

Study Guide

Discussion Possibilities for Write Beside Them

ON TEACHING

1. In Chapter 1, Penny says, “If you’d told me in my first year of teaching that I’d feel this way so many years and students and grade levels and states later, I’d have laughed that snorting kind of laugh that people find amusing. But I’m content here in this land of teenagers. I sing on my way to work. I’ll be writing with my students today: composing, rehearsing, thinking, crafting. I’ll be playing with words in a line, listening to students try to make sense of experience, and I’ll be surprised to look up and realize we’re out of time.” Consider your life as a teacher. Would you say you are content? If not, what is in your way?
2. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the way writing units work together to develop the skills and habits of writers. Some English departments have done a study of the vertical alignment of writing tasks students complete throughout high school. Sit down with colleagues and discuss the genres students are taught in your school. What’s missing?
3. Each section of *Write Beside Them* ends with a student focus. What impact did these stories have on your reading? With which student stories could you identify most closely?
4. Penny writes of the opportunities in a writer’s workshop. What has prevented you from starting one in your room? What gets in the way when you try it? Are you convinced that your students will write better under the conditions described in Chapter 6?
5. In Chapter 6 Penny says, “Here’s my bumper sticker: Some day schools will have all the technology they need and students will realize its power.” How has your school’s budget impacted the way you teach? What creative solutions have you found to inadequate funding?

6. Penny discusses conferring in Chapter 6. Think about a student in one of your classes during the most recent writing unit you completed. How many times were you able to confer one-on-one with that student? What happened during those conferences? How did your encouragement or direction during the conference impact the writing?
7. During the writing of this book Penny contacted Kayla, the student who was writing about her grandmother, to get permission for the reprinting of her work on the DVD. Kayla, now living in Florida and attending her final year at a university said, “I still have my writing from your class!” Do you think that is true for most students in high school? What do you imagine students will save from your class this year?
8. How does story writing fit into the curriculum in your course? Do you believe it has value or might enhance the skills you are trying to teach your writers?
9. Consider visiting the work online by Mitch Albom or Leonard Pitts, Jr. Penny discusses using their work as model texts. Gather as teachers and mark up the craft you notice in a sample essay, then discuss what you’ve found and what you might teach from one of these essays. How can text study help develop a writer’s thinking?
10. Penny discusses playing with the organization of a five-paragraph essay in the persuasion chapter. What have your experiences been with this form? Discuss its limitations as well as its support for beginning writers. Is there value in telling students how to organize their thinking? What are the risks in this practice?
11. In what might be the most controversial chapter in the book, Penny says that there must be a balance in English classrooms between writing about literature and writing about life. She says, “In a perfect world, there would be enough time to teach each well—an immersion in literature, then an immersion in writing as its own subject. Somewhere in four years of high school we have to make it happen. If we don’t, we’ll continue to have students playing the game of school, hardly engaging with our writing topics from books, and not improving as writers.” Identify claims made in this chapter that strike you as provocative or dubious or powerful. Write what you’re thinking or discuss with a few colleagues.

12. How do you teach grammar and punctuation? What works for you? Should teachers correct grammar and punctuation errors on drafts of student writing? How often? Look at the student essay in Figure 12.3. What errors would you mark on this draft?
13. How content are you with your teaching of writing? What do you feel you need to learn more about?

ON WRITING

I. I remember freshman composition at Oregon State University. I was asked to write about an author I admired or something like that. I wrote about A. A. Milne because my mother's reading of Winnie the Pooh stories was a treasured part of my childhood. I always loved the odd capitalized words in those stories and the voices of the characters. My paper came back with red pen corrections and a big C- at the top. The professor said I had chosen poorly and that A. A. Milne was an embarrassment as an author. I suffered through the course for the rest of the semester, feeling completely incompetent and hopeless.

Then as a junior I took a poetry course. I was terrified; I was most definitely not a poet. Each week we handwrote our pieces onto purple masters and copied them for the class. We sat in a circle and talked about what we read. I wrote a recipe for flirting on the corner of campus; I remember the freedom I felt when I wrote it; there were no expectations or limitations. I loved the course and listening to the work of other students each week. Two experiences: same campus. One told me I didn't write well; one encouraged me to reach for anything I wanted to explore in writing.

These examples remind me of the power of choice. I know which course I worked for. I know which course I never missed and which experiences I carried with me for months after. Choice, freedom, audience, respect: these are not insignificant concepts in the life of writers.

Penny Kittle

Think back to your writing history. Do any moments stand out from your days of learning to write? Do you remember any moments with teachers you felt encouraged your writing? Were there any who discouraged you?

2. Penny says in Chapter 2, “I now believe you really can’t teach writing well unless you write yourself.” Discuss this with your colleagues. Is it necessary to have recent experience writing what you ask your students to write?
3. Penny takes you on a tour of her writing notebook on the DVD. Have you ever kept a writing notebook? If you have one, consider sharing the work you do there with colleagues. How does it differ from the formal writing you complete for other audiences? How has notebook work been useful to you as a writer?
4. Try a few of the quick writes (see Chapter 5, page 34). Which helped you get to a topic that matters personally to you? Quick write with colleagues then discuss your process as writers.
5. Penny asks teachers to consider the amount of writing in high school that is devoted to responding to literature. Write a response to a piece of literature you enjoy studying with your students. Consider your writing process as you work. Save drafts. Consider how you might share this experience with your students as they begin to compose responses to this text.
6. Penny says, “There are unsettled relationships and experiences that my thoughts drift toward when I’m driving on a long stretch of highway with no one in sight: my father and I, an estranged friend, students I couldn’t reach. No doubt you have your own list.” What’s on your list? Make one.
7. On the DVD a student shares his storyboard with the class. Create a storyboard for a topic in your life. Consider the different ways you could construct a piece of writing by placing the scenes on your storyboard in different order. Try drafting one version.
8. There are several scenes on the DVD where Penny quick writes with her students. Is there value in this practice? How might students benefit from teachers who engage in writing during class time?