

VIEWING GUIDE



In the Beginning

Young
Writers
Develop
Independence



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Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K–8 (Fletcher and Portalupi 1998), *Nonfiction Craft Lessons: Teaching Information Writing K–8* (Portalupi and Fletcher 2001), *When Students Write* videotapes (Fletcher and Portalupi 2002), and *Talking About Writing* videotapes (Portalupi and Fletcher 2003) are available at www.stenhouse.com

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Viewing the Videotape in a Workshop Setting

Using videotapes in a workshop setting presents special challenges. Most people's experience with watching television is passive. Instructors need to work extra hard to prepare participants for a more active role in looking at these videotapes. Here are a couple of ways to prepare before watching the tapes:

1. Check out the equipment and sound in advance. Make sure the videotape segments are cued to the right spot in each tape. After you begin running any segment, walk to the back of the room and listen to the tape. The goal is to have the sound as low as possible but still loud enough so participants in the back can hear. The most common error instructors make in using videotapes is playing them with the audio too loud.
2. Ask participants to keep notes as they view the segment. Double-entry journals work well to help participants focus on what they are viewing. To make a double-entry journal, ask participants to draw a line down the center of a piece of paper and add the column headings "What I See" and "What It Makes Me Think About." These generic headings can generate all kinds of interesting observations for small-group discussions. Without the written notes to narrow down the focus of viewers, conversation can become fragmented.

Introduction

Entering a kindergarten classroom is akin to taking the back off a computer. It's an amazing experience in which you encounter a whole world crafted in miniature. The cubbies are small, the desks are low, the voices start soft but can quickly grow loud. The kindergarten classroom is inhabited by five-year-old creatures who are eager to learn yet not fully accustomed to the institution of school. Within a stretch of five minutes the same kindergarten child can be demanding, exasperating, charming, and even loving.

In the Beginning: Young Writers Develop Independence takes us inside this world and allows us to stand at the shoulder of one of the finest kindergarten teachers we know, Emelie Parker, as she works with her students. The video format allows us to watch the classroom dynamic while simultaneously hearing Emelie talk about it. In this tape we go inside Emelie's head and hear her reflect on why she made certain decisions during the course of her class.

This videotape showcases Emelie as a teacher of writing, showing how she helps students lay the foundation for their writing lives. She runs a writing workshop in which each student can walk in the shoes of a writer, work at their own level, at their own pace, on topics that matter to them.

Writing, of course, cannot be wholly separated from reading. While this is not a tape about reading in kindergarten, you'll see books throughout the writing workshop and evidence of Emelie's equally skillful teaching of reading. One of the real benefits of helping five-year-olds become strong writers is the positive effect it has on their reading.

In a kindergarten class, the writing grows out of a strong teacher-student relationship. It's clear that Emelie likes her students, respects them as learners, and believes in each one of them. She adjusts her instruction to fit the needs of particular students: with one girl she accepts and praises, with another she nudges the student to a new challenge. Like all kindergarteners, these children talk, interrupt, joke, and quarrel. Yet Emelie finds a way to keep her students engaged and always moving toward the ultimate goal—that they can each confidently say: I am a writer.

James Britton once remarked that in a classroom, the reading and writing "floats on a sea of talk." In Emelie's classroom, reading, writ-

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ing, and talk simultaneously support one another. Most of her students live in homes where languages other than English are spoken. Teachers who work with English language learners will recognize the special challenges of a classroom like this.

So settle in and spend an enjoyable half hour with Emelie and her students. We strongly recommend you watch *In the Beginning* more than once. In creating this tape, we watched this footage again and again, and each time found ourselves appreciating some new aspect of Emelie's teaching.

Overarching Questions

Consider:

- the structures Emelie creates
- the language she uses
- the expectations she conveys to students

How do each of these serve Emelie's important goal of having her students see themselves as writers? What are your own expectations and how do you convey them to your students?

How does a teacher meet the additional challenges of working with English language learners?

If you teach in a half-day kindergarten setting, how might you tweak your schedule to provide sustained writing time for your students?

Opening Sequence (00:26–04:18)

Mohammed (02:29) exemplifies a certain kind of student we see in the kindergarten writing workshop. He's wonderfully verbal, enthusiastic, and comfortable with drawing. Writing for Mohammed involves narrating and gesturing a story that accompanies his drawing. He's not yet ready or even interested in getting the story into print.

Talk about the joys and challenges of working with a writer like Mohammed.

In a brief second conference (03:05) we see a different kind of kindergarten writer. This girl understands that words will be used to write her story. Emelie gears her instruction to take this into account and focuses the student on the first sentence she will write. Notice how Emelie doesn't correct the grammatical errors in the child's oral language.

In a kindergarten class we need a definition of writing that is fluid enough to encompass both these writers. As the tape continues, watch how Emelie's teaching and the classroom she has created offer support to the varying needs of her students.

Word Work (04:22–09:29)

Note how the individual whiteboards allow every child to be hands-on and engaged. The activity echoes the real work they will face in the writing workshop.

Emilie's goal is not merely to spell *pancake* or any individual word, but rather to expand her students' strategies for figuring out how to spell any word.

How do Emelie's responses to her students' attempts support her goal of moving them toward becoming independent spellers?

Note Emelie's response to Austin (06:33). Emelie acknowledges what this student can do rather than focusing on—and correcting—what he cannot do.

Jesse says, "That was easy for me" (07:37) and explains why. Emelie makes use of the student's comment to help Jesse learn from what he did and to help others learn from it as well. This is a great example of seizing a teachable moment!

Emelie adds to a chart that lists strategies students can use to spell words.

What are some of the strategies your students use when they don't know how to spell a word?

Conferring with Writers (09:33–19:39)

Noticing what students are doing well is an important aspect of each of Emelie’s conferences. As you watch, take note of the specific things Emelie appreciates when responding to her students.

Dante (10:30)

Emelie uses literature to talk about titles. By doing this, she draws on Dante’s knowledge as a reader and also honors his writing by placing it side by side with books published by adult writers.

Emelie’s language is not limited to what she is currently working on with the student but directs the student to something bigger. For example, she says, “Every time you write, you’ll want to create a title page like this.”

Observation Tools (12:30)

Good teaching comes out of careful, close observation of students. Emelie uses a number of tools—alphabet chart, word chart, anecdotal notes—that allow her to record what she’s learning about her students.

What structures do you use now and what other ones might you envision using to keep track of your teaching and students’ learning?

Ithryp/Austin (14:12)

Emelie helps Ithryp and Austin use writing to reach beyond the walls of the classroom. Ithryp’s letter will be sent; Emelie’s invitation to Austin asks him to record his experiences at his grandma’s house.

What are some real-life invitations for writing that you can make available for your students?

Mishal (16:00)

Notice how Emelie brings the print resources of the class into the writing conference. Again, this conference works because Emelie has carefully observed and recorded what Mishal knows as a speller.

José (17:33)

As an English language learner, José interprets Emelie's question—"How do the flowers smell?"—very literally. Discuss the special challenges that exist when there are language issues such as this in a conference.

Jesse's Story (19:43–26:30)

In addition to being an academic skill, writing is a social skill. Note the various ways that Jesse's writing engages him in building social relationships with his teacher, his friend Dante, and the fifth-grade class. At Bailey's Elementary, writing is a glue that holds the school together. Having participated in writing workshops, the fifth graders listen to Jesse with the firsthand knowledge of what he is experiencing as a kindergarten writer.

In what ways could your school create common experiences and understanding about writing that would support students' growth over time?

Jesse went from writing about an experience that occurred one morning to sharing his published story the very next day. Talk about some quick and easy ways you can help students go public with their writing.

Jesse doesn't consider himself to be a strong illustrator, so Emelie shows him an alternative way to get his book illustrated. Notice how much detailed support she offers Jesse as he sets out to find his illustrator. She suggests language for Jesse to invite Dante: "Would you be my illustrator?" She lays out the process for Jesse and Dante to follow, suggesting that Jesse reread the text and make sure he knows what happened so Dante draws the right picture to go with the words. Reflect on other moments in this tape where Emelie provides careful scaffolding for her students.

Closing Sequence (26:34–28:42)

When asked about the most important thing she gives her students, Emelie responds, "Time to write with an adult by their side."

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We all know time is scarce, critically so in a half-day kindergarten setting, but Emelie reminds us, “The time is there, we just have to decide how to use it.”

How can you make time for your students to engage in sustained writing on a regular basis?

Notes for Second Viewing

Did You Notice?

Alphabet charts

Letters on wall

Self-made books

Wall charts to record conversations about writing

Kids' writing on whiteboards

Using the overhead to teach from student writing

Reading each other's self-published books

Kids writing in various formats (paper, stapled booklets, spiral notebooks)

Time Codes for *In the Beginning*

00:26–04:18	Opening Sequence
04:22–09:29	Word Work
09:33–19:39	Conferring with Writers
19:43–26:30	Jesse’s Story
26:34–28:42	Closing Sequence

Double-Entry Journal

What I See	What It Makes Me Think About