons include:

- Pre-writing
- Vocabulary
- Summary
- Compare and Contrast
- Personal Essay

The wonderful thing about learning to teach writing well is that there are just a few techniques one needs to know and be able to use. I provide a soft scripting outlining effective minilessons. This I do, knowing you'll adjust the scripting to fit your personality and style. Writing means thinking, pondering, planning. In this busy world, there's just no shortcut for thinking. The first, the most important, lesson you'll teach will always involve teaching students to think, to think about their thinking and to talk about their thinking. You'll know you're onto it when ninth graders walk into your classroom wanting to know if today is a "talking day." That's when you can beam inside knowing you've built the trust to go for the thinking.

I advocate a basic writing workshop approach to lesson planning. I'm all for predictable routines and procedures. They free us up as teachers to do the deal while providing students the freedom to operate at an optimum, not guessing our every next move. An explanation of the workshop minilesson accompanies the lesson template itself. It matters less *how* you structure your minilesson and more *that* you structure it.

The lessons are intended to be read and used as a coaching model that will put themselves out of a job. Once you've used the minilessons to scaffold the architecture of your instruction, you'll find you won't need them. Your students will need help with one strategy or another, but you'll be inventing the work with them to improve instruction, learning and conferencing. Together with your students and colleagues you'll build the culture you most wish to cultivate.

Neilia Solberg