Until I Write It Down

Students can often solve the puzzles of a text through their own writing.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo and Stephen Chiger

Flannery O'Connor, E. M. Forster, and Joan Didion were all visionary writers, prolific and piercingly insightful. It's easy to imagine the minds of authors like these as limitless reservoirs of wisdom.

But each of them argued that, on the contrary, they saw the world the same way everyone else does. So what made the difference? They understood the connection between writing and thinking.

"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" asked Forster.

"I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say," agreed O'Connor.

"I don't know what I think until I write it down," echoed Didion.

All three insisted that their understanding of the world wasn't whole until they made themselves write that understanding down. Our students are no different. Until we see what students can articulate in writing, we don't know what they comprehend—and on some level, neither do they. To strengthen our students as readers, the place to start is with their writing.

The Great Revealer

Discussion is beautiful because it's innately collaborative. But even a rigorous class discussion doesn't demand as much thought from students as independent written work does. When we speak, we take shortcuts, gloss over points we aren't sure about, or simply listen to those who enjoy the stage time more.

Writing, though, is the great revealer. It demands clarity—or at least it exposes a lack thereof. With writing, it falls to every student to communicate every word they believe, to commit their interpretation to paper and, in so doing, to think it through.

Angela Thomas leads a discussion after her students have written their thoughts about a text.

So why do we so rarely use writing specifically to *drive* literacy? Think about it: Typically, we teach, we lead discussion, we give a writing assignment, and we grade. Writing becomes a tool for evaluation, not instruction. But when we do this, we treat writing as a separate skill from reading. It's a late guest. It's an afterthought.

The reality is that people's understanding isn't complete until they can piece their thoughts together and write them down. So if you want to revolutionize your reading instruction, invite writing back into the fold. Give your students time to write during class, and give them feedback that responds to their craft *and* their comprehension. Great writing is a communication of great thinking, so strengthen reading and writing in tandem, not in isolation.

How does using writing help students solve the puzzle of a great text? Let's peek into two classrooms to find out.

Let *Everyone* Solve the Puzzle

Imagine a teacher whose class is analyzing the lyrics of the song "Birmingham Sunday," written by

Richard Fariña[1] and popularized by Joan Baez. The song mourns the 1963 bombing of an African American Baptist church by members of the Ku Klux Klan, an incident that killed four young girls. After giving the students time to read the lyrics in their entirety, the teacher asks the class to

> **Get students to engage with the text before they engage with one another.**

look closely at four lines that contain imagery and figurative language, including the couplet "And Denise McNair brought the number to two./ The falcon of death was a creature they knew." She asks students what they notice about the figurative language in this portion.

Three or four hands shoot up right away. One eager speaker mentions the phrase "falcon of death," pointing

out that this image is ominous. "Can anyone build on that?" the teacher prompts. Before long, another student adds that falcons are birds of prey and points to the significance of the author's comparing the KKK to that particular bird.

After this, the conversation picks up; many students talk excitedly about the nuances of this metaphor. The teacher gives them the last 10 minutes of class to write independently about the figurative language in the lines.

This approach is typical in English classrooms. Indeed, the fact that the teacher gave the students a complex passage to analyze and prompted them without hinting probably makes the instruction above average. Most likely, though, the lesson missed its objective.

By its design, this lesson placed the greatest amount of cognitive work not on the students as a whole, but on two or three students who happen to be both excellent readers and bold speakers. The other students didn't have to articulate their own interpretations of the text until they'd already heard someone else do so. In effect, the three students who dominated the conversation put a jigsaw puzzle together. The others got to admire the big picture once it was complete, but they didn't actually place a single piece.

The key to changing this dynamic? Get students to engage with the text before they engage with one another.

That's what Angela Thomas did when she taught this same text to her students. Angela, a 6th grade English language arts teacher at North Star Academy Downtown Middle School in Newark, New Jersey, taught this

lesson with the goal of improving her students' ability to analyze figurative language and scrutinize authors' word choice. (You can view a video of her lesson at http://tinyurl.com/ELThomas, using the password "uncommon1".)

After students read the poem independently, Angela gave them the same task our hypothetical teacher did, but instead of engaging the few enthusiastic hands that shot into the air, she asked students to write their answers individually.

This changes the whole experience. Now every student has a crack at the puzzle, even the ones who wouldn't normally raise their hands.

Writing: Connect the Right Pieces
Angela's approach gets every student working on a writing task fairly quickly. The next challenge is supporting students meaningfully in this process. Trying to review the writing of all your students during class time is difficult, like trying to help 25 students who each have a pile of puzzle pieces that don't seem to connect. Where do you start? How can you work with more than just a few students? Three actions can help you make sure students connect the right pieces at the right times.

Circulate Strategically
Create a classroom pathway that allows you to reach your students efficiently while they're writing. Here's a hint: using assigned seating, group your fastest writers together and go to them first. Most teachers are inclined to start with the struggling writers, but it's the speedier students who will have something of substance written down first. You can give them feedback that matters while other students have a chance to start unpacking the puzzle of the text.

Figure 1 shows how you might cluster students in a way that allows you to get to the faster writers first,

FIGURE 1. Suggested Seating for Providing Feedback on In-Class Writing

Student	Student	Student	Student	Student	Student
Student	Student	Fast Writer	Fast Writer	Student	Student
Student	Student	Fast Writer	Fast Writer	Student	Student
Struggling Writer	Struggling Writer	Fast Writer	Fast Writer	Struggling Writer	Struggling Writer
Struggling Writer	Struggling Writer	Fast Writer	Fast Writer	Struggling Writer	Struggling Writer

Grouping writers of similar levels together allows teachers to quickly give feedback to faster writers first (allowing slower ones time to get something down), and then move to help the struggling writers.

then the struggling ones, and then the rest. This arrangement requires some assigned seating, but that seating would constantly change as students demonstrate different needs.

Give Feedback
Giving meaningful feedback in a short amount of time isn't easy, especially when looking at extended writing samples. You'll need to target your review. Here's how teachers like Angela set themselves up for success as they glance at students' essay beginnings.

1. *Target the gap.* Ask yourself what core challenge (or challenges) this reading task is likely to present for students and quickly find the part of a student's writing that touches on that area. For instance, knowing that the purpose of this lesson was to get students to analyze figurative language, Angela predicted that zooming in on the connotation of the word *falcon* might be tricky for many students. So as she walked around the room, she planned to read only the part of

students' writing that dealt with the falcon image. She quickly scanned each essay for that word and read the sentences immediately around it.

2. *Plan your feedback.* Pre-think the feedback you'll likely need to provide to students, including actual wording. For example, Angela scripted the following prompts to use with students who were unclear about the falcon imagery:
■ "*Falcon* is an interesting word. What associations do you make with it?"
■ "Is this the word you'd expect the author to use here?"
■ "Does this word have a positive or negative connotation?"
■ "Try comparing this word to a related word that could replace it. For example, why use *falcon* and not *sparrow*?"

3. *Make it quick.* By targeting the gap and planning your prompts, you can deliver feedback quickly. You can read the key part of a student's work in 15–30 seconds and then give feedback in 15 seconds, which allows

you to reach multiple students in even a short session. Students then will get feedback on their reading comprehension every few days, rather than just when they take a test or turn in an essay.

Collect Data on the Trend

The real beauty of this system is that it allows the teacher to provide more targeted feedback to the whole class. As Angela circulates, she notes not only what individual students need in the moment, but also what's confusing the class as a whole about this passage. This information determines what she'll do next in the lesson. As soon as she sees a pattern emerge in student errors, Angela knows exactly where to

So Angela starts right there. She selects two responses that are representative of the trend and shows them to her class:

Kymani: [The author] chose to use a falcon because falcons have strong eyesight and they can see vast amounts of things. Falcons are scavengers, so people can know if something dies by looking for falcons. In the text it states, "falcon of death." A falcon is a beacon or symbol that something is in a dire situation where there is death. Falcons are attracted to death, so they are affiliated with it.

Amma: [The author] chose a falcon because a falcon is a bird of prey and has good ways to get its prey—just like the bomber had good ways to get its prey, the blacks.

"Raise your hand if you know what a falcon is," she says. Every hand in the class goes up. "What do falcons eat?"

When a few students confuse the terms *predator* and *prey*, Angela calls on Amma for the answer. "The food that they eat is called prey," Amma says, responding only to the specific question Angela has just posed, "and the [falcons] themselves are called predators."

"Okay," Angela agrees. "So, based on that, who are the predators in this poem? And who's the prey?"

Now the other students are able to articulate the figurative meaning in the poem correctly. When Angela has them re-evaluate which of the two responses is stronger, this time the answer is unanimous: Amma's.

By starting with writing, Angela has transformed her discussion. What is typically a moment of learning by listening changes to a moment of learning by doing.

Writing is the great revealer. It demands clarity—or at least exposes a lack thereof.

begin her class discussion. In essence, she focuses student conversation on the place where her class needs to grow.

Discussion: Seeing the Big Picture Together

So often, class discussion begins with a set of pre-scripted questions a teacher has prepared. The class puts the puzzle together in the order prescribed by the plan, even if students are struggling with something else.

But because Angela has already looked at her students' writing, she doesn't fall into this trap. As she monitored student work, Angela saw that her students demonstrated literal comprehension, so there was no need to spend a lot of time on that. As she'd anticipated, however, students struggled with unpacking the connotations of *falcon*. Her class didn't see the author's purpose in comparing the KKK to a predatory bird.

Note that Kymani's response is longer, but fails to unpack the connotations of the falcon image and contains incorrect information (that falcons are primarily scavengers). After the students have read the two responses, Angela directs students to talk to a partner about whose response is stronger—Kymani's or Amma's—and why.

It's possible that students will see that Amma's response is stronger, and rethink their own responses, but Angela is prepared either way. She knows most students are likely to prefer Kymani's response, which is reasonable but reflects the same limitation as most students' answers.

When Angela polls the class, she sees that her suspicion is correct. Everyone has gotten as far as they possibly could on their own. Now, it's time to nudge them the rest of the way—but without taking all the work away from them.

Developing Wisdom

Just like great writers do, our students discover what they know by writing. And when they reveal which pieces of the puzzle they're struggling to connect, we can help them bridge the gaps. Integrating writing into class instruction points our students along the path of O'Connor, Forster, and Didion—developing their own wisdom by piecing it together themselves. **EL**

[1]"Birmingham Sunday" by Richard Fariña. Copyright © 1964 by Universal Songs of Polygram International, Inc.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (pbambrick@uncommonschools.org) is the author of *Get Better Faster: A 90-Day Guide for Developing New Teachers* and the chief schools officer at Uncommon Schools. **Stephen Chiger** (schiger@uncommonschools.org) is the director of 5–12 literacy at Uncommon Schools.