

*Great Ideas for Mini-Lessons**:

1. Actual class procedures used during the writing period
2. Rules for the writing period made by teacher and/or students
3. Teacher models writing using “think-alouds”
4. Working together with the class on shared writing
5. “Words Authors Use” (Have a word a day. Examples: publish, illustrate, edit, topic, dedicate, etc.)
6. Grammar and Usage
 - nouns – words that mean a person, place, or thing
 - verbs – words that show action
 - adjectives – words that describe
7. Capital letters
8. Punctuation marks
9. How to “Set a Scene” (setting)
10. Fiction
11. Nonfiction
12. Mysteries
13. Stories that teach
14. “Feelings” in writing
15. Read a book, any book! Books are great writing models
16. How to add to or change a story
17. Staying on the topic
18. Rhyming words
19. Synonyms
20. Homonyms
21. Antonyms
22. Poetry (This could turn into a week of mini-lessons.)
23. Letter writing
24. Interviews
25. Riddles
24. Jokes
25. Newspapers
26. How to make a List
27. Student pieces (Always use a piece that a student has down correctly!)

*A successful mini-lesson is short, teacher-directed, and discusses only one topic.



Choosing a Topic

Procedure

The teacher begins this mini-lesson by telling the students, “When you write, you should usually choose topics you know a lot about.”

Then, the teacher models how she chooses a topic to write about each day:

“Today, I could write about my favorite basketball team, Wake Forest University. They are playing the University of North Carolina tonight. When these two teams play each other, it is always a good basketball game...I could write about my daughter’s new car. She is so excited about her first new car!...I could also write about my cat, Tommy. He’s such a rascal. I told you before that I had a cat named Tommy, but I didn’t tell you very much about him. I think I will write about my cat Tommy.”

The teacher then begins writing on an overhead transparency or on a large piece of chart paper so that all the children can see. She talks as she writes:

“I can put the title, My Cat, here at the top because I know that I will write all about my cat. I begin the first sentence with a capital letter: ‘My cat’s name is Tommy.’ I begin **Tommy** with a capital letter also because names begin with capitals.

“He is fat and furry, so I am going to write that for my second sentence. Once again I am going to begin with a capital letter for the first word in the sentence. I can spell **fat** but I am not sure of **furry**. Let me stretch out the word **furry** and listen for the letters that make those sounds: ‘**f-ur-re.**’ When I am writing a new word and I am not sure that I spelled it correctly, I write it the best I can, then I circle it. That means I will check that word if I decide to publish this story later.”

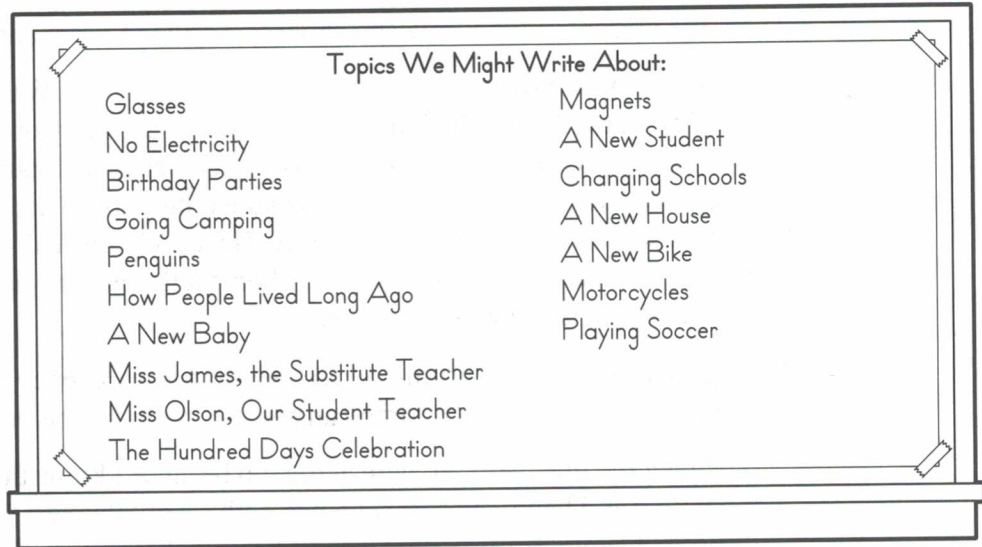
The teacher continues to talk about her cat and writes what she is saying:

“He likes everyone. He thinks everyone likes him. Tommy is a rascal.” (Stretching it out, she spells the last word **raskl.**)

After having written her five sentences, the teacher asks the students to tell her things they know a lot about. Hands go up and the list begins. The children tell her about their pets, parents, friends, and other topics in which they are interested. She concludes by saying, “Those all sound like good story topics to me! So let’s tiptoe back to our seats and begin to write about them.”

Topic Chart

Some teachers keep a chart in the room on which, throughout the day, they write topics about which they and the children might like to write. For example, when a child comes in with new glasses, the teacher comments on them and adds “glasses” to the chart.



Examples

Writing, by its nature, is a multilevel activity, offering all children an opportunity to do what they can! Here are several children’s responses, early in first grade, to the Choosing a Topic mini-lesson:



My cat is fat and furry.
 He is funny and playful.
 He is curious. He gets in trouble.
 (Wade)

MY CAT
 I have a cat.
 Her name is smoke.
 She's my on cat.
 I love her a lot.
 (Meredith)

My Mommy
 My Mommy is nice. She
 is pritty.
 I love her a lot. We
 play together a lot.
 My Mommy works a lot.
 She works at the
 farmace.
 (Stephanie)

I have a big dog.
 My dog slept in my bed with my and
 mom.
 Me and my dog we go outside
 my mom says we can go outside.
 (Brittany)



What to Do When You Can't Spell a Word

When elementary school students write, they cannot spell all the words they want to use unless they limit what they say to words they can spell. Children can and will choose “easy” words if the teacher (or a parent) talks too much about spelling it “right.” When children limit their word choices, they no longer write about an **enormous** dinosaur, but a **big** one. Food is not **delicious**, it is **good**. Friends are not **fantastic** or **wonderful** to play with, they are **nice**. **Children, whether eager or reluctant writers, need to feel free to express themselves and use the words they want to tell their stories.**

The Word Wall and other visible words in the room will help with lots of words, but there are many words young children have in their speaking vocabularies that are not in their reading or writing vocabularies. For these words, ask children to do what authors (and adults) do: say the word slowly and listen for the sounds they hear, then write the letters those sounds represent. Sometimes adults are right, and sometimes they are wrong. . . just like children! So, they circle the word and check on it later.

It is a good idea to have a mini-lesson on “what to do when you can't spell a word” early in the school year. After that, model what you do about spelling for several words—but not all the words—in each mini-lesson.

For this example mini-lesson, the teacher takes a big piece of chart paper or an overhead transparency and begins to talk and write:

“Today, I am going to write about the snow we had yesterday. I’m beginning with a capital letter because sentences begin that way. Yesterday was January 28. I can find the words **January** and **yesterday** on our calendar board. **January** is at the top; it is the name of this month. I know that under the calendar it says, ‘Today is _____. Yesterday was _____. Tomorrow will be _____.’ So I can look there and find the word **yesterday**.”

“Once again, for the second sentence, I start with a capital letter and write, ‘We had (**had** is easy because I can look on the Word Wall for it) six (the word **six** is one of the number words in the front of our classroom) **inches** (I look around the room for the word inches, and I don’t see it. If it’s not on the Word Wall, and I cannot find it anywhere in the room, I’ll stretch it out and sound-spell the word: **i-n. . . c-h. . . e-s.**) of snow (I can find **snow** on the theme board where all the winter words are listed under winter pictures).”

The teacher follows the same thinking process when she writes her next three sentences:

“I made snowballs. I made a snowman. I had fun in the snow.”

It is important to show children what adults and good writers do when they need a word they can’t spell. **Authors don’t stop their writing and look up a word. They keep writing, spell the word the best they can, and check it later.** Young children need to learn to have a spelling consciousness—that means spelling words as best as they can in the first draft and correcting them in the final draft. **Looking up words in the dictionary belongs in the editing stage, not the first draft.**



Adding On to a Piece

How can teachers get children to continue a story the next day? Continue a story in your mini-lesson, modeling the thought processes involved. For example, the teacher who wrote about the cat named Tommy (see page 95) continues her story the second day. She tells the children that she did not write everything she knew about her cat, and there are a lot more things she could tell. She could tell where he likes to sleep and what he likes to eat. She could tell some stories about times when Tommy thought he was a person and acted just like one.

Then, she takes out her piece from the day before, rereads what she has already written, and adds on to the story by starting a second paragraph:

My cat thinks he is a person. He likes to sleep on the bed. He puts his head on the pillow, just like I do! He likes to eat spaghetti. Sometimes he eats popcorn if it falls on the floor.

The teacher can continue the piece for a third day if she thinks her class is ready for more (maybe about a time Tommy surprised everyone and made them laugh). When writing longer pieces, the teacher can edit the paragraphs daily during the minilesson or spend the fourth day revising and editing all three. **There is no right or wrong time frame for this mini-lesson. Look at your students' writing to see what they need.**

My Cat

My cat's name is Tommy. He is fat and furre. He likes everyone. He thinks everyone likes him. Tommy is a raskl.

First Day

My Cat

My cat's name is Tommy. He is fat and furre. He likes everyone. He thinks everyone likes him. Tommy is a raskl.

My cat thinks he is a person. He likes to sleep on the bed. He puts his head on the pillow, just like I do! He likes to eat spaghetti. Sometimes, he eats popcorn if it falls on the floor.

Second Day



Editing Checklist: Capitalization and Punctuation

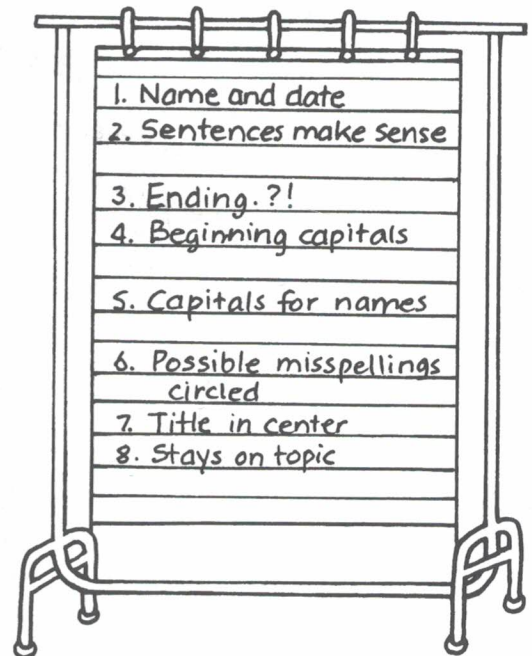
Many states or school systems have a list of required “language skills” which usually include punctuation, capitalization, and grammar. For years, these language skills were taught with worksheets and workbooks, but there was little transfer to students’ writing. **Now we know that if language skills are to transfer to writing, they must be taught during writing.** Some mini-lessons should focus on the language skills of punctuation, capitalization, and grammar.

For punctuation, capitalization, and grammar, develop and gradually add to an editing checklist like the one at right.

Note that items are added gradually.

The first thing this teacher put on the checklist was, “Name and date.” This was the only thing on the checklist. Each day as the teacher finished whatever writing she was doing for her mini-lesson, she pointed to the checklist and asked the children to help her check to see if she had included her name and the date. Some days, she had put both. Some days, she had put her name but not the date, or the date but not her name. On other days, she had put neither. The children soon got in the habit of checking her writing for this and loved pointing out to her when she had “forgotten!”

Once the teacher began the checklist, she also began asking children to check their papers each day before putting them away. In a week’s time, almost all the children were automatically putting their names and the date on their papers every day. Those who forgot one or the other quickly added it when the writing time was up and the teacher prompted them to check for it.



When almost all the children have learned automatically to do one important “mechanical” thing, it is time to add a second item. The teacher in the example added “Sentences make sense,” and from that day on, the children helped her check her writing for two things: Had she remembered to put her name and date, and did all the sentences make sense? During this time, she would usually write one sentence which did not make sense, either by leaving out a word, putting in a wrong word, or failing to finish the sentence. After checking for the name and date, the teacher and the children would read each sentence together and decide if it made sense and, if not, how to fix it.

Once there were two things on the list, the teacher asked the children to read their own writing each day to see that they had included their names and dates, and that all their sentences made sense. Sometimes it takes about a month for the children to get in the habit of checking for these two things in their own writing. When the teacher notices that most children do this, it is time to add another item to the checklist. The children don’t always find the sentences that don’t make sense (“It made sense to me!”), but they know that writers reread their pieces to check for this.

Take signals from the children for adding to the checklist. Don’t expect them to become perfect at executing each item on the list, but watch for them to know what they should be checking. **As the checklist gets longer, and what the children write each day gets longer, they can’t check for everything every day. Rather, they use the editing checklist to check their own first-draft writing before conferencing with the teacher.**



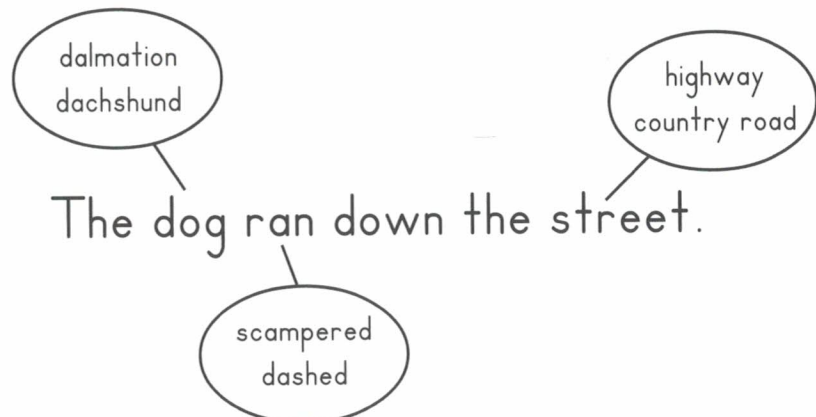
Parts of Speech

In addition to using the editing checklist, which is a part of almost every mini-lesson, **some mini-lessons should focus on the parts of speech—nouns, verbs, and adjectives and their functions—which is part of most primary language curriculums.** Most teachers begin to do some grammar mini-lessons during second grade. Again, take cues from the children. When children are writing fluently, it is time to help them begin to look for better ways to say things.

One teacher who did this quite well was a second-grade teacher who wrote a story one day and then read it to her class.

- The class then talked about nouns being words for people, places, and things. They looked for nouns in each sentence. Then the teacher asked, “Could I have used a better word than **dog**? Could I have said it was a **dalmatian** or a **dachshund**? When I wrote, ‘the dog ran down the street,’ could I have used a better noun than **street**? Was it a highway, a busy neighborhood street, or a country road?”
- After looking for the nouns and replacing them with more specific, more descriptive words and phrases, the teacher talked about verbs, or action words. She then asked, “When I wrote, ‘the dog ran down the street,’ should I have said, ‘he scampered,’ or, ‘he dashed’?”
- **The teacher helped the children see that using more specific nouns and verbs helps readers see your story better.** She reminded them, “When you write today, or if you are revising, remember to look at the nouns and verbs and see if you can make your story even better!”

Many of her students were soon looking at their own pieces and adding “bet-ter” nouns and verbs.



One student in particular put into practice many of the skills from these mini-lessons. He first wrote an informational piece about bichon puppies. Then he wrote a story about a bichon puppy, titled, "A Long Ride Home." It is always rewarding when teachers can see firsthand that the students are becoming better at writing!

Bichons by Brandon

A Bichon is a kind of dog. You can't be allergic to them, they do not shed and they are good with children. A Bichon puppy is about three inches long. You need to put a collar on them when they are 6 weeks old.

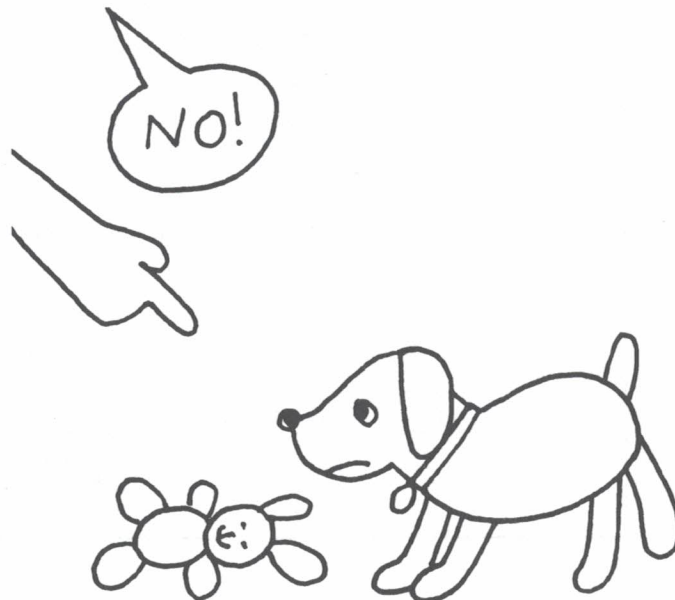
When they are puppies you will need to get them a chew toy because they will want to chew. A full-grown Bichon is about 1 foot tall and 24 inches long. They are really cute. When they are about 2 years old they will probably act like a kid. When they are puppies they will want to use paper. When they are older they will go outside to the bathroom.

A Long Ride Home by Brandon

One cold December day a Bichon mom named Bunny was having babies. They were born on December 10th. The runt of the group was named Frisco. He was the last one out of the mom. He was the first to get out of the box and the first one to go use the paper.

One January day a nice family of five came to bring him home. The boy's name was Weavil. The Weavils went in the house, got the puppy, went out, and got in the car. They soon left.

First the family stopped by a restaurant and got some food. They got home in two hours. Frisco was very excited, so he ran around. He was very happy to be at his new home. THE END





Revising and Editing

Many teachers write and edit during their mini-lessons every day, especially in first grade, where the pieces they model are as short as the pieces the children write. As the students' pieces get longer and longer, so do the teachers'. That makes writing and editing all in ten minutes more difficult. **Many second- and third-grade teachers spend several days on a piece: writing, adding on, and making it better with revisions and editing.**

Other teachers show the class several "good" pieces written by children in the class and then edit one of the pieces to show just how it is done. There is one rule for this: **It should not be an example of the best or the worst.** In one second-grade class, a boy wrote a piece about dinosaurs. He was such a good writer that it needed almost no revision or editing. A piece such as this is not a good piece to choose to model revising and editing, but it is a delight to the teacher and children.



Velociraptor

2 Velociraptor were hunting. They had seen a triceratops. A raptor pounced and became locked in combat too fierce for the other to enter. After a long battle neither of the two animals had won, both had killed the other in battle leaving the other raptor on his own. After scavenging some meat, he left in search of a new herd. A few days later the raptor had spotted a protoceratops nest. The eggs make an easy meal if it wasn't for one problem, an oviraptor. The slightly smaller predator was also eating the eggs, so the raptor would have to fight for a meal. The raptor moved toward the nest, then, slashing out with it's sickle-claws the velociraptor pounced scaring away the enemy and an easy fast-food stand. As the raptor feasted it heard a roar. Suddenly a Turbasaurus burst into view. The raptor saw another herd chasing Turbasaurus. The raptor decided to join the hunt. With his help, the herd brought down prey. He had found a pack.

Don't choose a piece that is hard to read or understand. **Choose something that is "good" and needs some work in order to be published.** This way, the students can enjoy reading the piece and learn how to edit (peer edit or self-edit) at the same time. Below is a story that a teacher used early in second grade to demonstrate this.

1. First, the teacher made a photocopy of the piece. Then, she made a transparency from the copy.
2. Using the transparency on the overhead projector, she let the children read the original and tell the author what they liked about it.
3. Next, she asked for any suggestions the children might have for ways to make it better. The children made suggestions for more specific words and a few sentences to add. The writer decided which suggestions to use in revising.
4. Finally, the children made editing suggestions, such as fixing spelling, re-writing run-on sentences, and correcting some punctuation.

Rough Draft

My Cat Filex by Sarah

My cat's name is Filex. He same times paly's around the house. He is funny. He sads on his bach feet when I hold chees in the air. And one time he juped up on the calner to get some cik-noodl soop. He likes me and my family. He like chees too. He is lasy some-times.

Final Draft

My Cat Felix by Sarah

My cat's name is Felix. He sometimes plays around the house. He is funny. He sits on his back feet when I hold cheese in the air. One time Felix jumped on the counter to get some chicken noodle soup. He likes my family. Felix likes cheese too. Sometimes, he is lazy. But I still like my cat Felix!