I write to stop and reflect. I write to see. I write to remember.

I write to find out what I’m thinking. Thinking with pencil in hand allows me to follow thoughts I’ve been carrying around but not understood (Why isn’t Lakeem monitoring more closely?) or to bring order to new ideas I’ve had.

I write to open up a question. Holding a notebook or a pad on my lap, I start making lists on a page or write down ideas I’ve realized go together. Sometimes this is in sentences. Sometimes it’s not.

I write because I’ve just heard someone use language in a beautiful way, and I want to capture those words before I forget them. I write to listen to the sound of words.

I write to have written perfectly. I often don’t write for anyone else to see.

I write to just start putting words on paper and see where I get. I write to bring the lens in close. To consider, to observe, to reflect on one particular thing or question. Why …..? Why???? I write to see what I hadn’t seen.

I write to be alone. I feel the pace of life getting faster and faster. When I write, I don’t talk, I don’t answer the phone, I don’t get one more thing done. I just sit. I recognize the solitude. And the silence and the thinking take care of me.

I am a writer. Yet one of the hardest things for me to say for years after I was published was that I was a writer. I could say I’m a teacher, a mother, a quilter…But a writer. That was different.

The teachers I work with understand what I’m saying. They see themselves as readers, and love reading. But for many, writing—writing is difficult. The idea of writing makes them uncomfortable. Writing is something to avoid. Writing makes them feel inadequate.

If you write just for yourself, writing can become easier. It can become what you want it to be. Maybe calling yourself a writer might seem a bit of a stretch or a bit pretentious. But could you start saying—at least to yourself—I write.”

Just two words. “I write.” Because as a teacher, if you see yourself as someone who writes, your relationship to words, to children’s writing, and to teaching writing during the lesson, opens up. (Because as a human being, it matters to see the world larger, to give yourself the time for your thoughts. And writing can do that.)

In considering writing, it might be helpful right now to ask yourself why you write or don’t write. If you write, read no further until you think about why it is that you write. Because starting to consider this can help you to see the children you teach in Reading Recovery differently.

Or, if you are one of the many teachers who doesn’t write, or even more, feels writing phobic, you might stop and try to figure out why.

• Do you not know how to start?
• Did a teacher or someone else at some point make you feel you couldn’t write?
• Do you think other people are better at it than you, and so you’re reluctant to try?
• Does it just seem too hard?
• Does it have to be perfect the first time through?
• Are you afraid of being judged by your writing?
There is a difference between writing to publish and writing to write. Writing to publish takes a serious commitment. Writing to write can more easily become part of a teacher's life. And that matters, because the distance from writing that so many teachers feel affects how we teach writing every day in the lesson. It affects how we have that conversation with children, how we think about how words go on a page, and what constitutes a story. But if you do write, if you start to see yourself as someone who writes, you can bring your students closer to the pleasure of their own words. Because writing tells you your words. In writing, our students can learn what their own words are. Think of the power of that. Think of how similar it is—knowing what your own words are—to the power of learning to read. In Reading Recovery, you not only can give your students the gift of literacy, you can teach them to hear who they are.

Ways of Writing: Lists, Free Writes, and Writing to Understand

My notebook is not neat. When I write to understand or to remember, the pages don’t end up looking like a finished piece of work. And they shouldn’t. Yet somehow, many teachers who are wary of writing have a sense that when you write, it should look organized, pristine, and perfect. Somehow, they were taught a sense of writing, that it should be finished before you start. And that there is someone standing over your shoulder, grading you as you write.

When you write to understand, to come closer to seeing something, the writing doesn’t have to be good. It certainly doesn’t need to be finished. It is just a way of capturing ideas. It can often be like writing the weekly grocery list. You get down the quick, obvious things you need to—the milk, the tomato sauce—and then it is having started the list that helps you to remember the parts you had thought of yesterday, but didn’t hold on to. Writing down tomato sauce helps you ten minutes later to think of the basil that you need tonight, too. So you walk back to the kitchen and write down basil. Which helps you to remember the Romano cheese, and then the floor cleaner. Why the floor cleaner? Who knows?

A grocery list does not need to look perfect. It doesn’t need to be finished before you start. And when you write a grocery list, you generally don’t feel the pressure of someone grading you on its quality. Keeping a notebook, pulling out a pad of paper to think, or just finding post-its quickly to capture some words can help you to bring thoughts together in a way that simply thinking about them or talking about them can’t. In the act of writing, you hold and present thought. You also find out what wasn’t there.
I spent some sessions last year with Reading Recovery teachers and literacy coaches working on writing. Mary Ellen Rhoades free wrote the lists in Figure 1 to describe a student.

Just like Mary Ellen, practiced writers will often free write as an exercise, setting a certain amount of time aside regularly to quickly write something small. Or to push themselves as they draft write about a topic. You just sit down and start writing, without censoring as you go. Sometimes you give yourself a prompt. A few free writes I have worked with are:

- Describe someone you don’t like, but tell who they are from their perspective, not yours.
- Explain the color blue in five minutes.
- Describe your earliest memory by showing, not telling, what it is.

Consider free writing about your students. Write for ten minutes about their three most powerful strengths. Tell everything you can think of about how they write. Or don’t tell everything. Just explore one thing. (Writers break rules all the time. They also don’t necessarily do what they’re told to do. These are two of the pleasures of being a writer.)

In our last session on writing, Martha Bowhan free wrote the thoughts in Figure 2.

As you write, remember: the writing you do about children is for you, not someone else. It doesn’t have to be neat. It doesn’t have to be finished. It has to be what you want. And you don’t have to let anyone else see it. Unless you want to.

Finding Time to Write: What You Don’t Have to Do

You don’t have to write well. It is worth saying about four hundred more times, your writing doesn’t have to be great. It just has to be your writing. The standard of perfection that many people feel about writing can easily keep you from finding the time to write, because who has enough time to sit down and write something that’s perfect? I can’t find time to write perfectly. But I can find time to play with ideas. Or to reflect for about twenty minutes.

You don’t need to keep a journal. I spent several years not writing because I didn’t keep a journal. I told myself that if I didn’t keep a journal, I certainly couldn’t be a writer. Finally, I realized I just don’t like to keep a journal. But it does matter to me to write. It was when I stopped requiring a journal of myself that I began to write again. If you like to keep a journal, you’re in quite good company. Keep it going. But if it makes you feel better to start writing without having to keep a journal, it made me feel better, too.

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Figure 2. Martha Bowhan Writing Sample

11/14/01
Writing is such a great way to put thoughts together. I think about this R.R. business all the time but I rarely put it down in words. I find I write the most important parts the parts that sum it up = I have a hard time expressing this. That summing up or boiling what it is that is not working = writing down the ideas/thoughts helps me to narrow my focus — It is “deadly” for me not to analyze my records if I don’t. I am working in the dark. The narrow focus from my analyses helps me to teach the next lesson with direction.
You also don’t need to write every day.
I don’t write every day. I teach, I have a family, I’m involved in a few groups, I like to read, and I get tired at night. There are ways, though, that I keep writing as a part of my life.

Small Ways to Find Time to Write
Start paying attention to the value of what you are thinking. I write when I’m not writing, and most writers do. I carry ideas around in my head that I finally work out by writing. Understand that your thinking is a part of writing. The child you’re puzzling about in Reading Recovery—the way you are thinking about her is pre-writing.

Attend to the questions in your head. Slow down and notice what you are wondering about. As a child leaves a lesson. When you’re driving. In conversation. When you can’t fall asleep. Give yourself five minutes at the end of the school day to just jot notes on what you are thinking. Start playing with your thoughts on paper.

Keep notebooks (notice I don’t call them journals) or pads of paper ready for ideas. Different sizes are nice. I keep a notebook at work. As a Reading Recovery teacher, you probably teach in two places at work, so keep a notebook in each place. I also have a binder I keep adding loose leaf paper to, with thoughts about specific children or my work with teachers.

At home I have one notebook for poetry and another one just to think in. If I’m in one place and my notebook is somewhere else, I just write on what is there. If I’m in the car and want to write something down, I use the backs of envelopes or post-its. If I really want to keep what I wrote as a record, I can transfer it later to the right notebook by photocopying it, gluing it in, or just putting the post-it on the page. I don’t feel I have to fill up one notebook before I can start another. (Remember, you’re not being graded.)

Decide to write with lists, or webs, or just by writing random thoughts on a page. It is much easier to find time to write a list than it is to write a book. I do some of my best thinking just by putting groups of things on paper. This is often not in sentences and rarely in paragraphs. Just thoughts. If I do this in a notebook, over time I notice patterns and connections in what I’m writing. Which leads me to new thoughts.

Decide to write—just for yourself—about a focus child. Then figure out how you are going to find twenty minutes to a half hour a week to do it. Will it be taking five minutes consistently after the lesson to just make lists or free write about the child? Is there part of a regular planning time or lunch time you are going to give to yourself each week, for just one or two days a week, just to write? Do you like to get up early? Do you like to stay up late? Could you once or twice a week take twenty minutes of that time, just for yourself? If you start enjoying this, would you like to take more?

Think about the ways you like to be alone, because those are the conditions for writing. Do you like music? Do you like quiet? Do you want to be at home with no one else there, or at home with someone in the next room? Do you like to go to a coffee shop and sit alone at a table with the buzz of people’s conversations around you? Take a notebook with you. Do you like to go on walks? Put a small notebook and pencil in your coat pocket, and just write down some of the words in your head. No need to publish a novel. Just start capturing some of your words.

All of these are finding that small bits of time can be the ground for writing. You may find that the lists you write
lead to paragraphs, or that writing small groups of words turns into a longer entry where you are finally getting at what you wanted to understand. That often happens with me. Just start small. You'll figure out what you want to do next.

**Listen to the Children You Teach**

Oral language is often powerful written language—we tend to forget that in thinking about writing. But there is a reason we talk about voice in writing. With voice, you hear who someone is.

Before writing *Five Kids*, I kept notes on the children I was teaching. I wrote what they said during lessons on my planning sheets. Sometimes while they were getting down their baskets and starting to read, I copied down the conversations we had had in the hall.

As a Reading Recovery teacher, you have become quite practiced in taking a running record while observing a child read. Writing down conversation while talking to a child, or while listening to the Familiar Reread, is the same type of task. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. It is in taking these notes and realizing that doing so is writing, that you may begin to see yourself as someone who writes. Not the winner of last year’s Pulitzer Prize, but simply someone who writes, who uses written words as a way of seeing the world.

If you start writing down children’s speech, the writing part of the lesson can become more of a pleasure, because the child’s writing will come more authentically from who they are. You will be more acquainted with their voice, and will hear it as they speak.

That writing comes from conversation can be a difficult concept to understand. But if you start truly listening to what children’s spoken words are, you can hear the writing in them. This year I co-teach in Marc Kornblatt’s class as the ESL teacher. During Guided Reading group last month, Darius wrote, “He is tall.” Minutes later, in talking about his father he said, “If my dad come down here, you guys would see how tall he is. He look like he’s seven something.” During the same lesson, Alicia had written, “I miss my Mom.” Then, in talking to me about it, she said, “Looks like when I go somewhere, I be ready to come home right away.” Just as in taking a running record, each time they used spoken words so well during our conversation, I wrote down what they said, and then said their words back to them. My teaching point that day changed to a discussion of voice. After class, I typed up at 26 font what they had said, and the next day read their words to the class and then hung them in the room. My listening to their words and valuing them has helped both Darius and Alicia to start thinking of themselves as writers. Darius told me yesterday, “I learned I gotta get my talking in my writing.”

How have kids learned to write, “He is tall,” when the words they describe the world with are so much more powerful? Because he and is are good high frequency words! Because you can generate, using the *-all* chunk? Because along the way, we as teachers were not taught the power of our own words?

Powerful writing often comes first from talking. Before I said Darius’ and Alicia’s words back to them, their idea of writing was unengaged and limited. Now they are beginning to feel consciously connected to their own words.

My colleague Lori Gustafson and I have in the last few years worked with children on memorizing poetry. Naomi Shihab Nye, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Basho, poetry by other children. It has been amazing to see how easily the students do this, and the children who may use limited language get structure and vocabulary, practice, and fluency in more complicated language. But Lori and I have also realized that our teaching the students to memorize has developed our own ear for how children speak. We more easily hear their particular use of language now, and in listening, memorize the students’ words ourselves.

Listen to children’s words. Say them back to them as part of your daily conversation—not inauthentically, not...
as rote, but in recognition of who they are. You will know them better, and they will write as writers.

See Your Students With a Writer’s Eye: Two Writing Exercises

Lorrie Moore, widely considered one of the best American short story writers, gave a reading a few years ago at Canterbury Booksellers in Madison. In describing how she writes she said, “First I have the image, then I find the words.” Think of the power of this—that this accomplished writer sees before she writes.

When I wrote *Five Kids*, I unconsciously started each chapter with a visual description of the child. It was only after I had finished the book that I realized I had begun each time so strongly in the visual. But it helped me tremendously as a writer to start with *who* I saw; to frame my thinking in an image. To have the image before I found the words.

I remember seeing Nkauj Hli in kindergarten, before I taught her or knew her. Her class would file past in a long line, moving from one room to another. The children were quiet and serious (mostly) about this civilizing task of getting somewhere together, the tops of their heads making a straight line as they walked past. Until the line got to Nkauj Hli. She would be somewhere in the middle of the line, resigned to standing out, a good eight inches taller than any other child in her class. After Nkauj Hli the line went back down eight inches and continued straight as the class moved on. If you watched the line until it disappeared, the last thing you saw was Nkauj Hli’s head and shoulders, moving on, floating above all else (p. 133).

There is power in showing who a child is. There is power in understanding that you see meaning. That is what is meant by the writing adage, “Show, don’t tell.”

The First Exercise

Take seeing as the basis for a writing exercise or free write. Choose one of your Reading Recovery students.

- Is there an image you have that represents this child?
- Sit with that image a bit. Keep thinking about it; find its meaning. Close your eyes and see the child.
- Now write. Spend ten minutes describing the child.

When you are done, reflect for a minute on what you learned about the child by describing her or him. Just stop and think for a minute. You might continue on, or at another time or with another student, take this exercise a bit further. Henry David Thoreau said in *Walden*, “The question is not what you look at but what you see.”

The Second Exercise

Consider Thoreau’s statement in order to reflect on one of your students. It might help to just take a certain number of minutes to write to each of these questions.

- Who is this child to you? (five minutes)
- Is the way you are seeing the child helping the child to learn? (five minutes)
- How could you shift your perception—no matter what it is right now—to encourage confidence, independence, and fluency in your student? (five to ten minutes)

Think. Then write. Then take some time to just sit with what you wrote.

What to Take Away

You can be someone who writes without publishing or even showing your writing to anyone else. Writing can simply be the act of picking up paper and putting down words in order to reflect, to understand.

When teachers begin to see themselves as writers, parts of the world open up. You have a new way to reflect and consider. You may start to hear your students’ words differently. Which means your students will more likely see themselves as writers, and understand they have a writer’s voice. You may see them more clearly, more subtly. Hear their words as you didn’t before.

And as a writer, you may take a bit more time for yourself. You may become more aware of the pleasure of the thoughts in your head. The questions you return to.

This is an invitation.