

## Study Guide

# ABOVE and BEYOND the Writing Workshop



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**Suggestions for Using *Above and Beyond  
the Writing Workshop* to Spark Meaningful Staff  
Development Discussions**

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## Introduction

There are three chapters in *Above and Beyond the Writing Workshop* which speak directly to issues of professional development. Educators responsible for staff development might choose to begin by asking staff members to reread Chapter 23, Professional Development Opportunities, on pages 275-281. These pages contain the questions listed below, each accompanied by an explanation.

- Do I need to become a more effective writer?
- Do I need to reach out to the community, tapping new resources?
- Do I need to carve out more time for my own reading?
- Do I need to enrich my content-area studies?
- Do I need to move away from the same old genres and assignments, trying new and shorter ones?
- Do I need to become more expert in children's literature, refreshing my classroom collections?
- Do I need to collaborate more with my colleagues?
- Do I need to offer my students more real-world reasons to write well?
- Do I need to learn more about the tools in a writer's toolbox?
- Do I need to encourage more student talk, becoming a better listener?
- Do I need to promote multi-genre teaching and learning?
- Do I need to differentiate instruction more frequently?
- Do I need to strengthen my students' reading/ writing connections?

Staff development leaders might begin conversations about professional study by asking teachers to choose the question that best applies to their own teaching/ learning situation. Teachers who select the same question can get together to chat about their professional needs and their plans for addressing those needs. In addition to selecting those challenges that will support their instructional growth, teachers can be invited to brainstorm additional ways to meet their chosen goals. For example, if teachers determine that they need to carve out more time for their own reading, they might decide to start a staff book club,

create a book swap program or lending library, devote a staffroom bulletin board to recommended titles and book reviews.

Chapter 24, *Concluding Thoughts: On Inventing, Innovating and Inspiring One Another*, contains two big professional development ideas. First, readers are presented with the idea of keeping a “Why not...?” file of potential teaching ideas. (See pages 284-285 for examples of future writing challenges that appear in my own file). Teachers can be asked to start their own files, sharing kernels of their ideas at staff meetings.

Secondly, teachers are encouraged to take one of their original ideas and design their own writing challenge. Whenever a new idea pops in my mind, I begin by asking myself the three questions which follow: I wonder if my students can do that? I wonder if my students would enjoy doing that? I wonder what my students would learn from doing that?” Once I decide a challenge would be worthwhile, I think about the elements listed on page 286. Asking teachers to reread that list of a dozen elements, will led to conversations about such essentials as choice, student interest, mentor material, time, publishing options, age appropriateness, high expectations and the use of templates.

Then too, leaders of staff development might have teachers reread the prologue to *Above and Beyond...*, particularly the elements described on pages 4 through 7. These planning reminders include the importance of students’ being able to get up from their desks, the role camaraderie plays, the power of encouraging students to produce original and high-quality work and the value of students having a wide audience. The prologue also has an introduction to the dozen guiding elements, (pages 5- 6), which are again discussed on page 286.

## General Professional Development Suggestions that Cut Across All Challenges

In addition to the professional development ideas presented above, several general suggestions for professional development appear below, followed by specific suggestions for each challenge. To write these sections, I imagined myself returning to the role of principal, leading weekly staff meetings. I asked myself, “How could I make precious staff development time as meaningful and productive as possible?” My answers to that question are woven into the comments which follow.

- Create a writing resource book room, collecting and labeling stacks of materials that support different writing challenges. Include those from *Above and Beyond the Writing Workshop* as well as other units frequently studied in your school.
- Create school-wide experts lists, tapping family and community members. Encourage teachers to call upon these willing experts whenever students require the interviewing of experts.
- Use staff development time as a writing workshop for teachers, asking them to create original texts to share for each challenge they offer to their students.
- Invite teachers to share new picture books, leading colleagues in a rich discussion of the book as well as how the book might inspire new writing challenges.
- Invite teachers of different grade levels who have hosted the same writing challenge to share their experiences, results, concerns, and ways they might revise their study in the future.
- Encourage teachers to bring student work in progress to receive suggestions for conferring, revising, editing, whole-class mini-lessons, and publishing ideas.
- Provide some of the titles listed in the chapter bibliographies labeled, “A Few Titles to Enrich Your Teaching.” Ask teachers to read picture books aloud and discuss how these materials might be used.
- Ask teachers how a challenge described for upper grades might be revised for lower grade students. Similarly, choose a challenge described for the lower grades and ask teachers how it might be enriched to challenge upper grade students.

- At whole-school grade meetings, invite teachers to discuss if any challenges had implications for kindergarten students.
- Discuss whether more supports are needed for struggling students. Which challenges require more scaffolding? What might those supports look like?

## Specific Professional Development Suggestions Related to Each Challenge

### Across-the-Globe

- Do an Internet search as suggested on page 14, locating articles that describe an event, tradition, occupation, etc., that varies from country to country. Duplicate and distribute articles to teachers. Invite teachers to read and respond to these articles and then answer the questions, “What topic would you choose if you decided to write an across the globe piece? Would this topic be an appropriate one to share with students? Where would you get your information?”
- Invite teachers to bring in collections of travel souvenirs and share how they might use these to launch the Across-the-Globe challenge.
- Review suggestions for asking follow-up questions during interviews, (pages 17-18). Invite a guest to be interviewed by a member of the staff. (Family members with interesting jobs or hobbies would work well). Fishbowl their conversation. Discuss whether the suggestions for asking follow-up questions apply to adult interviews.

### Quirky Questions and Biographical Sketches

- Create a school-wide bibliography of all picture book biographies on hand, listing title, author and classroom location.
- Ask teachers to reread the literature excerpts on pages 29-31 and name writers’ tools used by the authors.
- Lead a discussion of the effects these tools have on readers. Then read pages 31-34 to note similarities or differences in response.
- Brainstorm additional “quirky” questions. Then discuss how you might help students locate subjects for their writing if they came up with such questions as: Were you born in New Orleans? Do you speak Portuguese? Did you attend Columbia University? Are you a twin?

## Playing Favorites

- Prepare an explanatory letter to be given to all staff members who agree to be interviewed for this challenge. The letter should help avoid the pitfalls presented on page 43.
- Eric Carle and friends have answered questions about their favorite animals, colors, and bugs. Brainstorm additional What's Your Favorite...? questions that students could ask school wide. How might these become more sophisticated as you move up in the grades?
- Think through research material that would be needed for any planned question. Imagine if students decided to ask the adults in the school community, "What's your favorite place to take a vacation?" What kind of reference material might you gather to help students answer the adults' lingering questions about that location? What if students asked, "What's your favorite flower? What's your favorite sport? What's your favorite kind of music?" What are implications for resources needed? What role can school librarian play?

## Learning from One Writer

- Invite lower grade teachers to write a Monica Wellington-style book, (see page 50). Invite upper grade teachers to write an Eileen Spinelli-style book, (see pages 53-54 and Appendix 2, on pages 296-301). Share teachers' attempts.
- Collaborate on plans for an additional whole-class author study. (See pages 48-49 for authors well-suited for early childhood students. See page 55 for authors more appropriate for older elementary students). Read aloud selected books by the chosen authors. Discuss books. Upon rereading books, note distinctive features and techniques.
- Encourage teachers at each grade level to create their own lists of suggested authors for whole-class study. Discuss plans for acquiring abundant copies of the authors' books.

## Simple Scaffolds

- Ask staff members to form small writing teams and collaborate on a 1-10 counting book about your school. Make sure items selected are based on facts, not on random drawings or photos. In other



words, 3 is for three teachers named Jennifer, (if that is a true statement), rather than a drawing of three desks. (1 is for one principal, 5 is for five classes on every grade level, 6 is for the six grades in our school, etc.)

- Ask teachers to bring to staff meeting an alphabet book that they think is well-written. Share excerpts to spark conversation about elements of craft.
- Play the parlor game known as “Two Truths and a Lie,” to help teachers better understand the challenge of creating believable false statements. Ask teachers to create true or false statements for a chosen topic- a planet, a country, an animal, etc.

### Curiosity at the Core

- Ask teachers to read excerpts from *Father Knows Less* or “Can I Cook My Sister?” *One Dad’s Quest to Answer His Son’s Most Baffling Questions* by Wendell Jamieson. (see page 72). Initiate a conversation about how your teaching/learning community treats student’s honest questions. Brainstorm implications for classrooms throughout the grades.
- Ask teachers to reveal their own honest questions. Discuss how they would get answers to their real questions. What experts would they contact?
- Invite teachers to post their students’ areas of inquiry, encouraging staff members to jot down known experts in the field who might answer students’ questions.

### And the Award Goes to...

- Ask teachers to share their own areas of expertise. What awards could they imagine giving out within that area of study?
- Invite teachers to read and respond to the categories of children’s literature awards listed on page 83. What would their award winners be? What additional awards would they give out?

- Locate and distribute copies of *The New York Times* article, “The Bird Awards: 5 of the Most Fantastic Feathered Artists,” (2018) by Mara Grunbaum. Ask teachers to read the article and then name any literary techniques noted. Ask teachers to read the 6 statements on page 87 to note any additional elements of craft.

### Could It Really Happen?

- Distribute copies of *The New York Times* article, “Story Time Debunked,” by Horowitz and Shea, (2012) referred to on page 94. Provide time for teachers to read and discuss the article.
- To further support this challenge, hold staff meeting in the school library. Invite colleagues to browse the picture bookshelves looking for titles that inspire the question, “Could this really happen?”
- Select one of the chosen books and send teachers off to research. For example, after reading Mem Fox’s classic picture book, “Where is the Green Sheep?” (2004, Boston, Mass: HMH Books) ask, “Could it Really happen? Can sheep come in colors other than white?” Then send teachers off to research and share their findings. They in turn can share their work with their students.

### Just for a Day

- Locate and duplicate *The New York Times* article, “A Day in the Weather Room, Catching Storms on the Horizon,” by Alan Blinder (2019), that is noted on page 111. Invite staff members to read and respond to this article about a day in the life of a meteorologist. Ask colleagues, “What field of study are you interested in or consider yourself to already be an expert?” What worker is associated with that field of study? If you were to write about a day in the life of that worker, how would you make the day move along? Would you shape your information into appointments, stops on a journey, visitor conversations, a series of events or emergencies, hour by hour labels, etc.?
- Lead a conversation about what makes for high quality writing. Choose a title from the list on page 112 or from additional titles in the online bibliography in Book List 10. For example, you might read aloud and discuss Andrea Wang’s *Watercress*, (2021, NY: Neal Porter Books). Display excerpts on document camera, discussing elements of craft illustrated on these pages.

- Invite teachers to gather and share poems written in direct address that are appropriate for their grade levels. Create a school-wide anthology for easy access. Discuss how these poems would support Just for a Day writing.

### Doing What the Animals Do

- Invite teachers to listen to the *Freakonomics* podcast, “The Invisible Paw,” (episode 329), presented by Dalton Conley and Stephen J. Dunbar. Discuss whether human beings have unique traits or if these traits overlap with those of animals.
- Read aloud Richard Haynes’s picture book *Orangutan Hats and Other Tools Animals Use* (2021, Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press). Ask teachers to lift information from the book and follow the pattern established in the Etta Kaner book, *Animals Do Too! How They Behave Just Like You*, (2017, Toronto, Canada: Kids Can Press). The author asks a question, repeats a refrain, and then gives additional information.
- Bring stacks of animal reference materials to staff room, asking teachers to browse and record any surprising animal behaviors that parallel something that human beings do too.

### Imagine If You Were

- You can certainly have some fun while introducing this challenge. Ask teachers to select a name in the news, (politics, sports, music, Hollywood, etc.) Then ask them to create, “If you were\_\_\_\_, you would...” statements about their chosen person. Encourage volunteers to share their ideas. Then ask how they would add more information to each statement.
- As a follow-up, ask each teacher to select an animal. Distribute blank books with the words, “If you were a \_\_\_\_\_, you would...” pre-printed on every page. Have teachers fill in the blanks with the name of their animal and with statements about their chosen animal, one on a page. Then invite teachers to search the Internet to confirm, deny, or alter their statements. Finally, ask teachers to add on more useful information to each page. This procedure parallels what they will be doing with their students.
- Fill staff room with animal resource materials. Have teachers sort them by grade levels, noting any grade level gaps. Discuss how to fill in those gaps.

## Wearing a Mask

- Gather and distribute copies of persona/ mask poetry. (See bibliography on page 146). Carve out time to respond to the poems and discuss any distinctive features. Highlight poems that contain rich content information. Invite teachers to craft their own persona/ mask poems. Lead discussion on what can be learned from mask poetry that can be transferred to prose persona writing.
- Read aloud excerpts from persona/ mask picture books intended for upper elementary students. These might include Markus Motum's *Curiosity: The Story of a Mars Rover*, (2017, Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press), or David Lee Miller and Steven Jay Rubin's *The Cat Who Lived with Anne Frank*, (New York: Philomel). Display excerpts using a document camera. Discuss why authors might have chosen to take the object or animal's point of view. What are the benefits of this choice?
- Ask teachers to browse school and public libraries to locate additional persona/ mask picture books. Staff members can also clip newspaper article written from a surprising point of view. Create a school-wide master list of persona/mask material.

## Doing What They Do Best

- Staff meetings are prime time to build camaraderie. Nothing does that better than arranging for colleagues to break bread together, swap stories and laugh heartily. The questions listed on pages 149-150 are intended to get students to use the power of 3. Try asking those same questions of teachers, requiring that they also use the power of 3 in their responses. Be prepared for hearty laughter. (What do you like to do on Sundays? What do you do before you go to sleep? What do you do during the summer vacation? How do you help at home? What do you do after school?)
- Share any of the titles listed on page 155, "A Few Titles to Enrich Your Teaching: Books to Teach Craft to Young Writers." Spend time reading and rereading books aloud. Discuss those writer's tools that teachers would highlight in their classrooms.
- Challenge teachers to think through how this challenge can be used to enrich content area studies. (reread page 150). If students were studying Colonial America, for example, could they research and write such materials as, "What Cobblers Do Best, "(and chandlers, coopers, milliners, apothecaries,

wheelwrights, blacksmiths, etc.)? If older students were studying the environment, could they research and write such materials as, “What geoscientists do best, (urban planners, hydrologists, meteorologists, biophysicists, environmental engineers, etc.)?”

### Writing with Refrains

- Invite teachers to experiment with the use of refrains by writing a school specific picture book, along the lines of the writing about New York City on pages 163-164.

If you don't teach at \_\_\_\_\_ (name of your school), you don't know \_\_\_\_\_. You can't know \_\_\_\_\_.

No doubt, teachers will be playful, honest, and perhaps even a bit sarcastic.

- Ask teachers to bring to the staff meeting their favorite non-fiction books with refrains. Using the list of goals accomplished by using refrains that appear on pages 158-159, ask teachers to decide which of these objectives were achieved. Discuss whether additional benefits were noted.
- There is a list of teaching ideas on page 285 that offers ways to add freshness to personal narratives. One reads, “Add refrains to enrich students’ personal narratives.” Ask teachers to share student narratives, imagining if and how a refrain might add a literary quality to the work. They might also discuss how they would teach the weaving of refrains into personal narratives.

### Definitional

- Reread suggested concepts for younger students and older students on page 174. Discuss the appropriateness of these choices for the students in your school community.
- Share Bonnie Lui's *ABC of Feelings*. (2021, NY: Philomel Books). Discuss the grade of students who might be interested in defining such feelings as overwhelmed, anxious, or vulnerable.
- Ask clusters of grade level colleagues to list the concepts they consider appropriate for their grade level. Post results on chart paper and post for all to see. Discuss. Are there any surprises? Is there overlap? Should there be?

### Would You Rather...?

- A meaningful way to help teachers try this challenge on for size is to ask them to create “Would you rather...? questions for one another. Of course, the questions should not be just opinion questions like, “Would you rather eat in an Italian restaurant or in a French restaurant?” No, to fully understand what students would be doing, they need to ask questions that require abundant content knowledge to make informed decisions. Such questions as, “Would you rather buy a condo or a co-op? or Would you rather own stocks or bonds? or Would you rather vacation in Ladakh or the Faroe Islands.?” People without background knowledge will struggle to answer such questions.
- Refer teachers to Appendix 6, (pages 309- 320), which is filled with “Would you rather...? questions for students. Ask teachers to select ones that might be of interest to their students. Encourage teachers to create additional ones that might appeal to their grade level students.
- Share the new questions created by teachers, talking through what kinds of information students would need to provide so that their readers could make informed decisions.

### Nonfiction Calendars

- Ask teachers to select topics if they were to create informational calendars. What twelve subcategories would make sense?
- Ask teachers to bring in and share content-rich commercially prepared calendars, ones with photographs for every month. Discuss the writing that sits alongside the illustrations. Is it just a caption or label? A short paragraph? A lengthy paragraph? Is there one that comes close to what you would expect from your students? Discuss writing expectations for each grade level if students were asked to create non-fiction calendars.
- Discuss management of this writing challenge. When would you need to launch this study if calendars are to be ready for use in January, at the beginning of the new year? How will you help students keep 12 pieces of writing organized? What kind of supports will you need to bind and duplicate calendars?

## Creating Readers Notes

- Help teachers fully understand the value of back matter or authors notes by asking such questions as the following: Have you ever read a novel that required more background knowledge than you had? Have you ever read a novel that had the kind of author’s note or back matter that enriched your reading? Were these titles historical fiction? Have you ever read a novel that caused you to stop and look up information mid-reading to fully understand the story? Have you ever read a picture book to students, and you were grateful for the author’s note or back matter? How did that information help your instruction?
- Distribute copies of the Nerdy Book Club 2016 article by Elizabeth Dillow, “Top Ten Picture Books with Fascinating Author’s Notes for all Ages,” (See page 212). Invite teachers to read and discuss. Share as many of the ten titles as possible.
- Ask teachers to bring additional picture books with interesting author’s notes to the staff meeting. Invite teachers to share which features in the notes or back matter they would focus on in their teaching,

## Creating Glossaries

- Distribute chart paper, asking grade level clusters of teachers to list the non-fiction features they teach at each grade level. Display charts and note discoveries. Any surprises? Do features become more sophisticated as you move through the grades? Is there a lot of repetition? What are best practice methods for teaching students to use these features in their reading and in their writing?
- Ask teachers to share any adult reading material that contains a glossary. What are the genres of these titles? Are they non-fiction, fiction, poetry? Are the words in the glossary technical terms or words in a foreign language? Share any adult reading material that would have been enriched had it had a glossary.
- Discuss how teachers present dictionary work through the grades. Does your school have abundant and appropriate dictionaries for students? Is all dictionary work now done online? What dictionary skills need to be taught for students to create original glossaries?

### Research and Riddles

- Read aloud all three riddle books by John Canty: *Heads and Tails*, (2017, Somerville, MA: Candlewick.) *Heads and Tails: Insects*, (2020, Somerville, MA: Candlewick.) and *Heads and Tails: Underwater*, (2021, Somerville, MA: Candlewick.) Discuss other topics that would be appropriate for this series.
- Ask staff members, “What’s in the news that would be appropriate for your different age students?” Invite teachers to create riddles based on those people, places, or events.
- Create a school-wide anthology of riddle poems to be placed in the school library or the writing resources book room. Include poems for younger students as well as ones for older students.

### Every Day of the Week

- Ask early childhood teachers to talk about what they value in emergent reader material. List and display what is essential about these beginning reading materials.
- Reread original teacher-made texts on pages 253-54. Invite staff members to craft their own Every Day of the Week books for beginning readers. Carve out time to provide feedback.
- Ask the art teacher to support teachers’ efforts to illustrate their original Every Day of the Week books, reminding teachers of the importance of illustrations for young readers.

### Author Scrapbooks

- Reread suggested authors for Grade 3 students on pages 261-262. Invite teachers to star unfamiliar authors. Encourage staff members to recommend titles written by unfamiliar authors. Invite grade 3 teachers to revise this list for their own use.
- Ask other teachers to create author lists for their grade levels. Could they name 100 authors? Share lists. How many authors appear on several grade levels?
- Ask teachers to think about their own favorite authors. Which one would they choose if asked to create a scrapbook?