

GENRE STUDIES IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP

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FOREWORD

The most effective classroom instruction is provided by thoughtful and knowledgeable teachers. This planning guide has been designed to support teacher independence, providing a structure for organizing any genre study.

In using this guide, teachers will need knowledge of the basic procedures of writing workshop. Writing is a recursive process. It is important that teachers understand that genre studies do not follow a sequence of steps (Figure 1). For example, immersion can and should occur throughout a genre study. Likewise, while formal revision may come towards the end of the drafting, good writers learn to revise throughout the process. Each classroom of learners is unique — teachers must determine the appropriate pace for moving through the materials.

Teachers can learn from one another. In addition to providing support for individual teacher planning, it is hoped that the genre studies planning guide can provide a powerful tool for co-planning and reflection with colleagues. Over time, the teachers knowledge of materials and teaching ideas for each genre will expand, offering them opportunities to develop their own appropriate mini-lessons. In essence, allowing them to create their own “portfolios” to which they can add and from which they can draw to meet the needs of changing classrooms of students.

Creating writing workshops is enjoyable and challenging. It requires passion, creativity, hard-work, a certain stick-to-iveness, and talent. Writers create habits of mind as collectors, talkers, listeners and readers. In writing workshop classrooms, teachers and students come together to explore their worlds in new ways. Go for it!

Living the Writerly Life

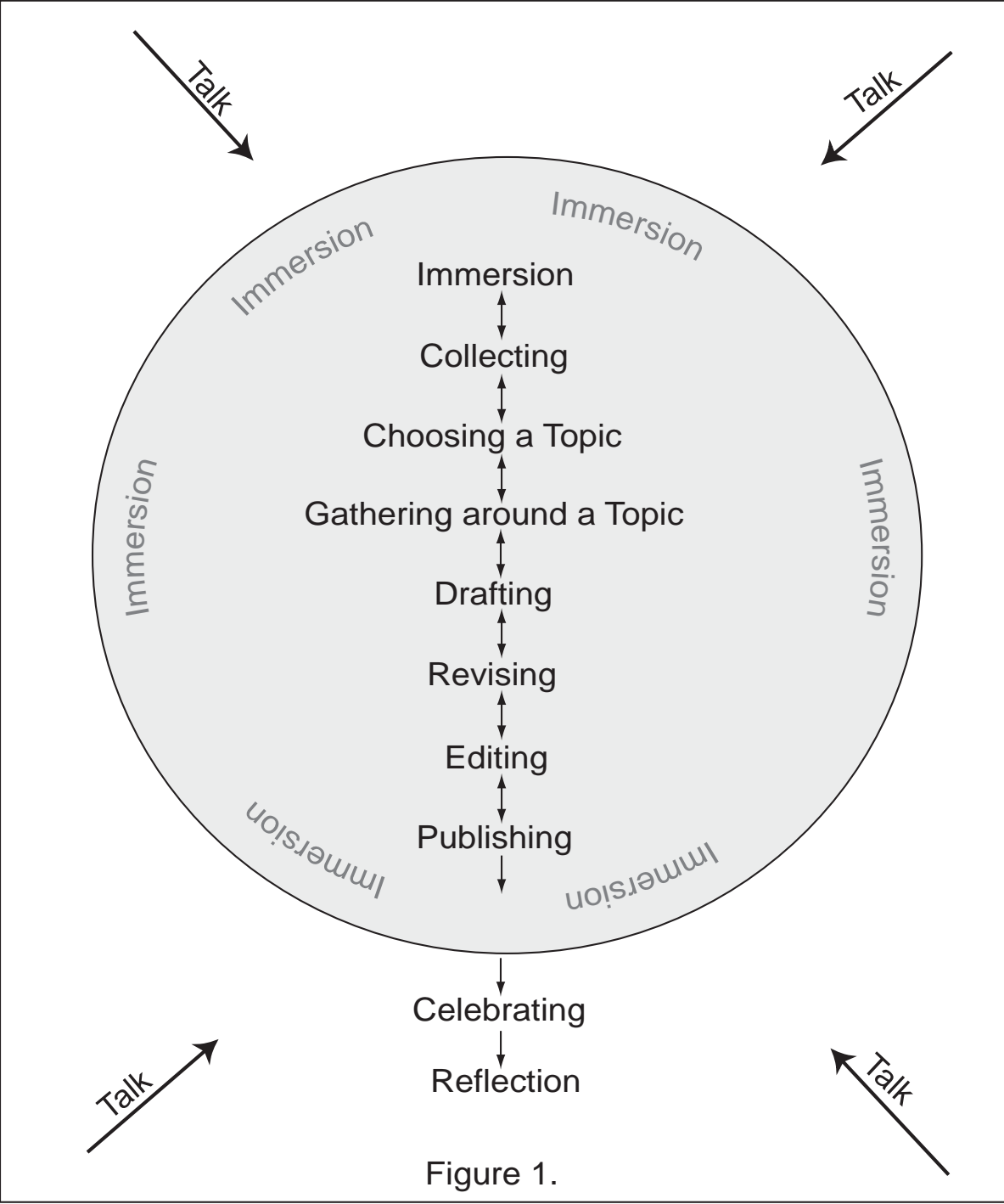


Figure 1.

Genre Studies Planning Guide

UNIT OF STUDY

A unit of study is a focused inquiry over a period of time – depending on the study, anywhere from three to six weeks in length. Not all units of study are genre specific. Other possible units may include: writerly life, revision, language use and conventions, craft, and open cycles. Generally, units of study are aligned with state standards. Selecting topics for a unit of study is often based on the teachers' and students' passions and interests, available resources, and the students' needs.

GENRE STUDIES

Genre Studies are focused on a specific *kind* of writing. They take an in-depth look at literature within the genre. Genre studies build community as the students read and talk about each other's writing and the work of beloved authors.

IMMERSION

Immersion is at the heart of any genre study. As Ralph Fletcher points out, the students' writing is only as good as the literature being read. Immersion uses literature to provide effective models. As the classroom comes alive with the voices of revered authors, students will become familiar with the texts before they are used to illustrate aspects of a particular genre. It is not always necessary to use an entire text; sometimes, teachers may wish to model with a portion of a text. In the immersion process, students will begin to see themselves and each other as writers of the genre being studied.

Best Guess Gathering

In best guess gathering, the teacher and students collect books that they think are examples of the genre. In some cases, a teacher may select and read aloud a few good examples before inviting students to add to the collection. Another teacher may state the genre being studied and ask the students to bring in whatever texts they think represent that genre. No matter how teachers approach best guess gathering, they will need to have a reasonable stack of books for the students to look through. Best guess gathering begins as you end one unit of study before starting the next.

Building a Definition

In order to create a definition of any genre, the teacher will need to choose a read aloud from the books selected during best guess gathering. Students will be asked to listen as writers, noticing the qualities of the genre. The teacher will chart the students' observations before sending them off to look at the gathered stacks of books. In this manner, the definition of the genre will begin to emerge. The chart will be added to throughout the study as students notice additional aspects of the genre. The students will learn much more in this collaborative process of building a definition than they would if the teacher had just given it to them at the beginning of the study.

Sifting and Sorting

The students have been talking about the essential elements of the genre. Now, they need to narrow their lens as they begin to pay attention to the rhythm and flow of the language, the form in which the genre is structured and the stylistic techniques of the writer. In sifting through the books, students will find the best examples of the genre. Other books that are not examples of the genre or are not well written will be sifted out. In the sifting and sorting process, what will remain are the texts that the class will use throughout the unit of study.

Selecting Touchstone and Mentor Texts

The students and the teacher have already selected texts that are like the kind of writing they will be doing. From this pile, the teacher will be looking for a few examples of books that are loved and admired in order to teach the class the qualities of well-crafted writing – these are touchstone books. At the same time, the students are discovering books that they love and admire to emulate in their writing – these are mentor texts. In selecting touchstone and mentor texts, the teacher and students need to see the potential for borrowing what they observe and discover about craft, written language, and conventions.

COLLECTING

Students are writing throughout any genre study. As noted in Figure 1, immersion and the students' own writing are occurring simultaneously. In this early stage of a genre study, the students are “collecting” pieces of writing that may lead to topic ideas for this genre. In essence, they are filling a well to draw from as inspiration for their writing. In the upper grades, students will be writing in notebooks, whereas in the lower grades, students will be keeping their writing in folders.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

In a similar fashion to the way students sifted through the literature to discover examples of the genre, they now need to sift through their own collected pieces of writing in order to discover a topic that they want to explore. This involves re-reading all of their writing around this genre with an eye and an ear towards what grabs the writer's interest the most. The students need to be sure that they have a deep enough commitment to their selected topic to sustain them throughout the rest of the process.

GATHERING

Gathering allows students to develop their ideas rather than just rewriting something they have already written. In order for their original ideas to evolve, students will become researchers — active participants in finding a variety of ways to learn more and add new meaning to their topics. The more students gather writing around their topics, the more they will have to work with when they begin drafting. In addition, students may want to practice what they are learning about the rhythm and flow of the language and the stylistic techniques of their mentor authors as part of their gathering.

DRAFTING

At some point, writers have to stop gathering and envision what their writing will become. They need to begin a draft. Faced with the question, "How will students take all their gathered writing to move into an initial draft?" teachers need to help students devise a plan. Again, students will re-read their writing. After re-reading, some students may discover that a central idea or theme emerges and free write a first draft. Other students may be struck by a single piece and choose to make that the centerpiece of a first draft. Yet others, will want to highlight excerpts from their pieces of writing in order to combine them in an initial draft. No matter which choice the writer makes, it is helpful to draft on loose leaf paper, double spaced. As Toni Morrison indicates, a writer needs to

get the first draft down quickly because the best part of writing happens in subsequent drafts.

REVISION

Revision allows students to re-see their first draft and polish their writing. Students have been reading literature throughout the study noticing, charting, and talking about the qualities they admire in the writing. During revision, they will be working on drafts with their mentor texts alongside them, reading like writers to determine the craft strategies and structures they want to emulate.

The revision process will result in a draft that students will edit for conventions. They will do most of this work individually. However, feedback supports writers as they draft and revise their writing; the students will need to talk with partners and in response groups.

EDITING

Writers may naturally edit their work. Editing occurs throughout a genre study. Whenever writers re-read their work they may notice syntax, punctuation, and spelling errors that they want to change. Writers do not necessarily think, “This is a series I need to add a comma” – their focus is on composing not “correcting”. Editing, in fact, can open the door to more revision.

Once students have a draft that is ready to edit for language use and conventions, the teacher will formally teach some editing skills. The teacher and students need to discuss and co-create an editing checklist based on the students’ prior knowledge. This checklist grows over the course of the school year as the students acquire new skills. Students will proofread and correct individually, with partners, in small groups, and with the teacher.

PUBLISHING AND CELEBRATING

In preparation for sharing with an audience, the teacher and students will need to decide when a piece of writing is “finished”. Students can choose to present a final draft by recopying in their neatest handwriting, typing, illustrating (if appropriate) or binding their writing.

When celebrating their work, the students see themselves as readers and writers. Likewise, the teacher will acknowledge the students as authors. In a celebration, students can share their work with their classmates, adults, other peers, and any invited members of their community. Students take their edited draft and refine it for publishing. In bringing closure to any genre study, publishing and celebrating honors everyone’s hard work and makes the writing public.

REFLECTING

After publishing, writers step back and reflect on the process and how it went. In writing workshops, students will want to talk with each other about their *process* and then write a reflection with guideline questions or on their own. Teachers will also ask students to reflect on their *finished pieces*. If appropriate, students can use a scoring rubric to help them with their evaluations. They will need to collect evidence to support their claims. For example, they can quote from their writing, attach copies of drafts, writing gathered around their topics or notes taken during partner and response group conversations – anything representing the work they stated they have done.

Students will be writing reflections at the end of each unit of study. Along with their writing and other related artifacts, these reflections can go into a portfolio. In this way, students can see how they grow and change as writers throughout the year and make plans for future writing.

The following grade level non-fiction units are examples illustrating the application of the genre studies planning guide.