

The Pen and Paper



Developed by:

Indiana WRITING PROJECT

A local site of the National Writing Project

Dear friends,

Genre study. . . What is this word, genre? What does it mean? How do we teach students to study genre? When we were novice writers (and novice writing instructors), we didn't know how to say the word correctly let alone teach students about genres. Through the Indiana Writing Project. . . we were taught the magic. Thank you, Bea Sousa, Robin Scott, and many other IWP fellows. Through the IWP fellows, we learned to teach each genre in three-week cycles sandwiched between narrative writing seemed to work the best. Immersing students in specific genre reading a couple of weeks before the writing cycle gave them some background knowledge about the genre and students knew enough to be ready to write when the study began. After concentrating on a genre for three weeks, we discovered students needed two weeks of choice writing to refresh them and to give us time to do the immersion of reading the next genre. . . three weeks of writing in each genre was magical rotation for us. Our students became familiar with the cycle of rotation and asked. . . "What's next?"

Most of us start school with narratives because is an easy genre—maybe you are saying, "I already do that!" Awesome! Students have stories to tell and love writing about what they know. We could teach any writing craft through the narrative genre because students wanted to improve their personal stories. We discovered during the specific genre studies, students applied the writing craft learned through narrative writing. We were thrilled! The more students wrote, the better they became and the more craft they utilized. Honestly, we figured out we could teach all the craft with narratives.

But some experts (and state standards) indicate that teachers need to focus less on narratives and concentrate more on persuasive writing or nonfiction. We found we did not need to replace narrative writing with persuasive or expository writing, we needed to remember that [Best Practice](#) indicates students must have choice and much of student choice is narrative. As teachers, we learned the three-week genre study cycle allowed for genre variety yet maintained narratives as the constant thread that bound our writing instruction. Ralph Fletcher, author and writing expert, believes that teachers should stay with narratives and add in persuasive and nonfiction, not instead of. "Narrative is how the students get their stride in writing. Their stories matter and are meaningful." Donald Graves also commented, "Always start with honest writing that matters to the writer--authentic and accurate. That is where good writing starts Persuasive also has the elements of narrative. It isn't divorced from it."

Once our instruction settled into the writing cycle pattern and students understood the characteristics of different genres, we found students experimented with genres on their own. Students self-selected topics and independently tried different genres all while maintaining a personal narrative draft they may or may not take to completion; it became a place to practice craft. Students became risk takers in their writing and in their reading. They began to independently recognize the different genres, not because we required it, but because the students understood writers write differently for different purposes and audiences. The students understood what the qualities of good writing looked like (and sounded like) and wanted to emulate it. We jumped for joy! Also, once a genre was taught, we could have students write in different genres in content area classes and students were able to do it! Before we knew it, students were writing in every class and were viewing writing not as a chore, but as a critical means of expressing themselves!

Writing genre cycles help us organize our writing instruction, and narratives bound all of our instruction together. More importantly, writing genre studies opened-up student possibilities for expression! Write on! Until next month.

Shirley and Susan

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8th Edition

April 2018

*Our goal is to promote
teachers helping
teachers.*

[Ralph Fletcher on
Narrative Writing
and Common Core](#)

[Genres: Movies and
Video Games
Depend on Good
Writers](#)

[NCTE: Teaching
Ideas by Grade Level](#)

Check out [Crow Call
by Lois Lowry](#). This
mentor text is a lovely
example of a memory
filled with lyrical
language.

Don't forget to sign up for
summer workshops with
IWP! If you are looking for
leadership opportunities,
consider becoming a mentor
with IWP!

- ❖ [Sign up to mentor a new IWP fellow on implementing writer's workshop in the classroom.](#)
- ❖ [Attend the week long Open Institute to BEGIN an educational writing journey!](#)