



Writer's Workshop in the Elementary Music Classroom

BY MATTHEW B. COURTNEY

With Kentucky's adoption of the national common core standards, literacy in all content areas has received a new and revived focus in our state. Students of all grade levels are expected to be able to communicate complex ideas with clarity of focus that has not been necessary in the past. The music educator must be able to adapt and grow in order to keep up with the changing times. By teaching writing techniques through the music curriculum, the music teacher will be armed with powerful tools for advocacy, new assessment mechanisms for students, and the ability to achieve success for students who otherwise would struggle to compete in the general education classroom.

WHAT IS WRITER'S WORKSHOP?

In her book, *No More "I'm Done!"* author and writing expert Jennifer Jacobson describes the writer's workshop as a method for creating independent writers. I have adopted many of her techniques and suggestions in my classroom and recommend her book very highly for those who are just starting to teach writing. While her book is geared towards the needs of the general education teacher, many of her ideas can be adapted and made appropriate for the music classroom.

When I first started the writer's workshop in my classroom, my primary concern was the lack of time I had to spend with my kids. I often thought "How can I possibly conduct a writer's workshop in only thirty minutes!" I had this notion that writing took place in a single sitting, with students aligned in perfect rows of cleared off desks, toiling away over lined paper with pencils sharpened to a dangerous tip. Like many music teachers, I do not have desks in my classroom. I do not have the budget to buy and maintain dangerously sharpened pencils for the entire student population of my building. I do not

have reams and reams of lined paper. And, I certainly do not have the hours necessary to allow the students this type of "creative freedom."

Then it dawned on me. Writing is an ongoing process. As a writer myself, I never complete a piece in a single sitting. I never sit at a desk, with lined paper and a sharpened pencil. I never write elaborate responses to a single questioning prompt. Why should I expect my students to do that? Writing does not have to be completed in one class time, or in two successive class times; it can, and should, be spread out over the course of the unit and the year. Writing is a growth process, and students need time to allow their writing to grow and blossom. The relaxed and artistic environment created by the music classroom is perfect for nurturing this type of growth. Students do not have to sit at a desk. They can sit on the floor, or under a table, or in the hallway. They can write with pens, markers, or chalk. They can use clipboard, or chairs, or walls, or the floor to support their paper while they are writing. Most importantly, they can, and will, enjoy writing more when they have the freedom to do such things!

HOW DO I CREATE A WRITER FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT?

When I decided to create a writer's workshop in my classroom, the first thing I had to do was redesign my classroom to create an atmosphere where words are as important as the music. I started by creating a word wall in my classroom. A word wall is a display that lists various vocabulary words that relate to the unit at hand. It provides students with a consistent word bank to refer to during class time discussions and allows for easy repetition and retention of the important words for that unit. My word wall (*pictured here*) is a large pocket



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chart with three circles. Primary grades get the yellow circle, fourth grade gets the red circle, and fifth grade gets the green circle. I use inexpensive index cards to post and change the words as the year progresses.

Next, I created a writing station to store the plethora of materials required to teach writing at all grade levels. This includes baskets for pens, crayons, and markers, reference books like dictionaries and music textbooks, notebooks filled with lined paper, staff paper, blank paper, and colored paper, clipboards, the list goes on and on. Providing a single station like this allows my students the freedom to make their own choices about their writing that day.

You may notice that one; seemingly essential item is missing from my list. Pencils! I do not allow my students to write with pencils. I only let them use permanent writing utensils. This forces the students to write, and spend less time worried about erasing mistakes, fixing spelling and usage errors, and rethinking their ideas. This is one of the many ideas that I stole from Jennifer Jacobson, but I quickly learned more advantages to the “permanent only” technique. The day I switched from pencils to pens, I automatically received paragraphs from my students instead of sentences. They wrote more because they spent less time worrying about their spelling and more time thinking about the words on the paper. Also, when I graded this first stack of ink stained pages, I realized that I captured a whole new window into the processes and understanding of my students! I could read “between the scribbles” to decipher the ideas that they initially wrote. I discovered greater understanding from my students, traced their thought processes, and saw that they really understood much more of the material than I had previously realized or acknowledged. By not erasing, I truly saw *everything* that a student had to say about a topic. This was a profound moment in my classroom that forever changed the way I assess my students, another topic for another article.

WHAT DOES WRITER’S WORKSHOP LOOK LIKE?

Writer’s workshop for the music classroom looks very different than it would in the general education setting. A writer’s workshop, as described by Jennifer Jacobson, may last an hour or longer, and probably happens at least three times a week, if not every day. It follows a loose schedule that roughly includes a mini lesson, free writing time, conferencing time, small group work, and a time for sharing. Writer’s workshop is a time for students to explore their own ideas, write creative and authentic pieces without a prompt, and carry a single work through the entire writing process

over an extended period of time.

As I have already mentioned, most music educators do not see their students with the consistent regularity and extended amount of time that the homeroom teacher will; and I’m here to tell you that this is not a problem! We are music educators, not language arts teachers. We can teach writing through our curriculum, and even though it may happen in short, irregular bursts throughout the year, the positive impact that it has on our students ability to think and express their ideas is profound. So how does the music educator implement a writer’s workshop in their classroom?

The first thing the music educator should look at is the type of prompts they are assigning their students. Good writing prompts, that allow students to think creatively, should be open ended and very broad. Do not ask students to answer a question, and throw away your packet of pre-released open response questions! Allow the students to choose their own topics within a unit. Recently, I offered the following prompt to my students: “Choose a component of sound and tell me everything you know about it.” This type of prompt allows the student to have the freedom to choose what they are comfortable writing about at that time, while still allowing me to assess what they have learned about our unit on sound. The student may choose to write about instrument timbres, or the shapes of sound waves, or the anatomy of the ear drum, or the mathematical proportions of wavelength and frequency, or the way sounds make them feel and can help them express their moods. In the end, I receive quality writing that is meaningful to the student. I can see that they understand the basic concepts that sound is made of vibrations that travel through the air as sound waves and are interpreted by the brain when those sound waves hit your ear drum.

The next component of a successful writer’s workshop is adapting the classroom routine to meet the specific needs of the music classroom environment. Whenever I have a “Writing Day” in my classroom, I always preference it the class time before. I review the prompt with the students and I tell them to come ready to write! When they come into my classroom, I meet them at the door with a stack of papers, write their prompt on the board, and let them go to town! They know where the writing materials are, they collect what they need and start working. I ask the students to write for a set period of time each day before they are allowed to conference with me. This is an adaptation of the regular education classrooms free writing time.

After the previously prescribed writing time has ended, I allow the students to bring their writing to me

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whenever they think they are “done.” At this time, I am able to conference with my students about their writing individually, while the rest of the class is working towards their own notion of completion. Let’s look back at my writing prompt about sound. Remember that I asked the students to tell me everything they know. When they bring me their writing, I read it aloud to them, and then ask follow up questions. Maybe they chose to write about vibrations. I may ask them, where do those vibrations come from? How do those vibrations travel? How does your brain turn those vibrations into sound? Upon the verbal prompt, the student will unload a wealth of information about the topic that they have not included in their writing. I simply smile and hand the paper back to them, and off they go to expand upon their ideas.

The first time you do this with your class, you will undoubtedly read a successive string of single sentence responses as the students feel you out for how much you actually expect them to write. As the process continues, and they realize that “everything you know” truly means “everything you know” your conferencing lines will become shorter and shorter, the room will become quieter and more focused, and your student’s responses will grow to be more thoughtful and complete.

At the end of the writing session, often times two or three classes after it starts, allow the students to share what they have written. Feature individual students who really nailed their topic and let them be the teacher. After writing about sound, I may have one student who can re-teach the ideas of timbre, while another re-teaches the anatomy of the ear, and a third re-teaches the concept of frequency. You will be amazed at how their youthful understanding of the topic can make even the most complex ideas simple and easy to grasp by their classmates. This re-teaching time is vital for making sure that every student can demonstrate mastery of the topic, and increases the self efficacy of the individual students in both the areas of writing and music.

With a little effort, study, and collaboration with your buildings writing leaders, any music educator can turn their classroom into an interactive and engaging writer’s workshop. The students will benefit from the text rich environment you create and the school as a whole will benefit from the unique writing samples that the music environment allows you to create.

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