Chapter 1:

THE POWER OF MODELING

"Nothing, absolutely nothing you will ever do as a teacher will be more powerful than modeling writing in front of your students."

— Vicki Spandel

Years ago, I decided to learn to knit. So I did what any self-respecting would-be knitter does—I marched myself down to my local library and checked out a book that promised to make me a knitter by Chapter 3.

With needles and yarn in hand, I perused the pages and carefully studied the illustrations and diagrams, and yet I quickly discovered that, in this case, a picture was not worth a thousand words. I simply could not make my fingers and yarn look like the ones shown on page 2. I could see the picture of the needle going through the small hole but, try as I may, I could not “cast on.” It didn’t take me long to realize that the words and pictures in this book (or any book) couldn’t teach me all that I needed to know in order to knit. I needed someone to show me how.

I phoned Grandma Wilson, my husband’s grandmother, and asked if she’d kindly clear her social calendar and teach me to knit. After my repeated promises of copious quantities of chocolate as payment, she gladly obliged.

On a sunny Saturday morning, we gathered our materials and made ourselves comfortable on the couch. Grandma began by asking me to simply watch her. She showed me how she tied a slipknot, and then she cast the first few stitches. I watched. I listened. I tried it on my own. Several times throughout the morning, Grandma placed her hands over mine and guided them as I attempted a stitch. Then she released me to try it on my own. Each time I would mangle my yarn into an unmanageable mess, she would softly say, “Okay, let’s see what we’ve got here,” quietly unravel the knots, and ask me to watch her again.
After a few more Saturdays (and heaps more chocolate), I was starting to get the hang of it. I was knitting. Pretty much. (Okay, in truth, I learned enough to make several scarves that I gave as gifts and my family wore for a few days as a show of support and immense kindness, but you get the point.)

Years later, I realized that Grandma Wilson had done what many effective teachers do: She had modeled the task. She had explicitly demonstrated and shown me what a proficient knitter is thinking and doing when she knits. Those mornings with Grandma Wilson were worth much more than anything I could have learned from a book.

If you think about it, modeling plays an important role in how the human brain learns almost anything. Infants and toddlers watch their caregivers walk, talk, and eat with a spoon. Piano students notice and note the way the instructor’s hands are placed on the keys when playing scales. Tennis players watch and listen as the coach demonstrates how to serve the ball. Student teachers observe a master teacher before teaching lessons on their own.

Collins, Brown, and Newman (1989) call this cognitive apprenticeship. Through this apprenticeship, processes that are usually carried out internally (i.e., reading, playing piano, driving, etc.) are externalized so the learner can see how an expert completes the task.

Modeling is said to be one of the most effective of all teaching strategies (Pearson and Fielding, 1991). This is especially true when it comes to writing. Research has consistently found that teachers who engage in writing experiences themselves can connect more authentically with students during the writing process (Cremin, 2006; Kaplan, 2008). Fisher and Frey (2003) found that writing fluency improved significantly when teachers modeled their own writing.

In 2012, Sharon Zumbrunn and Keegan Krause wrote an article that appeared in The Reading Teacher. In the article, seven leading authorities in the field of writing were interviewed and asked to share their beliefs about effective writing instruction. Zumbrunn and Krause wrote, “…(leaders) stressed that writing teachers need to be writers themselves and, as Thomas Newkirk said, ‘know from the inside out what writing is like.’”
In the same article, Jerome Harste (2012) recommended the following: “If I were to give a tip to teachers, I’d tell them to take out a sheet of paper and start writing. I’d also tell them to share what they write with students. I think we (as teachers) provide the type of demonstration that students need to see and be around. There’s power in making yourself as vulnerable as the students you’re teaching.”

The Common Core State Standards, or CCSS (2010), and most state standards require high-quality research and writing from even the youngest of children. These standards ask writers at every grade level to create pieces of narrative, informative or explanatory, and opinion writing in order to be prepared for the kinds of writing we do as lifelong writers.

As I read the CCSS, I notice one phrase that appears over and over: “with guidance and support from adults.” For example, one of the standards for kindergarten states, “With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.8). In fifth grade, one of the standards reads, “With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5).

It’s clear, isn’t it? If we want kindergartners to gather information from resources, it’s imperative that teachers show them how. Likewise, if fifth graders are going to dig into the courageous and sometimes difficult work of planning, editing, and revising, they must have the opportunity to tune in and notice the things that other writers do when they plan, edit, and revise.

As writing teachers, we often neglect the powerful strategy of modeling in our classrooms. We use mentor texts as a way to examine what other authors do in their writing, but we rarely demonstrate our own thinking and processes. Donald Graves (2013), a longtime advocate for modeled writing, said “Students can go a lifetime and never see another person write, much less show them how to write. Yet, it would be unheard of for an artist to not show her students how to use oils by painting on her own canvas, or for a ceramist not to demonstrate how to throw clay on a wheel and shape the material himself.”
So what if we crafted a piece of writing in front of our students, showing them how a proficient writer thinks and what a proficient writer does? What if we gave students a window into our thinking and allowed them to see the reality and messiness of our own writing process? What if we made ourselves vulnerable and took risks as writers—and what if we did that in front of our students?

I believe there is immense power in giving students a peek into the mind and processes of another writer. In fact, I believe that modeled writing could be called “a 10-minute makeover” for the classroom. If, every day, we took five to 10 minutes to model our own thinking and writing before asking students to write, we could transform our students into successful writers.

An anchor chart that we made for a mini-lesson or a list of writing features projected on an interactive whiteboard simply cannot take the place of an authentic piece of writing that is crafted on the spot. When I model, I’m showing students what I do before I write, while I’m writing, and when I finish a piece of writing.

Modeling also strengthens our students’ knowledge of:

- writing behaviors,
- different types of text,
- the writing process,
- story structures,
- how writing helps us and enriches our everyday life, and
- the vocabulary that writers use to talk about writing.
A Few Clarifications about Writing Instruction

Before we continue, allow me to make a few clarifications. In my workshops with teachers, I notice there is some confusion about what modeled writing is. Many teachers confuse modeled writing with other kinds of writing instruction found in classrooms. So let me begin by first explaining the difference between modeled writing and other writing experiences.

Modeled writing should not be confused with shared writing. A shared writing experience invites students to collaborate with the teacher to create a piece of writing. In a shared writing experience, the teacher holds the pen, but students jump in, give suggestions, and interact with the teacher as he or she writes.

Modeled writing also differs from interactive writing. In an interactive writing experience, teachers and students work together to decide what words, phrases, and sentences should be included in the piece, but now individual students are holding the pen and doing the actual drafting.

Shared writing and interactive writing are both effective scaffolds that support student writers, and they have a place in the writing classroom. Both experiences provide an opportunity to share ideas, collaborate, and create a piece of strong writing by working with other writers. Shared writing and interactive writing make it possible for all students to create a high-quality piece while raising the expectation for what is possible. Although shared writing and interactive writing help promote writing, I believe that the real transformation in our writing classrooms occurs when teachers engage in modeled writing.

Modeled writing is unique in that the teacher is doing all or most of the thinking and talking and all of the writing. In a modeled writing experience, students are invited to tune in and notice the things that the writer is doing, but they don’t offer suggestions or ideas for improving the piece. Instead, students listen and observe as the teacher plans, makes choices, researches, drafts, rereads, edits, evaluates, or revises. The teacher makes his or her thinking transparent while students observe. (See Fig. 1.1.)
**Fig 1.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Example of teacher language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared writing</strong></td>
<td>Asks for ideas and suggestions from students</td>
<td>Share ideas and suggestions for what should be written</td>
<td>What do we think about this lead?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Holds the pen and does the actual writing</td>
<td>Reread to see how the piece sounds</td>
<td>Who has an idea about how we could start this piece?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Writes, stops, and rereads often to see how the writing sounds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive writing</strong></td>
<td>Guides students as they think of words, phrases, or sentences to add to a piece of writing</td>
<td>Suggest words, phrases, or sentences that can be added to the piece</td>
<td>So we agreed that we wanted to add this sentence here, “Bears are excellent climbers.” Who would like to come up and add that sentence to our piece?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supports individual students as they add to the piece of writing</td>
<td>Hold the pen and do the actual writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reread to see how the piece sounds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Modeled writing</strong></td>
<td>Thinks aloud</td>
<td>Watch and listen</td>
<td>I want to speak directly to my reader here to add a little voice and interest to my writing. I’m thinking I could write....</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writes a portion of a piece</td>
<td>Notice what the teacher is thinking and doing as he or she writes</td>
<td>Or I could write....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stops to reread and sometimes revises while drafting</td>
<td></td>
<td>I like the way my first idea sounded. Watch me as I add that to my writing.</td>
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Blaze the Trail

My husband and I both love to hike, and we’d love nothing better than to pass this love of the outdoors on to our two young sons. So several times each summer, we pack enough snacks to feed a small village and head for the hills.

When we hike as a family, my husband is usually assigned to “blaze the trail.” He goes ahead of us and we trod behind. As he hikes, he will often look back at us and say, “Hey, watch your step on this rock. It’s slippery,” or “Step over this log like this.”

Our rationale is that if the boys watch my husband explore the trail first and learn from what he is encountering, it will help them to navigate the trail more successfully and actually increase their love of hiking. In short, it allows my husband to experience the trail first as a hiker and then as a guide.

What if we approached the teaching of writing with the same principle? What if we were willing to “blaze the trail” by experiencing writing tasks first as a writer and then as a guide? When we model our own thinking and writing for students, we are doing just that. We are saying: I know what the path before you is like. I’ve been there. Let me help you by sharing what I’ve discovered.

In order to see what this looks like in the classroom, let’s examine two variations of the same writing task.

Teacher A gives students an assignment. Students are asked to create a travel brochure about a state of their choosing. She makes a list of features that must be included in each travel brochure and explains that students will start by researching and collecting important facts about their states. She points out the basket of books that they can use when gathering their facts and reminds them to write down facts in their own words rather than simply copying the facts that they find in the book.

Teacher B explains that over the next few weeks, everyone will be researching and creating a travel brochure about a state. He passes out several travel brochures that he has collected from a local travel agency and asks partners to think about and answer the question: What makes a good brochure?
As he listens to several pairs share, he creates a chart called “Qualities of a Good Travel Brochure.” He and his students work together to create a list of features (colorful photographs, lists of attractions, a section about the weather, etc.).

After each student has chosen the state that he or she will write about, Teacher B chooses a state that has not been selected by anyone else. Over the next few days, before students began researching, Teacher B takes 10 minutes to show the students how he reads a short section of text and then jots down words or phrases to capture important facts about his state. Once he’s collected several facts, he thinks out loud and explicitly demonstrates how he uses the words and phrases to create interesting and inviting sentences to include in his travel brochure.

I predict that the students in Teacher A’s classroom will struggle. Without explicit teaching and modeling about how to read, research, and write, many students will simply do what they’ve always done—copy facts from the resources provided. The readers and writers in Teacher A’s classroom will likely become confused over the process and might simply give up and look for something more interesting to do. Those who do complete a brochure likely won’t match Teacher A’s expectations. Teacher A assigned a writing task, but she didn’t teach students how to engage in the reading and writing processes necessary for the task.

On the other hand, I predict that the students in Teacher B’s classroom will jump right in and experience success! The students in this classroom have been given the opportunity to examine the kind of information that is included in a quality travel brochure. The teacher has explicitly modeled how to locate information, read, take notes, and then turn those notes into running text. They’ve seen how an adult reader, writer, and thinker approaches the work. Teacher B hasn’t simply assigned a writing task; he has shown students how to engage with the resources to create high-quality work.

It’s clear, isn’t it? Before we ask students to do something, we should be willing to do it first. So before we ask our students to create a persuasive poster that teaches others about the importance of daily exercise, we should demonstrate how we would create a poster on a similar topic, such as eating more fruits and vegetables. If our student writers are going to be crafting a book review on one of their favorite books, we should show them how we write one using one of our
favorite books. These explicit demonstrations allow students to see how another writer completes the task. They also help students see what’s possible in their own writing. We blaze the trail and invite them to come join us!

The bottom line is this: As writing instructors, it’s imperative that we write. Think about it. If you want your child to learn ballet, you wouldn’t sign him or her up for lessons taught by someone who doesn’t dance. There’s a reason why a swim instructor wears a bathing suit and is in the water. Learning to write (like learning to dance, swim, or knit) happens best when someone comes alongside us and shows us how it’s done.

Throughout the next eight chapters, you’ll find tips, sample models, tools, and stories from the classroom to help you unleash the power of modeled writing in your classroom. I’ll serve as your guide as I share the triumphs and the tribulations from my own journey as a teacher of writing. Sprinkled throughout the book, you’ll find a plethora of examples of teacher language that you can use as you make your own thinking and writing visible to your students. In Chapter 7, I’ve created several sample mini-lessons that can be used “as is” or tweaked to match the needs of the learners in your classroom. Finally, in the Appendix, you’ll find reproducible templates that will help you as you plan for modeled writing and work with student writers.

As you read this book, I hope you’ll feel a nudge to begin the daily practice of thinking and writing out loud in front of your students. I think you’ll find it’s a powerful way to transform your writing classroom and give your student writers the tools and the confidence that they need to soar!