

THE

Write

THING

KWAME
ALEXANDER'S

GUIDE
FOR

INSPIRING
Student Writers



THE *Write* **THING**

KWAME ALEXANDER'S

GUIDE FOR  **INSPIRING**
Student Writers

© 2026 KA Productions, LLC
All rights reserved.

This book has been filed with the Library of Congress.
LCCN: 2026020120
ISBN 979-8-3309-2356-4

Edited by Cathy Hernandez
Cover design by Colleen Pidel
Interior design by Robin Erickson

See page 210 for the credits.

The classroom teacher may reproduce copies of materials in this book for classroom use only. The reproduction of any part for an entire school or school system is strictly prohibited. No part of this publication may be transmitted, stored, or recorded in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Website addresses included in this book are public domain and may be subject to changes or alterations of content after publication of this product. Shell Education does not take responsibility for the future accuracy or relevance and appropriateness of website addresses included in this book. Please contact the company if you come across any inappropriate or inaccurate website addresses, and they will be corrected in product reprints.

All companies, websites, and products mentioned in this book are registered trademarks of their respective owners or developers and are used in this book strictly for editorial purposes. No commercial claim to their use is made by the author or the publisher.



A division of Teacher Created Materials, Inc.
5482 Argosy Avenue
Huntington Beach, CA 92649-1039
www.tcmpub.com/shell-education



For two dear friends, Kim and
Chris, educators extraordinaire
whose lights still shine in the
hearts of many a student.





Contents

Foreword: Discovering the Neglected Genre	1
Preface: An Unconventional, Uncommon Writing Experience	3
Introduction: Finding Your Writing Groove	7
Part 1: Writing	15
Chapter One: Setting the Stage: Why Start with Poetry?	17
Chapter Two: Launching <i>The Write Thing</i> in Your Classroom	29
Chapter Three: Preparing to Write	43
Chapter Four: Writing the Draft	58
Chapter Five: Revising Is Re-Envisioning	77
Part 2: Publishing	89
Chapter Six: Making Student-Run Publishing a Priority	91
Chapter Seven: Step-by-Step Book Publishing	102
Part 3: Presenting	113
Chapter Eight: Presenting Student Work	115
Acknowledgments	126
Appendixes	129
Appendix A: Lesson Resources	132
Appendix B: Poetry Form Mini-Lessons	144
Appendix C: Book Publishing Resources	174
References	195
Index	197
Digital Resources and Video URLs	206
About the Author	208



Foreword to the First Edition

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? Of the story? Of the writing?” 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 it aloud. Write your own story. Journey into yourself, back into the world, then into your classroom. Share with your kids. And then watch them soar.



“Don’t play what’s there, play
what’s not there.”

—Miles Davis



Preface

An Unconventional, Uncommon Writing Experience

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.

Of course this book is centered around 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 Amanda Gorman's electric poem at the Presidential Inauguration. It's the rhyme you used to love to read and hear in elementary school. It's the Poet Laureate Ada Limón's poetry in space. 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 (1997) 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" (74).

But it's not just poetry. It's also prose. That's right: In this revised edition, with the help of my friend and colleague, Stan Tucker, I've added short-form fiction and nonfiction to the menu, to give you options when you and your students "Share Your Story."

When my publisher and I discussed a companion book on everything I've learned about reading—*When Everyone Reads*—we decided to also update *The Write Thing*. There are new ideas, new approaches, new experts, and most importantly, new POEMS. I'm over-the-moon excited to share this revised edition—not too revised, because the art of writing hasn't changed too much since Phillis Wheatley or Ernest Hemingway . . . I mean, we're all still trying to distill our HEARTS on the page—because now more than ever we need something to elevate our imaginations, to help us see what's possible. As George Bernard Shaw wrote: "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last you create what you will."

There's another uncommon component in this resource: 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 of your teaching as well).



"I'd been an English teacher for more than fourteen 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 ten 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, former Principal,
Clayton Huey Elementary School, New York

Finally, before we get into the nuts and bolts of cultivating avid and confident writers, we must say something about AI (artificial intelligence) and writing.

A NOT SO ARTIFICIAL POEM ON INTELLIGENCE

by Kwame Alexander

AI is not the writer
or the hand
is not the singer
or the band
is not even the drum
keeping time
while you find
your rhythm
word by word
by word.

It is the beat
you recorded
that one time
when your brain distilled
a life.

It is *Press play*.

Sure, it can borrow
a metaphor for you
can swipe a simile for you
can heist hyperbole
can try to be more you
than you

But then what about the work?
the risk
the satisfaction
of paying attention
to the small, great things

What of the indefatigable courage
to explore the language
of truth
that comes
when pencil
and memory
and soul

collide
like little clouds
in a sky full
of life-giving breath
way bigger
than any water-pirating machine.

Surely, it can help you
spend less time
correcting commas
and point of view
but *they* can't teach you
why *your* story matters
why *her* heartbreak won't let go
why *our* joy waits for us
at dawn
like a puppy
at bedside.

You may think it can
mitigate your creative uncertainty
correct your literary frailty
write an A-minus poem
but really, it'll just kidnap
your trembling voice
then translate all the pain
in ten seconds or less
like your grief
is a timed SAT prompt
all the while
never even knowing that
you still cry on snow days
because your mother
used to come into your room
while you slept and
drape you in warm towels
heated from the dryer
in the freezing garage.

continued 

AI will even explain
exactly what you mean
dissect your lazy imagination
like a classroom frog
but can it skip across the pond
that is the human condition
and fall
and get up
and fall
then get up
again?

Can it swim
across the big sea
of your wildly precious life
with the same care
and compassion
of a grandson
whose silence
vibrates louder
than any sentence?

Yes, AI can be a mirror
giving you all the answers
you seek
but it will never be able
to imagine
the soundtrack
playing between
the lines

it will never be able to hear
the wonder being born
right now
and right now
or even right now

It will never be you
asking the right questions
and finding yourself
in each answer
one word
at a time.

Of course, with all that said, surely you can and will find some ethically responsible ways to use all of this new technology to turn your classroom into a vibrant rehearsal space for the writerly life, rather than a courtroom of stale testimony and regurgitated evidence. Right? Okay then, I'm off my soapbox now. Carry on!

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 unintimidating to students, but would be extremely appealing. I feel as strongly about *The Write Thing*. The writing experience described in this book 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 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?



Introduction

Finding Your Writing Groove

“When you’re teaching kids to write, you’re teaching kids to think.
Writing is the window through which all thinking starts.”

—Sheryl Block, former fourth grade and
special education teacher

Poet and children’s book author Ralph Fletcher says, “We need to show students the invisible stairs that writers climb from inspiration to the finished product.” As a published author and a literacy professional, I am particularly experienced in coaching students up the writing and publishing mountain. How I arrived at this summit 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 a tween 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 I could, 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 to 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. 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 thirty-five 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, most of 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. When it was time to meet with their students, 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.

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 workshop's fiercest advocates. 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.



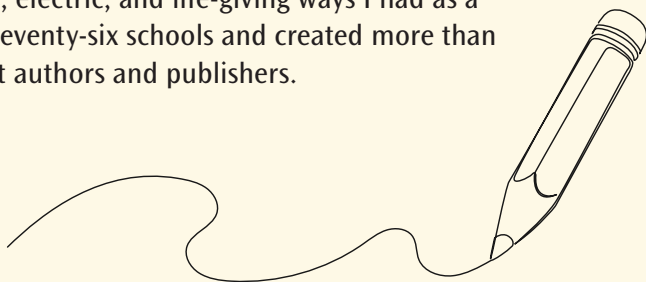
Solo Act: Deanna Nikaido

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 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."

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. During those nine years, we visited seventy-six schools and created more than five thousand engaged and excited student authors and publishers.



During Book-in-a-Day’s nearly ten-year tenure, we worked with high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, the deaf community, and incarcerated youth, publishing over five thousand student authors. I was always 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 and stories 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 youth 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 like to think of poetry as a jump-off to other forms of writing—prose, plays, nonfiction. So, for teachers who want to try other literary forms, you’ll find some new mini-lessons and ideas in this edition.

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.

How to Use *The Write Thing*

The three-part writing experience presented in this book—writing, publishing, and presenting—captures the tools, techniques, and energy of Book-in-a-Day. Students participate in different types of writing: modeled, shared, interactive, and independent. *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)
- Share Your Story (Writing Fiction and Nonfiction)
- Lessons in Action
- KwameTime Videos
- You Can Too!
- Questions for Kwame
- And lots of poetry and prose!

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 and frequently asked questions by teachers.

What About Time?

Out of necessity, our Book-in-a-Day workshop was one day, two at most. Your writing experience doesn't have to follow such a rigid timeline—it could be a week, a month, a semester—or better yet, a new writerly 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!



KwameTime Video for Teachers

The Write Thing Overview



Appendix and Digital Resources

Please look through the appendixes of this book (pages 129–193) for a wealth of mini-lessons, guidelines, checklists, and forms to help you and your students during various stages of *The Write Thing* writing experience. All student-facing activity pages mentioned throughout the book are provided in digital form for your easy reference and use. The sample writings shared throughout the book are also provided digitally to encourage you to display them for shared or modeled reading opportunities. See page 206 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 class? This book includes a series of video clips of me in action. See page 206 for more information.

The clips are divided into two menus: Kwame Guides Teachers and 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)!

Page	Kwame Guides Teachers
12	<i>The Write Thing</i> Overview
18	The Essential Importance of Writing
72	Model Lesson: Haiku
77	Revising Poetry
91	Why Publish?
107	Setting Up Your Classroom Publishing Teams
115	Presenting Tips and Techniques
125	Kwame's Top 10 <i>The Write Thing</i> Tips

Page	Kwame Guides Students
44	Defining Poetry
61	Introducing Spine Poems
62	Introducing Borrowed Poems
71	Introducing Haiku
80	RE-vising Your Poems
99	Publishing: Put Your Words into the World!
103	Brainstorming a Book Title
109	Setting Up a Classroom Publishing Company
116	Presenting 101: Tips for Success

KwameTime Videos



PART 1:

Writing

The classroom writing experience is a gathering place of passionate ideas and opinions. It is the room where our students can go to become successful communicators, to imagine and reimagine the world.