

# Writing Can Change Everything

MIDDLE LEVEL KIDS WRITING THEMSELVES INTO THE WORLD



EDITED BY SHELBE WITTE

Principles  
**in Practice**

WRITING IN TODAY'S  
CLASSROOMS

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Cover Design: Pat Mayer  
Cover Image: Marvin Young

NCTE Stock Number: 74876; eStock Number: 74883  
ISBN 978-0-8141-7487-6; eISBN 978-0-8141-7488-3

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Witte, Shelbie, editor.

Title: Writing can change everything : middle level kids writing themselves into the world / edited by Shelbie Witte.

Description: Champaign, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Seven teacher-writers share their approaches to mentoring, modeling, and facilitating middle level writers to explore their places in the world, grounding their work in NCTE's Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing position statement"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020005063 (print) | LCCN 2020005064 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814174876 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780814174883 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Composition (Language arts)—Study and teaching (Middle school) | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Middle school)

Classification: LCC LB1631 .W725 2020 (print) | LCC LB1631 (ebook) | DDC 372.623—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020005063>

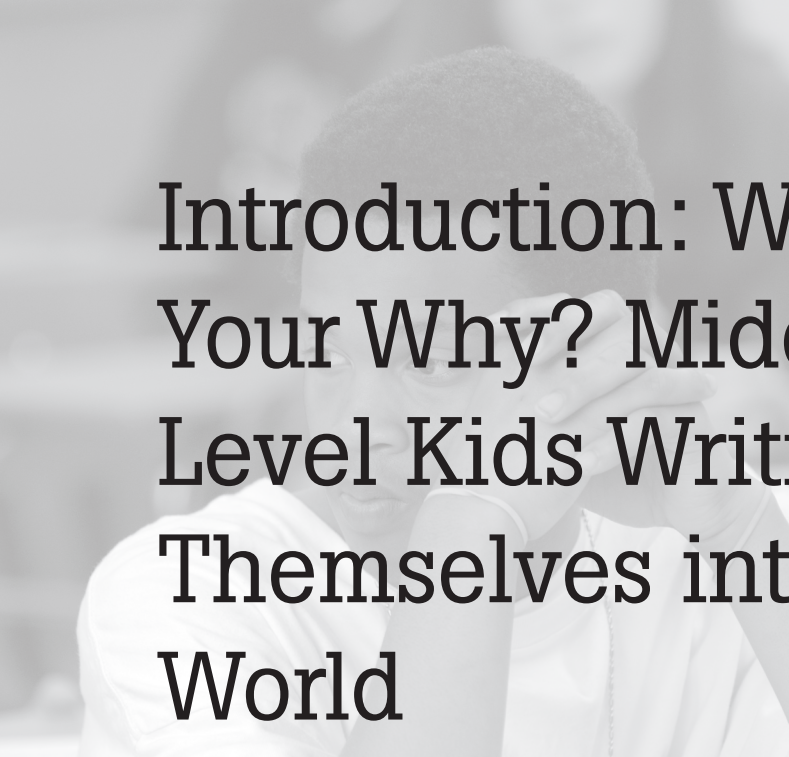
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020005064>

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# Introduction: What's Your Why? Middle Level Kids Writing Themselves into the World

Shelbie Witte

It's important to begin any discussion or conversation about writing and the teaching of writing with the acknowledgment of our "why." Why do we write? The truth is that writing is and has been at the very center of who we are as people. Throughout literate human history, we've used writing to negotiate what it means to be a person, a family, a community, and even a country. We've used symbols and alphabet and moving image to depict narratives, construct arguments, explain processes, and imagine worlds of possibilities that have propelled us forward. We've used writing to find the peace in world conflicts, to track and experiment the cures for disease and the path of discovery, and to document the present for future generations. What a privilege it is to be a teacher of something so vital to what it means to be human.

## **Who Are We?**

I have the great privilege of being an educator. Before my current position as a teacher educator, I was thrilled to spend many years as a middle school ELA National Board Certified teacher in Oklahoma and Kansas, where I was deeply involved in the local National Writing Project (NWP) sites. We might want to pause here to do a close reading of the previous sentence, as it is loaded with important

lenses that I bring with me to this project. While I am not currently teaching in a middle level classroom, you will find my heart is there. Most of my professional work is with middle level teachers and with middle schools, and I am proud of my current editorship, along with Sara Kajder, of one of the National Council of Teachers of English's premier journals, *Voices from the Middle*. My time spent writing alongside my middle level students is certainly one of the highlights of my teaching career and even of my life.

I am joined in this book by seven middle level educators who each brings with them their own journeys and their own life experiences to this project. I brought with me to this project some of the very best middle level educators I know, including Sarah Bonner, Illinois, and Margaret A. Robbins, Georgia, who are “on fire” for the endless possibilities of creative, project-based learning in the classroom, and Frances Lin, California, a leader in the Middle Level Section of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and a writer and mentor for her students. I first came to know Tracei Willis, Mississippi, through our mutual friend Wendy Warren and then face to face at the NWP Annual Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2017, where Tracei shared during the morning plenary her life-changing experience with The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights (TOLD). I had the pleasure of meeting two tremendous New Jersey educators, Lauren Zucker and Joseph S. Pizzo, at the NCTE Annual Convention a few years ago and have enjoyed following them both through social media spaces as they share their smart thinking with all of us. And finally, I was thrilled that Matthew Homrich-Knieling, Michigan, a Linda Rief *Voices from the Middle* Award winner, accepted the invitation to share his approach to critically sustaining pedagogy through public narratives. These teachers, from diverse settings and with diverse backgrounds, center writing in their classrooms and think carefully and critically about what it means to be a teacher of writing.

It's also important for us to acknowledge here a shared understanding of middle level students. For the purposes of this project, we share many common experiences as middle school teachers and are unapologetic in our embrace of middle level kids as unexpected and unique as human beings can be; middle level kids are multidimensional, multiemotional, multitalented creatures of curiosity and confusion fueled by gusto, hormones, and a little bit of magic. We acknowledge that “our teaching and learning lives are marked daily by the unrelenting energy, sharp quirkiness, and knotty complexities that middle grades youth bring to our every interaction” (Kajder & Witte, 2016, p. 7). Nancie Atwell describes middle level learners as being “on the verge of everything good: purposeful self-expression, serious curiosity about the world and how it works, a sense of humor and a sense of style, tolerance, compassion even, and their own identities” (2016, p. 9). Throughout the chapters in this collection, you will see multiple examples of middle level

learners on the verge of everything good, and their teachers working tirelessly to help them get there.

## Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing

Ten years ago, NCTE established October 20 as the National Day on Writing, and since that day, thousands of people, adults and children alike, have shared their “whys” to a broader audience through the #WhyIWrite initiative (<https://whyiwrite.us/>). Not only has #WhyIWrite provided a way to capture a snapshot of what writing looks like in the twenty-first century, but it has also drawn attention to the broader understanding of what it means *be* a writer. In the past decade, changes in culture and technological advancements and access have made visible the importance of writing and writing well. And for us as teachers of writing, this movement and writing visibility offers a “why” *for* our work with our students: we write and teach writing because being a writer is part of being in the world. And this impetus served as the driving force behind the creation of NCTE’s *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing* position statement.

NCTE’s *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing* statement (PKTW), written and adopted in 2016, guides teachers in understanding how the larger picture of the art and craft of writing is directly impacted by the writing pedagogy we use with students in our classrooms. Since NCTE wrote the original *Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* statement in 2004, the ways in which we engage with writing opportunities have increased dramatically in that “the ways writing and the spoken voice are mutually supportive in writing processes have become increasingly facilitated by technological capabilities” (PKTW, p. ix; the page references to this document map to the version reprinted in the front matter of this book). Indeed, NCTE reminds us of the dramatic shifting of our communicative worlds and the sometimes contradictory advice we as teachers are given about how to navigate it alongside our students.

The PKTW provides ten professional principles that guide the teaching of writing and that frame our work within this book. While each principle serves an important purpose in the process of becoming a writer, the principles also work together in tandem for a more holistic view to help us understand the pedagogical approaches to teaching writing.

We know from our adult life experiences that **writing grows out of many purposes** (Gardner, 2014; Haddix, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Schleppegrell, 2007). Perhaps most indicative of our current times, middle level learners are learning not only the art and craft of writing, but also a great deal about the multitude of ways that writing is important to being a person. From everyday informal writing tasks such as lists and recipes to more formalized writing events for academic purposes,

“it is important that students have experiences within school that teach them how writing differs with purpose, audience, and other elements of the situation” (PKTW, p. x). A type of situational literacy, understanding purpose and audience is a skill that builds over time and requires in addition the ability to recognize a mismatch in message and target audience. This becomes complicated as we consider that **writing is embedded in complex social relationships and their appropriate languages** (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2016; Graham et al., 2016; Janks, 2009; Krishnan et al., 2018; Mirra, 2018). The language we use matters, and the social contexts in which the language is read and understood also matter. We cannot consider our writing in isolation, as the relationship between writer and audience is as complex as the languages we use. Additionally, the social aspect of writing in a community of writers brings with it the added dimension of the writer, the reader, and all relevant others living in “a structured social order, where some people’s words count more than others, where being heard is more difficult for some people than others, where some people’s words come true and others’ do not” (PKTW, p. xi). As we negotiate writing workshops and peer responding, these social spaces are complicated by these dynamics and add to the layers of emotion embedded in what it means to share our writing publicly with others and to receive both praise and critique in the process.

Adding dimensions of complexity to the ways in which we write is the fact that **composing occurs in different modalities and technologies** (Coiro et al., 2014; Hicks & Turner, 2013; Howell et al., 2017). The twenty-first century is robust in its opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities and to become more active citizens than has ever before been possible in our history. The ways in which we compose have expanded dramatically, with new practices and vocabularies at our fingertips. Transmodal messages shared through written word, digital image, or short video and audio are instantaneously available to the world through social media channels, while research reports and entire novels are being written with iPhones and thumbs (according to Weinberger [2016], author Jeff Zentner wrote *The Serpent King* on his iPhone). The implications for writing pedagogy are simultaneously frightening and full of potential for guiding students to a deeper understanding of the power and influence these technologies afford them, as well as the impact their words can have on individuals as well as on society. Our “increased access to various modalities and technologies has created opportunities for students with a wide range of abilities, backgrounds, and languages to compose with more independence and agency” (PKTW, pp. xii–xiii).

The instantaneous nature of writing and publishing in digital environments brings forward more discussion about the tensions related to **conventions of finished and edited texts as an important dimension of the relationship between writers and readers** (MacArthur, 2018; Sommers, 1980; Witte, 2013). Teachers



of writing work earnestly to strike a delicate balance between promoting student writers' unfettered flow of ideas and teaching the standardization of language conventions that a writer must internalize in order to be better understood. This balance is difficult to achieve. In fact, "each teacher must be knowledgeable enough about the entire landscape of writing instruction to guide particular students toward a goal, including increasing fluency in new contexts, mastering conventions, and perhaps most important, developing rhetorical sophistication and appropriateness—all of which work together" (PTKW p. xiv). Facilitating opportunities for new thinking while guiding revision and editing work is both an art and a craft.

Ultimately, at the heart of our work as teachers of writing, we must embrace the philosophy that **everyone has the capacity to write; writing can be taught; and teachers can help students become better writers** (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Certo et al., 2012). We know from decades of experience that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves, which is the founding philosophy of the National Writing Project (NWP). We also know that effective writing teachers know and understand the theories of composition and know how to translate those theories into practice. In addition, we need to recognize that all writers, even gifted ones, can be characterized as struggling in many contexts and new writing situations. Ultimately, "writers need to learn multiple strategies and modalities to compensate for moments when they feel stuck or defeated, to get on with the business of composing" (PKTW, p. xvi). We need to make visible our own writing strategies, modeling and mentoring our students alongside our own work, and highlighting the lifelong journey of being a writer. We also need to be unequivocally insistent about taking the necessary time in our classrooms to develop our students' capacity to be writers. We value what we spend time doing; writing matters. And because **writing is a process** (Bazerman, 2013; Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1981; MacArthur et al., 2013), having the time necessary to do the work of writing development is critical. While the concept of a linear process of writing flourished in publications and classrooms in the 1980s, we have since learned to embrace an understanding of the process of writing as more complex and robust, as an individualized approach needing facilitation versus prescriptive dictation of structure. The multiple cognitive processes at play during writing do not happen in a linear fashion. Using skills, strategies, and reflection, people "develop and refine writing skills throughout their writing lives, as they take up new tasks in new genres for new audiences. They grow continually, across personal and professional contexts, using numerous writing spaces and technologies" (PKTW, pp. xvii–xviii). Or more simply put, **writing is a tool for thinking** (Applebee & Langer, 2013; VanDerHeide & Juzwik, 2018). While much of the writing we do in classrooms is for a larger purpose or audience, we need to recognize the importance of the informal writing necessary to understand, to clarify, and to inquire. Putting thoughts on

paper provides students the opportunity to visualize their thinking and to evaluate the best next steps to move their thinking forward. It's vital, then, to emphasize and model for students that "the use of writing to generate thought is still valuable; therefore, forms of writing such as personal narrative, journals, written reflections, observations, and writing-to-learn strategies should be included in the curriculum" (PKTW, p. xix).

It's important to also recognize that writing does not happen in a vacuum, for **writing has a complex relationship to talk** (Dutro & Cartun, 2016; VanderHeide, 2018; Vetter & Meacham, 2018) and **writing and reading are related** (Graves, 1991; NWP with DeVoss et al., 2010). Many successful writers talk through their writing ideas with trusted colleagues, and the same is true for students. When students are provided opportunities to discuss, detail, and even defend their writing to groups of their peers, they grow in their understanding of their work. For students, talking about writing is "partly in order to get ideas from their peers, partly to see what they, the writers, say when they try to explain their thinking" (PKTW, p. xx). Also important to the dynamic is the relationship between reading and writing. Not only does reading provide examples of mentor texts for a writer, but becoming well-read on the writing topic allows writers to speak from knowledge and "draw on what previous writers have said" (PKTW, p. xxi). A literacy-rich classroom with diverse texts and genres allows students to become more comfortable with wordplay and to engage in writing that stretches their experiences.

And finally, a discussion about writing principles cannot be complete without acknowledging the reality of the need for effective writing assessment, which embraces the philosophy that **the assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment** (Hillocks, 2002; McGrail & Behizadeh, 2017; Christenbury et al., 2011; Yancey, 1999). Writing assessment, and any assessment for that matter, should be for the benefit of the learner, the individual being assessed. And yet, for the most part, writing instruction in our country is designed as an outcome of the state mandates designed to determine teacher and school success. Unfortunately, part of that movement involves assessing writing with computers programmed to recognize particular algorithmic patterns of "success." The realities of state-mandated assessments may not soon go away, so educators must advocate for multifaceted assessments of our students' writing, evaluated by experienced (not Craigslist-hired) writing professionals who understand the complex, rhetorical, and recursive nature of writing (Strauss, 2013).

Through these ten principles, the PKTW statement provides us with the very best thinking in the study of writing and writing instruction. It serves as a springboard to demonstrating how we actively approach the teaching of writing in our own classrooms and frames our demonstrations of that work in the chap-

ters that follow. In these chapters, we situate our classroom practice with purpose and with a lens on writing that moves thinking forward: writing that “does” work; writing that influences and makes their world a better place, either by helping a middle level student write their way to a better understanding of self or by creating writing that makes social moves within a community and impacts a larger world. The teachers featured here are doing the hard work of teaching writing in ways that focus on these goals. When we can help students become better writers, they become better at expressing their thoughts, defending their ideas, speaking truth to power. In doing so, we have the opportunity to use the writing that we do to make a difference. Writing for social change—for better water conditions, for safer schools . . . all have the potential to make an impact.

In each of these chapters, we provide readers with a glimpse of each teacher’s classroom and the “whys” that ground their work with their students. We situate each teaching approach within the PKTW statement and provide examples of how each middle level teacher navigates their approach within these best practices. Ultimately, each teacher shares what works for them, what they would do differently, and how they are continuing to learn and grow from their reflection.

Within each section of this book, we share a writing approach from both a micro and a macro perspective to offer opportunities to consider how each can be accomplished, from a classroom-level perspective to a larger community perspective. In Part I, *Writing That Enters the World*, we examine what it means for middle level kids to put their writing into the world. In Chapter 1, Frances Lin offers us the micro approach, tackling the difficult task of teaching and fostering revision using the beloved NWP exercise of “Where I’m From” to model her own memoir poetry. For many students, writing memoir is a first step in putting their words on paper for the “world” to see. In Chapter 2, Sarah Bonner shares the macro approach and how project-based learning changed her entire teaching approach as her rural students found purpose in self-driven inquiries that impacted their larger communities.

In Part II, *Writing That Moves the World*, we examine what middle level kids can do when given the opportunity to take ownership of their writing to express their thinking about complex social issues and to solve problems through sophisticated inquiry projects. Tracei Willis, in Chapter 3, shares the micro approach and delights us with poetic expression and real talk about motivating middle level learners to have difficult discussions about the world, starting with themselves. Chapter 4 highlights the macro approach with Margaret A. Robbins and her middle level students as they share how they discover, define, design, and deploy video and board games for elementary students through design-based critical thinking and composition.

In Part III, *Writing That Heals the World*, we expand our understanding of

the power of what writing can do to heal others and initiate change that can address and even solve some of the world's larger issues. Chapter 5 spotlights Lauren Zucker and Joseph S. Pizzo as they share the micro approach of writing sympathetic expressions of comfort to encourage and prepare students for difficult conversations. And in Chapter 6, Matthew Homrich-Knieling describes the power of pedagogy that recognizes Latinx middle level immigrants as co-designers of their own curriculum through public narratives and writing that *does* the work of healing a world gone wrong, a macro approach.

What resonates most with me in this thoughtful and critical convocation of voices is our collective hope that this book, and our work in it, will give all teachers permission to do the hard work of writing for a purpose—to attempt to try some of the suggested approaches or to stretch and try something new, to guide middle level students to do writing that helps them better understand the world and to better find and stake their places within it. We are cognizant of the fact that teachers come to a book with a wide range of skill sets. Some of you may be seeking assistance with what we would term *traditional* writing instruction approaches, while others of you may be interested in more contemporary, multimodal, and twenty-first-century approaches. Regardless of where you are in your learning, we want each of you to see the possibilities and to say, “I can do this.”

### Learning Tracker

Reflect on the ten principles of the *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing* statement. Which principles come easily to you in your teaching? Which principles challenge you as a teacher? How much class time do you allocate for each of the principles? How do these principles align with your students' purposes for writing?

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Identifying writing as central to what makes us human, editor and teacher educator Shelbie Witte has gathered a diverse group of middle school teacher-writers who open widely the doors of their classrooms to share their approaches to mentoring, modeling, and facilitating middle level writers as they explore their places within our world. Early adolescents might be physically and emotionally in flux, but they are also multidimensional, multitalented creatures of curiosity, always pushing the boundaries of discovery and possibility. The seven educators whose classrooms are showcased in this book know that being a writer is being part of the world, and they lead their students toward the understanding that writing makes a difference, both in their own lives and in the broader world. *Writing Can Change Everything* invites all of us to consider how the principles outlined in NCTE's *Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing* position statement weave throughout the best practices on display as students write through creative self-expression, narrative, inquiry, and project-based learning.

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