WORKSHOP HELP DESK

A QUICK GUIDE TO

Reaching Struggling Writers

K–5

M. COLLEEN CRUZ

Workshop Help Desk Series

Edited by Lucy Calkins

with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

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CHAPTER ONE

"I'm not a good writer."

I know them when I see them.

Sometimes they groan when writing time is announced.

Sometimes they ask for the bathroom pass, or to sharpen their pencils, or to see the nurse.

Sometimes they carve holes in their writing notebooks with the points of their pens. Or else they erase until there is nothing left but desktop.

Or they pull their hoodies up over their heads and lay their heads down on their arms, looking for all the world like they are trying to become invisible.

They don't have to say anything at all. But, if I happen to ask what's going on, and they happen to feel safe that day, they might say, "I'm not a good writer."

We strive to create classrooms where all of our students and their different learning styles are honored. We know that not every student is going to be naturally good at math or science or even art. And yet, for some reason, when a student

feels she is not a good writer, many of us take it personally. We love writing. Or maybe *we* don't love writing, but we feel for some reason that our students should love writing. And besides, there are so many other kids in the class who maybe aren't the most sophisticated writers yet are proud of their work nonetheless. "I want to share," they'll say. "Wanna read my piece?" they'll ask.

And so we feel helpless when faced with a student who does not exude that same confidence, who doesn't see himself as a good writer. Or perhaps we feel guilty because we've been teaching day after day, week after week, without noticing that we're not quite reaching every single student after all. Of course, even if we have noticed these students—perhaps even obsessed about them—they still can make us feel guilty. We've noticed and worried about them, but have we helped? Sometimes, because none of the methods in the books we read seem to work with those kids, we end up doing nothing beyond worrying.

I know I certainly felt that way as I raced between my thirty-two fourth graders. I would see them—I always saw them. And I wanted to help them. But since I didn't always know what to do, I sometimes simply walked past them, hoping I would figure something out later to help them. And sometimes I did. I talked to the wise colleague or went to the perfectly timed workshop, and I was able to return fully prepared to help those students. But often I simply worried about them and tried to smile at them while moving quickly on to students I knew how to help.

Nowadays, I still smile at these students. They are the ones I make a beeline for whenever I step into a classroom. They

are the ones I revel in and can't wait to pull a seat next to so I can get to know them better. Because helping these students grow has become one of the fundamental reasons I am still a teacher—and I've now embarked on a lifelong journey to discover ways to teach them.

Understanding Our Students' Writing Identities

Mel Levine says that childhood is one of the few times in our lives when we have to do things that we are not good at. School is wrought with hurdles and obstacles for students who struggle academically. It is also filled with opportunities for students to find their affinities.

As adults, if we are not good at something, we avoid it. And if we can't avoid it, we develop strategies for dealing with it—we use calculators when we're bad at arithmetic; we call a tech support line when the computer is on the fritz.

Unfortunately, our students cannot avoid the demands of school that they feel no affinity for, no matter how much they shrink into their hoodies. Writing is one of those demands.

We can begin to help these students if we don't let them shrink so far into those hoodies that we stop seeing them. We need to see them, and to see them as writers. You can start helping these students if you take a few minutes away from conferring during one writing period to just observe a student who has been off your radar. Notice the student's behaviors: her posture, her focus on the paper, where her eyes look in the classroom:

- Does she look to the chart you made during the minilesson?
- Does she ask someone sitting at her table for help?
- Does she spend a long time writing the date at the top of the page or otherwise make herself look busy?
- Does the student spend most of her writing time drawing?
- Does she intentionally make it known to her classmates that she is not writing today?

All of these things can give us insight into how the student views herself in relation to writing. We can tell whether the student uses any independent strategies to get herself going, such as rereading charts or checking at past writing. We might notice that she tries to make herself busy, perhaps because she is trying to present the image of a student who has it all together. We might even see that she is quite resourceful at getting classmates to help her out of a jam, showing strength in social skills (or overreliance on them).

It can help to follow up this work by taking some time to study that student's writing work for insights into the student's writing identity. To get a fuller picture of the student, look at her writing across several curriculum areas. Then you might look to see if there are any places where her confidence seems markedly stronger or markedly weaker. A few key questions come to mind when determining writer confidence:

- Are there some subjects about which the student writes more or with more confidence than others?

- Are there any places where she gives insights into her feelings about writing?
- Does it appear that the student writes with more confidence when the writing is more open-ended or when the writing is more prescribed?

By looking at student work, we might see that some students sputter during writing workshop, but when writing about a recent science experiment, their pens seem never to stop. That could indicate that the students may not struggle with stringing words together into sentences in instances when they are confident about the content, but when the content is a little tougher (which can be the case when students are trying to write a personal narrative on a topic that makes them feel vulnerable), the students' confidence takes a nosedive. Or perhaps, as was the case for quite a few of my students, we find that in their notebooks, students will actually have written brief rants about writing—and those rants express exactly what they find so daunting. "My hand hurts! I can't think of what to write! I hate writing!" an entry might read. We might also discover that the student is perhaps more comfortable with fill-in-the-blank or very controlled writing. In those instances, we need to do a little digging to learn whether the student's comfort zones reflect her past schooling experiences or whether they are more indicative of a fear of making a mistake.

Once we have gotten a better sense of a student's behaviors during writing time, and have spent time studying her work, we might then make a plan to interview the student. This interview is not the same sort of conversation we might

have when researching what to teach in a conference. Instead, we are working to get as full a picture as possible of this student's sense of self, and we particularly want to gain insights that will help us make bridges to writing.

For some students, this conversation will take place during a regular writing workshop; for other students, we'll set aside a different time to have the conversation. Either way, we'll make it very clear to the student that we want to learn a little more about her and that this is in no way a punitive conversation. The tone should be one of respectful interest.

Following are some things we might want to find out about the student:

- What does the student enjoy doing when she's not in school?
- What does the student enjoy in school?
- How does the student feel about writing?
- What is the student's favorite piece that she's written this year?
- What is her least favorite piece?
- What does the student find hard about writing?
- What does the student find easy about writing?

From this conversation, we should discover even more about the student that can help us create writing situations and teaching points perfectly tailored to her strengths and passions. We can discover perhaps that the student is a ballet dancer on the weekends. Perhaps the piece of writing that we thought of as the student's best was not what the student

chose. We should also have a sense of what the student thinks matters about writing when she tells us what she finds easy and what she finds hard.

After observing the student, having a conversation, looking at her writing, and perhaps checking in with last year's teacher, we should have a good picture of who this student is as a writer, and probably an even stronger sense of the student as a person. We are now on the track to helping this student develop a more positive writing identity. In order to do that, we can create a plan of action. The plan of action might be based on the following:

- the student's strengths, both writing and nonwriting
- the student's interests
- the student's struggles
- the student's view of self

The plan of action should address the writer as a whole—and most certainly begin by working with the student's areas of strength in mind.

Strategies for Helping Students Develop Stronger Writing Identities

When we think about students slamming down their notebooks, tearing up their pages, or asking repeatedly to go to the bathroom during writing time, it can be disheartening. It helps to keep in mind that there is a lot we can do to help them,

once we've gotten to know them better as people and as writers. We can then begin the work that could take one class period, but more likely a few weeks or months—the quest to help a student become a confident writer. We can do this by exploring every area of our classroom lives, from the ways our students interact with each other to the lessons we choose to teach to individual students.

Create a Community of Writers Who Struggle and Succeed Together

At the start of the school year, each of us works to create a community in our classroom. We play name games, try trust activities, and share personal stories. As part of this, we share stories of writing struggles and successes. It is crucial to continue building and renewing the community all year long.

There are many ways I've seen this work done in the classrooms I know best. Some teachers make a special share time on Fridays, when students and their teacher sit in a circle and share, popcorn style, a story of their writing that week. The teacher often jumps in to share an incident in which she struggled as a writer or made a breakthrough as a writer. Then one child, then another and another share similar stories. In some classrooms, this sharing of writing-life stories happens between partners, when teachers suggest that instead of sharing actual pieces of writing, partners talk about moments of despair, insight, or discovery.

One teacher told me that companionable talk between writers seemed so essential to her that she wanted this to be a resource for children at the point of need, yet she worried

that allowing children to share writing-life stories might invite constant talk during every writing workshop. She couldn't stomach the idea of a writing workshop filled with chatter. So that teacher created a special student conference table complete with pens, sticky notes, and an egg timer. When a student wanted company as a writer—perhaps when she did something particularly fabulous or when she felt especially paralyzed—she could simply tap her partner's shoulder, walk over to the conference table with her partner, set the egg timer, and have a short conversation.

Creating opportunities like these in our classrooms benefits the entire class, strengthening everyone's sense of community. That said, probably no one benefits more than the student who does not view himself as a good writer. He will soon see that he is not the only one who struggles with writing. And, perhaps more importantly, he will see that there are ways to overcome writing difficulties.

Think Vygotsky: Teach into the Zone of Proximal Development

Lev Vygotsky taught us that a child learns best when she is challenged within her zone of proximal development. When a child finds a task too easy, she is not learning anything and might in fact become bored and see learning as not for her. If a challenge is too much for a child, she will become frustrated and unable to learn and she will begin to think learning is not for her. The challenge for educators is to strike that fine balance of creating opportunities where the child feels both challenged and supported. When considering our work in writing, we can

ensure that students have many opportunities to build on their areas of strength while reaching for the next goal.

So, for a child who struggles to fill up the page, or even write beyond a sentence or two, we don't say, "Everyone must produce a two-page piece." That would just set the child up for frustration. Alternatively, we don't just accept the one sentence as the best the child can do. Instead, we might have a conference with the student, where we talk about setting goals for ourselves that stretch us past our own best work. And together, with the child, we set a goal that the student can meet during the day's session, say five lines one day, eight lines the next, knowing we will build on it in the immediate future.

When we consistently teach in this way, considering a student's zone of proximal development, and the student finds himself more and more capable of rising to greater and greater challenges without being overwhelmed by frustration-level demands, the student's confidence level will undoubtedly rise.

Consider a Student's Affinities

Fortunately, writing is made up of a variety of genres, topics, and forms. So many, in fact, that for even the most reluctant writer, with a little bit of digging, we can often find some sort of connection to that student's areas of passionate interest. In my first year of teaching, I longed for read-aloud every day. It was something I felt good about and the kids seemed to enjoy. Every day I would get better and better at read-aloud.

And eventually I began to steal ideas from read-aloud to transfer into the subject areas I didn't feel so confident about. I realized my students were really well behaved when sitting on the rug. So I changed my students' spots for math from tables to the rug.

If a student who is declaring himself a bad writer was very successful writing informational books, we might look to the unit we are currently teaching, say fiction, and consider how we can build a bridge for that child. We might say, "One thing I know about writers is that they can often really get going when they reflect on what they did well in the past. I noticed that when we were working on informational books, you were on fire. What were some of the topics that you wrote about? Maybe we can think about how to turn those into ideas for fiction stories." When we work like this with a child, we are taking an area a student already feels confident about and using it, much like I used read-aloud, to explore areas where he has less confidence.

Additionally, after interviewing a student and making sure that the classroom offers plenty of opportunities for him to succeed outside of writing time, it's important to build on those feelings of success by finding similar affinities, or areas of expertise in writing, specifically.

These areas do not have to be big, like a talent for personal narrative, although they could be. More often than not, we'll discover that a student has the market cornered on something more surprising and probably more practical for the average elementary school colleague. I make it my job to uncover an area of writing I can not only cultivate in this

student but also announce to the whole class, saying that this student is the go-to person for this particular area of expertise. In my fourth-grade classroom, which I wrote about in *Independent Writing* (2004), I created a "Help Wanted—Help Offered" bulletin board. Students would post their strengths, such as "I'm a good speller," as well as the help they needed, such as "Does anyone have any good ideas for an 'About the Author' page?"

Partner the Student with a Younger Writing Buddy

You might have noticed in your interview and observation of the student that she talked with pride about caring for a little brother, sister, or cousin. Or maybe you just noticed that she lights up whenever she works with someone who seems to need her. This student might be the perfect person to pair with a writing buddy from a lower grade. In fact, you might decide in the end that you want to create a long-term relationship with one of the lower grades, meeting on a regular basis to share writing, offer tips, and celebrate.

Often students who feel like they are not good writers simply need to see someone else who is struggling, someone else who needs reassurance. It's amazing how many students who just minutes before were despairing that their writing was terrible will compliment and coo over a younger student whose own writing is at a much lower level developmentally. It's also true that often the frequent and admiring eyes of this younger student can do much more to build the confidence of a self-conscious writer than all of our efforts combined.

Use That Student's Writing as an Exemplar in the Classroom

Many of us use student models for everything from classroom management ("Thank you for showing me you're ready to work, Malcolm") to teaching alternative math algorithms ("Can everyone look up here and see the new addition strategy that Christina is going to teach us?").

During writing workshop, we can make sure we are always on the lookout to be impressed by each of our students, especially those students who do not feel so very impressive. We note each independently used strategy, each new idea, each word choice as another opportunity to share this student's best work with his colleagues. The challenging part is to find something that the student is taking a risk to do, not just something he already knows he does well.

If Christina has been using dialogue effectively in her stories since September, it will not inspire Christina or her classmates to point out that she uses dialogue in her stories. However, if Christina has tried something new, such as using some flashy punctuation or pulling out her mentor text to look for possible ways to craft an ending, we should stop the presses and make an announcement. The announcement should be given in a tone of *I'm not surprised* mixed with the energy of a discovery: *I plan to use this strategy myself right away.*

This method works best when you have a classroom that very much works as a community and follows the teacher's cues. This strategy can also backfire if either the students are unwilling to view each other with new eyes or the student you are highlighting does not believe you are sincere.

Teach Students About the Struggles and Successes of Various Published Writers

I feel the reason so many Americans enjoy reading *People* and *Us Weekly* is not just to see what not to wear or who wore it better, although that's part of it. I think the main reason we enjoy (or hate) these magazines is because they hold up celebrities and their lives as examples for us to scrutinize. If that star is having trouble losing the baby weight, then I shouldn't feel so bad. If this star can overcome his fear of flying, then I can, too. We compare and contrast ourselves with these stars and their successes and failures all the time.

Writers are just such stars to our students. We can take advantage of this by collecting stories of writers' own struggles and successes. We can trawl the Internet, looking for authors' web pages, and collect those stories. We can read books about writers' lives to our students, such as Paula Graham's *Speaking of Journals* (1999) and Paul Janeczko's *Seeing the Blue Between* (2006). We can pore over the back flaps of book covers to try to glean what the writer's process might be. We can invite writers to our schools and ask them to talk about the challenges of writing as well as the joys.

We can then collect all the quotes, tips, and ideas we find and cocreate a living bulletin board that we add to and find inspiration from all year long. Quotes such as this one from Kate DiCamillo: "I write two pages a day. Usually, those two pages stink pretty bad. I rewrite. And rewrite. And rewrite. And rewrite. And rewrite. And each time I rewrite, the pages get a little better." Or Jon Sciezska, who describes writing as hard labor, like "ditch-digging." Or read from Jacqueline Woodson's website, where she describes writing as hard work and says,

"Revising is hard. Thinking of new things to write about is hard. And difficulty makes it that much more rewarding."

When we do this *People* magazine–type work, students who think they are not good writers and that writing is hard will realize not only that they are not alone in feeling this way but that "real" writers—ones they admire and whose books they read—feel this way sometimes, too. We all do at one time in our lives or another. We can help make that knowledge as well as make the rewards of persevering public.

Your Reflections

I'm imagining that you've run into a few students who disappear into their hoodies or spend their writing time looking as if they are praying no one will ever read what they have written.

Take a couple of minutes to jot down the names of the students in your class whom you have heard say, "I'm not a good writer."

Then jot down your plans for next steps in working with each of these students. Have you already interviewed and observed the student or do you still need to do that? Do you already have some of the strategies mentioned in place in your classroom? Are there ones you want to try?

I am reminded of Rosa, one of my former students, who moaned for the first month of school, whenever we had writing time. She would use her arm and hair to cover up her writing as she went. "I'm a terrible writer. A terrible writer," she would say, shaking her head whenever I asked to see her work. She didn't put spaces between her words, her letters

were cramped together, and her spelling was almost entirely phonetic. But, when I asked Rosa to read aloud her work to me, which was influenced mostly by the heavy diet of fantasy books that she read, I was bowled over. And I told her so. I spent much of the year working on helping her see just what a truly fantastic writer she was. She was a perfect student for the strategies discussed in this chapter as well as the next.