THE Never-Fail WRITING METHOD

By Kate Nonesuch

COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING PROGRAM
Community Learning Network
PGFL

The Never-Fail Writing Method

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Community Learning Network

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Acknowledgements

More than 1,000 adult learners, over many years, helped me invent the Never-Fail Writing Method. Sometimes they worked with me and sometimes they resisted me; always they made their own decisions for their own reasons. In doing so, they taught me how to teach and brought joy to my working life.

Vicki Noonan, my department head at Vancouver Island University, always found a way to say, "Yes!" when I asked her to make space (and find money) for my "unusual" ideas. Her leadership was inspiring.

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My heartfelt thanks to all.

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Introduction

Learners who can't write. Learners who won't write. Learners who can't get started. Learners who don't proofread. Learners who write a stream of consciousness with no organization or forethought. Learners whose skills don't improve. Learners who feel discouraged about writing and who doubt that they can ever do it adequately. Learners who drop out.

Over 35 years ago, when I started teaching writing with adult learners like those mentioned above, I was bewildered and frustrated. I was generally unsuccessful at teaching them, although I worked hard at making interesting assignments and writing copious notes on their papers. What was I doing wrong?

Later, I came to recognize the behaviour of learners who couldn't write, who didn't write, who couldn't get started, as resistance. Even later, I came to see it as **healthy** resistance. Those learners have been in the position of failing at writing many times. They do not want to ever be in that situation again. They choose not to write so as not to fail at writing. I've been there. I get it.

Other learners, who did write when asked, didn't improve much or very quickly. I would spend a lot of time making comments on learners' papers, noting errors, but when I gave the papers back, they would hardly glance at them before stuffing them into a backpack or a binder, never to look at them again. I tried many things: make corrections in red pen, give encouragement in green pen; choose one error only, and mark every instance of that error; say two positive things for every negative; but nothing made any difference. The same learners made the same errors the next time they wrote.

I noticed that telling people what they have done wrong, especially if they have done many things wrong, discourages them and makes them defensive. They close down. It does not produce a teachable moment.

I learned that people get better at writing when they get specific feedback about what they are doing well, rather than feedback about mistakes they are making.

There is a generally unspoken agreement between learners and me: I will do my best to give them the instruction they come for, and they will do their best to improve their skills. I start with the assumption that learners keep their part of the unspoken agreement. I believe that they make mistakes because they do not know how to avoid them. I know that they do not maliciously hand in shoddy work and that they will work hard to do well if they have some confidence that they will be able to do well.

As a literacy practitioner, I want learners to succeed, to learn, to develop the skills of writing that will take them on to the next stages of work and education. I want to feel successful in my work. I want the joy of watching people learn.

I needed a never-fail writing method for teaching writing.

Taking the Never-Fail Road

When I was in school, I always got good marks. It was the custom in my high school that, after a test, the teacher would return our marked papers, and go over it, question by question, so we could see where we went wrong.

I always got an A, and I loved going over those tests. If I had 92% or 87%, I would pay close attention as the teacher went over the questions I got full marks on, and when it came to the questions where I had less than full marks, I would listen carefully to the explanation of what was needed in that answer, analyze my own answer to see what I had missed, and make notes on my paper. Even if I got 100%, I was willing to go over the paper, confirming that I had in fact done well, laughing at the teacher's jokes, and thinking about her comments on where others had gone wrong on a particular item.

When I became an elementary school teacher myself, I saw the process from a different angle. I discovered that the very learners who needed it most were the ones who paid least attention. As I talked about the test, learners who had not passed talked to their neighbors, doodled on their papers, stared at the ceiling, or got up and went to the bathroom. Learners with C's and D's, who had a grasp of the subject, but had missed the finer points, continued to miss the finer points. They looked bored or uncomfortable; their body language told me that they were somewhere else, that they were not making mental notes that would improve their performance on the next test. Only the learners who had earned an "A" on their tests were paying attention and making notes, eager to learn from their mistakes.

When I began to teach adult literacy, I knew my learners already had experience with failing to make the grade—most likely, they were the people who had got C's, D's, and F's in elementary school. That experience had made them sure they couldn't write, had filled their heads with a dozen half-remembered rules they weren't sure how to use in their writing, and left them with a fear of putting pen to paper.

They needed a never-fail writing method for improving their writing.

The Never-Fail Writing Method in a Nutshell

I developed this method of teaching writing while I was an instructor in a developmental education program for adults. There was a wide range of learner levels in the program, ranging from people who could barely read at all to people working at a level equivalent to Grade 10. Class size varied from 12 learners at the basic literacy level to 28 at the higher levels.

I present the method here as I practiced it with classes of learners, but it is easily adapted to working one-to-one, or with very small groups. Usually there were English language learners (ELL) mixed in with native speakers in the groups, and I have also used this method working one-to-one with English learners.

The Never-Fail Writing Method helps learners improve their writing by focusing only on their successes, and ignoring all errors. The practitioner finds small examples in learners' writing of things that are done well, and uses those examples as the basis for teaching how to write.

The principles behind the Never-Fail Writing Method are few:

- Give specific, detailed feedback to learners about what they have done well.
- Give the feedback to each learner in a group of other learners, whenever possible, so they can learn from each other, so your work with one learner's writing can benefit everyone.
- Ignore all mistakes.

There are only a few deceptively simple steps in the method.

1 Learners Write

First, learners at whatever level, with whatever skills they have, write. Some will refuse to write; some will "forget" to write; some will leave their writing at home or avoid writing in other creative ways. I don't worry about them because I know this will change when they see the respect I show for the writing of other learners, and hear the positive feedback I give.

Some learners will write for themselves, either by hand or on the computer. Some will write with you using the Language Experience Approach (LEA).

2 A Quick Proofread Together

When the learner has produced a draft, even just one sentence long, the practitioner and learner do a quick proofread together.

3 Prepare the Writing for Sharing

The writer, or another person if necessary, types the writing for ease of reading. The practitioner photocopies the set of writings for the writing group or prepares to share it on a screen. Sharing is always optional.

4 The Writing Group

The practitioner convenes a writing group where learners take turns reading their writing aloud to the group. After the first learner reads, the practitioner gives specific positive feedback about the writing in front of the whole group, giving equal time and enthusiasm to every learner's writing.

The practitioner never mentions errors of grammar or spelling or organization, nor do they offer any suggestions for improvement. Ever. When attention is focused on what learners do well, a warm and supportive atmosphere develops.

After the feedback for the first reader, every learner picks their favourite sentence from the piece and reads it aloud.

The process is repeated until all the pieces of writing have been shared.

I've tried to get learners to help each other with writing, but it was a disaster! How can this judging panel work?

I've had the same experience. If you set learners loose to find each others' mistakes, or suggest improvements, chaos reigns. They don't have the skills to give feedback, and learners come away feeling humiliated by their peers.

In the writing group, I never invite learners to comment on another's work except under very controlled conditions: to ask every learner to read their favourite sentence in another learner's writing; or in the advanced writing group, to give a medal for the outstanding quality of a piece of writing.

I never permit learners to mention errors or to suggest improvements in another learner's writing.

5 The Advanced Writing Group

When learners begin to take a more active role in noticing what's good in a piece of writing, you can change the format of the writing group to give them more responsibility for pointing out what is good about a piece of writing.

As before, a learner reads their writing aloud. The practitioner does not give any feedback; instead, the whole group is divided into groups of four, each small group to become a panel of judges. They look at the piece again, consider the beginning, the ending, the organization and the details used, and decide which of those areas is best. As a group they award a medal for that aspect of the writing.

Then, as before, every learner picks their favourite sentence and reads it aloud to the group.

For details of the method, see The Never-Fail Writing Method in Practice, page 15.

Why Does the Never-Fail Writing Method Work?

It works because the positive feedback creates an atmosphere where learners can pay attention to what is being taught. The positive atmosphere supports them, so they are not short-circuited by emotions and memories that come from years of failure and interfere with their ability to learn in the moment.

It works because learners see examples of how to write well in their own writing and in the writing of other learners. They hear specific feedback about what was done well and why it was effective.

It works because feedback takes place in real time, person-to-person. We are dealing with people who have difficulty reading and interpreting the written word. Surely written feedback is the worst possible way to help them.

It works because the practitioner gives feedback in front of a group of other learners. The effectiveness of the feedback is multiplied by the number of learners who hear it. Its value is further augmented by the supportive comments learners make on each others' work.

It works because it can be used with a range of levels of writing abilities in one group.

It works because practitioners can implement it as slowly or as quickly as they like, and new learners can easily be incorporated.

It works because it considers that writing is a generative process. It is more than grammar and punctuation. Writers are making art of their lives, and adult learners bring the artfulness and richness of their lives to their writing, no matter how weak their grasp of mechanics. The method looks for that richness and highlights the artfulness.

It works because it comes in a simple framework. There are few steps, so learners get used to the routine easily. It uses a cyclical structure, so learners don't have to be proficient at the first steps to take in the next ones.

Yet underneath that simplicity, the Never-Fail Writing Method is a complex, nuanced, artful practice that smoothly moves learners towards a goal of being thoughtful, capable writers who know what makes a piece of writing good, and who can implement those techniques in their own work.

Seems unbelievable, right? Possibly, in your shoes, confronted all at once by the whole thing, I wouldn't have believed it either. I would have dismissed it as too good to be true. Fortunately, however, I developed this method slowly, inch by inch, until it emerged in its final form, so I got a chance to see parts of it working as I moved further and further away from the "givens" of teaching writing.

You can take a gradual approach too: Start by giving specific feedback about the good things you see in learners' writing and ignoring the mistakes.

Benefits of the Never-Fail Writing Method

Like an iceberg, most of what goes on in the Never-Fail Writing Method is hidden. On the surface, learners see the simple structure: Write, then go to the writing group, or later, to the advanced writing group. Underneath the surface many things are going on, beginning with increasing confidence and a growing trust in the safety of the writing group. From there come multiple benefits for both learners and practitioners.

Benefits for Learners

Learners model good writing for themselves and for other learners. In every piece of writing, no matter how short or full of mistakes, there will be something wonderful: a word, an image, a joke, an example that gets the point across, or something that makes the reader smile or cry or remember. That is good writing.

Learners who are confident something good will be found in their writing are more likely to write more, and write more often. That in itself improves writing skills.

Learners' confidence increases when you find some things worth pointing out as examples of good writing. This confidence supports them in their next writing assignment.

Learners write more often, and they write longer, clearer, and more interesting pieces. Grammar and sentence structure improve. Punctuation improves.

Learners notice their skills growing. Their previous experience with writing has been hearing over and over again all the ways they are wrong, but here the value in their work is recognized and celebrated. They learn to talk about what they do well and to understand the effect their writing has on the reader.

Learners' confidence and success build a generosity of spirit that leads them to participate actively in the success of others.

The writing group builds a strong and positive community, because every learner has something to teach others, and everyone has something to learn from others. Interacting in a positive way with each other's writing helps form a co-operative working group in the classroom.

Learners hear and benefit from the feedback given to other learners, so that the effectiveness of the work you do in responding to one learner's work is multiplied by the number of learners who hear it.

Learners take an active role in analyzing what makes writing good. They are asked to give feedback in accordance with their increasing ability to verbalize the qualities of good writing.

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Figure 1. Looks simple on the surface, but there are hidden depths.

Writing Group

Each learner shares writing with the whole group. Practitioner comments only on what's good and gives equal attention to every learner.

After each piece of writing, everyone reads their favourite sentence from it aloud.

Writing Group, Advanced

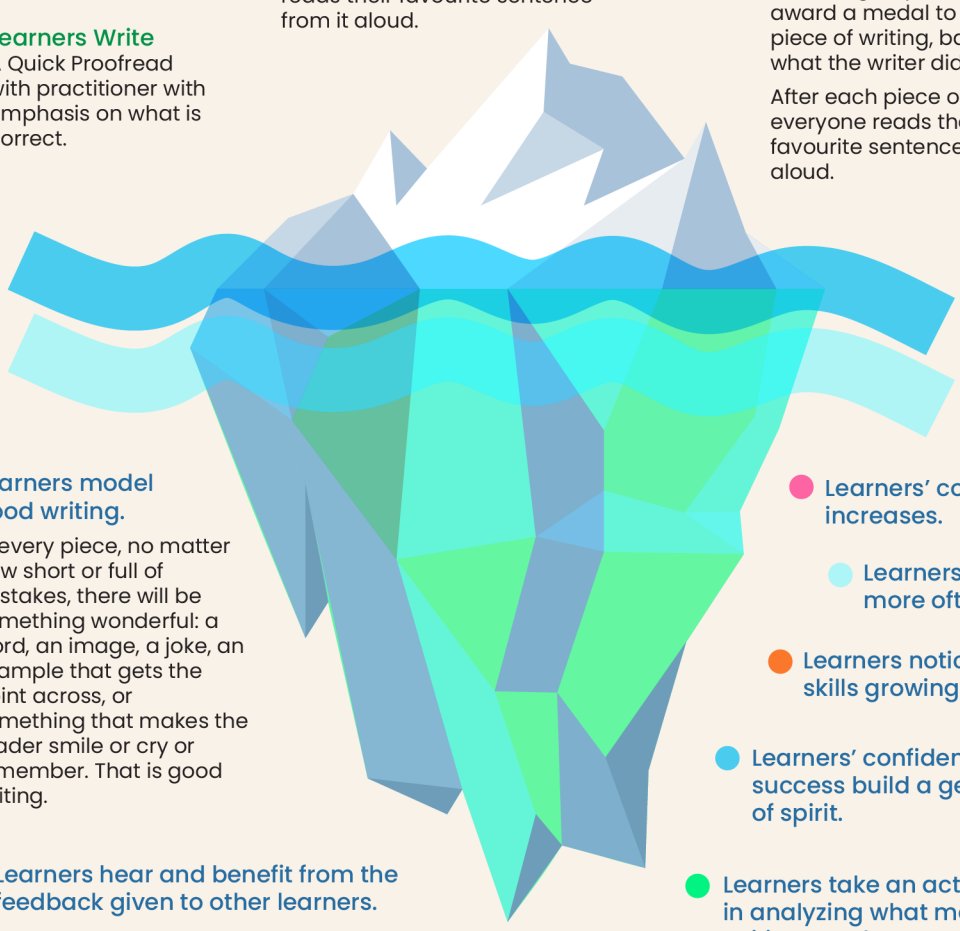
Each learner shares writing with the whole group.

In small groups, learners award a medal to every piece of writing, based on what the writer did best.

After each piece of writing, everyone reads their favourite sentence from it aloud.

Learners Write

A Quick Proofread with practitioner with emphasis on what is correct.



Learners model good writing.

In every piece, no matter how short or full of mistakes, there will be something wonderful: a word, an image, a joke, an example that gets the point across, or something that makes the reader smile or cry or remember. That is good writing.

Learners' confidence increases.

Learners write more often.

Learners notice their skills growing.

Learners' confidence and success build a generosity of spirit.

Learners hear and benefit from the feedback given to other learners.

Learners take an active role in analyzing what makes writing good.

The writing group builds a strong and positive community.

Learners learn to think of their audience.

Learners begin to edit more carefully.

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Learners learn to think of their audience. They develop a stronger interest in editing and proofreading their work when they see that it helps other learners to understand the writing, and to read it the way the writer intended.

Learners begin to edit more carefully. What will engage the reader? What will help them understand? What will persuade them? Learners begin to articulate an analysis of what makes one choice of words or one type of organization better than another. Thinking about the audience and careful editing are the foundations of skilled writing.

Benefits for Practitioners

Job satisfaction. Learners making progress, engaging in the work, co-operating with you and others, making progress that they can see for themselves. That's what I come for, every day.

A stronger relationship with learners that goes both ways. You see them engaged in trying to improve, so you feel connected with them in this enterprise of improving their writing. They see you engaging with their writing and, through their writing, with their lives and their ideas, so they feel connected with you.

Higher learner retention. Learners can make quick, visible progress in writing, which increases their motivation to stay in the program longer.

No outside marking. You do the work of responding to the writing in the writing group, when the learner is present to take it in.

No more of that frustrating marking cycle in which you spend time making written comments on learners' writing and hand it back to them; then they hardly look at it, and make the same mistakes the next time they write.

Making the Shift to Positive-Only Feedback

The invisible part of the Never-Fail Writing Method is the most difficult thing for practitioners to embrace: **Ignore bad writing; it will go away.**

Ignore Bad Writing

I do not comment on any errors in the writing group. Not one. Not ever. I am making a safer space for learners to take risks in trying something new. I am trying to get rid of learners' feelings of terror at the blank page, and I want to encourage people to write more and to write better. I do this by giving specific feedback about what is working in their writing. I do it by creating an atmosphere of positive feelings, co-operation, and camaraderie.

I make a promise to the learners that I will not allow any errors to be pointed out, or any "suggestions" to be given in front of the group. That promise is what makes them willing to share their writing and their opinions about what makes good writing. Learners must be able to rely absolutely on that promise. If I slip and make a critical comment on someone's work, I will have a lot of work to do to restore that atmosphere, to build their trust again.

It goes against the grain for a writing teacher not to point out errors. It is a big step even to ignore some errors, and point out only the most important ones. As I began to ignore errors, I worried:

- How will they learn if I don't show them where they went wrong?
- The practitioner at the next level will criticize me if I pass on learners who are not prepared.
- Maybe I'm being too soft! I should have higher expectations.
- Learners expect me to mark their errors. What if they assume everything I don't mark wrong is right?

But do you never tell a learner something is wrong?

In answer to a direct question from a learner, I will say something is wrong. Otherwise, no.

If a learner asks me, "Is this right?" I give them the straight goods because they have initiated the dialogue. Their question tells me that they want to know, and that their thinking brain is more involved in the answer than their feelings are. They are willing to hear that they are wrong.

"Yes," I say, "You got that right. How did you figure out what to do there?"

Or "No, you got that wrong. Let me show you how it's done."

Failure Doesn't Teach

Sitting with all these conundrums in the early days of developing the Never-Fail Writing Method, I came across an article and a challenge. Someone (I don't remember who) was offering a cash reward to anyone who could prove to him that people learned from failure. The title of the article was "Failure Doesn't Teach," and the premise was that there was no research to support the common belief that we learn from our mistakes, or that every mistake is an opportunity for learning. I seized upon the article as support for my intuition.

Some Current Research

More current research supports the premise that pointing out errors does not promote learning, because when you point out learners' errors, they cannot pay attention to your explanations. Feelings of stupidity and shame, for example, use up whatever psychic energy they may have had for learning. Pointing out errors makes people tune out. I want learners to tune in.

In a 2019 study, Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach gave multiple choice tests to research participants. They told some of the test takers which answers they had answered correctly (success feedback). They told other test takers which ones they had answered incorrectly (failure feedback). Both sets of learners got full information on what the correct answer was. When tested later on the same information, those who had been told what they did right scored higher than those who were told what they did wrong.

> Our society celebrates failure as a teachable moment. Yet in five studies (total N = 1,674), failure did the opposite: It undermined learning . . . .
>
> Across five studies, participants learned less from failure feedback than from success feedback—even when both types of feedback contained full information on the correct answer. Failure feedback undermined learning motivation because it was ego threatening: **It caused participants to tune out and stop processing information.**[1]

[1] Eskreis-Winkler, L. and Fishbach, Ayelet. (2019). Not learning from failure the greatest failure of all. Psychological Science, 1–12 Accessed July 18, 2023.

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ayelet-Fishbach/publication/337127055_Not_Learning_From_Failure-the_Greatest_Failure_of_All/links/5dd1a0e792851c382f46a2d4/Not-Learning-From-Failure-the-Greatest-Failure-of-All.pdf

Moving Away from Marking Errors

It is not easy to make the shift to giving positive-only feedback or success-only feedback. Everything seems against making that move. As students we had our errors marked, points docked from essays; as practitioners we are primed to notice weakness and mistakes. Learners expect us, from their own experience, to mark their work with red ink. Funders of formal foundational learning programs often measure program effectiveness by attendance and levels achieved. Even learners, used to being graded, sometimes insist you mark all errors or give grades.

What do you do if a learner insists you mark every error, or give a grade on a piece of writing?

I say that I will mark the piece in any way the learner wants, providing the learner sits with me while I do it. We sit together as I mark, and I do a combination of teaching and marking to the depth the learner is comfortable with.

Learners bring only their best work to this situation, so usually it is a fruitful interaction.

How difficult, then, to go against the current and begin to ignore "bad writing," to skip over errors as if they weren't there. Moving from "Learners can learn from their mistakes" to "Learners lose their motivation when confronted with their errors" takes many of us far outside our comfort zone. It may challenge our very identity as a teacher.

I know that coming to my program takes many learners out of their comfort zone, yet they brave it anyway. Am I willing to go out of my comfort zone to make something more comfortable for them?

If you've read this far, something is telling you that the Never-Fail Writing Method is worth a try. What do you have to lose? What support can you find as you try it? What support do you need? Is there a colleague who would take the plunge with you? Or a group of colleagues?

Alongside the Never-Fail Writing Method

In separate sessions not connected with the writing group, I explicitly teach some skills that support the Never-Fail Writing Method by making it more likely that the pieces learners bring to the writing group are easy for others to read and understand. I focus on end punctuation for basic literacy learners and other kinds of mechanics as needed for more advanced writers (e.g., quotation marks, apostrophes, capitalization). When learners apply those lessons to their writing, I call attention to the correct usage in my comments on their writing.

I also explicitly teach what I have come to think of as four stages of the art of writing: Think, Write, Edit, and Proofread. I break it down into these four stages to help learners see writing as a process that anyone can learn, not as a magic ability that some people have, and others don't. Different skills are needed in each stage, and different strategies can be used in each. For more details, see What to Teach Outside the Writing Group, page 34.

Many Cultures, Many Voices

Learners in our programs come from many cultures. Some are First Nations learners; some are settlers whose families came to this country decades ago or yesterday. Some come from the white protestant English-speaking culture that is dominant in most of North America, others from marginalized groups. Differences in wealth, gender, sexual orientation, and levels of physical and mental abilities further divide learners into subgroups.

Writing grows out of culture. Learners from every group bring particular styles of storytelling and humour. Every group has rules about what things can be mentioned in polite company and what things are better not spoken of, much less written down. In the writing program, every learner should be able to speak and write in an authentic voice, honouring their heritage.

Practitioners must be prepared to welcome these many voices, to make space for them to shine. Many First Nations learners, for example, come from a strong oral tradition, and have a well-developed sense of what makes the spoken word effective and memorable. The same may be said for learners raised in a tradition that includes frequent attendance at sermons and religious revivals. Expect to find in their writing rhythms that please the ear, sentence structures that repeat and build to a climax, and wordplay that makes their ideas easy to remember. You can hold up these techniques as examples of effective writing.

Some cultures tell stories about a situation that requires action, but they leave the ending open for readers to come to their own decision about what should be done. Others tell a story and end it with a definite statement that gives one, and only one, lesson to be taken from the story. The difference in format and organization of each story comes from different values and contrasting patterns in culture, teaching, and learning.

I was raised in a white middle-class family, and I went to university, so I am most comfortable with endings that wrap up loose threads and state a definite conclusion. When I get a piece of writing that leaves me hanging, free to make my own conclusions, I need to be careful to set my assumptions aside. I need to recognize a different kind of voice than I'm used to and figure out how it works, instead of feeling vaguely unsatisfied because I don't see a "real" ending.

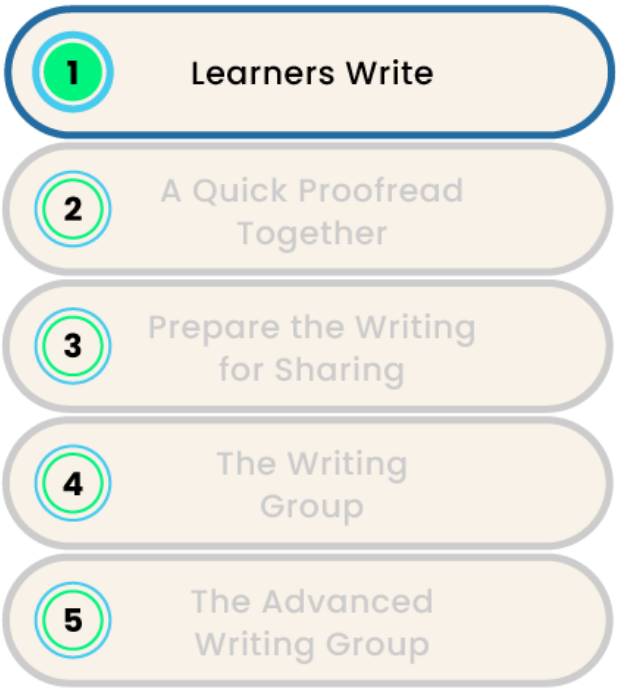
I try to honour all the different styles of thinking and writing by remembering, and reminding learners, that all styles developed to serve the needs of the people who use them. Every writer writes for an audience and an occasion. The start of any good writing is figuring out your audience, the occasion you are writing for, and who you are in relation to both. Learners who begin at that point are able to speak in their own voice.

The Never-Fail Writing Method in Practice

This section is a detailed, step-by-step description of the Never-Fail Writing Method in practice.

1 Learners Write

Writing is hard. It is work that requires thinking, planning, organizing, and remembering all at once, while at the same time requiring attention to spelling and sometimes even to the shape of the letters in a word. Writers have to push down the annoying chatter in their minds about capitals, periods, paragraphing, and other mechanics that threaten to overwhelm their ability to think, plan, and remember. Add to this the flow of emotions about the subject you are dealing with, doubts about your own abilities, and worries about what people will think about the finished product—even as I write this paragraph, I am aware of all those thoughts and feelings. I am ready to get up and go on a permanent coffee break!



Yet I ask adult literacy learners to do this hard work. I know from experience how easy it is to get distracted, to give up, or to take a break and never come back to a piece of writing, so I do everything I can to start and keep the flow of writing going.

Begin by asking learners to write something. Depending on the abilities of the learners, it might be a sentence, a paragraph or two, or a longer story or essay. When I make a writing assignment I suggest a topic, but I always begin by saying, "If you came with something in your mind that you want to write, that is what you should write today. Ignore my suggestion and start writing."

If the learners are very basic writers, you might be doing the Language Experience Approach (LEA) with them, where you do the writing for them as they tell their stories.

Even learners who usually write for themselves may need a scribe occasionally. I am always willing to write or type for any learner who is telling a story close to the heart, whose emotions interfere with the mechanics of writing. I will scribe for a learner who gets tired midway through a piece, or who has to leave early. My goal is to have them get something down on paper.

Safety First

When I give the prompt, I remind learners about keeping themselves as safe as possible: *When you start to think about this topic, you know there are many roads it could take you down. Some of those roads will lead you to dangerous or unhappy places, others will bring you happiness or something more neutral. Choose the road you want to go down before you start to write. Then write about things that will take you down your chosen road.*

Keeping the Flow of Writing Going

I go to great lengths to protect the time and space I set aside for writing, to keep it free from distractions, in an atmosphere where everyone is working at the same tasks. If I'm working with a single learner or a pair of learners, I write too, inviting them to interrupt me when they need help with something. In a larger group I am too busy to write myself, but I know that people are more productive when everyone around them is writing.

The best way I found to eliminate distractions was to have a "writing marathon." I chose Tuesday morning, 10:15–12:00. We took 20–30 minutes for the prompt (video or reading and discussion, or discussion of something going on in the program, the community, or the world). Then people started writing. The goal was to finish the piece, proofread it with me, and hand it in before lunch.

After learners finished their writing and proofread it with me, they had to leave the room (or the building when I worked in a storefront literacy centre). I didn't want the people who were still writing to be distracted by someone who had finished writing. If that someone started to do math homework, for example, leaning over to ask someone what the assignment was, opening their binder rings, perhaps dropping a pencil, it could disrupt a writer's train of thought. I didn't want the bustle, and I didn't want the temptation that might lead a writer to think, "Oh, it would be easier to do math right now. I'll finish this writing tonight."

As learners write, I remember the rules about feedback: I never point out a mistake; I never suggest an improvement. We don't stop to correct errors; we want to get a first draft done. The rest will come later.

Beginners should always write when there is someone available to spell words, if requested, and to answer questions as they arise. When someone asks for the spelling of a word, I silently write it where they can see it. If I'm working one-to-

one, I write it on a piece of paper beside them. If there is a group, I write it on the board so everyone can see. (If they are all writing on the same subject, likely other people will want the spelling of that word, or they will see it and get inspired when they are gazing around wondering what to say next.) I give them the spelling they need as unobtrusively as possible, so as not to interrupt the flow of writing for them or anyone around them.

Similarly when someone asks a question, I try to answer simply: "Yes," or "No."

"Do I need a capital C on 'chief'?"

I glance at the sentence, "Our reserve has a good chief."

I say, "No," and go on my way. I don't take the opportunity to explain why "chief" sometimes takes a capital and sometimes doesn't, or to give examples like "Chief Dan George" and "a chief engineer." **This is not a teaching moment. This is a "get-something-down-on-paper moment," and I refuse to be distracted.**

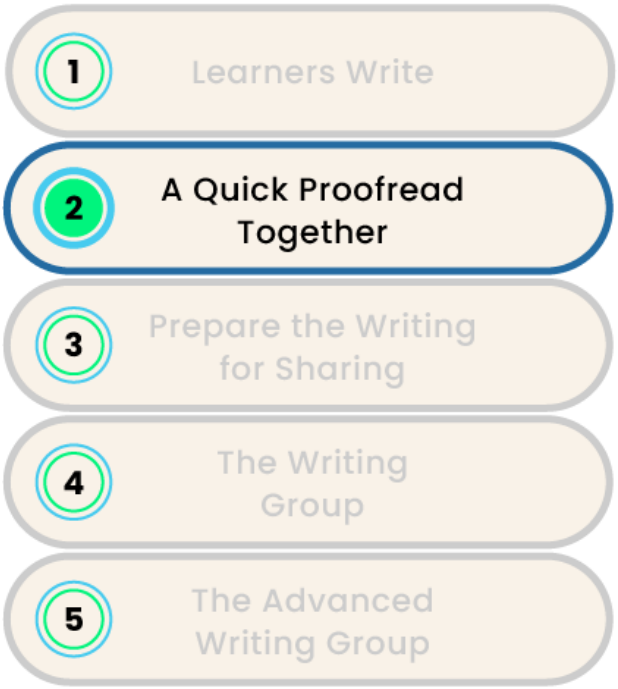
I circulate as they write and make very brief comments on things I like in their writing: *"Oh, you've got a great first sentence—it makes me curious about what happens next"; or "That's a good description of your dog; I can almost see those floppy ears."* When they are in the flow of writing, I don't interrupt, but if someone is stuck, I'll ask a question about what happened next, or ask what feelings the incident brings up.

I try to be around when a writer is coming to the end of the draft, to help them get a real ending, instead of just stopping when they run out of things to say. I might ask a summing up question, such as, *"How do you feel about that now?"* or *"What do you want the reader to think about when they finish reading your piece?"* I invite them to write the answer to the question as the last line of their piece.

2 A Quick Proofread Together

As learners finish their writing and come to hand it in, I have a short one-to-one session with them to do a quick check for periods and missing words. Even here in private, I point out what they have done well and ignore the rest.

1. Start by reminding the learner why we proofread: to make it easier for others to read and understand. Every writer wants the reader to read a piece the way the author meant it to be read. Proofreading makes this possible.



2. Ask each learner to read the piece aloud while they check for periods and missing words.
3. Don't call any attention to missing periods or to periods in the wrong place.
4. Stop them every time they come to a place where their punctuation is correct and say that it is correct. *"That period is exactly where it needs to be."*
5. Add an explanation of why a period is needed at that place. Where Do the Periods Go? (page 58) is a poster for learners.

As they proofread, learners will often notice a place where a period is missing and put it in. Show your delight by complimenting them on their proofreading skills. **When we point out learners' errors, we are doing the proofreading for them, not teaching them to proofread.**

Over time, as they get better at putting periods in their work, and are bored with me interrupting them with an explanation of why they are correct, I turn the tables. I ask them how they know they need a period at that particular place. There is a shift from me saying why a period is needed over to them articulating the rules about periods. This small shift is an example of the way the responsibility for analyzing why the writing is good can shift from practitioner to learner. As the learner learns a skill, the practitioner models how to articulate the steps in the skill. As the learner becomes more proficient, the practitioner nudges them to begin to talk about their thinking process.

When their periods are nearly all correct, I may ask them to hunt for the missing one: "In this paragraph, there is only one period missing. Can you find where it should go?"

Missing Words

If there is an occasional word missing, I comment, *"I heard you say, 'on the bus,' but I don't see the word 'the' on your paper. Can you put it in?"*

If there are many words missing, it makes me think the learner may not be ready to write paragraphs on their own. For that day, I make a mental note of what is missing, and I put those words in later, when I'm getting the writing ready for the writing group. The next time I ask learners to write, I shift into the Language Experience Approach for that learner, and I write the story down. For some tips on teaching proofreading to basic readers, see Appendix F Proofreading with Basic Readers, page 59.

For more specifics about teaching proofreading outside the writing group, see Teaching Proofreading, page 60.

The Draft Goes to the Writing Group

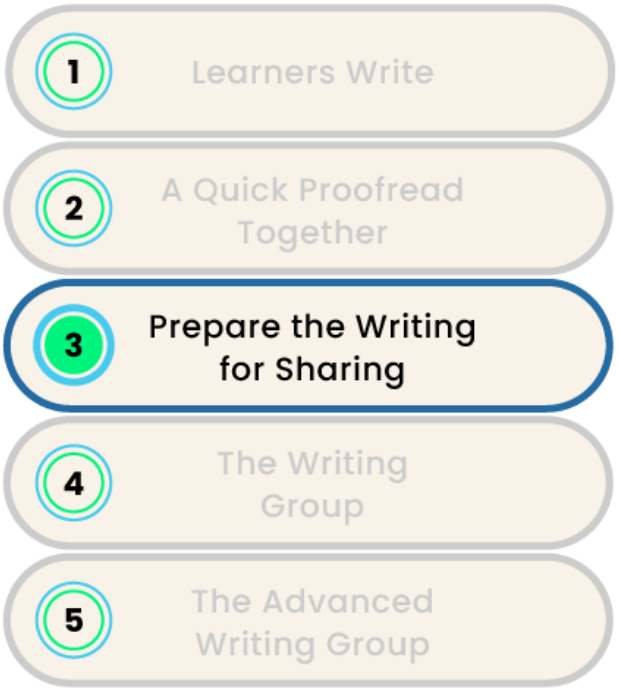
Does every piece have to have perfect periods before it comes to the writing group? Not at all. What comes to the writing group is an early draft, usually a first draft. Nobody writes a perfect first draft.

As far as I can tell, in the writing group, no one notices the mistakes. An author, when reading their work aloud, reads it the way they meant to write it. They pause and take a breath where it makes sense, whether or not there is a period to guide them. Sometimes a particular part of their work can be so confusing that even they cannot make sense of it. Sometimes they keep on going past that rough spot, and nobody says anything. Sometimes they pause, figure out what they meant to say and read it that way. I say, *"Good proofreading!"*

Later, every learner will choose their favourite sentence from each piece to read aloud. When looking for their favourite sentence, they always avoid the parts that are confusing; they look for something that makes sense and is easy to read.

3 Prepare the Writing for Sharing

Writing has to be typed before it can be shared with other learners. Handwriting is too difficult to read, and typing improves the look immensely.



I have used various systems for getting the writing typed. Sometimes I type it myself. It is usually quick to do, and because I am not spending any time on marking or making comments on the writing, I have those few minutes to spend on typing. It also gives me an opportunity to think about what I will comment on when it is read in the writing group. Occasionally I have had a volunteer or a secretary available to type up everyone's writing.

If there are computers available to learners, they do the typing themselves. Many learners like to skip the handwriting stage and go directly to writing on a keyboard; others like to write by hand, then type it into a computer or other device, which gives them the opportunity to do a little revision as they go. They save it to a folder I have access to, as well as to their personal folder.

Then I gather the writings into a single file, putting two or three on a page if they fit, and make a copy for each learner. Alternatively, I can show the writing on a

screen, one piece at a time. If it's within your scope, there are opportunities for teaching computer skills here, including saving and retrieving files, using the spellchecker, using different fonts, and inserting a graphic to go with the story.

Why Share the Writing?

An audience is essential to a writing learner because in our world we write to communicate. When a learner writes for the practitioner's eyes only, the act of writing becomes something else: a task to be done, a product to be judged and marked, a throwaway. When learners know that, as a general rule, I plan to share their writing with the group, they concentrate on communicating with the group, because the group is their audience.

If you are working one-to-one, it is more difficult, but still possible, to find opportunities to share writing with other learners or with a wider audience. For some suggestions, see Appendix A Working One-to-One: Opportunities for Sharing Writing, page 37.

Whether you are working one-to-one or with a group, opportunities to publish learners' work to a larger audience abound. Writing for a collection of learners' writing to be given away at an event provides powerful motivation for editing and proofreading. For some suggestions, see Appendix B Sharing Learners' Writing in the Larger Community, page 38.

What about a learner who never shares?

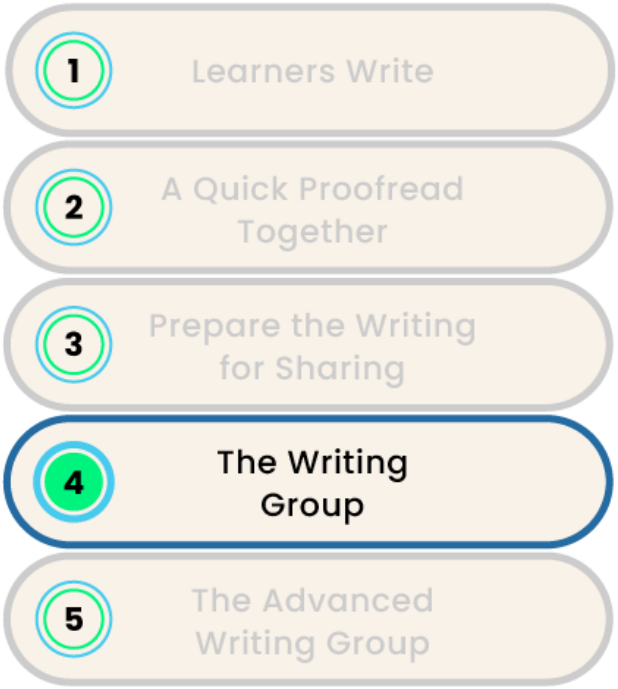
Sometimes I wait a long time for a learner to share their writing, but I do not cajole or otherwise "encourage." Even when I think they "should" feel safe to share, or that their writing is more than good enough to share, it is not my decision to make. So each time, after we proofread together, I ask, "Do you want to share this with the group?" and when they answer no, I say, "Write 'Do not copy' at the top so I'll remember." No discussion.

Sharing Is Optional

Learners who do not want to share their writing with the group put a "Do Not Copy" message on it when they hand it in. I read and make comments on their paper, but do not take it to the writing group. At the beginning of the term, some learners may refuse to share, but after they have been to the writing group a couple of times, they see how respectfully the writing is treated, and are then generally happy to share their work. Occasionally a learner who usually shares will write something that is too personal for general sharing and opts out for that piece.

4 The Writing Group

The writing group is a time for learners to share their writing and get specific feedback on what they did well. You can designate one of your regular sessions as the writing group or set up a different time.



The writing group is a special place, a sea of positive emotions. Learners hear feedback in a warm enthusiastic tone, instead of reading cold words on paper. They often find common ground with others through reading about their experiences; certainly they have the shared experience of being told their writing is good, and of working confidently to make it better. The fact that everyone gets the same quantity and quality of feedback promotes a sense of community and equality between beginning and more sophisticated writers.

When learners know from experience that their writing will be held up as an example of good practice, they come to the writing group prepared to be pleased and proud; this gives them the space to be generous towards others. So, for example, when I notice out loud that someone's story is longer than anything they have written before, the rest of the group is quick to join in with their congratulations.

Any form of writing, whether assigned in the writing program or elsewhere, can come to the writing group: a narrative of personal experience, a poem, a report on a science experiment, a recipe, a fictional story, an essay, or an opinion piece.

Learners who have not produced any writing are part of this feedback session. They feel the supportive atmosphere, see for themselves the respect that is given to learners' writing, and they benefit from hearing the feedback on other learners' writing. Learners who are reluctant to write become more willing to give it a try. I just wait for that to happen.

If I have copied a piece of writing, but the writer is absent, we do not read it or comment on it, but we save it for another time, when the author can read it for us. Learners who have two pieces (usually because they were absent at the last writing group) choose one to read. Of course if you are working one-to-one, you will have no time constraints, and you can take up every piece a learner writes.

Set the Ground Rules

I start by reminding everyone that we are commenting on what's good and ignoring the mistakes, because that is the fastest way to help people get better at writing. I explain the method to learners, so they know that pointing out errors is not an option. From the beginning, if any learner starts to make a negative comment about another learner's work, I nip it in the bud.

Learners Read Their Work

Starting with the first learner, I ask them to read their piece out loud while the others follow along. Learners have the option to ask me or another learner to read for them, and occasionally they do. I don't ask for their reasons: It is an option for anyone to take anytime they like.

I have learned to listen to more than words while the author is reading. I hear sounds of reaction to the writing: a laugh, a sharp intake of breath, a murmur of sympathy, or an "Oooh" at something that is cute or sweet. As soon as the learner has read, I comment on any sounds I heard during the reading. Such responses are real feedback, and they signal to the writer that they have successfully engaged their listeners.

The Practitioner Gives Specific Positive Feedback

There are only a few steps to giving this kind of feedback:

1. Look at the piece of writing, ignore the mistakes, and find something that the learner did well.
2. Read the good part out loud.
3. Say it's good, for instance, *"You have a really strong beginning here."*
4. Say what effect it had on you as you read it, for instance:
   - *It made me want to read more.*
   - *It made me see a picture in my head.*
   - *It made me laugh (cry, think, wonder).*
   - *It cleared up something I was confused about.*

How do you decide what to comment on?

I comment on what I want to teach. This is where my practice in noticing errors comes in. Although I don't notice any mistakes out loud, I see what people are having trouble with. That is what I want to teach.

So I find some place where it is correctly done, and comment on that, in detail.

- *It made me feel good (bad, sorry for, angry).*
- *It reminded me of something from my own life.*

"Look," I might say, "Barb tells us what her uncle said when he found the dog wearing his pajamas. She gives us his exact words. I like to hear his voice in there; it makes a change from hearing Barb's voice telling the story, and I like a change. When I hear his words, I feel like I'm right there, and I believe the story more because I get it right from his mouth."

I go on to make another comment about something else Barb did well, and my part is done. The whole thing (reading and commenting) takes three or four minutes. For more examples, see Appendix G Learners' Writing Samples, with Comments, page 61.

Equal Treatment

Every learner gets the same number of comments, and the same amount of time and enthusiasm spent on their writing. This practice reinforces the idea that every learner is capable of good writing, and everybody can learn from everybody else; it is not just that "poor" writers can learn from "good" writers.

If I'm working one-to-one, do I have to limit myself to two comments?

No. One of the advantages of one-to-one is spending more time on what the learner does well. Sometimes I have to stop because they get overwhelmed with so much praise!

Making Comments

First, I look for things that move me. What makes me smile, or feel sympathy or empathy? Which images stand out? **Always, I'm looking at what effect the piece has on me, as the reader.** I ask myself, "What did the writer do to have that effect on me?"

Second, I keep in the back of my mind things that learners are having trouble with, and I look for examples of where someone has done it well. Someone who has written a paragraph with perfect punctuation always gets a mention for that, as does an English language learner who has written a whole perfect sentence.

If I want to encourage people to do more careful proofreading, I comment on a piece with very few errors: "You have done some good proofreading here. I see you are thinking about periods and missing words and spelling. It makes your writing easy to follow because I can concentrate on your story. I don't get distracted by wondering what you meant to say."

All my training in finding errors and noticing weaknesses does not go to waste. The errors I silently notice help me decide what to look for. I look for someone

who has done it well, and seize on it when I find it. For example, if I notice that many learners do not write in paragraphs, or make incorrect or rough paragraph breaks, I find someone who has done it correctly, and concentrate on that:

"Look at this," I say, "Marvin has three paragraphs here. What time of day is it in this first paragraph? That's right, the morning. What time is it in the second paragraph? Right, now it's that night. And the last paragraph? Yes, it's the next day. So Marvin helped us understand that time was passing by starting a new paragraph each time. And notice how it looks on the page—so much easier to read than one big, long story. It makes me want to dive in, because I can see that he has organized it for me."

Another learner may have paragraphs that each talk about a particular person, or a particular point. Explaining in detail how a couple of learners divided their work into paragraphs has been much more effective than teaching a lesson on paragraphing from an outline or using a printed text, even though the printed text will be more correct than a learner's work. **When it comes to facilitating learning, the swirl of positive emotions in the room is always more effective than the textbook example.**

You can start from just a glimpse of good practice, and expect it to expand and improve over the weeks as the following example shows:

How do I comment on writing from English Language Learners?

As usual, I comment on what I want to teach. If the lesson is on the simple past tense, for example, their assignment at the end of the lesson or chapter will be to write about the activities of the day before. They bring their writing to writing group, and I comment on what I want to teach or review. I point out all the "ed" endings that are correct, and say that they help me understand that these things happened in the past. I point out a correct use of "went" and we laugh about how irregular verbs don't make sense, but even so, this learner has remembered not to say "goed." As well, I continue to look for details that move me, organization that helps me understand, and so on.

One day, when I was wanting to help learners vary their sentence structure and break out of the habit of one simple sentence after another, I seized upon one learner's work that had a question in it.

After Brad had read his piece out loud, I seized on something that changed the monotonous rhythm that had been set up. "Look at this question!" I exclaimed. "It woke me right up. My ears were hearing da da dah! da da dah! da da dah! and getting into a routine, when suddenly I heard something different. The question has a different rhythm. That change in rhythm made me pay attention to the question. And then I had to think of my answer, too, so I had to do a little

work. Then Brad gave his answer, and I could compare it to my answer. I was surprised that our answers were so different, and that made the whole thing more interesting. All from that one little question."

On the next assignment, two or three more learners tried out questions, and in the writing group I exclaimed over all of them as variations in sentence structure. I talked about what the question did to make me involved in the writing. The next week, out of fourteen learners, eight used questions, and I was able to guide a more in-depth discussion of the use of questions. What work does a question do at the beginning of a story? at the end? in the middle? What difference does it make if you give an answer to the question, or just leave it for the reader to answer? What effect does it have if it is the kind of question that has no answer?

It is one of the joys of the method to watch as learners learn from your feedback and follow the models set by other learners in the group. The effect of your very explicit feedback is multiplied when it is given in the writing group for all to hear, and learners' growth is visible not only to you, but to the learners themselves.

Details, Endings, Beginnings, Organization

I find a loose progression as learners become more skilled. At first, it may be only a single detail, a couple of words that catch your attention in a piece that is mostly disorganized and vague. Something in the description of a person or animal stands out, and I can point to it as a good detail that makes me see a picture, or that adds something more specific to the information the writer has already given me.

I find that good endings come sooner than good beginnings, because learners often start a piece without a clear idea of where it's going, but gather steam as they go along, and finish strong. Their piece will have a good ending, but a weak beginning. (Later they will spend some effort thinking about their whole story before they begin to write, or they will go back to edit their beginning after they finish their draft.)

When I'm looking for things to comment on, I find good details and strong endings even in the work of the least skilled writers in the group. Details and endings are important to every writer, and I am happy to keep reinforcing their importance.

More skilled writers also have other things to offer to the group, such as good beginnings, and good organization. So likely I will not comment in the group on their details or endings; instead, they provide examples of these later-developing skills for everyone to learn from.

Of course, this timeline is only an approximation. Sometimes a learner who is only beginning to write is a great storyteller and produces a beginning with a real hook, or organizes the story to a surprising conclusion.

One year a learner, talking about the difference between her former school experience and this one, said: "We are all teachers here." I asked her to make a banner and we hung it up at the front of the room.

Going Beyond "Good Work!"

So you've found something in the writing that stands out in a positive way. You want that learner to know it's good and to keep on doing it. You want other learners to follow suit. You want to give feedback that helps learners understand why it's good, and what they have done to touch you, to inform you, or to keep you interested.

This seems like a difficult task to many practitioners. Most of us (including me), although we may write often, have no formal training as writers. No wonder the idea of giving specific feedback on how to write well takes us out of our comfort zone. However, most of us are readers of novels, non-fiction, news, poetry, and social media. There lies our strength in giving feedback on writing. You recognize what you like in a book or an article; you know what moves you or makes you think.

You don't have to know everything about writing well. You just have to say that something caught your attention in a good way. Then, if you can, say what the writer did to have that effect on you. You can find more ideas on what to say in Appendix C The Art of Giving Feedback, page 40.

Everyone Reads Their Favourite Sentence

When I've finished with my brief comments (much, much briefer than all that explanation in the section above), I ask every learner to look at the piece again and to underline their favourite sentence. I underline my favourite, too. Then, because I want the author to be the last to read, I start with the learner next to them and we go around the room, each person in turn reading out their favourite sentence. (If we're sharing writing on a screen, I ask learners to jot down the first and last words of their favourite sentence, so they commit to one before they hear the others read.)

I take my turn to read my favourite wherever I come in the circle because my choice is no more important than anyone else's choice.

I ask them to read the whole sentence, from period to period, not just the words they like best. This requires them to pay attention again to sentences and periods, but it is a situation where they can't go wrong: Find two dots on the page, and read what's between them.

Sometimes the author gives us a run-on sentence that has a period missing in the middle, for example: "My husband fell asleep in the middle of the show I gave him a poke in the ribs when it was over." Some people choose to read the whole thing as their favourite sentence. Others will mentally insert the period and choose to read either the first part or the second. Nobody bats an eye. Neither do I.

What if a learner only wants to criticize?

Very occasionally, in the little pause while people are underlining their favourites, a learner will say privately to me, "I can't find any sentence to read. I don't like any of them."

I say, "You don't have to like any of them. There is one that you think is a little better than all the rest. Read that one."

I give people the option to give a brief reason for their choice as they read their sentence, and sometimes they do. As time goes by, I hear more learners giving their reasons, echoing the kind of analysis I've been doing. (When many learners start giving reasons for their choice, I know that we are ready to move on to the advanced writing group where learners take more responsibility for analyzing why something is good.)

Sometimes nearly everyone picks the same sentence, and the power of that sentence echoes in the room as it is read out time and time again. Sometimes the piece is only one sentence long, and the author gets to hear it read out over and over again. Sometimes there are so many good sentences that many different ones are picked as favourites. That is also good for the writer to hear.

What if two learners pick the same sentence?

If someone says, "I picked the same sentence as Joe did," I ask them to read it anyway. "If it's good enough to pick twice," I say, "It's good enough to read twice."

For the writer who has just read, this is the last few minutes of basking in positive feedback They hear sentences they have written read out with warm approval, one after another. They hear the cadence of their own good language in the voices of other learners.

Then we go on to the next learner's work, and we do the same thing with that piece: the learner reads, I comment specifically on a couple of things that are well written, and every learner picks a favourite sentence and reads it out loud. It's a simple pattern, but very satisfying on many levels.

How Does the Writing Group Improve Writing?

In that sea of positive emotions, where most people are relaxed and feeling safe enough to hear the details of the feedback, the atmosphere changes from a lack of interest in other learners' work to a sense of "We're all in this together and I can help and learn from other learners." The feelings of security, respect, and competence leave them open to paying attention, to learning more about writing, instead of having to use their energy being defensive or worried.

First, having an audience for the writing is encouraging to the writer. Knowing that the whole writing group will read their work is a powerful motivation to take pains with their writing. The practitioner's response is encouraging and having every learner pay enough attention to it to pick out a favourite sentence is also encouraging.

Second, it often comes as a surprise to learners that they do anything well. After the initial shock wears off, they begin to feel competent at certain parts of the writing task. Since including a bit of conversation was such a hit, Barb is likely to try it again the next time.

Third, other learners are also affected by hearing the process with the first learners' work. If another learner's work can provide examples of good practice, maybe theirs can too. They may think that they'd like to sprinkle a few bits of conversation in their next piece if that's what it takes to get noticed.

Finally, learners are asked to make a judgement about the writing in front of them. Which sentence do they like the most? It does not matter which sentence they pick; choosing requires them to begin to analyze what makes good writing.

5 The Advanced Writing Group

The final phase of the Never-Fail Writing Method brings a twist to the writing group. In this advanced writing group, the practitioner does not comment on the writing. Instead, the responsibility for saying publicly what's good about the writing moves from the practitioner to small groups of learners who jointly award a medal to each piece of writing.

Moving on to the Advanced Writing Group

You may use the format of the writing group as outlined above for many weeks, or even many months, using the writing group to give specific, positive feedback to the learners you are working with.

At some point you will begin to notice they get bored. They have heard the things you say about what makes effective writing many times. In fact, they have now internalized some of it, so it is no longer a thrill to hear you say it.

You will also notice that they begin to accept your invitation to say why they have chosen a particular sentence as their favourite. They will then repeat the kind of things you have been saying all along, such as: *"It touched my heart"; "I could just see the car from the way he described it"; "This first sentence made me want to know what happened next."*

You may hear them talking about their own work in these terms when they are writing, editing, or proofreading it. That is how the learners tell you they are ready to take on more responsibility for giving specific feedback and for analyzing their own writing. When you see those changes in your writers, you know it's time to move to the advanced writing group.

In this phase, the onus on giving public feedback shifts from the practitioner to the learners. Although I am no longer giving that immediate feedback in front of the whole group, I still take the opportunity to do it in private. Both while the learners are writing, and when they proofread it with me before they hand it in, I comment on the things I like, just as I did previously in front of the whole group.

The Format of the Advanced Writing Group

In the advanced writing group, the format changes, and the onus of giving feedback shifts from you to the learners.

As before, learners write, followed by the usual quick proofread, and their writing is then prepared for the writing group.

Divide into Small Groups

When the advanced writing group is brought together, I divide learners into groups of four. I ask them to move to sit with their group so that it is easy to talk among themselves, but still easy to shift a little to give their attention to the whole group. We will be going back and forth many times from small group to large group.

Learners Read Their Work

As before, I ask the first learner to read their piece aloud.

Learners Become a Panel of Judges

With no comment on the writing, I ask each small group to become a panel of judges. They must agree to award one medal to the piece of writing they have just heard. They can give a medal for a good beginning, a good ending, good details, or good organization, whatever they think is the best thing about the piece.

Instructions to the Panel of Judges

Your group is a panel of judges. You must give one medal to this piece of writing. You can give a medal for a good beginning, a good ending, good organization, or good details. Your group must agree on which medal to give. You can give only one medal.

When you have decided which medal to give, each of you can pick your favourite sentence. You do not have to agree on the favourite sentence.

As I circulate while the panels of judges are working, I hear the kind of comments I previously gave during the writing group, such as: "I think we should give the medal for a good ending; it surprised me." It does not matter which medal gets awarded by any group. The purpose of the group work is to get learners analyzing and talking about writing. If there is a lively discussion in a small group, I count that as a success.

Some groups might have a hard time discussing the writing and make a quick decision to put themselves out of their misery, then sit waiting for the time to be up. When I notice a group sitting in silence, or in idle chatter, I push them a little to explain their reasoning, and then model the next step:

"Which medal did you decide on?"

"Organization."

"Good choice. How is it organized?" (I validate their decision, and ask for details about it.)

"Well, he starts in the morning, then the afternoon, then he tells what happened the next day."

"So he organized it in the order things happened. That's the most logical order when you are telling a story about something that really happened. How does that help you when you're reading the story?" (I model giving a reason for their decision, and ask for its effect on the reader.)

"It helps you follow along." "It's clear." "You don't get mixed up."

"Ah, I see why you gave a medal for the organization." (Again, I validate their work on analyzing the writing.)

If they say they gave the medal for details, I ask for examples of good details in the piece; if they chose the beginning or ending, I ask what effect that beginning or ending has on the reader.

The Judges Report Back

Each panel of judges reports back to the whole group. Occasionally I ask a panel to say why they made the award, especially if I know they have had a good discussion. If nearly every panel makes the same award to one piece of writing, I might take a minute to look at the piece again: "Oh, so many medals for the ending of this piece. Let's look at the last part again to see why so many judges thought it deserved a medal."

Individual Favourite Sentences

After every panel of judges has reported on the medal they gave, I ask each learner to read their favourite sentence aloud to the large group.

The reading of individual favourite sentences continues to be important. It ensures that every learner has to make an individual assessment of what is good, even if they don't participate much in the medal-giving discussion or if they can't make their choice prevail. Sometimes a learner with strong opinions finds that others on the panel will not agree with them. They want to give the medal for the beginning, but all the other learners think the ending is the best thing about the piece. In that case the learner can go along with the small group about the medal, but read the first sentence as their favourite sentence in the large group, and perhaps add their reasons at that time.

When everyone has read their favourite sentence, it's time to move on to the next piece of writing.

Analyze the Medals

I keep a running tally of all the medals awarded. After we have read everyone's writing, I call attention to it. The chart gives a rough picture of the strengths of the whole group on that day

Beginning	
Ending	
Details	
Organization	

Usually after a session of awarding medals, there is not much time or

energy to do much of an analysis, but a comment about which medals were most or least awarded sums up the day's work. I then take the opportunity to focus on something I would like them to pay attention to the next time they write.

How Can the Medals Improve Writing?

The medals become a kind of shorthand to use with learners when they are working on their next writing assignment. Medals can remind learners of the things they should look for when they are editing their writing. I also use them as a challenge to help learners focus on things they could improve the next time they write.

Challenge to the Group

When I offer the next writing assignment, I might set a challenge about which medals to aim for. If organization is a difficulty for many learners, I could challenge the whole group to aim for medals for organization. This means that learners who have difficulty organizing their pieces may pay special attention to this, and ask for help while drafting or editing the piece. As well, the challenge will produce many examples of good organization that can be examined with everyone in the next writing group.

Challenge to Individual Learners

While a learner is working on a piece, I might ask them which medal they think their piece will get; this encourages analysis and possibly prompts some editing. I might agree or disagree with their assessment, but we will have to wait for the next writing group to see who is right.

In the moment of working with them, I make a mental assessment of what most needs work in their story (e.g., a weak or confusing beginning) and say, *"Suppose you wanted to get a medal for a good beginning. How could you be sure to get it?"*

Change the Categories to Suit the Learners

Depending on the level of learners you are working with, you can change the medal categories. For example, there might be a medal for smooth transitions or for a clear thesis statement.

When you name the medals that the judges have available to award, you focus the learners on aspects of writing that you want them to pay attention to. This flexibility makes it possible to adapt the method to suit learners at any level.

If learners are writing essays that are too long to be brought to the writing group, sharing everyone's introductory paragraph might be useful. In an introductory paragraph you are looking for a strong opening sentence, a clear thesis statement, clarity, and conciseness. Ask the panels of judges to award each introductory paragraph with one of those medals.

While working with a class of Grade 12 students, I pulled out two examples of good writing from each of their essays, included the students' names, and arranged them into a single document under these headings: strong opening sentence, clear thesis statement, good transitions, correct use of quotations, and strong concluding paragraphs. After making a copy for everybody, I took a class period to examine every example, with discussions about what made each one effective.

What to Teach Outside the Writing Group

In the writing group, elements of good writing come up at random moments, depending on what you see in the writing that learners bring in. You can pick examples from the writing that focus on what learners need to learn at the moment, but often learners need more explicit teaching, and more focused practice.

I do this explicit teaching and practice outside the writing group, and then look for examples in the writing group of learners using what they have learned.

You may already use a textbook or a program that gives practice on structure and grammar. This can support the work you do in the writing program, and the writing program gives learners a reason and motivation for learning the material. Frequently such programs and texts ask learners to write a paragraph (or more) at the conclusion of a lesson. Those paragraphs can be brought to the writing group as ordinary pieces of writing. Texts for English language learners often ask for a paragraph or short essay at the end of a lesson or chapter. This work too can be brought to a writing group.

I focus on three things:

- end punctuation (i.e., periods, question marks, and exclamation marks)
- stages of the writing process
- proofreading

These three are the essentials to get the Never-Fail Writing Method to work. There are some links to activities and posters for learners in the appendices that follow.

End Punctuation

If many periods, question marks, or exclamation marks are missing when work comes to the writing group, other learners cannot easily make sense of it. They cannot read it the way the writer would read it. Appendix E Teaching Sentences and Punctuation, page 53, details some activities to use to teach end punctuation.

The Stages of Writing

Good writing is the result of a process that includes four stages: Think, Write, Edit, and Proofread. Many literacy and ABE/GED learners think that writing means you write down some things as they come into your head, then hand it in. I explicitly teach four stages so they can see the separate skills and activities that come

into play at various times in the writing process. See Appendix D The Stages of Writing, page 48.

Proofreading

I practice proofreading as learners hand their writing in, as I have shown above (page 19). But I also teach proofreading more formally outside the writing group, (i.e., when learners are writing short answers in response to exercises.) There is a poster for learners in Appendix D The Stages of Writing, page 51.

Finding the Joy

The focus in the Never-Fail Writing Method is always on the writing group. That is where you build the positive atmosphere that encourages learners to write more, and to write more often. That is where they see examples of good writing, and see themselves as writers whose skills are improving. That is where the joy lives.

The teaching I do outside the writing group (i.e., end punctuation, the stages of writing, and proofreading) helps learners bring writing to the group that other learners are able to read and understand. Good writing is not simply correct mechanics; in the writing group we move beyond mechanics to look at questions of style. We look at how a writer can engage the reader, which is a much more interesting question than "Did I get the periods right?" I believe that all learners, even those at a very basic level, can engage with those wider questions of style. They don't have wait until they have learned mechanics before working on making their writing interesting. They are writing for a real audience (the writing group), not simply doing an assignment for the practitioner to mark, and audiences want to be moved, persuaded, shocked or informed. Correct punctuation and spelling cannot accomplish those desires.

Teaching writing to literacy learners always brought me joy. The writing group was a sea of positive emotions for me as well as for learners. They found satisfaction in their progress, and I found satisfaction in my teaching.

I hope you have read enough in these pages to make you decide to move to positive-only feedback on learners' writing, and to consider a writing group. I wish you the joy of it.

Appendix A
Working One-to-One: Making Opportunities for Sharing

Your program might support any of these initiatives to provide opportunities for learners to read and give feedback to other learners.

1. Learners who work one-to-one with various practitioners could come to a special group meeting every week or two that would be facilitated by a practitioner who would run a writing group as discussed here. That practitioner would need to get the learners' written pieces in advance to prepare them for the writing group.

2. Make a central binder for shared writing, or make a folder on Google Docs. Practitioners who work one-to-one could have access to the binder or folder and would post their learners' writing to it.

   When working together, practitioner and learner read another learner's writing, the practitioner leads a conversation about what is good in the writing, and each picks a favourite sentence. They might jointly award a medal. The learner notes the favourite sentences, and the medal, if given, for the original writer to see.

3. Display writing on a bulletin board with an envelope underneath, with some forms to fill in and leave in the envelope for the writer. The form might say:

   This is what I liked about your writing:

   _____.

   My favourite sentence is

   _____.

Many of the suggestions for Sharing Learners' Writing in the Larger Community (Appendix B, page 38) are compatible with programs in which practitioners work one-to-one with learners.

Appendix B
Sharing Learners' Writing in the Larger Community

When writing is shared with a larger circle than the writing group, there is an opportunity for revising that first draft and polishing it up. The larger audience and the fact of being published both provide motivation to edit and proofread, to move from a first draft to a final form.

Every published writer works with an editor. Learners whose work is being published also need an editor to make sure they look good in print. Practitioners can work one-to-one with learners to make the punctuation and spelling perfect, while not losing the wording and the voice of the original. It is the time for the practitioner to **do the proofreading**, not just encourage the learner to do it.

Meaningful Consent

When we make opportunities for learners' writing to be shared more broadly, consent becomes an important issue, especially if names are attached.

Your program may have a policy and a consent form for learners to sign (example in Appendix H, page 64), but it is important that learners also understand the possible consequences and give knowledgeable consent. What is the difference between putting their writing on the net and publishing it in a booklet that has only 50 copies printed? What if they run for office one day, and their opponent finds their story on the net? What is the advantage of using initials or a fake name?

Some of the activities below are events that you might want to invite the press to attend. Special precautions must be taken in that case because most people, not just learners, don't understand the possible consequences of talking to the press. For example, a student of mine gave a long interview to the local newspaper about his life and how he came to be in our program. The story was on the front page, with pictures. It was a great story, admiring of the learner, and generally very accurate, but the reporter or the headline writer called him "illiterate," a word which we never used, and which he found insulting.

Writing Opportunities That Involve Editing and Polishing for Real Occasions

We Honour Our Supporters

Learners write about someone who supports them coming back to school. Polish the writing, print it, and put it in a frame. (If possible, get a picture of the supporter and learner together.) Invite all the supporters to come to an event. Learners introduce their supporter by reading the piece they have written. Everybody has refreshments.

Unsung Heroes

Similar to previous event, but write citations about unsung heroes in our lives and invite them to come in to be honoured.

The People in My Life

Learners make a collection of writings about people who are important to them. Copy and bind the collection so the learner can give them away as gifts to the people in the book.

A Souvenir Booklet

After a field trip or other big occasion, ask learners to write a report or reflection on the event. Polish them up and collect them in a booklet to make a souvenir for everyone who participated.

A "Best of the Year" Collection

Near the end of the year, ask learners to look at every piece they have written so far, and pick their best to edit and polish for the collection. You might decide that each learner gets a page, which might have room for two or three short pieces, or one longer one. Perhaps each learner might get two pages if your group is small, and your budget is large. These collections are great for giving to funders and other supporters and excellent to use as reading material for learners.

Letters to Politicians

Politicians nearly always answer (especially if you visit their office and deliver the letters in person).

Appendix C
The Art of Giving Feedback

Feedback starts with your response to the learner's writing. There are two simple questions to ask yourself, as the reader. What moves you in the writing? What did the writer do to provoke your reaction?

Then there are a few small steps to giving feedback that will make the writer want to write more.

1. Find something that works in the piece of writing. It may be a touch of humour or a detail that gives you some important information. It may be the organization of the piece, something with a clear chain of events, or incidents arranged to give you a surprise at the end. It may be something that reaches out and touches your heart or something that reminds you of your own experience.
2. Read it out loud so the writer can hear what you heard.
3. Tell the writer your response *(e.g., "I laughed"; "It made me sad"; "It cleared up my confusion"; "I could see a picture of what you were talking about").*
4. Then, if you can, tell the learners how the writer made you respond as you did, so they can do something similar another time. **What did the writer do to have that effect on you?**

Still looking at that particular small example of good writing, here are some other questions that help focus the main question:

- How does it help the reader in the task of reading (i.e., good organization, headings, title)?
- How does it involve the reader in the piece? Is it calling up the reader's own experiences? Is it asking the reader to do some thinking?
- Does it appeal to the heart or to the head? How does it do this?
- How does it appeal to the ears (i.e., rhythm of the sentence, repetition of similar sounds, a break in a pattern)?

Make your comment as specific as possible. You can start by saying, *"This is a really good ending,"* but don't stop there. Go on to say what the writer has done to make it a good ending, for example:

> *"You show your strong feelings at the end. That really connects me and my feelings to the information you gave earlier."*
>
> *"I like the way you sum up the past and point to the future."*

"When you said at the end that the dog was really a wolf, I was surprised, but suddenly everything made sense."

"Your ending doesn't give me any easy answers, but it leaves me with something to think about. I like that."

The more specific I am, the clearer I am about how endings can help a writer achieve their purpose in writing the piece.

The chart below gives you some specific responses to learners' writing, responses that show learners exactly what the writer has done, as well as how and why that brought value to the piece. The responses are listed roughly in the order you might expect to find them as a learner's skills gradually improve. However, don't be surprised to find some very sophisticated bits of writing from very beginning writers, especially from those who are good at telling stories or jokes.

The first column suggests some things to look for in learners' writing.

The second column outlines what you could say about it. It sometimes gives a detailed look at what the writer did; sometimes it tells how that affected the reader's response. It explains the value of using the technique.

In the third column are examples from learners' writings.

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Vivid details	Details make the ideas or the action clearer. They "paint a picture." Can you feel, see, hear, or smell what the writer experienced? Details can also give more information about something the learner has already mentioned. (A good detail is usually the easiest thing to find in a learner's piece.)	"My body feels like a grumpy bear." "We seen five elk beside the road. There were two cows, two calves and one bull with big horns on him."

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Clear organization	Point out how the writer has organized the piece and say why it works in this case. Information given in chronological order is the easiest to understand. Weakest points first, followed by gradually more important points build up the case and make the last point seem more important. Withholding some information until the end may surprise the reader. Various film techniques can be used in writing as well, to the same effect as they have on screen (i.e., starting at the end of the story and circling back to the beginning; moving from a wide, distant view to a close-up, or vice versa).	"On my birthday Doug brought me breakfast in bed. Then I had a lazy day I talked on the phone with my friend in Wainwright. At night we went to my mom's for a birthday supper. We had cake."
Strong beginning	A strong beginning reaches out and grabs the reader's attention. It prepares the reader for what is to come.	"It was the scariest night of my life." "It was really touching to hear Linda York speak." (This was a good beginning because it led into a piece that was all about what Linda said and how it touched the writer.)

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Strong ending	A strong ending lets the reader know the piece is over. The writer didn't just stop because their phone buzzed. It leaves the reader with something to think about, or with feelings about the writing. An ending that echoes the beginning sets up a "spiral effect" that brings everything in the piece back into the reader's mind. Sometimes an ending wraps a piece up and tells the reader what to think. Sometimes an ending leaves everything open for the reader to decide what to think.	"Well, we got our message to the people." "So I am happy I made the step and went back to school." (First sentence: I took a big step to go back to school.)
Suitable title	The title introduces the piece. It may prepare us for what is to come. It fits just right, not too broad or too narrow. It hooks the readers' interest.	"My Camping Trip" "Silence and Noise"

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Correct punctuation	Correct punctuation makes the meaning clear. It makes the piece easy to read. It lets the reader concentrate on the meaning instead of on trying to figure out what is being said.	"I am tired. I get tired of thinking. I am used to working. Can I borrow your thinking cap?"
Humour	Humour makes the reader laugh.	"My brain is at home in bed I'll go home at lunch. And ask it to come back to school with me."
Repetition	Repetition of a word or a sentence makes the point stronger. A variation in the repetition prevents boredom. If the reader was not paying attention the first time, the repetition gives them a second chance to get the information. Shakespeare often repeated the important things three times, first in ordinary language, then in more poetic language, then in a rhymed couplet.	"Sometimes I wish it would take one day at school and then I would be out there with the working people making money! money! money!" "I was embarrassed. My face went red. I felt hot. I ran out of the room. I wanted to get my hot red face out of there."

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Variety of sentence length	A variation of sentence length appeals to the ear. It has a pleasing rhythm. When there is a variation, we pay attention to the point made in the sentence that is different. For example, in a series of sentences that are long, long, long, then short, the attention is focused where the rhythm changes, and that should be where the important point appears.	"Well to make the long story short, me and her grew apart. I'm real lucky that we separated so gracefully and that I can still go and see her little boy. I still can take him to the movies, but her new boyfriend gets a little jealous about that. I understand that."
Use of conversation	Using someone's exact words brings the reader into the scene. We feel like we are really there. A conversation may also slow down the action so the reader has time to be aware of what's happening. It provides a break for the eye, and appeals to the ear. It provides a change of voice from the writer's voice.	"And then I heard the kids scream out loud, 'What is that, Dad?'"
Appeals to the heart	Appeals to the emotions make the reader want to be on the writer's side. That kind of writing uses emotionally charged imagery and ideas.	"This time of year is really hard for some people because they can't be with their loved ones for one reason or another. These people can feel lost and all alone at this time of year, which is sad."

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Questions	Questions provide a change of rhythm. They lead the reader to think.	"For my medicine wheel this is the way I look at it. Am I living in balance?"
Smooth transitions	Transition phrases or sentences can guide the reader through the piece, through time or space. They prepare the reader for changes in thought or emotion. Transitions can emphasize the writer's points.	"Next" "Later" "When we got home " "Meanwhile, in the living room" "On the other hand"
Quotations from an authority	Quotations from an expert can back up the writer's point. They bring a different voice into the piece.	"I wasn't sure what to do, but the doctor said, 'Take her to the emergency ward.'"
Appeals to the head	Appeals to the head make the reader think. They try to get the reader to agree with the writer. Facts and figures help make the writer's point.	"I feel that animals have to leave the big city so they could be free from the pollution. I feel all animals should not live in the big city with all the bad pollution. They're all safer in the woods."

What to look for	What effect does it have?	Examples from learners
Profanity or other possibly offensive language	Profanity gives the reader information about the speaker. It may make a person seem more true-to-life. It may offend some readers, but it can also emphasize the writer's point. Think of your audience. Do you want to offend some people? Sometimes you do. Do you care if they stop reading? Sometimes you care, and sometimes it is more important to show someone as they really are.	"He had things handed to him on a silver platter and so that made Richard a real stuck-up snob and self-absorbed asshole."

Appendix D
The Stages of Writing

I teach learners these four stages of writing in order to break down the writing process into more manageable chunks, each requiring specific skills. I want them to be aware of what stage they are in at any moment so they can concentrate on each skill in its turn.

When I sit down to help a learner, I ask what stage they are in, and I gear my assistance to that stage. A learner in the **thinking stage** needs a wide-ranging conversation about the topic and what they want to include in their piece. A learner in the **writing stage** may need a few words of encouragement or a question about the topic to keep the flow of words running. A learner in the **editing stage** needs some questions about what will make the writing clearer or more engaging to the reader. A learner in the **proofreading stage** has already worked on getting ideas honed and organized and is just looking for small errors in spelling and punctuation. Learners in the proofreading stage will not be open to adding new sections or reorganizing the whole piece. They are FINISHED!

Think

Some people like to think through what they want to say before they start to write. They may find an outline or a mind map useful to organize their thinking. When they write their first draft, it is likely to be fairly well organized and not to require much change.

Other people like to write first, so as to get down on paper whatever is in their minds. They often find an initial 5-minute free write helpful. They get a very rough draft down on paper, look at it carefully, and then do their thinking about what they will write, where they will expand, where they will cut, and how they will organize their points. Sometimes they take a fresh sheet of paper to write their "real" first draft.

Write

Letting go of worries about mistakes, and just letting the words flow is the secret to getting a first draft down on paper. No matter how bad that first draft is, it gives learners something to work on in the editing stage.

Some people like to do a timed writing for a first draft. Set a timer for five or ten minutes, put your pen on the paper and keep it moving until the bell goes off. Keep writing, even if all you write is: "I can't think of anything to write." Eventually something more interesting will come into your mind, and you are on your way.

Edit

For many literacy learners, editing will be a new concept. For others, editing and proofreading may be lumped into one category called "Checking it over before you hand it in."

Yet for many writers, both professional and nonprofessional, editing is the stage they spend the most time in, and the stage they like the best. The hard work of getting the first draft down on paper is done, and now they can spend their time and energy in making small and large changes to make the work accomplish what they set out to do.

This is the stage where learners can concentrate on organization, and the idea of dividing the work into paragraphs to help the reader follow comes into play.

I often use a writing prompt that introduces learners to organizing their work into paragraphs. I show a video and ask them to write two paragraphs using the question: "What did you see?" in the first paragraph and "What did you think and feel?" in the second. In the writing group I take a couple of good examples and point out the elegance and the ease of understanding that comes from organizing in this way.

Working with the medals in the advanced writing group of the Never-Fail Writing Method encourages learners to do more editing before they hand their work in. You can give them another reason for editing by publishing a collection of learners' writing to give away at some special occasion or by helping learners make a collection of their own writing (e.g., a collection of separate writings about important people in their lives that can be copied and given to each of the people featured). See Writing Opportunities That Involve Editing and Polishing for Real Occasions, page 43, for more on this.

Proofread

Like editing, proofreading is a term and a process that many literacy learners have not heard before, and most are not used to doing it. Proofreading is the final check to find small errors before the work is copied for the writing group or for a wider audience.

When they find a reason to edit their work for publication or for giving away to people outside the writing group, it calls for extra careful proofreading. **Everyone writing for publication has someone who helps with proofreading and finds the errors they missed. Learners deserve the same treatment.**

Errors in End Punctuation

When I look at a learner's work that has some period errors, but is mainly correct, I ask myself, "Does the learner understand where to put end punctuation?" If yes, then the issue is proofreading. The learner doesn't know how to proofread or is not in the habit of doing it.

If I am working one-to-one with a learner who has 80% of their end punctuation correct, I know the problem is proofreading. In that case, I point out all the paragraphs where the punctuation is perfect, and I ask them to make the other paragraphs also correct, by reading out loud to check their work. If they can't find a missing period, I point to the line where it should go, and ask them to read the sentence again to find it. If they have put in an extra period, I read the paragraph aloud, paying no attention to the extra period, but making a clear pause and intake of breath at the correct periods. Then I ask them to find the period I didn't need to stop at because the words made sense without it.

The Stages of Writing

Think

Write

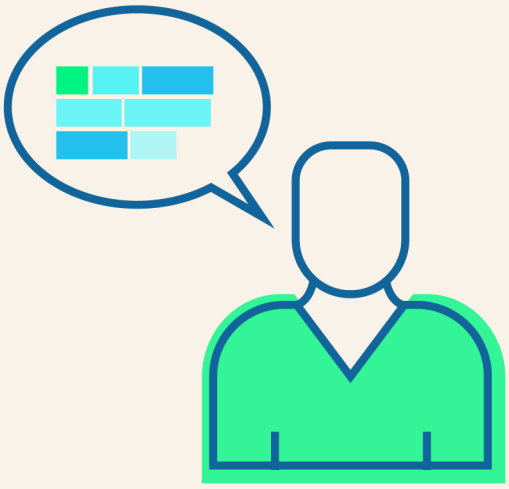
Edit

Proofread

THE Never-Fail WRITING METHOD
By Kate Nonesuch

COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING PROGRAM · Community Learning Network · PGFL

How to Proofread



Proofread out loud.

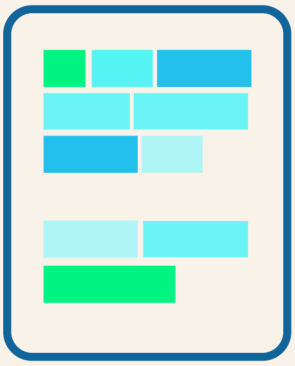
Your ears give you a message.

Your eyes give you a message.

Do you get the same message from both eyes and ears?

Yes? Great.

No? Change the words on the paper to match the message you hear.



Trust your ears to catch the message you want to write.

Appendix E
Teaching Sentences and Punctuation

What Is a Sentence?

Before you can punctuate correctly, you have to know what a sentence is. Here are some multimodal activities to help learners get familiar with that basic unit of thought.

Separate the Sentences

In pairs, have learners read a piece of text together sentence-by-sentence with one learner reading the first sentence, and the other learner reading the next one, taking it in turns. This requires learners to pay attention to the periods and lets them hear each sentence as a unit. The text must be at a very comfortable reading level for the learners. If you are working one-to-one, do this activity with the learner. It looks like (and it is) a reading exercise, but it also fosters an awareness of the sentence as a unit of thought.

The "Pop-In"

To focus on the sentence as something that is a complete thought, I model a "pop-in." I go out of the room, close the door behind me, then pop in, say a sentence or a fragment, and pop out again. For example, I'll open the door and say, *"When you're finished the exercise,"* then close the door. Next, I come back in and ask people if what I said was a complete thought. Did they get a message, or are they confused about what I meant? Would it need a period, or would it need to be joined to some other words? There is something about the opening and closing of the door that isolates the words and makes them easier to examine.

Then I ask individual learners to pop in with their own set of words, and we figure out if it is a sentence or not.

You could use a door or a screen to pop in from, or simply stand up, say the words, and sit down again.

The Complex Sentence

I explicitly teach the complex sentence pattern because most sentence fragment errors in learners' work are the result of putting a period where the comma should be in a complex sentence. The pattern is:

"[subordinate conjunction] _____ , _____ ."

("If dada dada comma BOOM period."

"When dada dada comma BOOM period.)

I repeat that pattern over and over, using a sing-song voice for the subordinate clause and a strong "boom" for the main clause and inserting various subordinate conjunctions as examples:

"If it's raining, I'll drive you home."

"Whenever I see his puppy, I have to laugh."

Subordinate Conjunctions

if

after

when

while

whenever

since

because

although

though

Following are some physical activities to use instead of, or alongside, paper-and-pencil exercises.

Write a Sentence That Follows the Pattern

I give them a subordinate conjunction and another word, and ask them to use both words in a sentence that fits the pattern. For example, I might give them "when" and "monkey" to follow the pattern: "When dada dada comma BOOM period." To encourage interesting sentences, I remind people that we refuse to be bored. We want something exciting like:

"When the lion came in, the monkey hid under the table."

"When the monkeys found the bananas, they jumped up and down."

I go around to help with spelling, then ask everyone to write their sentence where everyone can see it (i.e., on the board or in the chat). We read the sentences, with emphasis on the pattern.

Writing on Your Feet

I prepare some sentences with two clauses, then type each clause on a separate sheet of paper. I shuffle the papers, distribute one to each learner, and ask them to match themselves up into complete sentences. When all have found a match, each pair reads their sentence to the group. Alternatively, learners write their sentence on the board, and I review them with the group.

If you are **working one-to-one**, put the clauses with the subordinate conjunctions in one pile, and the main clauses in a separate pile. Ask the learner to choose one

from each pile to make a complex sentence. Similarly, in the variations that follow, a learner can join the pieces together to make a sentence on the table. These may be copied if the learner needs to practice writing or typing.

Make similar adjustments for the variations that follow.

Punctuating Complex Sentences

All the sentences are complex (e.g., "If it's raining, I'll give you a ride.") This means that some learners get a main clause and others get a subordinate clause. Their task is to make a sentence with the pattern "[subordinate conjunction] _____ , _____ ." I provide the cards with the clauses, and learners go around to find another learner whose clause goes with theirs to make a sentence.

It is easiest if the clauses on the sheets have capital letters and punctuation as needed.

When learners find that too easy, I write the clauses with no punctuation or capital letters, and provide a pile of papers with either periods or commas on them. Learners find their match; then the two of them pick punctuation as needed from the pile of periods and commas. If the subordinate clause comes first, they need a comma. If the main clause comes first, they don't. Their choice.

To make it still more difficult, I give them pieces of paper that have only a main clause, with no capitals or end punctuation. Learners match themselves up, then choose from a pile of sheets with "since," "if," "because," "when," "whenever," "although," and use periods and commas from a pile as needed. Here they must think about putting the conjunction in the clause that is less important. For example, notice the difference between *"While I was buying groceries, the dog died";* and *"While the dog died, I was buying groceries."* Both are correct, and both might be said in a particular situation, but there is a difference in import.

Joining Clauses with "And," "But," and "Or"

All of the clauses are main clauses with no capitals or end punctuation. Learners match themselves up, then choose from a pile of sheets with "and," "but," or "or" to join the clauses together, and take one from a pile of sheets with periods. Some style manuals require a comma before the "and," "but," and "or." If you follow this style, put out a pile of commas too.

Although the simple sentence, with one main clause, is the easiest to punctuate, this exercise of joining up two simple sentences with "and," "but," or "or" asks something more complicated. Learners must think about the relationship between the two main clauses and pick the appropriate word to join them.

Punctuation

Where do the periods go? (I say "periods" instead of "end punctuation" for simplicity, and because "punctuation" can be difficult to pronounce or read. However, I explain that they may substitute a question mark or an exclamation mark for a period, depending on the context.)

I give learners three methods for figuring out where the periods go:

- Use your ears.
- Use your shoulders.
- Use your brain.

Use Your Ears

Read your writing out loud, slowly, and with expression. Your ears may hear a definite pause. That's where the period goes. Your ears may hear your voice go up or down. That's where the period goes. Your ears may hear you take a breath in. That's where the period goes.

Use Your Shoulders

Read your writing out loud, slowly, and with expression. Pay attention to your shoulders. When you feel them go up as you take a breath, that is where the period goes. You may feel your shoulders go up, or you may feel it more in your back or chest.

Use Your Brain

Use your brain to think about the meaning. If you are talking about one thing, then start talking about something else, those two things have to be separated by a period or joined by some word. (You can leave the option of a semi-colon for more advanced learners, unless someone asks about it.)

Example: "Marie is good at math her sister is better at English."

First you tell us about Marie, and then you tell us about her sister.

You can separate those two things with a period: "Marie is good at math. Her sister is better at English."

If you like, you can join them together with a word. You have many choices of words to use to join them together: "Marie is good at math, but her sister is better at English." "Marie is good at math, and her sister is better at English." "Marie is good at math, although her sister is better at English." "Although Marie is good at math, her sister is better at English."

Notice that, in the last two examples, “although” is the word that lets you join the two ideas together, but it does not always come at the same place in the sentence as “but” and “and” usually do.

The Thorny Question of Teaching Grammar

When I’m dealing with second language learners who have a good grasp of grammar, then I can use the grammatical rules to explain the punctuation, although usually people who can talk about subjects and predicates already know where to put the period.

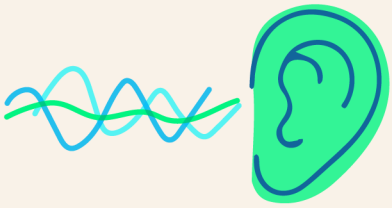
Those of our learners who speak English as a first language already know English grammar. You can tell they know grammar because they never say things like “I the dog kicked,” or “I saw very old two men.”

However, they usually cannot talk about grammar. It seems to me that by first teaching people how to recognize a noun and a verb, then introducing the idea of subject and predicate, we build a very shaky foundation for teaching where to put the periods. I’d rather use the methods outlined above, and short circuit the grammar lesson. **Basic literacy learners need to know where to put the period long before they tackle talking formally about grammar.**

Where do the periods go?

Read out loud to find out!

1 Use your ears.



Do you hear a pause?

Does your voice go up or down?

Do you hear yourself breathe in?

2 Use your body.

Do you feel your shoulders go up as you take a breath?

Do you feel your back or chest move?

3 Use your brain.

Think about the meaning.
Do you talk about two things?
Use a period to keep them apart or a word to join them together.

THE Never-Fail WRITING METHOD
By Kate Nonesuch

COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING PROGRAM · Community Learning Network · PGFL

Appendix F
Proofreading with Basic Readers

Mainly I teach proofreading by doing it with learners. (See A Quick Proofread Together, page 17.) What follows is a more detailed description of working on proofreading with learners whose reading skills are very basic.

Whether they are working on writing for the writing group or a more basic task, such as writing one-sentence answers to questions, I ask them to read out loud slowly, with expression, and notice the two messages they get: one from their eyes (what they have written); and one from their ears (what they meant to write, which is what they say when they read the work aloud). The skill in proofreading is to notice when these two messages are different.
When learners see and hear two different messages, they should change the words on the paper to match their intent.

When we point out learners' errors, we are doing the proofreading for them, not teaching them to proofread.

Missing or Extra Words

If they have left a word out in their written work, they may automatically put it in as they read it aloud, and may not notice the omission. On the other hand, they may read their work as written, without the missing word. This will confuse them, and they may stop to look at the sentence again.

If they have written a word twice, or put in a word that doesn't belong, they may skip over the extras without noticing them. On the other hand, they may read everything, exactly as written, and then struggle to make sense of it.

These are difficult errors for learners to spot. In both cases, they need to take their eyes off the page, listen as they say out loud what they want to say, and then adjust the text to match what they hear.

Many beginning writers have difficulty hearing and seeing at the same time. Sometimes it helps if I say the words they meant to write while they tap each word on the paper, until they come to the error and can see what is wrong. Sometimes they say what they want to say while I tap the words on the paper until we find the error.

Teaching Proofreading with the Language Experience Approach (LEA)

One of the advantages of doing language experience is that **you** put the periods in. They are all correct. If I'm using LEA, I'm glad that I get to teach periods from the start, rather than having to do remedial work with learners who write their own stories and have problems with punctuation. I say that the period is a "stop sign" for the reader, to make sure the reader reads the story the way the writer wrote it.

When I'm writing as the learner talks, I write the periods VERY LARGE (about the same size as the ball of the letter "a") and make a big production out of doing so.

When I read the story back to the learner, I ask them to circle the periods as I read. This lets me know they're following as I read and reminds them of the function of the period.

When the learner reads the story back to me, I ask them to tap the desk or stamp their foot at each period.

After we have read it several times, sometimes with me reading and sometimes with the learner reading, I ask them to copy the piece, either by hand or on the computer. When the learner copies the story onto paper or onto the computer, I ask them to check that every period has been copied correctly, and I check and ask for corrections if necessary. (I ask for corrections because this is not a writing task; it is a copying task.)

When the piece gets to writing group, I can hold it up as an example of good work with correct punctuation!

Appendix G
Learners' Writing Samples, with Comments

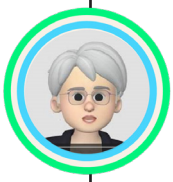
Some examples of comments a practitioner might make if these learners' stories were brought to writing group.

The Roosevelt Elk

Yesterday when we went to Gordon River we seen five elk beside the road. There were two cows, two calves and one bull with big horns on him. That was pretty neat.

It was the first time I seen a bull. I was pretty surprised to see them.

D.



D. gives us some great details here. He doesn't stop at saying there were five elk; he gives us a better picture in the second sentence. His description takes the same form as some videos. He starts out with a wide-angle shot, the road to Gordon River. He zooms in a little to show five elk beside the road, then zooms in closer and we see more details—two cows, two calves and a bull. Then he zooms in on the big horns on the bull. Every time he zooms in we get a clearer picture.

D. puts himself into the story by saying how he felt. We feel more connected to the elk because we know D. and trust him to tell the truth.

Untitled

The following is a description of a class session where the teacher was away and Joe, a student, guided the proceedings.

We did our reading with our partner first.

Then we did our reading out loud to the class.

Then we went and did our test.

It was all right.

After we did our easy spelling. It was different.

Joe did a good job.

I think it turned out all right.

D.

D. gives us many details about his day. He helps us understand by telling us the order things happened in, and by using words like first, then, and after.

This is a great ending. D. gave us his opinion about the whole day to sum things up.

Layan

Layan is my daughter. She likes strawberries very much. She eats strawberries with cake. She likes balloons. She doesn't need Pampers anymore, just at night. She is trained. She can go to the bathroom.

She says, "Help, Mom."

I help her. She feels good.

At night she says, "No pampers!"

I feel very good. I feel proud of her.

She feels proud.

She is an easy child.

S.

S. has given us a lovely picture of her daughter, with lots of details to tell us about her, such as her love of strawberries and balloons. She also tells us about how old she is, without really saying.

We can hear Layan because S. gives us her exact words. When she says, "No Pampers," I can almost see her stamping her little foot.

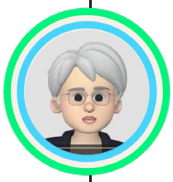
Dear Adriana Future Self:

I want to write you this letter to tell you that I am proud of you, proud of how far you come. Keep going, don't stop, all the failures in your life are just a bump, challenge yourself each day to wake up turn the computer on and focus on searching for that one job that is set on your heart. Tell yourself that all those rejections will one day be no more, no more frustrations, no more sitting in front of the computer, no more mundane routines.

You will reach the top of the ladder, it might seem impossible but with every step you take you are getting closer to your achievement, you are beautiful, and intelligent and you still have time to make your mark in society. So, keep going thrive towards your goal, never give up and trust in yourself.

From:

Adriana Future Self.



This strong sentence appeals to the ear. We hear "no more" "no more" and every time we hear it, we hear how sick and tired she is of the frustrations of her day.

Look at all the details here. She gives many reasons for hope; she piles on the reasons why success will come; she encourages herself three times in the last sentence to keep on going.

Notice the contrast between the mood of the part shaded orange and the part shaded blue. Each mood is in its own paragraph.

Appendix H
Sample Permission Form

Never-Fail Writing Method Consent Form

Choose all that apply:

- ☐ I understand my permission is voluntary.
- ☐ I give permission for my writing to be used in the Never-Fail Writing Method e-Learning at www.calp.ca.
- ☐ I give permission for my voice recording to be used in the Never-Fail Writing Method e-Learning at www.calp.ca.

Choose one:

I want to use my:

- ☐ First name
- ☐ Initials
- ☐ Fake name
- ☐ No name

I can contact the Community Learning Network to ask questions about how and where my writing is used at (780) 485-4926 Ext 1.

Signature	Date
Printed Name	Contact Phone Number
CALP Contact Name	CALP Contact Email