

## MERLE HOM, NBCT

An alumnus of both the University of Washington and Columbia University writing projects, Merle Hom's article first appeared in *Classroom Leadership*, published by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. She has taught in the North Thurston and Olympia School Districts for the past twenty-one years.

*Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it. We grow a piece of writing not only by jotting notes and writing rough drafts, but also by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, yearning.*

### ■ LUCY CAULKINS

*The Art of Teaching Writing*  
(2000, Heinemann, p. 4)

## A Writer's Notebook: Making Writing Come Alive

As an elementary classroom teacher, I struggled with how to bring writing to life for my students. I conscientiously followed our writing curriculum, yet my students saw writing as a tedious chore that had little connection to their lives. I often heard statements and questions such as, "I don't know what to write," or "How much longer do we have to write?"

This all changed five years ago when I took part in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at New York's Columbia University. The one big idea I came back with was the Writer's Notebook (WNB). It changed how I teach writing, how I look upon writing, and how my students feel about writing.

### Writing on Their Own

The WNB, as used in my classroom, is a simple composition book that the students often decorate to make their own. It's not a diary or journal in which students chronicle events. Instead, it's a writing space, in which a writer can, through writing, deeply explore an image, a memory, a feeling, or an idea. The WNB is a receptacle that catches the flow of my students' uncensored ideas and thoughts. When we have enough ideas and words, we tailor a masterpiece.

Students write in their WNB silently for 15 minutes in class each day. This becomes a class ritual. Students have complete freedom to choose any topic about which to write. The only requirement is that they must write at least one page per day. Often, I use an “inspiration starter,” such as a current news item, an issue within the classroom, or a brief read-aloud of a moving or thought-provoking piece.

### **Writing Together**

After each WNB writing session, the students share in small groups, and a few volunteers share their work with the whole class. I find that students are eager to read their pieces aloud and receive feedback and, sometimes, inspiration from their peers. Magic happens. For example, James was a struggling fourth grader who refused to write. One day in November, however, he broke through his fear as he sat quietly with his classmates — all of whom were engaged in their silent writing. As he gazed at a papier-maché parrot hanging from the ceiling, James became inspired. He put his pen to paper and wrote a short poem about it. I watched him smile as he thoughtfully and slowly wrote. He asked to read aloud his “first poem ever” and received sincere applause from his classmates. One remarked, “Wow, it’s amazing that you wrote such a great poem, especially for a first one. My first one was certainly not nearly as good as yours.” That

evening, James’s mother e-mailed me to tell me how much James appreciated his classmates’ show of support. He told his mom that he almost cried at that moment. James then went on to write in his WNB every day and provided a lot of supportive feedback to his classmates’ writings.

Several of my students also discovered that they like to write together in pairs or threes. They brainstorm together, agree on what to write, and then each one writes about the topic in his or her own WNB. They say the activity doubles their ideas and that their best ideas come when writing together.

### **Why It Works**

As I reflect on and analyze why WNB inspires my students to be more willing and accomplished writers, I see three things. First, it generates material for further writing. It is a practice field for writers to free up, sort, and clarify thoughts and ideas to form new insights and connections. The WNB becomes a place to live like a writer.

Second, it enhances the students’ confidence and feelings of self-worth. Heterogeneous groups share as equals, with no sense of competition. The students do not have to get to the same destination; their interests and attitudes naturally take them to different places.

Third, writing and sharing helps to create a safe learning environment that, in turn, supports each student's writing. By nurturing each person's ideas, we contribute to the lives of others as well as our own. The seed planted by this seemingly simple show of respect and acceptance extends far beyond school and into adulthood.

Now, thanks to the WNB, this is what I hear my students say throughout the year: "I don't go anywhere without my WNB." "If there ever is a fire in my home and I can take only one thing, it will be my WNB." "It's so much fun; it gets me writing." "My WNB is my friend; I can tell it anything. I used to hate writing, but now I write with a big smile on my face. I even have a poem published!"

My students are now able to grow a piece of writing by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, and yearning — thanks in large part to the Writer's Notebook.