



# SELF-DIRECTED KINDERGARTEN WRITERS

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## ABSTRACT

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*This article seeks to empower teachers to create a literacy environment in which children begin to identify as writers: confident, willing to take risks, engaged, excited, persistent, resilient, resourceful, and self-starting. The teaching methods provided in the article are centered around the writer's workshop model, applied in a Kindergarten classroom in the mid-South, where the focus is on independent writing time and not a task completion. Writing was viewed as a time to dive deeper into creating meaningful messages, work on writing craft, and set goals as a writer. The methods discussed in the article can foster an environment where young children can become self-directed writers, and nurturing within them the confidence to share their stories with the world.*

*Keywords: Kindergarten, writing, motivation*

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**T**he term *self-directed writer* was made popular in Leah Mermelstein's book of the same name (Mermelstein, 2013). Mermelstein describes the qualities of self-directed writers as students who are independent first and interdependent second. These writers are confident, willing to take risks, engaged, excited, persistent, resilient, resourceful, and self-starting. The first and second authors of this article spent a year writing and learning alongside 20 kindergarteners in a rural public school in the mid-south. They were seeking the most effective strategies to nurture our youngest children into becoming risk-taking, autonomous writers.

This article seeks to empower teachers with strategies to create a literacy environment in which the youngest children begin to identify as writers through choice, self-directed writing strategies, and a brave writing mindset (Schrodt, 2020).



## SELF-DIRECTED WRITING

Several evidence-based strategies have been combined to create this idea of self-directed writing for young children. Previous meta-analyses have revealed that both direct, explicit writing instruction and goal setting are effective for improving writing quality in elementary students (Graham et al., 2012). In addition, modeling good writing has been shown to be effective for adolescents (Graham & Perin, 2007). Schrodt et al. (2019) found that adding student choice increased student writing growth, motivation, and perseverance. Keeping all of these things in mind, we set out to provide an instructional strategy which would be both steeped in research and allow our students to have choice and freedom as they grow as young writers.

### WRITER'S WORKSHOP

The writing workshop structure (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1994) was selected for this study due to the focus of a mini-lesson with direct, explicit instruction, time for student engaged in writing, and opportunities for peer feedback (Calkins, 2020). The writing workshop begins with time for direct, explicit writing instruction through a mini-lesson and then moves into independent writing time where students write and the teacher confers with students. During this conferring time, the teacher reinforces the ideas from the mini-lesson, listens to students' needs, and helps direct them in goal setting and reflection. The workshop ends with a time to share their writing with an audience beyond the teacher, reading what they produced during writing time on an author's chair or to a small group of friends. The final step in the workshop is a short reflection time (Kissel, 2017) for students to think about what they did as a writer today and what they will do tomorrow to be successful in the workshop. This predictable structure allows students to be able to be in "a constant state of composition" (Graves, 1994, pg. 104) where the focus on the independent writing time is not a task completion, but a time to dive deeper into creating meaningful messages, work on writing craft, and set goals as a writer.

### SETTING WRITING GOALS

For students to become more self-directed, it is important that they know clearly the goals and expectations for their writing (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Though primarily



researched in older elementary and adolescent students, research has repeatedly shown that adding goals to writing increases writing quality (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham et al., 2012). For young children, rubrics and checklists allow for a set of clear criteria for success to be visible and available to students before, during, and after their writing. These goals allow for differentiation and choice as students take responsibility to improve their writing. Rubrics and checklists were located in each student’s writing folder, as well as magnified to provide large visual cues for the kindergarten students. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1**

*Goal Setting Chart with Name Clips and Rubrics*



	YES!	NOT YET
I used good coloring.		
I wrote my name and short cut date.		
I thought about something I love, something I know a lot about, or something that happened to me.		
I used illustrations to give more detail to my writing.		
I used kindergarten spelling.		
I put spaces between my words.		
I wrote one or more complete ideas.		
I used the word wall to spell sight words.		
I started sentences with a Capital letter.		
I used an end mark (.?!).		

Using a think-aloud, the teacher modeled setting a goal by placing a name clip next to the goal that matched her need as a writer. The students then came up one by one and clipped their name next to their focus for that writing session. These goals would show up often in writing conferences as students worked toward mastery. Goals can be continued over several writing sessions or modified based on conference outcomes. Two transcripts of conferences are included below along with the writing sample in Figure 2.



**Teacher:** When you put your clip on the goal “I can read my writing,” what is something you are going to do to make sure we can read it?

**Student:** Finger spaces.

**Teacher:** That helps us to know where the word starts and where the word ends. Can you show me where you added spaces?

**Figure 2**

*Student Sets the Goal “I put spaces between my words.”*

	
Before setting goal: “I love the skateboard.”	Adds on to the story after setting goal of “I put spaces between my words”: “Ride on the skateboard.”

After the interaction above, the student went on to add the next part of the story, working on the spacing goal. Here is another example of goal setting.:

**Teacher:** What did you place your clip on to work on today?

**Student:** Reading my sentences. Reading my story. If you can't read your own story then someone else won't read your story because you won't understand your story.

**Teacher:** How do you do that? How do you know you can read it?



**Student:** You go back and reread your sentences and see which one you need to go back and fix.

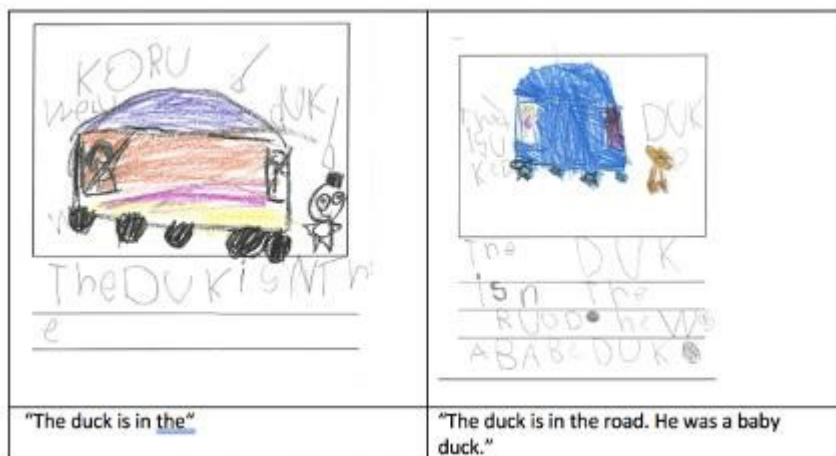
**Teacher:** I am going to challenge you to do just that!

**Student:** I'm gonna challenge you too. I'm gonna challenge you to come back in a minute and see how I'm doing.

After the interaction above, the student chose to read her piece of writing shown in the first box of Figure 3. While reading her writing, she realized she left out the word “road” at the end of her sentence. Reflecting on her writing goal, the student also noticed she did not have spaces between her words which made her writing hard to read as well. The student decided to start fresh and ended up adding another sentence detail to her writing.

### Figure 3

*Student uses her writing goal to revise her story*



### WRITING CONFERENCES

Carl Anderson's seminal work on writing conferences has taught many teachers to begin writing conferences with the phrase "How's it going?" (Anderson, 2000). This phrase



allows for the student to set the agenda for the conference, allowing for both choice and responsibility in the conference. Part of becoming a self-directed writer is learning to access and use strategies for persevering when the writer gets stuck (Schrodt et al., 2019). Teachers can use conferring as a time to help students identify and use self-regulation strategies to keep going in their writing. Kindergarten writer Layla was a striving writer who had not yet written a whole sentence on her own in writer’s workshop. She was stuck as she started her sentence “I see a unicorn.” A portion of the conference is transcribed below:

**Layla:** I am trying to say, “I see a unicorn.”

**Teacher:** Let’s count out that sentence. I see a unicorn. That’s four words. You already got the word *I*. That’s wonderful. The second word is see. How do you think you could figure that out?

**Layla:** The wall.

**Teacher:** That’s right. You used a strategy to point to the word wall. Now unicorn. That’s a long word. What strategy could we use for spelling that word?

**Layla:** Stretchy snake.

**Teacher:** Let’s practice our stretchy snake we did earlier. \*stretches out the word *unicorn* slowly\*

Layla’s writing is seen in Figure 4. The first lines of her writing show her struggle as she starts and stops and restarts her sentence, “I see . . . a . . . I . . . a . . .” After her conference, Layla was able to write on the third line many of the phonemes found in the sentence “I see a unicorn” and her first complete sentence (I C A UNCN). Layla added one more sentence



saying “I love unicorns” (I L UNCNC). The conferring moves made by the teacher helped Layla move her writing forward. Table 1 provides a starting point for teachers as they work with students in writing conferences with a self-directed lens.

**Figure 4**

*Layla’s Unicorn Writing*



In the video below, Layla is seen reflecting on what she did as a writer that day. She is demonstrating the hard work of sounding out the word “unicorn,” using her arms and hands to stretch out the sounds in the word.

<https://youtu.be/NtTHNhZTnHw>





**Table 1**

<b>Writing Conference Questions to Encourage Self-Directed Writing</b>
How's it going? (Anderson, 2000)
How do you think you could figure that out?
What strategy could we use for spelling that word?
What tool could you use to help you figure that out?
What did you do really well today as a writer?
What are you working on as a writer today?
What is something you are doing as a writer to help yourself meet that goal?
When you reread your writing, do you notice anything you want to change or add?

### CHOICE

The term authentic writing has been used to describe writing instruction that allows for students to write for meaningful purposes. This term can be vague in the sense that authenticity means different things for different people. Choice is one way to increase authenticity

(Behizadeh, 2015), motivation (Graves, 1994), and agency (Janks, 2009) in student writing. Two strategies for choice in writing in kindergarten were used in this class: 1) choice on where to physically sit and write during writer's workshop and 2) choice on what topic to write about.

### *CHOICE IN SEATING*

Many kindergarteners are experiencing their first formal education setting as they step into the classroom in August. The goal of many teachers is to help these children develop independence and self-management skills that will help them stay motivated and take charge of their learning. Developing these skills gives students self-confidence. Just as an adult chooses the library, a comfy chair, or a coffee shop as the most effective place to work, students in this kindergarten writer's workshop were allowed to choose any place around the room to write. Just like any other skill presented in class, choice seating in writer's





workshop should be gradually released to the students as the teacher models, practices, and sets expectations for this time. The teacher sets expectations from the beginning by modeling how to gather the supplies needed to find a spot and what kind of spot is the most effective for writing. Lap desks, clipboards, bean bag chairs, and easy-to-transport supply boxes are all great materials for supporting this work environment (see Figure 5). See Table 2 for an anchor chart that can be co-created with students while teaching this routine.

**Table 2**

*Choice Seating Anchor Chart*

<b>Expectations for Choice Seating</b>	<b>Questions for Self-Reflection</b>
Choose a place that is comfortable.	Will I be able to sit here comfortably for 30 minutes?
Choose a place that is effective.	Do I have a hard surface to write on (a desk or a clipboard)?
Choose a place that allows for space.	Am I an arms-length apart from my friends?
Choose and place and stay there.	Am I ready to start writing?

**Figure 5**



### *Kindergartener Chooses Where to Sit During Writer's Workshop*



#### *CHOICE IN WRITING TOPICS*

By self-selecting topics, children can connect their writing to their own experiences and interests, compelling them to write with a purpose beyond the teacher. When students are allowed to write on topics of their choice, they write with more variety and creativity, and increase their overall achievement (Bonyadi, 2014; Schrodt et al., 2019).

Over the course of the year, the kindergarten students wrote on over 200 unique writing topics. Students wrote on topics ranging from sharks to painting their nails to dragons and hot chocolate. Figure 6 demonstrates choice in genre (how-to) and topic (Star Wars).

Writing topics were inspired and spread across the room through modeling and sharing. Each workshop would end with students sharing their writing with their friends, spreading around ideas for the next person to write with (Author 1 et al., under review).



**Figure 6**

*Kindergartener Writes on the Self-Selected Topic of Star Wars*



### MORE SOPHISTICATED INVENTED SPELLING

Invented spelling is the ability of young children to use their knowledge of letter sounds and alphabetic knowledge to create words. Research has shown that invented spelling may be a predictor of reading success in kindergarten and spelling in first grade (Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2017). The use of invented spelling frees children to creatively write, rather than focus on conventional spellings (Schrodt et al., 2020). When combined with self-regulation and mindset training, invented spelling has led to an increase in significant growth for young writers (Schrodt et al., 2019). Spelling is one of the most common obstacles for students to overcome when writing. Not knowing how to spell a word can stop a student's writing flow and prevent them from continuing to write. A self-directed writer must be willing to take spelling risks, becoming a brave speller (Author 1 et al., 2020) in order to write independently.

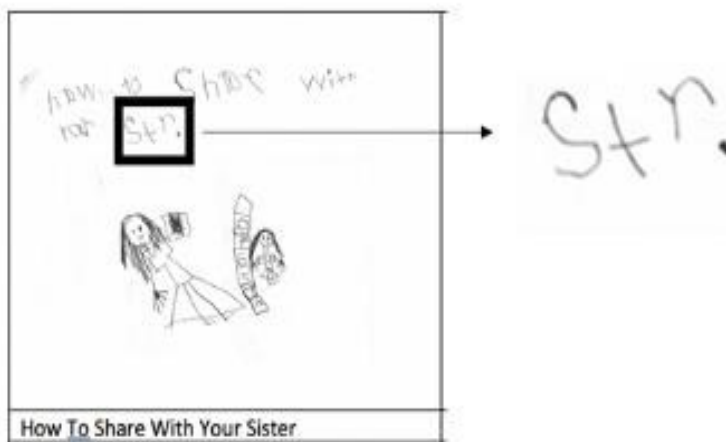
First, it is important for students to be able to make a first attempt independently at spelling the word they would like to spell, encouraging phonetic spelling when necessary. In this class, kindergarteners were taught to use a visual cue called "stretchy snake" to slowly stretch out the sounds in a word in order to hear each phoneme in the word. The



students used their hands as physical support, balling up their fists together in front of their chest and then slowly pulling them apart as they stretch out the sounds in the word. Maya was writing a how-to story about sharing. During her writing conference, the teacher asked if there were any words she spelled bravely on her cover page. Maya said the word “sister.” See Figure 7.

### Figure 7

*Maya Demonstrates Brave Spelling*

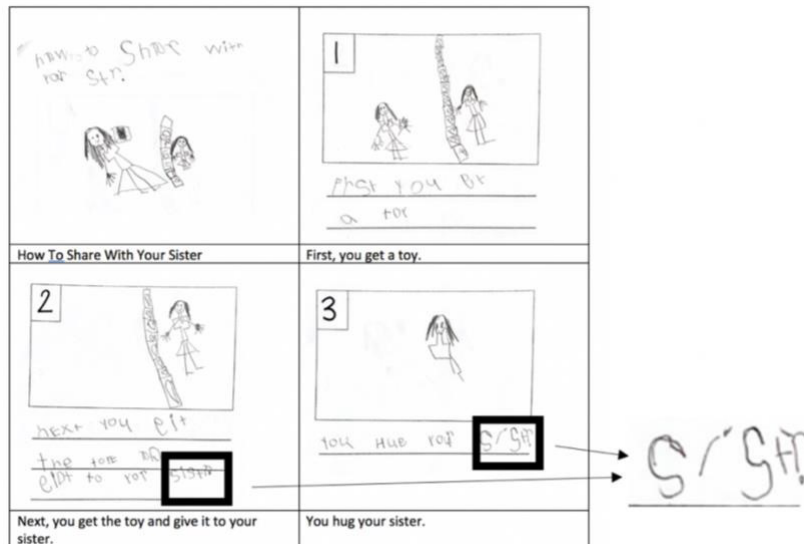


After an initial independent attempt at spelling the word, the teacher can then guide the student into a slightly more sophisticated spelling of the independently spelled word (Pulido & Morin, 2017). Maya’s teacher said, “I see you bravely wrote the word ‘sister’ here. I see lots of sounds that you heard when stretching out this word. You wrote STR. Are there any sounds you can add or take away to make this spelling even better for your reader to read? Let’s stretch it out and see . . . /sssiiiiisssttteeerrrr/.” Maya increased the sophistication of her spelling by adding /i/ and another /s/, moving her spelling from STR to SISTR. See Figure 8.



**Figure 8**

*Maya Increases the Sophistication of her Spelling*



## MODELING AND REFLECTING

At the end of each writer's workshop, the teacher left approximately 5 minutes for reflection (Kissel, 2017). Toward the end of the workshop, students had the opportunity to walk around and read their work from that session to at least three classmates. This gave the young writers time to reread their work, think about the letter sounds or words that were written, think through the message (did I write what I wanted to say), before having the opportunity to sit in the author's chair and share with the whole class.

During the author's chair, the teachers would use their own writing to model reflection strategies on how to appropriately respond to a classmate when they moved into the author's chair. The students would then be asked to think about their work as writers, reflecting on something they had been successful at (a star!) and something they still needed to work on (a wish!). Depending on time, one or more students would put their writing on the document camera for all to see and would read their writing for the class. This would be an opportunity for classmates to give a star and a wish for the writing



presented in class. The compliment always came first, with the suggestion at the end. This created a culture of feedback, making it the norm in the classroom to have a goal to be working on as well as establishing a respectful writing community.

### CELEBRATIONS WITH LENS TOWARD SELF-DIRECTED WRITING

Writing celebrations are a hallmark of the writer's workshop. Celebrating the hard work of young writers for an authentic audience can give students the feeling of instant success and is an important factor of motivation and purpose in their writing. The celebrations in this kindergarten class were thrown with a self-directed writer lens, communicating to caregivers and students that we are celebrating the effort, progress, and content of the writers, *not* the perfection of the work. A successful self-directed writer's celebration includes the following:

- 1) **Invite an authentic audience:** It is important that students experience an audience outside of the classroom walls for their work. Invite caregivers, grandparents, support faculty, principals, and older schoolmates to the celebration. When students have opportunities to discuss their writing with an authentic audience, it helps them think through and articulate their process of writing (Bomer & Arens, 2020).
- 2) **Work on display does not have to be "perfect:"** Resist the urge to correct every error in the writing shared at the celebration. It is ok to show the growth process, including displaying student invented spelling.
- 3) **Display progress:** Display previous writing from earlier in the year to show growth. Figures 9 and 10 show Ethan's writing progress on display at the celebration.
- 4) **Compliment page:** Provide a page that visitors can sign with a compliment for the students, encouraging visitors to compliment beyond neatness and spelling, recognizing effort and content. See Figure 11.



**Figure 9**

*Ethan's October Writing Sample*

Name: [REDACTED] Date: 10-17

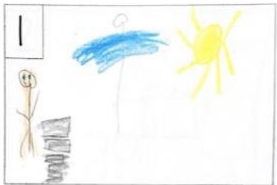
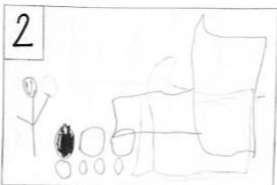
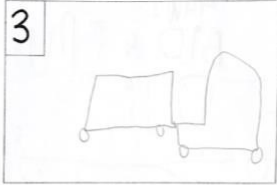


I am cuddling  
with my dog

I am cuddling  
with my dog

**Figure 10**

*Ethan's February Writing Sample*

<p>1</p> 	<p>2</p> 	<p>3</p> 
<p>First you get metal.</p>	<p>Next you get the wheels.</p>	<p>Last you put on the wheels and then go drive vroom vroom</p>
<p>First you get metal.</p>	<p>Next you get the wheels.</p>	<p>Last you put on the wheels and then go drive vroom vroom</p>



**Figure 11**

*Compliment Page for Writing Celebration*



## CONCLUSION

Working with the writing workshop model of mini-lesson, independent writing time, and reflection, has shown that kindergartners can take on these important steps and often take these ideas and strategies to the next level on their own. Choices in seating and writing topics can give young writers motivation, as well as an authentic celebration experience to share their work. Conferencing and modeling can serve as a way to support individual writers throughout the workshop experience. Goal-setting enables young writers to look at their work with a critical eye, and make plans for their next steps in developing their craft as a writer.

The literacy experiences described above help to outline strategies to empower teachers to create a literacy environment where young self-directed writers can thrive. The young writers in this classroom were able to take on the role of a self-directed writer by making choices in many aspects of their writing for authentic purposes. Using choice of writing





topics, location for productivity, and writing goals motivates young writers to share their messages with the world.

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