



SHELL
EDUCATION

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WRITE THING



→ KWAME
ALEXANDER

ENGAGES STUDENTS **IN**
WRITING WORKSHOP
(AND YOU CAN TOO!)

Foreword by Kylen Beers

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WRITE
THING
KWAME ALEXANDER
ENGAGES STUDENTS **IN** WRITING WORKSHOP
(AND YOU CAN TOO!)

Kwame Alexander

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WORD WHISPERER, DREAM MAKER, FRIEND, SOMETHIN' ELSE

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Acknowledgments

I liken the process of developing and fine-tuning the writing workshop to jazz. Sure, I'm the bandleader, but the literary magic that's been created on elementary, middle, and high school stages over the past 25 years of my literacy work is the product of an orchestra of writers, educators, librarians, and literacy advocates jamming to the same mission: Getting young people excited about, and engaged with, writing.

Since the inception of my Book-in-a-Day writing and publishing workshops, on which *The Write Thing* is largely based, I've planned, perfected, and riffed on processes and implementation with a wonderful community of working writers and artists. There was certainly planning, but I've always been a believer, like Miles Davis, "that you don't play what's there, you play what's not there." And, so in most of my workshops, in the quest to find the write groove, spontaneity has always trumped planning. Thanks to the talent, trust, insight, and creative energy of my poetry and Book-in-a-Day colleagues—Tinesha Davis, Deanna Nikaido, Janice Sapigao, Joanna Crowell, Ruby Veridiano, Angel Wood, and Titilayo Ngwenya (who, fittingly, happens to be an accomplished jazz singer)—thousands of students have discovered and shared their powerful voices.

T. S. Eliot said, "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal." While I am proud of the uniqueness of the Book-in-a-Day workshop, I also know that it did not come out of a vacuum. My first formal writing workshop was at Virginia Tech, at the feet of world-renowned poet, Nikki Giovanni. She created an exciting, authentic, and relatable literary environment that I still mimic to this day. If, like Wynton Marsalis says, "a musician's whole life is to listen," then it is the job of any worthy writer to read. At the beginning of my writerly career, as I was trying to translate my love of poetry and literature into a classroom strategy, it was the groundbreaking literacy research and publications of Lucy Calkins, Ralph Fletcher, and the America's Choice Educational Team that provided me with an instructional design model to articulate my goals. The scholarship, activism, writing, and friendship of colleagues such as Pam Allyn of LitWorld, Naomi Shihab Nye, Marshall Johnson, Angela Turnbull,

Toni Blackman, Dr. Marcelle Haddix, and Dr. Bryan Ripley Crandall of the National Writing Project continue to be a source of inspiration and innovative thinking around global and local literacies.

If you've ever heard Cannonball Adderley's stunning 1958 recording of the Miles Davis composition "Somethin' Else," then you know that his playing sounds so smooth, so effortless, it seems, as jazz critic A. B. Spellman has stated, that "he wasn't even paying attention to what he was doing." The tune is magical, and a big part of the reason is that he featured Miles Davis on the record and Art Blakey was featured on drums, and that's a band you don't mess around with. I am thankful to the marvelous musicians who play so perfectly on these pages: Ann Marie Stephens, Van G. Garrett, and, especially Chris Colderley. Chris is a poet, researcher, and elementary school teacher in Hamilton, Ontario, who asked me to bring Book-in-a-Day to his fourth-grade class, and again, up for the challenge, I said yes to our first elementary cohort. It was so successful that we came back four more times, empowering more than 300 student authors of five anthologies. Chris was invaluable in helping me conceptualize this book, and he provided valuable research and editorial assistance that helped round out this text and bring the stage to the page. Andrea Davis Pinkney, Ray Coutu, Sarah Longhi, Brian LaRossa, Danny Miller, Sarah Morrow, Kevin Carlson, and literacy visionary Lois Bridges were guiding lights with a professional touch matched only by their encouragement and brilliance.

I am grateful to all the students and educators who've allowed me to teach (and be taught) during this enlightening journey, especially Noni Carter, Jennifer Brown, Carlin Pierce, Gwen Benton, Nick Grzeda, Mary Pelicano, Gregory David, Priya Sitaraman, Allie Bruce, Linda Holtslander, Dana Davidson, and especially Kim Hardwick, who had the vision for this book long before I did and who has the distinction of bringing Book-in-a-Day to her schools the most times: nine.

Finally, I am indebted to my patient and loving family that continues to share me with the page and the stage: my wife Stephanie, my daughters, Nandi and Samayah, and my parents, Dr. E. Curtis and Barbara Alexander.

FOREWORD

Discovering the Neglected Genre

by Kylene Beers, Ed.D.



An old Welsh saying reminds us that there are three things for which we should give thanks: an invitation, a gift, and a warning. Over the years, this adage has sprung to mind when someone has handed me a gift, sent me an invitation, or occasionally offered a warning. And these words came to mind when I received a copy of this book you now hold in your hands.

This book is an invitation. In a time in which education is too often about the correctly bubbled test item, this book reminds us that a true education is far more. Education is exploration of our very selves, our discovery of who we are and where we fit; it's certainly about finding out, but it's also about wondering and wandering. It's about imagining and inventing. It's about where we've been, where we are, and most certainly where it is we might go next. All of that is in this book as Kwame Alexander shows us how to connect children to a genre that is all too often relegated to one month or one unit.

Poetry—what I'll call the *neglected genre*—draws us into ourselves as it simultaneously lets us give back to the world a fresh understanding, a new vision, a re-vision of one moment. Kwame puts it better when he explains that poetry lets us “write our own journeys, find our own voices.” Without a doubt,

this book invites you on a journey, a process, a discovery of how to connect your students to a genre that encourages creativity and yet honors discipline; that demands imagination, yet is grounded in truth. If you want your focus on poetry to extend beyond the occasionally read poem and if you believe all students have within them that desire to share their truest feelings, then this book is your invitation to change. To connect. To bring poetry into your students' lives.

And perhaps that is what makes this book a gift. First, it's a gift that Kwame has given all of us as he shares his journey, as he shares his voice, as he shares his insights and understandings. As I read the pages, I understood a writer I've always admired has given us all a gift of inspiration and education. His calm you-can-do-this voice rings through these pages and his of-course-you'll-want-to-do-this excitement soars. He tells us that poetry ... *has the power to reach students, tap into their emotional intelligence while allowing them to freely and openly express themselves. It can be the school where our children go in order to learn to write well.*

And then he gives us the gift of showing how to make that happen. In step-by-step specificity, *The Write Thing* shows us how to move students from ideas, to drafts, to finished products, to a published work.

And this book is a gift that we're not expected to keep to ourselves. With videos and mentor texts, Kwame shows us how to share excitement for writing with our students. For those of us who would quickly say, "But I'm not a poet," this book shows us how to unleash the poet Kwame believes resides in each of us, polish our work, and then publish it for an audience—even a small one—so we all see that our poems become a gift to others.

Finally, I'll add my own warning. This book demands your time. It demands your attention. It demands that you examine what you have done and what it is you could be doing. It gently urges you to examine practices and ask yourself (as I had to ask myself), "Do I really understand the power of the poem?" The book is divided into three parts—writing, publishing, and presenting—and concludes with the most helpful Appendix I've ever seen in a book. While it reads fast, this book should not be a fast read. Linger. Muse. Reread. Mark. Read the poems aloud. Write your own poems. Journey into yourself, back into the world, then into your classroom. Share with your kids. And then watch them soar.

PREFACE

An Unconventional, Uncommon Writing Workshop



That Will Have Your Students Writing for Their Lives

When I was in college, I wanted to be an actor and a playwright. I'd written a play my sophomore year at Virginia Tech, produced it, and received rave reviews from students and teachers alike. On a dare, I applied to a theater master class, taught by some of the most renowned artists and writers in the industry: Cicely Tyson, Spike Lee, and Charles Fuller. Luckily, I was accepted.

Mr. Fuller, who had just penned the powerful and critically acclaimed film *A Soldier's Story*, starring Denzel Washington, based on his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, led the playwriting component of the class.

We each had to share our work-in-progress, and I remember him telling me that mine lacked soul, it lacked emotion, and while I may have employed some of the devices that make for a good dramatic play, my piece simply was too long and uninteresting. "Go write some poetry," he said. "Poems are the basic building blocks of all forms of writing. Learn how to do that, and you'll learn how to write your play."

So, you're thumbing through a catalog, or you're in a bookstore, and you come across this colorful professional resource with a handsome poet on the front, and it's called *The Write Thing*, and you think, "Great, just what we need, another book on teaching writing!" But then you decide to pick it up. You take it home, open it up, read a little, and determine that it is at least interesting ... until, you get to this very scary word: POETRY. And you keep reading, and you quickly notice that it's ALL POETRY. The. Entire. Writing. Workshop. Is. Poetry.

Of course it's poetry, people! And it's the opposite of scary. It's soothing. It's the love poem your college sweetheart wrote to you. It's the rhyme you used to love to read and hear in elementary school. It's poetry because some of your favorite writers are poets: Maya Angelou, Shel Silverstein, Shakespeare. It's poetry because what teacher doesn't want their students' writing to be full of emotion. It's poetry because, as literary critic and educator Northrop Frye (2001) says, "If literature is to be properly taught, we have to start at its center, which is poetry, then work outwards to literary prose ... Poetry is the most direct and simple means of expressing oneself in words."

I've been teaching this writing workshop for more than 20 years and it's always been poetry because, the truth is, reading and writing poetry is fun and functional. Yes, I could have written a handbook for using fiction in a writing workshop, or memoir, or playwriting—wait, that's a good idea, stay tuned!—but for an introduction, there is no better literary vehicle to launch a writing workshop with than poetry.

As if I wasn't already thinking outside the box, I've added another uncommon component to the writing workshop: publishing. As a child of a book publisher and as a published author myself, you'll just have to trust me on this one, folks: The level of confidence your students will attain when they see their work available for public consumption is off the charts. It will be one of the highlights of their schooling. And your teaching as well.

I'd been an English teacher for more than 14 years, and I'd never seen anything like it. Poetry and Publishing. The workshop was so successful that we implemented it three years in a row. And when I moved to a new district, we did it again. I have witnessed students as young as 10 years of age walk taller because they were writers. Published writers. As administrators, it is our

responsibility to provide opportunities for our students that are not only academic, but also empowering and transformational. That is education at its finest.

—Kim Hardwick, Principal,
Clayton Huey Elementary School, New York

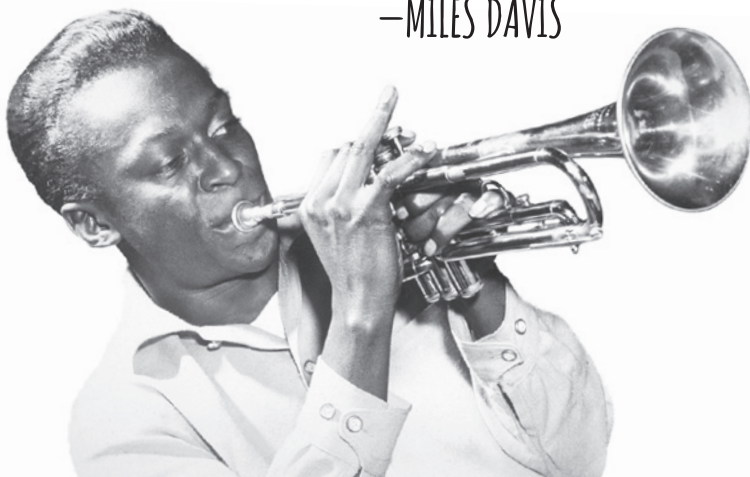
When I wrote *The Crossover*, many publishers were afraid of it: “Kids, especially boys, don’t like poetry,” they told me, “and this book will never sell.” I always believed that poetry, because it is so concise, rhythmic, and energetic, with tons of white space, would not only be unthreatening to students, but would be extremely appealing. I feel as strongly about *The Write Thing*. This writing workshop may be unconventional and uncommon, but it will work. It will have your students writing for their lives. And enjoying it. If you don’t believe me, just ask seventh grader Ian, whom I met on a recent school visit:

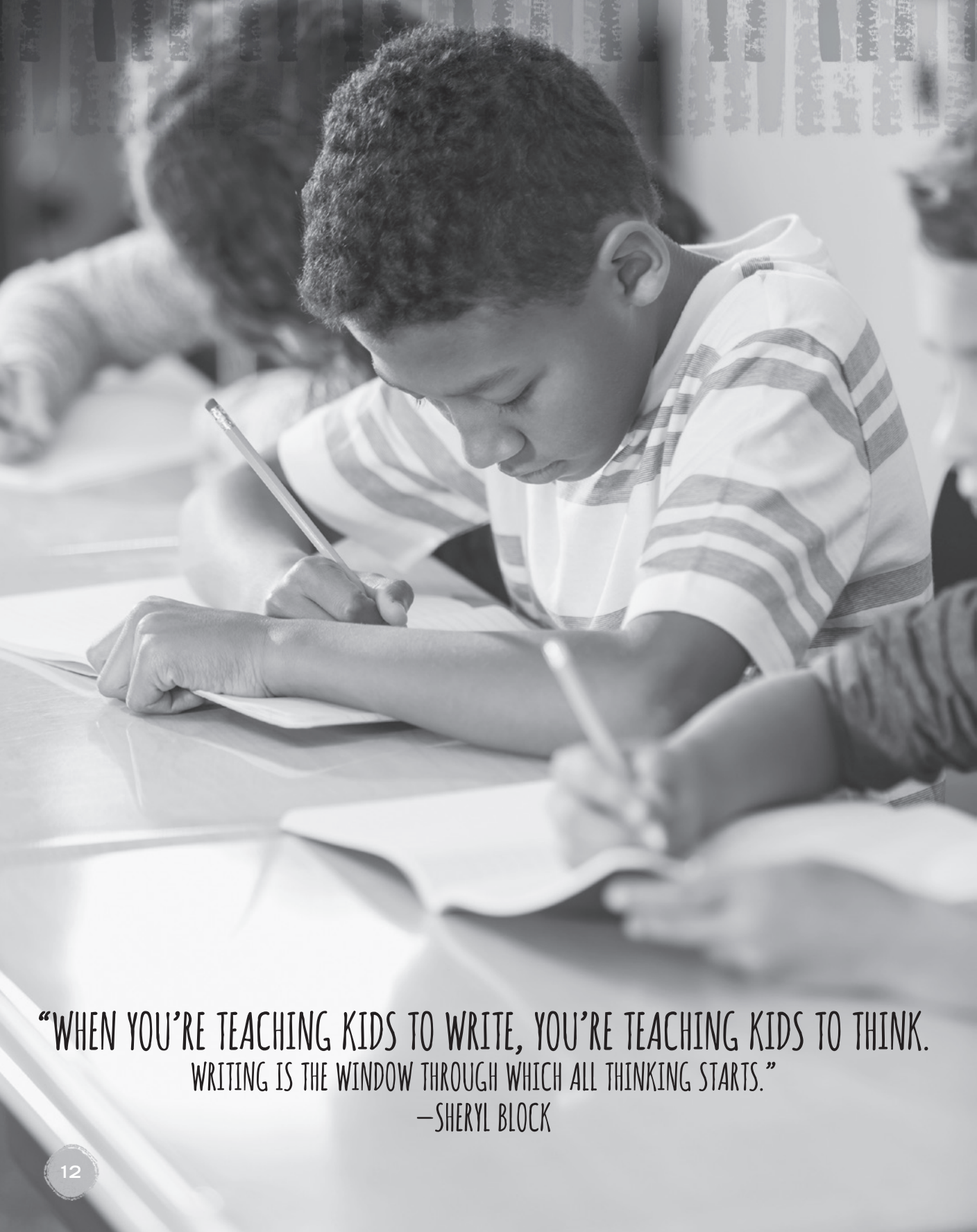
I used to think poetry was boring. No fun, stupid, etc. After your book and presentation, I actually started to like it. It's interesting that you can use your own emotions and feelings to write something.

Now, isn't that interesting?

“DON’T PLAY WHAT’S THERE,
PLAY WHAT’S NOT THERE.”

—MILES DAVIS





“WHEN YOU’RE TEACHING KIDS TO WRITE, YOU’RE TEACHING KIDS TO THINK.
WRITING IS THE WINDOW THROUGH WHICH ALL THINKING STARTS.”

—SHERYL BLOCK

INTRODUCTION

Finding Your Writing Groove

Lucy Calkins says, “When students are published authors, they make reading-writing connections” (2001). In my 25 years of literacy work in schools around the world, I have witnessed this transformation firsthand, in particular with the Book-in-a-Day workshop that I founded in 2006. I took Calkins’s innovative idea a step further and decided that the connection becomes exponentially stronger when the publishing component is, get this, student-run. How I arrived at this concept is a case study in child labor practice, happenstance, and improvisation.

I grew up with a father who wrote books and owned a publishing company. My mother wrote children’s books and taught English. Books lined our walls and were stacked on floors in each room: biographies, history, fiction, textbooks, visual art, memoirs, children’s literature, folklore, poetry. We read for fun, for punishment, for relaxation, even for competition. My very first writing workshop took place in our family room, where my siblings and I made up stories about the places we traveled and the people, real and imagined, we met, then shared them in family talent shows and as bedtime tales. This was our ritual. But, there was another side to this. I worked for my father’s publishing company. And, I loathed it.

As an elementary and middle school student, I was involved from concept to shelf in the book publishing process. From typing to stapling direct-mail catalogues to exhibiting books at trade shows, I was immersed in literature and publishing daily while my friends played video games and rode bikes.

Don’t get me wrong, I did get to play outside, but only after the inventory had been completed.

When I left for college, I had but one goal: to get as far away from books as fast as possible. So, I majored in biochemistry with every intention of becoming a doctor, until I encountered organic chemistry, and quickly changed my major to something more familial: English. After a series of classes and workshops with dynamic and inspiring creative writing professors such as Nikki Giovanni, my appreciation for story came full circle. I was back in my family room, only this time I decided that my literary pursuits would be life-sustaining, not just fodder for bedtime entertainment. I was going to write for a living. But not just pen to paper. My plans included hosting writing retreats, producing book festivals, publishing other writers, and teaching writing. So, I did. I was leading a full writerly life. And, I loved it.

Which brings us to Book-in-a-Day.

Creating a Student–Run Publishing Enterprise

From 1995–2005, I operated my own publishing company, continued conducting writing workshops in middle and high schools across the country, and wrote seven books, including *Do the Write Thing: 7 Steps to Publishing Success*. I'd been asked by novice writers, on a regular basis, how to publish a book. That book was my answer.

Do the Write Thing (DTWT) is like Publishing 101. It is designed for the novice who wants to learn the ABCs of book publishing. This reading will be similar to the first time you rode a bike. Remember when your father guided you down the sidewalk day after day? Then, one Saturday he let you ride by yourself. Just like that. And while you did fall a few times, eventually through practice, courage, and ingenuity, you mastered it. Unlike most publishing how-to books, which seem to get mired down in every possible detail and tedious direction, this book will give you a general map drawn in bright colors, and leave it up to you to chart your own course. I will impart my knowledge if you promise to tap into your creativity. My purpose is to teach you the mechanics of book publishing so that you feel confident enough to “ride by yourself.”

—Preface of *Do the Write Thing: 7 Steps to Publishing Success*

The Beginning

I loved the bike riding metaphor in the preface. And, apparently so did a lot of other people. Suddenly, I became a budding expert in the field of self-publishing, and writers were turning to my text to help them find their literary stride. One such writer was Dana Davidson, a young adult novelist, who also happened to be an AP English teacher in Detroit, Michigan (a Newsweek/WDIV-TV Outstanding Teacher Awardee, in fact). She'd read my book and asked if I would consider facilitating a publishing workshop for her high school seniors. Over the course of the school year, her students had written fiction, essays, articles, axioms, and poems, and she wanted to reward them with a book. There was one hitch, however. She wanted me to teach the students so that they could do the actual publishing work themselves. That, and she only had one day for all of this to occur. Naturally, always one to embrace a challenge, I said "Yes!" and made my way to the Great Lake state.



There were 35 students in each of Dana's five classes, which began at 7:30 in the morning and concluded at 4:30 in the afternoon. Like Bobby McFerrin leading a choir of singers in a musical experience that is completely improvisational, for those nine hours we created powerful melodies, rhythms, and textures. One class proofread, another created a title and designed a cover. Each group of students became a different department in our makeshift publishing company. By the end of the day, our performance, birthed out of a literal celebration of spontaneity, was complete. Two weeks later, copies of their paperback book, *Unspoken*, were delivered to the school, and a book party was held where students presented poems from the book to an excited audience of teachers, parents, friends, and educators. They autographed copies. They became proud authors. I bet you're wondering how it all went down, right? Keep reading

Transforming Young Lives

Word got around that I'd just helped a group of students publish a book in a day, and requests started coming in for me to work my magic at other schools. Unfortunately, the student work lacked the quality of the students in Dana's classes. The writing just didn't "behave." Rather than publish student work that was not up to par, I began offering a prerequisite writing workshop, with a focus on accessible and authentic poetry as the literary vehicle, prior to the

publishing workshop. I began to model my unconventional writing workshop for teachers, sharing my tools to get students excited about writing. There had to be a structure, because it was called Book-in-a-Day, and I only had five hours with each group of students. Of course, I left enough room for flexibility within those five hours in case I had a creative epiphany or brainstorm (and I had many, thanks to the intellectual curiosity and diversity of the different students). Teachers were surprised that students, who typically had to be dragged to pen and paper, were now composing haiku.

Recently, while facilitating a middle school writing workshop in Singapore, a group of teachers shared with me their surprise that a boy who loathed reading and writing had become one of the stars of the writing workshop. He regularly volunteered correct answers to my questions; he eagerly shared his masterpieces with the group; and when students got a little loud and distracted, he shhhushed! them. Talk about the power of writing to transform young lives.



SOLO ACT: DEANNA NIKAIDO

BOOK-IN-A-DAY LITERACY COACH

When I was first introduced to the Book-in-a-Day literacy program, I was excited at the thought of helping a few students get their own work published, which was something no one else was doing. In many ways, in the beginning, it was beyond the students' (and teachers') dreams to actually do something significant like publish a book (in a day). There were so many unknowns.

When working with young people, it's sometimes difficult to tell if or how you're making a difference. Thank goodness for the students who came up to us during break on the first day offering candid pages of their soul for us to read. But what about the students who had rarely, if ever, set foot upon the boat of their own words; never fully untied it from the dock, set it afloat, or let the throttle full out? I think what surprised me most were these students: the middle school boy who sat twirling his blank sheet of paper until the last hour of the day who ended up writing a love poem to his girl from the viewpoint of a football field; the third-grade boy who says he has nothing to write about and then stands up eager to share his poem about his brother who died and is surprised by his own tears; the high school girl who tells us how poetry saved her life; or the fifth grader from Canada who wrote, "Poems are like ships that take you away to places where you can let out what's inside of

Helping Students Find Their Voices

The goal of Book-in-a-Day was for students to “find their voices” so that they could uncover and express the woes and wonders of their world. And, it worked. Each workshop became a community of empowered voices. We laughed. We cried. We connected with literature in the same vital, electric, and life-giving ways I had as a child. After nine years and 76 schools, we created more than 5,000 engaged and excited student authors and publishers.

How to Use *The Write Thing*

The three-part writing workshop presented in this book—writing, publishing, and presenting—is my attempt to capture and share the tools, techniques, and energy of Book-in-a-

you. Poetry can be like wind, hard to catch but easy to feel. Those words that are jumbled inside of you can be expressed in a way to make a poem take you to a new world.”

Since Book-in-a-Day’s conception in 2006, we have worked with high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, the deaf community, and incarcerated youth, publishing over 3,000 student authors. Over the past 12 years, I have been amazed by the students’ willingness to be candid. Some hoped that by being published, someone would read their words. Really listen. Maybe a parent or someone they liked or had a fight with. Some felt their poems could be megaphones traveling into the world to make a difference. Others just needed to share the best or worst moments of their day. Whatever the reason, these youths had a lot on their hearts and minds. They wanted to be heard.

For reasons I can’t explain, poetry has always been a safe and acceptable way to say just about anything you want or need to express. It is the art of painting with words; building a bridge between the heart and mind; developing an emotional intelligence, which is even more necessary now in this Digital Age where connection is becoming more and more virtual. Poems look you in the eye.

I had no idea that this program to create a handful of student authors would catch fire in the way it has or become the compass these young people needed to be able to access their own unique voices; to say what they want to say as they journey into their own possibilities.

Day. Students participate in different types of writing: modeled, shared, interactive, and independent writing. *The Write Thing* and *Book-in-a-Day* are interchangeable terms. Think of this book as a guide to getting your students engaged with (and excited about) writing, reading, and speaking. It is designed for teachers who crave a literary jumpstart—part how-to, part inspiration.

The book is organized around a series of running features:

- Kwame QuickTips
- Solo Acts (voices from the field)
- Lessons in Action
- KwameTime videos
- You Can Too!
- Questions for Kwame
- And lots of poetry!

Lessons in Action are woven throughout the book at points of need. I've avoided designating grade levels because a good lesson is a good lesson—and I know you'll do what effective teachers always do: adapt it to fit the unique needs and interests of your students. You'll change it up if you work with older, sophisticated students, and you may simplify if your youngsters are just finding their way into the exciting new world of reading and writing. The Questions for Kwame throughout the book include both questions students ask when I visit them as well as frequently asked questions by teachers.

What about Time?

Out of necessity, our *Book-in-a-Day* workshop was one day, two at most. Your *The Write Thing* workshop doesn't have to follow such a rigid time line—it could be a week, a month, a semester—or better yet, a new way of life for you and your students. What's most important here is that you listen to the music of your students, be inspired, orchestrate, help them find their groove, and just jam!

Appendix and Digital Resources

Please look through the Appendixes of this book (pages 136–208) for a wealth of mini-lessons, guidelines, checklists, and forms to help you and your students during various stages of *The Write Thing* writing workshop. All student-facing activity pages mentioned throughout the book are provided in digital form for your easy reference and use. The poems shared throughout the book are also provided digitally to encourage you to display them for shared or modeled reading opportunities. See page 207 for more information about the digital resources provided with this product.

How to Access and Use KwameTime Videos

Interacting with students and teachers and sharing my love of poetry is such a big part of my job. And, I love it. Thing is, save for cloning, I can't be at every school. Unless ...

Want to bring me into your classroom to assist with *The Write Thing*? Want a smiling, handsome poet to help jumpstart your writing workshop? This book includes a series of video clips of me in action. See page 207 for more information.

The clips are divided into two menus: 1) Kwame Guides Teachers and 2) Kwame Guides Students (and, as you'll notice, some clips work for both you and your students). The good news: you can watch them again and again, as many times as you might find useful—Kwame on an endless feedback loop (I may even slip a few poems in there for your enjoyment)!

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KwameTime
Videos



