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Jennifer K. Allen
University of West Georgia, jkallen@westga.edu

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Cover Page Footnote
This manuscript is dedicated to the Tall Teachers and Small Teachers who have taught me so much about writing over the years.

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Eating Pizza with Chopsticks: Discovering Flavorful Truths about Writing

Jennifer K. Allen, University of West Georgia

The classroom was busy and bustling with noise. It was our partnered writing time, also known as WIN Writing Time (Allen, 2019; Allen, et al., 2019) and the Small Teachers (elementary students) had excitedly accepted the invitations from the Tall Teachers (pre-service teachers) to write with them – on topics that were Worthwhile, Interest-based, and No-stress (WIN). (*I borrowed the terms Tall Teachers and Small Teachers from education professors at the University of South Carolina because these terms capture the transactional approach to teaching and learning, as both groups are continuously teaching and learning from one another.)

Just a few months prior, WIN Writing Time had simply been an idea I had floated around with some colleagues and elementary classroom teachers as I struggled to find ways to make authentic writing instruction seem attainable for my students. Grateful to work in a college of education that promotes school-university partnerships, I sought out and took advantage of an open classroom space at the elementary school in rural West Georgia where I used to teach, and I created and nurtured a partnership with a third-grade teacher who was excited about bringing additional energy to her writing instruction. As an associate professor of literacy education who is passionate about writing and writing instruction, I was eager to watch my students, Elementary Education majors, develop a passion for writing and a confidence in themselves as teachers of writing as they worked weekly with their third-grade partner students to help them connect with writing through high-impact, low-stakes experiences with writing (Fletcher, 2017). After all of the hard work my partner teacher and I had poured into launching this writing partnership, it was fulfilling to finally see it in action. Win Writing Time, the mutually beneficial writing experience I had envisioned, was unfolding right before my eyes.

Through the productive chatter, I somehow managed to zoom in on a seemingly small interaction between a Small Teacher and a Tall Teacher. “Cut it
up and use chopsticks!” one of my Tall Teachers joyfully exclaimed as she read her piece of writing to her Small Teacher. I peered over their shoulders and listened in as this Tall Teacher shared the rest of her opinion writing that focused on why people should eat pizza with chopsticks. As a person who is not skilled with using chopsticks and almost always declines using them, I found myself being drawn into this piece of writing and wondering why on earth a person would use chopsticks to eat pizza. Admittedly, I prefer using no utensils to eat pizza and typically devour my slice like a starving pup. But, I discovered that while the writer had sprinkled a taste of humor and sarcasm into her piece, she had also included some valid and reasonable arguments for why people should try eating pizza with chopsticks.

Her piece was clever and sparked a writing duel as her Small Teacher wrote an equally shrewd rebuttal (see Figure 1). Their pieces sparked my curiosity, and I began to think more about this interesting notion of eating pizza with chopsticks. My reflection led me to ultimately realize that there are a lot of connections that can be drawn between eating pizza with chopsticks and writing. Just like mastering the skill of using chopsticks to eat can take longer than you originally anticipate and make you feel frustrated at times, so, too, writing can feel awkward and difficult and messy at times, requiring you to take the process one step – or bite – at a time. Similarly, just as using chopsticks comes with its own set of etiquette rules and norms, writing comes with its own set of expectations. Additionally, just as chopsticks are made out of a variety of materials – gold, wood, bamboo, ivory, plastic – writing utilizes an array of tools and media and comes in a variety of modes and genres. Writing can spice up what sometimes feels like a very normal and mundane experience, similar to what using chopsticks can do if you’re used to eating with silverware – or just your fingers. Most importantly though, just like you can only get better at eating with chopsticks by actually eating with chopsticks, you can only become a better writer by actually engaging in the act of writing. And just like the sense of accomplishment you feel after successfully eating a meal with chopsticks, writing can provide you with a sense of triumph once your well-crafted words reach your intended audience.

Of course, I have known these truths about writing for a while as I have experienced and witnessed them firsthand both as a writer and a teacher of writing. But this specific observation brought these ideas to light, situating them front and center in my mind and subsequently in my curriculum for my writing pedagogy course. This simple act of slowing down and paying attention while my students wrote and shared their writing helped me to refocus my lens and reminded me to zoom in and make a conscious effort to notice the small, yet significant moments that unfold during writing time. For it is in these moments that I—along with the Tall and Small Teachers—can learn so much about writing. After all, how could one ever imagine that the idea of eating pizza with chopsticks could offer such a tangible analogy for writing instruction?
The Back Story: Teaching Writing Brings Trepidation and Tensions

As an assistant professor who teaches a writing pedagogy course for pre-service elementary educators, I have noticed a consistent trend among the students I teach. The majority of my students begin my course sharing their reluctant feelings toward writing as well as a low sense of self-confidence when it comes to writing and teaching writing. In fact, I have discovered that almost all of the pre-service educators I teach have negative memories of and/or associations with writing as students, from elementary school, middle school, high school, or college. Many of their negative memories revolve around having to write about prescribed and uninteresting topics, being required to write in highly-structured and formulaic formats, and receiving overly critical feedback from teachers.

Standardized and Stifling School Experiences with Writing

On a writing interest inventory that I invite my students to respond to as part of the introduction to my class, many of my students share that while they once loved to write as young children, their joy for writing diminished as the standardized testing era resulted in a narrow view of writing instruction (Creely & Diamond, 2018). My students often report that they rarely, if ever, had opportunities to tell their stories, express their thoughts, or reflect on their identities.
in the world around them through writing. Instead, they spent much of their writing time responding to specific prompts and adhering to rigid formulas in an effort to prepare for the forthcoming assessments.

These feelings that many of my students express about writing fall in line with the fact that standardized assessments have impacted the small amount of writing that exists in classrooms, resulting in writing instruction being replaced by standardized writing assignments that feel like empty academic exercises instead of meaningful experiences (Calkins, et al., 2012; Davis & Vehabovic, 2018; Hansen, 2012). In many classrooms, testing has become the focal point, and writing has been whittled down to simply equipping students with writing strategies that educators believe will better prepare them for passing the test (Ravitch, 2010). Teachers unfortunately feel pressured to succumb to the testing frenzy, assigning assessment-based writing prompts that stifle student creativity and cause them to disconnect from the joy and meaning of writing.

The trouble with standardized and programmatic approaches to writing instruction is that they largely ignore what experts know to be true about the writing process. Writing should be approached as a meaning-making experience where emphasis is placed on the process writers engage in while working toward a purposeful product (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Campbell, 1996; Emig, 1971; Fletcher, 1993; Graves, 1994; Kerr, 1999).

In the classroom, this means that students need to write often and routinely so that they develop habits as writers and learn to navigate having increased control in making decisions about their own writing (Calkins, et al., 2012). When students take on an active role in choosing topics and workshopping their writing through conferring and collaborating with other writers, they are able to experience the writing process and see themselves as writers. This is often lacking in many of today’s classrooms.

**Anxiety about Teaching Writing**

Aside from time and scheduling, which are realistic challenges for teachers, educators also cite that writing gets overshadowed in the classroom due to the fact that teachers feel uncomfortable teaching writing as they lack confidence in themselves as writers and as teachers of writing (Frank, 2003; Street & Stang, 2008). Over the years, I have had many conversations with pre- and in-service teachers about why writing instruction is often not given priority in the classroom, and the most common perspective they share – scheduling aside – is that that they do not feel confident about teaching writing, so they shy away from teaching it.

This is alarming because teachers’ beliefs often inform the instructional decisions they make in the classroom (Farrell & Guz, 2019). In essence, teachers who harbor self-doubt about themselves as writers tend to be more hesitant about teaching writing (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016) and may be less likely to engage
students in writing regularly in the classroom (Brindle et al., 2016; Graham, et al., 2001; Morgan, 2010), resulting in classrooms where only 10% of English Language Arts instruction time for elementary students is devoted specifically to writing instruction (Moats, et al., 2006).

Writing instructional practices are known to be tied to teachers’ efficacy beliefs about teaching writing (Rietdijk, et al., 2018; Troia, et al., 2011). Thus, raising teachers’ efficacy as writers and as teachers of writing should be an important goal. One of the best ways to build confidence in writing is to engage in writing more frequently and have opportunities to practice and apply relevant writing skills and strategies. Simply put, in order to become more effective teachers of writing, educators need to be writers themselves, which means being intentional about carving out time to write, and they need hands-on experience with teaching writing (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 2003; Murray, 2004; 2005). Thus, one of my primary objectives for the writing pedagogy course I teach is to design writing experiences for my students that instill in them both a passion for writing and a confidence in themselves as writers and as teachers of writing so that they enter the teaching profession with positive attitudes toward writing, a confidence that they are prepared to take on the challenge of teaching writing, and a vision for what they hope writing instruction will look like in their classrooms (Morgan, 2010).

**High-Interest, Low-Stakes Writing for the WIN**

I am fortunate to be able to teach some of my writing pedagogy courses at local elementary school sites as part of the Professional Development School (PDS) model (NAPDS, 2008), which gives my students opportunities to work alongside elementary school teachers and elementary level writers as part of their course learning. The Elementary Education students I teach at the local elementary schools have the advantage of being able to apply their literacy learning with real students in real classrooms, which situates their learning in authentic contexts. Because of the clinical setting in which my students are able to learn, I have been able to develop and implement an approach to writing instruction that allows my students to connect with writing and partner with elementary writers in a meaningful way. I named this mutually beneficial partnership **WIN Writing Time** because pre-service teachers (Tall Teachers) collaborate with elementary teachers and their students (Small Teachers) on a weekly basis to provide high-impact, low-stakes writing experiences (Fletcher, 2017) that are **Worthwhile, Interest-based, and No-stress (WIN)** (see Figure 2).

In designing **WIN Writing Time** (Allen, 2019; Allen, et al., 2019), my hope was that I could create a learning experience that would nudge all involved—pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and elementary writers—to (re)consider their notions of writing and writing instruction and see that writing is a powerful tool for learning, living, and communicating ideas (Ray & Laminack, 2001). Over the
course of several iterations of *WIN Writing Time*, pre- and in-service teachers, elementary students, and I have experienced writing from a unique perspective, allowing us to observe and come to understand important truths about writing and writing instruction. The remainder of this article will elaborate on those truths that help to engage young writers and lift the level of writing instruction in the elementary classroom.

![Image of teachers and students engaged in writing](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/)

*Figure 2, Tall Teachers and Small Teachers engage in meaningful writing experiences during WIN Writing Time.*

**Just Keep Chopping: Simple Truths to Savor about Writing**

The partnership of *WIN Writing Time* provides an authentic means for intentionally infusing joy and meaning into writing—both for my students and for the elementary teachers and students with whom they work. *WIN Writing Time* acts as a commercial for writing because it gives pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and elementary students opportunities to experience writing and envision possibilities for writing as they collaborate with one another through a variety of meaningful writing experiences. In the following sections of this article, I will revisit the chopsticks analogy from the beginning of the article to illuminate the simple truths about writing that emerged from *WIN Writing Time*. Educators can rely on these truths about writing to become better writers themselves, and they can seamlessly integrate these truths into their writing pedagogy to create more confident, experienced, and joyful writers.

**Truth #1: Eating with chopsticks often requires support**

Imagine the first time you tried eating with chopsticks. If your experience was anything like mine, you became frustrated because you could only pick up tiny bites of food at a time and your stomach wanted you to eat more quickly than the
awkward chopstick technique would allow. Imagine how much this feeling of frustration would have been magnified if you were trying to eat your meal with chopsticks while everyone else around you gobbled up their food with ease, using their preferred method of eating. Similarly, writing can be challenging and frustrating and messy at times.

Writers often struggle putting pen to paper—or fingers to keyboards—to get the words down as quickly as the ideas are swirling through their minds. Sometimes the well of ideas runs dry and writers struggle with what to say. Sometimes perfectionism and fear of mistakes prevents writers from fleshing out their ideas. Though on the surface writing sometimes appears to be effortless, neat, and orderly, it is actually a messy, recursive process that can be frustrating and take longer than writers originally anticipate (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006).

Obtaining exemplary writing from our students means helping them find a writing process that works for them and is similar to the processes professional writers cycle through as they work. This is why it is so important for teachers to establish a supportive and responsive community of writers who can relate to one another’s challenges and struggles as they work through the writing process (Ray & Laminack, 2001). Writers need opportunities to collaborate with peers and teachers who support them and offer feedback as they work through the writing process together. When writers work alongside one another and support one another, they create a safe environment in which writers feel free to take risks and compose texts that they are willing to share with others (Calkins, 1994; Håland et al., 2019; Korth et al., 2017). This also means that teachers must write themselves so that they can write alongside their students, understand the challenging processes their students are going through, and know how to support them in their writing endeavors (Graves, 2021). In an interview about teaching writing, Graves (2021) stated, “You can’t invite someone to sing a duet with you until you know the tune yourself.” The best way to learn the “tune” of writing is for teachers to be writers who are well-versed in the processes that help them produce a meaningful product.

When teachers experience the possibilities that writing has to offer, they are more credible teachers of writing who can invite students to experience those possibilities alongside them (Whitney et al., 2014). The first-hand successes and challenges teachers experience in writing help them better know and support their students as they compose and revise (Brooks, 2007). Moreover, when teachers write with and in front of their students and model the writing process, students are more likely to view them as integral members of the classroom writing community (Graves, 1985; Zumbrunn et al., 2017).
Truth #2: Chopsticks come with their own set of norms and expectations. Did you know that cultural differences influence chopstick etiquette in different countries? The way a Japanese person handles their chopsticks might not be the norm in Korea or China. Just as chopstick etiquette varies by region, so too writing comes with its own set of expectations that vary by genre, purpose, and audience. While this does not mean that we should abandon descriptive writing approaches in favor of prescriptive ones that favor “rules” over creative license (Ray, 1999), it does mean that we should help students keep the purpose and audience of their writing front and center so that they know the appropriate organization, format, style, voice, craft, and conventions to utilize so their writing will fulfill its purpose and be understood by their audience (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019).

If writers want their words to have the power to move their readers, writers must write in ways that meet specific demands of their intended audience members (Ray & Laminack, 2001). Thus, helping students understand the importance of knowing their purpose and audience so they can meet the expectations of their audience is a crucial component of writing instruction (Behizadeh, 2018). Students’ genuine investment in their writing allows our writing lessons to feel relevant and valuable because we are able to seamlessly embed the teaching of writing skills, techniques, and structures into writing for purposes and audiences that students genuinely identify with and respect (Routman, 2005). When students understand that their writing should cater to their specific purpose and audience, they are able to make informed decisions as writers and gain a sense of ownership over their writing. When students feel a sense of ownership over their writing, they feel empowered to take risks and experiment with the structures and techniques they have learned about and are better prepared to meet the demands and purposes of writing endeavors (Fletcher, 2017).

For example, a student writing a note to a friend approaches that experience much differently than they would if they were writing a formal letter to their school principal. The stakes are much higher in one, and thus the expectations are different. Still, for both pieces of writing, the writer has a genuine message to convey and is therefore invested in making sure to abide by the appropriate genre and format expectations and write with voice, style, and standard conventions that facilitate the communication of their intended message. This is why in our classrooms, we want to emphasize the importance of staying true to one’s purpose and audience and avoid leaning too heavily in the direction of prescribed, formulaic, and test-driven writing, which often leaves students experiencing less choice and decision-making in writing, seeing writing as irrelevant work, and becoming less invested in the process (Fletcher, 2017).

To help students write in ways that resonate with their audiences, teachers can lean heavily on mentors and mentor texts to highlight language used in...
purposeful and interesting ways (Ray, 1999; Shubitz, 2016; Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). In order for students to study these mentors and mentor texts successfully, teachers must first help students see themselves as writers so that they will be invested in learning the art of reading like writers (Smith, 1983; Ray, 1999). In this way, students will come to see language as something that they, too, can manipulate with purpose and intent. The benefit to this approach to teaching writing is that it allows teachers to embed the learning of conventions and language techniques in context, as opposed to teaching them in isolation, which helps students see these concepts in action and understand how they function for them as writers (Ray, 1999). Language conventions take on new life as students are able to see how the conventions help their words to have more precise meaning.

Truth #3: Chopsticks are made out of a variety of materials.

You may have only experienced eating with chopsticks made out of wood or plastic, but chopsticks actually come in a variety of other materials, too, such as ivory, bamboo, and gold. Similarly, writing necessitates the use of a variety of tools and materials. Providing students with an array of tools and materials they can use for writing gives them a sense of ownership in creating their own masterpieces. Just think for a moment about all of the potential tools students might use to participate in more traditional writing experiences. There’s the obvious pen or pencil and lined paper, but imagine students’ excitement when we entice them with different types of paper, such as note cards, memo pads, and other decorative stationery. And what if we encourage them to use colored pencils, pens, crayons, markers, or paint.

In addition to letting students explore writing “the old-fashioned way,” they can also create multimodal pieces of writing in digital formats that extend meaning through the use of visual and auditory sources (McKenna, 2014). This develops students’ digital literacy skills by giving them space to explore electronic environments for planning, composing, revising, editing, and sharing ideas with others (McKenna, 2014). Students can work in standard word processing programs and also use digital tools such as Animoto, VoiceThread, Glogster, Book Creator, or Storyboard That! to create 21st century writing pieces.

No matter the genre and purpose of the writing, students have a variety of tools at their disposal that they can use for composing and reaching their audience. Providing students with access to a variety of tools for writing, both traditional and digital, creates a community of writers who are equipped with a well-stocked writing toolbox and who feel empowered to select tools that are best suited for their specific writing purposes and needs (Gormley & McDermott, 2014).

Truth #4: Using chopsticks can enhance an ordinary experience

Just like eating pizza with chopsticks can add some pizzazz to your pizza party, writing can give life to an everyday topic or seemingly ordinary experience.
Fletcher (2017) unpacks the idea of “writerly play” and asserts that writers play with writing much like young children play with objects—through exploration, discovery, imagination, fascination, and pleasure (p. 29). He further emphasizes that writers can make almost any subject come to life when given the space to think in lively and playful ways. This kind of playful thinking in writing is important because it promotes risk-taking and experimenting in ways that surprise the reader—and writer!—with something unexpected.

To nurture playful experiences with writing, we must support students in developing an artful mindset for mining their lives to uncover potential writing subjects or stories. As Lucy Calkins (1994) states, “writing does not begin with deskwork but with lifework” (p. 3). Teachers can help students pay close attention to their interests and life experiences and develop a habit of mind for noticing and pulling the significant stories from their seemingly simple lives. When students develop a keen eye for stories and subjects that energize them, they can jot them down on a Heart Map (Heard, 1999) or in a Writer’s Notebook (Fletcher, 2003) where they can simmer until students are ready to write about them.

The key to increasing students’ engagement with writing is to make writing meaningful and pleasurable by giving students choice in writing, providing opportunities to be creative with their writing, and helping them connect writing to things they know and care about (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Creely & Diamond, 2018). Instead of feeling bound and stifled by tired topics, and over-used formulas and structures, writers feel unrestricted and liberated when they can write engaging pieces that emanate from their interests and life experiences and involve risk-taking and creative thinking.

**Truth #5: Getting better with chopsticks takes practice**

Like most things in life, getting better at using chopsticks requires practice. It should come as no surprise that your chopstick handling skills will improve the more you actually eat with chopsticks. Similarly, you can only become a better writer by actually engaging in the act of writing itself. The best way to grow successful writers is for students to write frequently and routinely for predictable and sustained periods of time (Calkins, et al., 2012; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Kissel, 2017; Lee & Smith, 2020; Ray & Laminack, 2001; Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). The more time students spend engaged in the act of writing, the better.

Students enjoy classes like art, gym, and band because the doing part of the activity is prioritized so that true learning can occur (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Similarly, students learn how to write by actually doing it, not simply talking about it. Donald Murray captured it best when he said, “The best teacher of the writing is the writing. Not the teacher. Not a book. Not a test. But the actual writing you do, producing different genres: brainstorming, drafting, revising, sharing, and tinkering with the words to make writing worth reading by others” (Kittle, 2020). If we want
to create accomplished writers, we must prioritize writing and give our students uninterrupted time to write daily so that they can gain the necessary and invaluable experience they need with writing (Ray & Laminack, 2001; Routman, 2018). The more time students spend practicing the craft of writing and honing their skills as writers, the more confident and effective writers they will become.

**Savoring the Important Truths about Writing (and Chopsticks!)**

After combining my learning from reading books and articles about writing with my experiences teaching writing and watching closely as Tall Teachers and Small Teachers engaged with writing during *WIN Writing Time*, I have made a pact with myself to make it a priority for the pre-service teachers I teach to gain hands-on experience with writing and writing instruction as part of their teacher preparation. I want my students to experience first-hand these simple, yet powerful truths about writing.

Writing is something all students – and teachers! – can learn to do well (Duke, et al., 2018). Teachers play an integral role in growing confident writers who are inspired to write because they understand the value writing has in their lives (Routman, 2005). Teachers must work alongside students to create a community of writers who feel personally invested in their writing, are free to take risks in their writing, and experience an overall sense of joy and success when they engage in writing.

Each time I facilitate and observe a session of *WIN Writing Time*, I am reminded of what we can learn from authentic, meaningful, and low-stress writing experiences. A seemingly small encounter with writing—such as overhearing a Tall Teacher talk about eating pizza with chopsticks—reminded me of some important insights about writing and solidified my thinking about writing and what I should prioritize in my work with pre-service teachers. I want to be sure that I leave no doubt in the minds of my Tall Teachers and the Small Teachers they work with that these truths about writing can and should be the norm for what students experience in the classroom. And just maybe, they will become teachers who wrap their teaching around these truths, leaving a lasting impression on the writers they teach and showing them that writing can elicit just as many feelings of joy, determination, confidence, and accomplishment as successfully eating a slice of pizza with chopsticks.
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