Digging Deeper Into Writing Workshop Components: Grades K-6

Handouts
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NESA
November 8th & 9th, 2013
Dubai
Workshop Teaching

Focused Minilesson (10-12 mins)

Connection
Teaching (Demo)
Active Engagement (Guided Practice)
Link

Conferences
Traditional R-D-T
Research
Compliment
Teach / Practice
Link
Coaching
Teaching Point (+ Demo?)
Guided Practice
Link

Mid-Workshop Teaching Point:

Management/Stamina, Struggles, Celebratory

Small Group Strategy Lessons

Connection
Teach/Practice
Link

Teaching Share

Progress, Process, Craft, Content
**Essentials:**

* Demonstration Teaching (adult models for students what they are to try)
* Use of Mentor Texts
* Strong sense of independence in the classroom
* Supplies readily available for students to use independently
* Clear classroom management techniques
* Connections made between reading and writing, naturally and often

**Language Arts Scheduling Options for International Schools**

* Considerations for Pre-K
  ~ Interactive Read Aloud 4xs a week/15 mins (Emergent Storybooks, Rhyming/Pattern books, Wordless books)
  ~ Nursery Rhymes and Songs 4 xs a week/15 mins
  ~ Choice Time: “Writing Workshop” where students make whatever genre of “book” they want (Stories, NF, Label/Concept, Wordless…)
  ~ Guided Play with oral language focus
  ~ Shared Reading later in the year, as students know letters of own name and are more familiar with concepts of print

* Considerations for Kindergarten
  ~ Shared Reading 5xs a week/10-15 mins (can also be done in small groups during RW)
  ~ Writing Workshop 4xs a week/30-45 mins → **phase out frequency in order to pick up intensity of Reading Workshop for second half of the school year (5 xs a week), with more emphasis on Guided Reading**
  ~ **Early in the year Reading Workshop – students begin routine of reading independently for 5 mins with Emergent Story Books, or Shared Reading texts (JR leveled texts for those who are ready); partner reading for 5 minutes, 2-3 xs a week/10-15 mins
  ~ Interactive Read Aloud 4xs a week/10-15 mins
  ~ Interactive Writing 4xs a week/10-15 mins (can also be done in small groups during WW)
  ~ Word Study 3-4xs a week/10 mins (can also be small groups during WW or RW)
* Considerations for 1st-2nd Grade
~Writing and Reading Workshop 4 xs a week/45 mins
~Interactive Read Aloud 4xs a week/15 mins
~Shared Reading 4xs a week/15 mins
~Interactive Writing 3xs a week/15 mins
~Word Study 3-4 xs a week/15 mins

* Considerations for 3rd Grade
~Writing and Reading Workshop 4 xs a week/45 mins
~Interactive Read Aloud 4xs a week/15 mins
~Shared Reading 1-2xs a week/15 mins
~Interactive Writing 1-2xs a week/15 mins
~Word Study 3-4 xs a week/15 mins

* Considerations for 4th - 5th Grade
~Writing and Reading Workshop 4/5 xs a week/45-60 mins
  Could do ‘Major / Minor’ weeks off and on
~Interactive Read Aloud 4xs a week/15 mins
~Word Study 3-4 xs a week/15 mins
# Sample Curriculum Calendar

## Writing Workshop

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking, Drawing, Writing (6 weeks)</td>
<td>Launching Writing Workshop (3 weeks)</td>
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<tr>
<td>What Authors Do, I Can Do Too (6 weeks)</td>
<td>Small Moments (6 weeks)</td>
<td>Authors as Mentors (Non-Genre Specific, 7 weeks)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Moments (6 weeks)</td>
<td>Writing for Readers (5 weeks)</td>
<td>All About Books (7 weeks)</td>
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<td>Poetry (6 weeks)</td>
<td>Teacher Choice (4 weeks)</td>
<td>Small Moments (7 weeks)</td>
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<td>How-to Books (4 weeks)</td>
<td>How-to Books (2 weeks)</td>
<td>Fiction (6 weeks)</td>
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<td>All About Books (4 weeks)</td>
<td>All About Books (4 weeks)</td>
<td>Poetry (3 weeks)</td>
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<td>Independent Writing Projects (5 weeks)</td>
<td>Poetry (3 weeks)</td>
<td>Exploring Different Genres (3 weeks)</td>
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<td>Authors as Mentors (5 weeks)</td>
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<td>Teacher Choice (3 weeks)</td>
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## HKIS – Primary School

### Other Writing Units to Consider:
- Looking Closely: Observing, Labeling and Listing like Scientists
- Song-writing
- Revision
- Writing Adaptations of Familiar Fairytales/Folktales
- Writing to Grow Ideas: Literary Response
- Persuasive Writing: Reviews
- Travel Writing

### Upper Grade Writing Units to Consider (3-5):
- Poetry
- Memoir
- Multi-Genre Projects / Independent Projects
- Literary Picture Books
- Realistic Fiction
- Historical Fiction Short Narratives (and any other kind of fiction, especially after doing Realistic Fiction)
- Literary Essays / Book Reviews & Recommendations
Narrative and Non-Narrative (Expository) Writing: Entertaining, Informing, Persuading

STORY (Narrative):

~ Text is driven by a plot line with a beginning, middle, end
~ Problem / Solution, with sense of growing tension
~ Character(s) changes across story in some way
~ Setting / scene changes

Genres: Personal Narrative (true story from own life); Realistic Fiction, Mystery, HF, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Memoir (hybrid often including expository)

IDEA-BASED (Non-Narrative):

~ Text is structured with the frame of an idea (thesis) and supporting points
~ Evidence provided to support idea

Writing Partnerships

Guiding Questions:
~Who is like me as a writer? Who is not like me as a writer?

~What can my partner help me improve upon? What can I help my partner improve upon?

Strategic Partnerships: Use as much information as possible about your writers, to find a good match for each

~Writing Abilities:
   Alike in abilities enough, so that it does not turn into a one-on-one tutorial (could use Narrative Writing Continuum from TC as resource for assessing)

~ELLs:
   Place a stronger English speaker with a weaker, but not too far apart in abilities;
   Place two students who are quite similar in language acquisition stages so that they can encourage each other

~Stages of Language Acquisition:
   Students with strong oral language skills can work with shyer students, working to bring their voices out more;
   Students with strong oral language skills (but bossy) can work with each other to “duke it out”

Consider triads when necessary
Keeping partnerships stable:

Try at least 1-2 units before switching. Students need to build a relationship and work out the kinks in their partnership. They need to get to know each other as writers and develop a bond over their ongoing writing pieces, and the writing process that they are experiencing. As students get older (by 4th/5th grade) they may stay in a stable Writing Partnership all year long.

Teaching How to Take Turns, Talk and Listen

Model these skills repeatedly in Minilessons, Conference fishbowls, Mid-Workshop Teaching Points and Teaching Shares.

* Good Writing Partners make sure to both share their work by taking turns
* Good Writing Partners put the work they are looking at in between them so that they can both see/read it at the same time
* Good Writing Partners often practice reading aloud their own work to each other
* Good Writing Partners understand that their job is to first listen, then to offer a compliment and a ‘teaching point’ or suggestion
* Good Writing Partners speak clearly and articulately, letting their partners know what they want help or advice with, and offering their own ideas when it makes sense to support their partner
* Good Writing Partners are on the lookout for mentor texts for their partner, once they get to know the writing they are working on
* Good Writing Partners ask each other questions, when they are confused or need clarification
Writing Process

Primary Grades:

Immersion
Rehearsing / Planning
Drafting
Revising
Editing
Publishing
Celebrating!

*Students use Writing Folders, with STOP and GO sides for organizing ongoing work*

Upper Primary Grades:

Immersion
Collecting/Gathering Entries
Choosing
Developing/Nurturing
Drafting
Revising
Editing
Publishing
Celebrating!

*Students use Writers’ Notebooks, and keep a drafting folder for organizing ongoing work and collecting resources*
**Minilessons**

**Connection** - give a lay of the land for students and help to set context, name the specific teaching point, inspire

**Teaching** – show the specific teaching point in action, or by example

**Active Engagement** – allow students the opportunity to practice with a partner and with teacher’s coaching

**Link** – restate the teaching point and help to set context, inspire

**Watch for:** structure, overall pacing and ways that students are engaged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pacing/Time of Lesson:</th>
<th>Notes for improvement?</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Connection</strong></td>
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Minilesson Template

Minilesson Teaching Point:

Connection:

Teaching:

Active Engagement:

Link:

Materials/Resources Needed:

Anchor Chart:
How To Find a Focus In a Writing Conference

1. The student tells you something she’s doing or trying to do as a writer (you don’t have to always follow the student’s agenda).

2. Ask assessment questions based on what you value to help you identify what the student is doing as a writer.
   a. **Student Initiates Writing**: Why are you writing this? Who do you hope will read this?
   b. **Student Writes Well**: What are you doing to write really well? What does your draft still need? What revisions have you made? Why?
   c. **Student Has a Process**: Where are you in the process? What steps have you taken? What strategies are you using? How are they helping you to write well?

3. You follow up on something you’ve planned or worked on with this student before.

4. You follow up on a recent minilesson.

*Referenced from Carl Anderson’s One to One Conferring*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What am I learning about this student writer? What do I notice them doing?</th>
<th>What do I need to teach this student writer? Goals…</th>
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Structures for Writing Conferences

“Research- Decide- Teach”

Research – ask open-ended questions, follow up questions, look at student work quickly

Decide what to teach and name teaching point clearly

TEACH – COACH – TEACH – COACH (as needed by individual student)

Link – repeat teaching point in generalized terms, to ensure it applies to other days/work

“Coaching”

Research – most likely already done and written down in conferring notes

Observe - watch child write, quickly glance over pictures/writing

Teach by Coaching – as child draws/writes, help them along by giving lean prompts, repeat as necessary

Link – repeat teaching point in generalized terms, to ensure it applies to other days/work

“Check in” *

Research – ask specific question, quickly glance over specific work

Celebrate, Clarify or Reinforce – give child direct feedback as to progress

*This conference serves as a more formal assessment type of conference, and is most likely to be used if teacher has repeatedly taught something specific to class/individual and wants to see how the work is progressing. Can be very useful for management and expectation purposes.
## Writing Workshop Conferences

**Grade/Class:** 

**Unit of Study:** ________________  **Dates:** ________________

**Big Goals:**

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**Names:**

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<th>Pulled into Small Group Strategy Lessons</th>
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Conferring

Roles: Student, Teacher, Coach

Watch for and practice:
~ Structure
~ Overall pacing and how the work is recorded for future reference

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<tr>
<th>Conference #1</th>
<th>Student:</th>
<th>Recorded TP and next steps</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<td>Research &amp; Compliment</td>
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<td>Research &amp; Compliment</td>
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What Is a Writing Conferring Toolkit and What Does It Have In It?

- A toolkit that has some materials you can use as a teacher to teach from
  - Materials we can put in our toolkits
    - A few teacher demonstration pieces in different stages of development- show samples: pictures, pict/labels, pictures and bare bones writing, well written piece
    - A few pieces the teacher has created to TEACH INTO something many kids struggle with (for example: focus, elaboration, etc..)
    - Mentor text so you can use it to do an explanation and example conference
    - Conferring cheat sheets- to refer to what you taught the children previously and also what might be teaching possibilities inside this unit of study
    - Student writing samples- to show children and give them a vision of what they are making
    - Small charts you may want to use with kids or tools you want to encourage them to use more often (abc charts, personal word walls, grammar rules, etc…)

Tips For Using Your Toolkit

- Put writing pieces in plastic sleeves and keep a vis a vis marker in your toolkit so you can easily demonstrate for a student without destroying your writing piece or having to make it over again- this way you can reuse it
- Carry it around with you during conferences so that you are forced to use it- it is one thing to make a toolkit and another to actually use it!
- Keep blank sheets of paper, blank booklets and/or graphic organizers so you can teach planning out a draft - many kids need lots of work on this- this way you can model touching the pages to rehearse your writing and sketching across the pages first, or touch each point on a timeline while thinking outloud what might go there
- Try to post it things you may want to use pieces to teach so you can find them easily and so you don’t have to look through them in front of your students
- Don’t overload your toolkit with too many pieces- then it becomes difficult to use because you don't know which piece to pull out and teach from
Toolkits for Different Genres

• Generally you can make your toolkits for any genre with the same materials mentioned in the beginning
  ○ Teacher demonstration pieces in different stages
  ○ Teacher demonstration pieces that consider things kids will struggle with (for example: skipping steps in a How-To book, All About book that has little elaboration, Realistic Fiction story with a weak/short ending, etc…)
  ○ A few student samples in that genre
  ○ One mentor text that your students know very well- its easier if it is soft cover
  ○ Blank booklets and pages
  ○ Blank conferring grids and cheat sheets if you have them made up for your unit (you can put a few goals on the top of your conferring grid to remind you of things to teach inside of the unit)
Small Group Work – Strategy Lessons in the Writing Workshop

Quality
• Topic Choice
• Sense of Story
• Focus
• Details
• Elaboration
• Word Choice
• Organization
• Sequence

Habits
• Getting to Work
• Planning
• Rehearsing
• Staying at Work
• Risk-taking
• Self editing
• Self revising
• Rereading
• Ideas from Published Texts

Conventions
• Spacing
• Letter Formation
• Spelling of HF Words
• Spelling unknown words
• Using Tools for Spelling
• Ending Punctuation
• Capitalization

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<th>Names / Date</th>
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**How to work with a mentor text**

1) Read the piece through at least twice. The second time around, highlight places that you think are particularly moving or interesting or sentences or paragraphs that you found to be beautiful or memorable.

2) Looking back at the places you’ve highlighted, read through them slowly, asking yourself, “What is the writer doing in this passage that makes it so successful?”

3) Name the craft move that the writer made as a generalized strategy. For instance, if you noticed that the author used short, choppy sentences when building up to a critical moment, you might name the craft move in this way: “Writers build suspense by shortening the sentences leading up to a critical scene.”

4) Think about the steps that a writer would have to take to successfully use the new strategy you’ve discovered. For the short sentences strategy, the steps might look like:
   a. Find a part in your story where you want to build suspense.
   b. If you have long sentences here, shorten them by taking out the word “and” in between phrases and putting a period instead.
   c. Try new writing of very short sentences as a way to make the suspense even greater.

5) In a minilesson, show both the mentor text passage that demonstrates the strategy (this could be your connection) and your own use of the strategy in your writing (this will be your demonstration teaching). Ideally, the whole mentor text will have been read aloud at a prior time so that the students are already familiar with the whole text before diving into a specific part.
Additional Components of Balanced Literacy to Support
Writing Workshop

Shared Reading (emphasized Pre-K through 3rd grade): All eyes on one text (Big Books, document camera) while teacher leads the students in choral reading. Texts chosen at students’ general reading range and are highly engaging, often rhyming and/or with patterns. The same text is read multiple times, and with each read the teachers chooses a new focus. Oral reading skills (phrasing and fluency) as well as print strategies emphasized. Students also have time to think and talk about the text together. In PreK-Gr1, minimum 4-5 days a week; in Grades 2 -3, minimum 3-4 days a week.

Interactive Writing (emphasized Pre-K through 3rd grade): Class composes a text together based on student interest and a real audience. Teacher guides the composition and shares the pen with students to co-write text. Final product is conventional and can be re-read by class together. In PreK-Gr1, minimum 4 days a week; in Grades 2 -3, minimum 3 days a week.

Word Study (Phonics Instruction): School-wide programs like Words Their Way or Fountas & Pinnell. Students learn rules for spelling and written language at separate time (grammar, conventions, mechanics) and teacher continually makes connections back to Writing Workshop, as well as analyzes student work on regular basis to see application. Minimum 3-4 days a week.

Shared Reading
Watch for:
➢ How the teacher paces through the reading of the big book
➢ How the students are actively engaged in the choral reading of the big book
➢ What the teacher specifically works out or points out with students during the reading of the big book (print strategies? Phrasing/fluency? Comprehension? Etc…)

Interactive Writing
Watch for:
➢ How the teacher paces through the composing of the class text
➢ How the students are actively engaged in the composition/decision making of the text, as well as the physical creation of it – balance between teacher/students
➢ What the teacher specifically works out or points out with students during the composition and reading of the text (High frequency words, illustrations, spaces between words, phrasing/fluency…)
**Writing Celebrations**

~Museum Style

~“Out in the Real World”

~Performance

~Writing Around the School

+ Many more!

*Students should spend limited amounts of time “publishing” when possible, although great emphasis spent on 100% grammatically and conventionally correct writing*

**Reading / Writing Connections**

Students should continually see the connections between Reading and Writing. Teachers can foster this understanding by…

~Linking Units of Study when possible
~Encouraging reading of own writing frequently
~Pointing out connections to Writing Workshop during Shared Reading, Interactive Read Aloud and Reading Workshop
~Linking R and W partnerships together at times in interesting ways
~Encouraging students to comment on connections during conferring (Ask: *How does this connect with what we’ve been learning in Reading Workshop?*)
~Actively promoting the usage of Mentor Texts during Writing Workshop, across all units when possible
Spelling Development in a Writing Workshop

1. **Draw**
2. **Label**
3. **Write** (inventive spelling)

**Emergent Spelling** (Kindergarten)

- Children learn to recognize and write the letters of the alphabet
- Children play with sounds in words and letters (beginning and rhyming sounds emphasized)
- By end of this stage, children acquire an understanding of the concept of words, and begin to match picture cards to the words that represent their names

Examples: RASIY (bed), ARACL (ship), LcaYR (drive)

**Letter Name-Alphabetic Spelling** (Grade 1)

- Children apply the alphabet principles primarily to consonants.
- By end of this stage, children are able to represent most short vowel patterns, consonant digraphs, and consonant blends correctly.

Examples: BAD (bed), SEP or SHP (ship), FOT (float), LOP (lump)

**Within Word Pattern Spelling** (Grade 2)

- Children spell most single-syllable, short vowel words correctly
- During this stage, children move away from the sound-by-sound approach of the letter name and begin to include patterns or chunks or letter sequences that relate to sound and meaning

Examples: TRANE (train), SOPE (soap), DRIEV (drive), Spole (spoil)

**Syllables and Affixes Spelling** (Grade 3-5)

- By this stage, children already spell most one-syllable short and long vowel words correctly
- Focus of instruction shifts to multisyllabic words and patterns
Word Study: Possibilities For Fitting It All In

10-15 mins  Word Study component of Balanced Literacy- daily

5 minutes  Partnership work during R or W Workshop
  Give students something to find/notice or fix in their own independent R or W-
  then allow them to share with a partner; help them partner-edit often, not just
  during the final editing stage of the writing process, so that they learn to do it
  more on-the-go

5 minutes  Teaching Share at the end of R or W Workshop
  Connect back to what you’ve done or are currently doing in ongoing Word Study
  time, so students see the importance of its practical application AND get some
  extra practice

2-3 minutes  Mid-Workshop Teaching Point during R and W Workshop
  During Writing Workshop – help students look at their own writing with a
  specific lens – remind them of past learning and to check; set them up for future
  learning by pointing out what some students have done; address general struggles
  that they may have

5-10 minutes  Small group work: Strategy Lessons during R and W Workshop
  During R or W workshops, pull kids together with common needs (use
  assessments from DRA, running records, past conferences, looking at student
  work) and teach them in a small group. Give them new or different strategies for
  applying spelling, conventions and grammar rules to their writing

•  ELLs – For students who spend time out of the classroom, coordinate with ESL
  teacher so that at times the students are bringing their independent reading and/or
  writing to the out-of-the-classroom session and getting more one-on-one help in
  understanding the English language and its rules. The ‘Push-In’ model is most
  appropriate for the majority of students with any degree of ESOL needs. Teachers
  working with the same child in different settings should spend time sharing
  conferring notes too – what has been taught, what student is approximating, what
  student is understanding and applying independently, what student is still
  struggling with….
My name is Yoon. I came here from Korea, a country far away.

It was not long after we settled in that my father called me to his side. “Soon you will go to your new school. You must learn to print your name in English,” he said. “Here. This is how it looks.”

YOON


O

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“And in Korean my name means Shining Wisdom. I like the Korean way better.”
“Well, you must learn to write it this way. Remember, even when you write in English, it still means Shining Wisdom.”

I did not want to learn the new way. I wanted to go back home to Korea. I did not like America. Everything was different here. But my father handed me a pencil, and his eyes said Do-as-I-say. He showed me how to print every letter in the English alphabet. So I practiced, and my father was very pleased.

“Look,” he called to my mother. “See how well our little Yoon does!”
“Yes,” she said. “She will be a wonderful student!”
I wrinkled my nose.

My first day at school I say quietly at my desk while the teacher talked about CAT. She wrote CAT on the chalkboard. She read a story about CAT. I did not know what her words meant, but I knew what the pictures said. She sang a song about CAT. It was a pretty song, and I tried to sing the words, too.
Later she gave me a paper with my name on it. “Name. Yoon,” she said. And she pointed to the empty lines underneath. I did not want to write YOON. I wrote CAT instead. I wrote CAT on every line.

I wanted to be CAT. I wanted to hide in a corner. My mother would find me and cuddle up close to me. I would close my eyes and mew quietly.

The teacher looked up at my paper. She shook her head and frowned. “So you are CAT?” she asked. The ponytail girl sitting behind me giggled. After school I said to my father, “We should go back to Korea. It is better there.” “Do not talk like that,” he said. “America is your home now.”

I sat by the window and watched a little robin hop, hop in the yard. “He is all alone, too,” I thought. “He has no friends. No one likes him.” Then I had a very good idea. “If I draw a picture for the teacher, then maybe she will like me.” It was the best bird I had ever drawn. “Look, Father,” I said proudly. “Oh, this makes me happy,” he said. “Now do this.” And he showed me how to print BIRD under the picture.

The next day at school the teacher handed me another YOON paper to print. But I did not want to print YOON. I wrote BIRD instead. I wrote BIRD on every line.

I wanted to be BIRD. I wanted to fly, fly back to Korea. I would fly to my nest, and I would tuck my head under my little brown wing.

The teacher looked at my paper. Again she shook her head. “So you are BIRD?” she asked. Then I showed her my special robin drawing. I patted my red dress, and then I patted the red robin. I lowered my head and peeked up at her. The teacher smiled.

“How was school today, my daughter?” my mother asked. “I think the teacher likes me a little,” I said. “Well, that is good!” my mother said.
“Yes, but at my school in Korea, I was my teacher’s favorite. I had many friends. Here I am alone.”
“You must be patient with everyone, including yourself,” my mother said. “You will be a fine student, and you will make many new friends here.”

The next day at recess, I stood near the fence by myself. I watched the ponytail girl sitting on the swing. She watched me, too. Suddenly she jumped off the swing and ran over to me. She had a package in her hand. The wrapper said CUPCAKE. She opened it and gave me one. She giggled. I giggled, too.
When we were back in school, the teacher gave us more printing papers. I did not want to write YOON. I wrote CUPCAKE instead.

I wanted to be CUPCAKE. The children would clap their hands when they saw me. They would be excited. “CUPCAKE!” they would say. “Here is CUPCAKE!”

The teacher looked at my paper. “And today you are CUPCAKE!” she said. She smiled a very big smile. Her eyes said I-like-this-girl-Yoon.

After school I told me mother about my ponytail friend. I sang a new song for my father. I sang in English.
“You make us so proud, little Yoon,” my mother said.
“Maybe America will be a good home,” I thought. “Maybe different is good, too.”

The next day at school, I could hardly wait to print. And this time I wrote YOON on every line.
When my teacher looked at my paper, she gave me a big hug. “Aha! You are YOON!” she said.

Yes, I am YOON.

I write my name in English now. It still means Shining Wisdom.
Eleven
Sandra Cisneros

What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don’t. You open your eyes and everything’s just like yesterday, only it’s today. And you don’t feel eleven at all. You feel like you’re still ten. And you are – underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that’s the part of you that’s still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama’s lap because you’re scared, and that’s the part of you that’s five. And maybe one day when you’re all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you’re three, and that’s okay. That’s what I tell mama when she’s sad and needs to cry. Maybe she’s feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That’s how being eleven years old is.

You don’t feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don’t feel smart eleven, not until you’re almost twelve. That’s the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn’t have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I’d have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would’ve known how to tell her it wasn’t mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

“Whose is this?” Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. “Whose? It’s been sitting in the coatroom for a month.”

“Not mine,” says everybody. “Not me.”

“It has to belong to somebody,” Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It’s an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It’s maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn’t say so.

Maybe because I’m skinny, maybe because she doesn’t like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, “I think it belongs to Rachel.” An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

“That’s not, I don’t you’re not…. Not mine,” I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

“Of course it’s yours,” Mrs. Price says. “I remember you wearing it once.” Because she’s older and the teacher, she’s right and I’m not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don’t know why but all of a sudden I’m feeling sick inside, like the part of me that’s three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them
shut tight and bit down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater’s still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I’m thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, “Now, Rachel, that’s enough,” because she sees I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

“Rachel,” Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. “You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense.”

“But it’s not –“

“Now!” Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven, because all the years inside of me – ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one – are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren’t even mine.

That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s okay.

Today I’m eleven. There’s a cake Mama’s making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late.

I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.
Further Resources:

~ twowritingteachers.com.wordpress.com
~ indent (kateandmaggie.com)

One to One Conferring
How's It Going? Carl Anderson
Assessing Writers Carl Anderson
Take Joy: The Writers Guide to Loving the Craft Jane Yolen
A Writer Teaches Writing Donald Murray
The Craft of Revision Donald Murray
The Resourceful Writing Teacher Jenny Bender
Reading/Writing Connections in the K-2 Classroom Leah Mermelstein
Don’t Forget to Share: The Crucial Last Step in the Writing Workshop
A Fresh Look at Writing Donald Graves
First Grade Writers Stephanie Parsons
About the Authors: Writing Workshop with our Youngest Writers Katie Wood Ray
What We Know By Heart Katie Wood Ray
Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts Katie Wood Ray
Wondrous Words Katie Wood Ray
Independent Writing Colleen Cruz
The No Non-Sense Guide to Teaching Writing Davis & Hill
What a Writer Needs Ralph Fletcher
Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide Fletcher & Portalupi
Boy Writers Ralph Fletcher
The Revision Toolbox Georgia Heard
Writing Towards Home Georgia Heard
Mentor Texts Lynne Dorfman
Already Ready Ray & Matt Glover
Engaging Young Writers Matt Glover

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