The power of Quick Writes - in any grade! - with Shauna Cotte

Triple R Teaching Podcast #210

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of Reach All Readers website, coming to you with the last in our series about teaching writing.

Today, we're going to finish off the series with a really practical episode with Shauna Cotte. She's going to talk to us about Quick Writes. According to the Keys to Literacy website, "Quick Writes are short, informal writing tasks that can be assigned during class or as brief, out of class assignments. Quick Writes help students remember, organize, and manage information, and they can be used at any point in a classroom lesson to help them communicate their thoughts, experiences, and reactions to what they are reading and learning." Best of all, you can use them in any grade, so here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Shauna!

Shauna Cotte:

Thanks so much. Happy to be here.

Anna Geiger:

I'm glad you're here to talk to us about Quick Writes. This is actually the last in quite a series about teaching writing, although I'm sure we'll get back into writing in the future again. I'm happy to have you here to talk to us about Quick Writes and why they're a really practical way that teachers can get students writing more.

Before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself, share your history in education, and talk about what you're doing now?

Shauna Cotte:

Absolutely. I'm excited to be here to shine a little bit of a spotlight on writing, reading's equal partner. I am currently in a vice president role at Keys to Literacy and I'm the senior director of the professional development team, that leg of what we do. I've been at Keys since 2007.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, quite a while. Wow.

Shauna Cotte:

It's been quite a run, and I've held different roles there over time. Keys to Literacy is an organization that focuses on providing high quality professional development for educators and leaders. We do coaching.

It's been fun to be part of a really mission-driven organization. We're a bunch of literacy geeks and gurus that kind of have come together around the idea that learning to read and write is foundational to really your life experience, and how do we provide educators with the information to not have reading and writing often be the gatekeeper that it is. We want to let kids really live a full and impactful life without literacy skills being a barrier.

I have been working in education, which feels crazy, for over 20 years now. When I think back to the passion for the literacy facet of the education field, if I take my roots back to childhood, I feel like I was a literacy geek from the start. I grew up with parents that worked multiple jobs, but I grew up next to a public library. That really afforded me… And I benefited from a bit of hyperlexia tendencies as a kid, so I read early, but being next to that public library… It didn't dawn on me then, but the access that I had to endless books, information, the escape, and the vocabulary that that built for me, I think I took for granted that that's just how it worked.

Fast forward to college, I went in declared as an education major, and I happened to benefit from a program that put students out early into the field, lots of field studies, before you ever geared up for student teaching. It dawned on me early that this reading thing wasn't a great experience for many kids. It was often a barrier. There were kids who couldn't read at all or that were miserable because of reading and writing and literacy demands. I think that that ended up focusing my graduate level work.

Then went on to get a master's in language and literacy instruction, and I think tying it back to, there's a quote, I don't know exactly who said it, but the sentiment is, to find your purpose, figure out what breaks your heart in the world and go out and do that work. I figured out early on that I wanted to be an education major, but what would really be my focus? It is that heartbreaking work of how do we get kids to be able to have that access to not have reading really be the barrier that I then came to see in the field early on that it was.

I hooked up with Joan Sedita, who is my boss at Keys to Literacy, and she's the founder of Keys to Literacy. I lucked out being mentored by her early on. Joan Sedita worked at the Landmark School up in Beverly, Massachusetts. It's a really kind of Mecca for where to go to learn what to do with students that are dyslexic or have language-based learning disabilities. Joan ran some excellent outreach work there, and I collided with her in grad school.

I went on to be a classroom teacher, then to become an interventionist, and then eventually to land at Keys where now I have the opportunity… I don't have my own classroom, but I get into schools and classrooms all across the country, pre-K to grade 12, and I get to do the work of bringing great literacy practices to teachers, and then seeing them play out in classrooms. Then it's looking at those results, coming back, and adjusting what's going on. I've been doing that for quite a while at this point.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's quite a history. So would you say that you were always aware of evidence-based teaching, or did you ever have your foot in balanced literacy?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, I think that's a great question. In my higher ed work, I was a product of the 90s and balanced literacy was certainly dominating. I lucked out in my graduate work to land with some professors at that

time who then connected me with Joan. I ended up being mentored in my graduate work with what are we really doing to teach kids how to read?

What I found was at the end of my undergrad work, which was very whole language/balanced literacy focused to land and say, “Oh, it's Monday morning, and I'm going to go help with this summer program.” There were students that showed up that couldn't read at all. They were in seventh grade, eighth grade, and I thought, “Well, what are we supposed to be doing with them come Monday morning that's actually going to make a dent in this that's not going to be in that balanced approach?”

So when I got to grad school, I had a series of professors, one of them being Sally Grimes, who was a big literacy guru here in our home state of Massachusetts. She connected me with Joan. I was able to be mentored by people that did not waiver from the idea that explicit instruction, phonics early and often, and in a particular way, was going to be the heartbeat of how they were going to end up able to decode.

So I didn't have the experience that a lot of people did in the nineties where the only thing they were exposed to was that whole language or that balanced literacy approach. I think that because of it, I then ended up in my early teaching jobs, and it was tougher to go up against the culture of what was going on in the school, or the materials that were purchased, or the approach that was happening was very much... We did the Units of Study for writing, and we did some things that in hindsight were not moving kids along in the way that we now understand, but you have to be part of the culture of what's going on in the school.

So yeah, I came up in that time, but luckily collided with some mentors that really were impactful for me in how I approached what I was doing.

Anna Geiger:

Based on the people I talked to, that's a unique experience that I'm sure you're really happy to have. That's really wonderful. For most of us, it took a lot longer.

Now, would it be true that schools that hire Keys to Literacy to come help them are already interested in the science of reading? Or do you find that you're with schools that really are still very much in a balanced literacy space?

Shauna Cotte:

I think both, but by the time someone has come to us or reached out to us or responded to potential partnership work, there is a need that's been identified. Maybe that's data-driven, maybe it's legislation-driven, maybe it's a team of teachers that have sort of banded together and brought up the idea of what we're doing isn't working.

There are different ways that we end up in conversations around how we come to do work in those schools, but often it involves a paradigm shift from what's been going on or it involves a shift to be closer aligned too.

Sometimes it can feel like an overhaul. In the accounts that we work in, or the clients that we work with, there is a range of where are we pushing off from? Let's push off from here. We have to change everything about what we're doing. We really need to change the way we're approaching certain topics within phonics. We need to really bring this writing piece.

We're finding that if we could think about trends that are going on. Many departments of ed, districts, and schools have been tackling with more intention the science of reading and what early reading and

beginning reading looks like over the last several years as this kind of wave has really been cresting. Some come with the reading much more intact than it would have been years ago with how they're approaching thinking about it, and purchasing materials to implement it.

Many are now looking at how we did not bring writing along with that work, and we need to really take a look at that.

Also we are seeing a second trend. One trend is bringing writing along, and a second trend is what are we doing at the adolescent level? We have focused a lot on K-3, or our district has focused a lot on K-5, but what are we doing in 6-12? Or what are we doing in 4-8 if we only focused on K-3?

We're seeing that kind of landing the plane a bit in the science of reading, but needing to bring writing alongside and needing to think farther out than if you were only thinking about this with at K-3 or K-5, what's happening in the adolescent lane?

There's still quite a work to be done in what we like to think of as our specialty being practical. How are we practically bridging all of these research recommendations we're learning about into what it looks like in the classroom? Along with that practicality, how to bridge it over. I also think about how to execute these recommendations in a focused way.

Anna Geiger:

Speaking about practicality, let's talk about Quick Writes. What are those, and why should teachers consider using them?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, so Quick Writes are the ultimate practical thing that you can start doing tomorrow.

I think first, there's a lot of schematics for how to think about writing, but often when I work with teachers, I try to think about if you had three buckets, Quick Writes is one bucket. This is the short, informal bucket.

In the middle, I like to think about there's these content area learning tasks you might have students do. You might ask them to summarize something. You might ask them to do an explanatory one-pager about something. These things in the middle really move your comprehension of the content along. They're not quite Quick Writes. They take longer. It takes longer for fourth graders to write a summary than to do a Quick Write.

So if Quick Writes are over in one bucket, short and informal, a middle bucket we consider content-learning tasks. These are things that are in service of the content. It's deep thinking via writing. It's not totally quick, but it's also not the third bucket, which we think of as formal writing tasks. This might be the essay, the collaborative letter you do in second grade to the principal that has some revisions and goes to a real audience.

There's the formal stuff on one end, there's the Quick Writes on the other end, and there's this space in the middle that's not quite either. It tends to be things we do to boost comprehension.

But if we take Quick Writes as a focus, it's not the only kind of writing that you do. These are short, they're informal, they're low-stakes because you do your best with spelling, they're not published, and they don't require multiple revisions.

They should take, by rule of thumb, less than 10 minutes. We often talk about them at Keys to Literacy as the sketchbook. This is not the masterpiece; this is the sketchbook of what's going on. And they really are a powerful low-pressure form of formative assessment. I think that makes them one of the best assets

for teachers. Quick writes are this powerful, low-stakes formative assessment. It's one of their greatest qualities.

If we think about students responding to a prompt or a reading or a discussion topic, you have this fast little window into what they're thinking, what did they understand, what did they misunderstand, how are they processing the content, are they engaging or developing critical thinking, or not there yet.

When you're teaching a topic or they're reading something, there's often a gap between what you taught and what they learned. A go-to strategy that makes sense is to ask questions, get student responses, get some choral response, get students to turn and talk, but there's nothing like a Quick Write to tell you what every single student has going on upstairs about what was just sort of read, said, or done.

I just think it's a really powerful formative assessment that allows teachers to dipstick.

If I could add to that, it is an engagement win. Often when you're talking with students, compliance is not engagement. You can get the head nodding or students sort of going through the motions. When students have to write, when they have to pick up a pen or a pencil and they have to write, they're forced to think, and it's not just about getting it right because it's low stakes. It's about making meaning.

Quick Writes are a formative assessment. They are an engagement win. It reinforces memory and retention. It deepens understanding. It promotes metacognition. Students have to think about what do I know? What do I not know? How am I thinking about this? Without even realizing it, for them, it's promoting metacognition.

In short, Quick Writes make learning stick, and every teacher I know is in the business of making learning sticky. It serves as this window into the student thinking, but it's this overall tool for cognitive growth and it boosts memory, leads to metacognition, it engages students, and it only takes a few minutes a day.

One helpful tip that I would give that goes with that is to tell students *why* they're writing. One of the big things that I try to do with the teachers that I work with is talk about how human motivation is complicated. We often get the question related to writing about how do I motivate my students? There are layers to that, but if you think about one variable of human motivation is knowing why you're doing something.

They don't even have to like writing, but they should know why they're doing it. I don't really like to floss my teeth, but I know why I'm doing it. Sharing with students that it is in the act of writing that you clarify your thinking, you deepen your understanding, you organize your thoughts, you build connections. It's not just writing down what you already know.

Some of my students would think I was nagging them, like, “We just did a turn and talk, and now I have to write it down?” It is in the act of writing that all those things occur, and nine times out of ten as a teacher, I used it for the engagement reason alone. How do I engage everybody right now and connect them to what's going on? We're going to write for the next 90 seconds.

It's just a really powerful tool, and my tip would be to give students the purpose around why you're doing it at whatever age you teach.

Anna Geiger:

Great tip. Can you give us some examples of Quick Writes?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, Quick Writes is anything that is this sort of a short stop and jot type of writing that would go on. I like to think about them as small bursts of writing, but you could be filling out a graphic organizer. Students could be generating a question. They could be doing various forms of note-taking. It could be sentence expansion. You have a simple sentence, "The cat ran." Where? Why? How? We can do sentence expansion. You can use lists, especially at the younger grades, students love lists. Sketches with labels, admit tickets, exit tickets, margin notes.

It's all of these short bursts of writing that come into play that really add up over time. They help build writing stamina. They help build writing fluency. But they're the small bursts of writing that go on.

Anna Geiger:

So when you have children do Quick Writes, do you recommend a particular procedure? Like we always write them on a half piece of paper, or we write them on dry erase boards, or we hand them in. Do you have any advice on that?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, I think a variety in the Quick Writes case is always good. One of the recommendations I make as the grades go up is if you have somewhere that's a go-to spot for them... This could be to the students have a notebook and you count 30 pages back and you put a little post-it note and it says, "Quick Writes."

Back in the day, I used those little blue books, they were almost like the little test booklets, the little kind of mini composition booklets. My students used to have those, and we would write "Quick Writes" on the cover, and when they would fill up, we would trade them out.

Having a go-to spot for them allows you to do them often. You can do several Quick Writes per lesson if you wanted to, let alone should you do several per day, you want to do them often. Having somewhere that they can stop and jot that's an easy grab will lead to you doing them more than thinking, did I run off admin tickets? Did I run off exit tickets? Did I run off that reflection sheet?

I do think it's great. They love when there's a little bit of a variety. I would say sometimes run off that admin ticket or that exit ticket that they can literally ticket turn in on a half sheet of paper. Pass out a post-it note where they can generate a question on the way to lunch and stick it on the door as they go. But also having a go-to place where you manage them and can sort of look at them over time like a collection that you can pull out opportunistically, I think is a management tool that leads to an increase of you writing them.

Some teachers in the older grades will have students almost keep just like a running Google doc and they just try to keep putting the date and the task and they might run it in the whole first semester of what's going on, or they run them seasonally, or they run them monthly. Then you can look at, over the course of this month, look at all the Quick Writes we kind of typed into here in fifth grade. You can go in and you can look at students really easily as a collection.

My caution would be that you want to make sure you are writing them by hand at times. We know that that's a deeper encoding going on in the brain. And especially in the earliest grades, we're not wanting to introduce that digital component too early, but some also curate the go-to spot digitally.

I do have a couple of favorites that I do lean on more often. One being a four-square or a friar. Teachers tend to be familiar with what those are, where you take the key word, you put it in the middle or up at the top, and then you have four boxes, four opportunities to interact with that word. One box could be a sentence stem. One box could be a list of examples. One box could be a visual that you sketch and

label. A four square, that's a perfect example of something that teachers tend to already be familiar with that provides multiple opportunities to interact with a vocabulary word. We use those often.

A second favorite or go-to that I have is sentence stems. Using those sentence stems, it could be if you're doing the water cycle in second grade, "Water goes up into the sky when _____, and it comes back down when _____." You can use this when you're doing precipitation and evaporation and condensation.

You could be doing sixth grade, reading *Out of the Dust*, and you could do a sentence stem, "The dust bowl changed the life of farmers because _____. As a result, _____." I'm looking for a little cause/effect of what can they kind of get going about the background we've been building about what happened during the time of the dust bowl.

Sentence stems, sentence stems, sentence stems. You can use them for anything, and with those they really get kids going.

A third one that is a go-to is getting students to generate questions. So a lot of times the person driving the questions in the classroom is the teacher, and what we know from research is that in the act of generating a question your comprehension is aided, it is deepened. You are needing to actively be involved in the learning when you have to generate the question. It promotes curiosity, it deepens your understanding, and getting students to generate increasingly high quality questions.

So if I'm in fourth grade and I'm doing animal adaptation, students might start with, "What is an adaptation?" But we often will teach them Bloom's taxonomy. We'll teach the taxonomy right to students.

"Can you ask a higher level question?"

"Okay, well if what is an adaptation is a lower level question, maybe I could ask what's the difference between a physical adaptation and a behavioral adaptation?"

That's a great question. That's an analysis question. Then they start coming up with, create your own animal with three special adaptations and tell us how with the environment that they live in, how these adaptations help them. Students can be generating those.

What we know is just the act of generating the question helped their comprehension, let alone having them answer them. So generating questions is also a real go-to. Sentence stems, generating questions, and those four squares are ones I lean on quite a bit.

I find for teachers, lots of things can qualify as a quick write. But finding ones that work particularly well, that are real go-to's for you… My students over time would become used to, "Oh, yep, we know what's up with a four square. We've got to fill these in. We're processing vocab. We know what to do when we're generating questions. Mrs. Cotte expects us to ask a lower level question, but then move into higher order questions."

When you can have a few that you go back to over and over again, students get more independent and can go deeper with what you're asking them to do rather than, "What do you do with these four squares? I guess I'll write a question down." Well, no, we want them to be some quality questions. They just become the ones that you lean on.

Anna Geiger:

Do you ever repurpose the Quick Writes? Like, do you have them trade their questions for someone to answer or things like that?

Shauna Cotte:

Absolutely. I also think Quick Writes are a good catalyst for letting students drive the discussion more with what their thinking is. So if you have going in your classroom accountable talk or talk stems where you're trying to promote, or move away from, what often happens in classrooms where the teacher asks the question. “What is a physical adaptation?” They call on a student, a student says something where all the kids are looking back at the teacher, and then the teacher calls on another student It's kind of like this individual ping-pong match where the teacher is getting to the student and waiting for the return and the students are used to it.

If you're moving to say, we're all accountable to the learning here and we're accountable to what each other are saying, then we're moving toward this accountable talk environment. We have talk stems like, “I'd like to add to what Anna said.” Or “When Anna said this, I was a little confused.” “Anna, can you tell me more about…?”

I find when students are doing Quick Writes… If they’re writing about what is a physical adaptation? And I gave them a minute to write about that and I call on you, I'm expecting another student to say, “I agree with that because,” or “I disagree because I think that's a behavioral adaptation we learned about.” “I want to add to what Anna said…”

Quick Writes are a great catalyst for if you can share those out a bit, turn and talk, whole group, it can really let what students are bringing forward drive the conversation.

Anna Geiger:

So you're saying sometimes you'll take a break in a lesson, do a Quick Write, then get back to the lesson.

How do you manage that when you have kids finishing really quickly, and some finishing slowly? What scaffolds do you provide to help everyone complete the task?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think with Quick Writes, because they're informal and they're done quickly, and we know they don't take a lot of planning time, that's also what's really great about them. They can even be opportunistic at times. We need to be a bit more intentional about how we support them, and being more intentional about how often we're doing them, and then being more intentional about how we support them.

So a couple of ideas here, a couple of examples. I often will recommend to teachers to create a boundary. “We're going to write for the next 90 seconds. For the next 90 seconds, write what you know about…” Then even my students that sort of struggle the most when they have to do the complex task of writing say, “Well, I can do anything for 90 seconds, right?” I put a boundary on it that's a time limit.

We will sometimes say, as another boundary example, “In two to four bullets, please list causes of the American Revolution.” It’s two to four, it's bullets. Then students don't spend four of the five minutes you meant for this to happen going, “Is this a list? Is there a rubric? Am I supposed to write in sentences?”

Often when I put a Quick Write task up on a whiteboard or a Google slide, I will even write, “QW:.” This is a Quick Write. That signals to them, “Okay, I'm doing my best with spelling. It's not going to get published. I'm not doing multiple revisions.”

Sometimes I'll see teachers put up a Quick Write. “What were some of the causes of the American Revolution?” for fifth graders, and they start asking questions that sometimes annoy teachers, but they're good questions. “How long is this? Does this have to be completed right now? Am I writing a

paragraph or a sentence? Is there a rubric for this?" The teacher's just meaning it to be a Quick Write, but we weren't clear on the boundary.

QW colon, this is a Quick Write. "In the next 90 seconds you will write, in two to four bullets, please list." Now they're not wondering, "Is this a sentence? Is this paragraphs?" Boundaries is one recommendation as a scaffold.

A second recommendation, I mentioned it a bit earlier, are sentence frames. So instead of saying, "How are rocks formed?" you can say, "Sedimentary rocks are formed when…" Use that type of frame.

Many students that don't know how to get started. "Exactly how do I answer this question?" It just removes that barrier that sometimes teachers face. Well, it's not a Quick Write, because some of them can't even get going.

Now, it starts to naturally differentiate itself. The point you brought up earlier, where students might be in different places with how long something's taking them. If they all get going with the frame, one student might just finish that sentence. Another student might add a second sentence and a third sentence, and that's OK. It naturally will start to differentiate where can we all get in the next 90 seconds? Where can we all add in two to four bullets? One might write two and one might write four or beyond.

Put those boundaries on frames like how much time are we spending on this, and students will get in different places with it. So creating a boundary like a time or list of bullets, creating sentence frames.

A third thing that we often do is we will support Quick Writes with visuals. So if you're asking a Quick Write about the Dust Bowl, put a photo up. If you're asking about the water cycle, project the water cycle as they're trying to write. If you're asking about the branches of government, put up a visual of that. Supporting Quick Writes with visuals can really help certain students. It helps jog the memory. It gets them going.

Then there are two more. One is word banks. It's sort of classic, but putting a frame together for students, it could be a paragraph frame, it could be a sentence frame, it could be, "For the next 90 seconds, I want you to describe cell division, and use these words when you do it."

That word bank which could be used in flexible ways is a real lifeline that gives students some confidence. It gives them some language. Some students have the receptive language, but not the expressive language.

Then a final one I'll mention is paragraph frames. It's propping students up with a task that might be compare, contrast, or to sequence something, or to explain something. Often we do these Quick Writes with these prompting words like summarize, explain, compare. Those all have different structures for how you would respond.

I once had a student say to me when I asked him, "When you see this compare or analyze or summarize or explain, what's the difference here?"

He said, "Oh, they all just mean answer the question."

But really, they mean something different. When you can provide a paragraph frame that gives the structure of compare-contrast or the structure of sequence or the structure of something explanatory, that gives students a clue to know how to build a response with that type of prompt.

Anna Geiger:

Back to the sentence stem, just a quick question about that. If you're trying to get them to do this in just 90 seconds, do you have them write down the sentence stem and then finish it, or just finish it?

Shauna Cotte:

Good question. Sometimes if it's provided, like we were talking about earlier, I'm going to give the admin ticket. I can put the stem right on the admin ticket, but sometimes I will also give a choice.

If students are in the younger grades and there are still some of my students that are in second grade really struggling with letter formation, and other students I want the practice of that letter formation in there. Sometimes I'll say to students, "You can do the second part of the sentence." Sometimes I'll say, "Here's the sentence stem, get going. You can decide. Do you want to write a whole sentence?" The ones that really can't take that on tend to make that choice. But I think that can be flexible.

Students copying things really doesn't lead to any deeper understanding, but when you're trying to practice a sentence that has a subject and a predicate and a capital letter and a period, or you're trying to get that letter formation practice in… There are reasons you might make the call that you want them to write the whole thing.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, you have to really think about what your goals are for right at that time.

I watched your presentation called Right Now from Keys to Literacy. In that presentation, you switched out what we might typically do, and then you improved it. Could you share some examples of that?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah, so thinking about often when you're reflecting on your teaching and you're thinking about the idea of Quick Writes, well, this isn't anything novel. Of course, I've had students stop and jot and fill out graphic organizers and do four squares. This is an example of an instructional practice that really you want to be reflective to think about. How do I refine what I'm doing?

So if I used to write a question like, "How are rocks formed?" Now I think more intentionally about planning that. I could provide a visual of the rock cycle. I could provide a sentence frame that says, "Sedimentary rocks are formed when…", or "The formation of igneous rocks differs from metamorphic rocks because…"

If we are in second grade, and we're looking at the life cycle of a plant, instead of writing, "What is the life cycle of a plant?" I could provide a little template with some transition language. "First, a seed is planted in the soil. Next, the seed absorbs the water, or next we water it. Then the seed absorbs the water," or whatever that would look like. Instead of just sort of the bigger question, I'm thinking about, let me add a visual, let me add a sentence stem, let me add a little bit of a paragraph template here that has the transition word language for them.

The idea of doing the Quick Write isn't new, but what is new is the refinement of the scaffolds that I'm thinking about to set this up for success, to keep it quick, and to keep it as meaningful as possible for the learning that's going on. You want the Quick Writes to always, always be in service of the learning.

The other question we get along with how do I motivate my students to write… It's probably the number one is I don't have time to fit writing in, or I don't have time to do the writing that would be required for my students to have better stamina or a better writing fluency or just better writing skill.

But Quick Writes really is a way to make a dent in it. You can do them at any grade level, any content area, at any point in any lesson. And we know what they are. I think we need to think about how to do them more often, and how to do them with more intention.

Some of those instead of examples are, can you go back to spots where you would have students stop and jot or write something down and think about, is that the best question? How could I scaffold this? How could I put a boundary on it? How could I be more clear out of the gate?

Anna Geiger:

You just said you could do these in any grade level. Talk to us about how you could start with these, whether kindergarten or first grade, especially when, as you said, some kids are still working on letter formation. What are some tips?

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah. I think in the youngest grades, I do want to again caution that we want to keep these by hand versus digital. Don't go digital too early. By hand turns out to be powerful. We know that when they're doing the writing by hand, the brain activation is stronger. You have language centers, memory regions, motor planning, all of that coming into play turns out to create a deeper encoding in the brain.

Handwriting builds a stronger foundation for literacy because of those benefits they have with sound symbols, spelling practice, and letter recognition. Doing Quick Writes by hand is not just a motor task, it's a literacy task. Typing matters and it has its place, but timing matters. When we're thinking about these earliest grades, we want by hand.

So much of what goes on in early writing really does have a root in the transcription strand of what's going on, so handwriting, letter formation, and spelling. A lot of that, we're hoping, is going on in the phonics block.

With the youngest students, in K-2, they're working on transcription skills, but we also want them working on composing. So a young student might still be working on letter formation, but they can compose a setting by drawing it and labeling it, right?

Sometimes Quick Writes can really help with... They can serve phonics skills, they can serve transcription practice, but I like to think about transcribing and composing in two buckets. Where are the opportunities for these younger students to do lists? Sometimes we give the topic, sometimes they're driving it, but animals you like, foods you eat, signs of spring, words that start with the letter B, but that list writing is a great quick thing. Students love it. They respond well. It's easy to fit in really alongside a lot of content areas or their interest.

There's labeling. If you're learning about the life cycle of a plant, they could be labeling the plant. I was in a class recently where they had read Stella Luna, and they were doing some directed drawing about a bat. They were giving the bat a setting, and they were creating the setting. They were composing and they were taking things that they learned about bats being nocturnal and about echolocation and sound waves. What they did with the directed drawing is the teacher added the layer of asking them to add some labels. That label was quick. Some students could only do sort of onset and rime, initial sound and end sound, and they didn't get the middle sound, but it was a way for them to start to practice that labels add information to what your reader can now see. They can see your bat, and now they can see these labels.

Labels and lists, I think, are two classic ways that even at the youngest grades, you can really start to fit in writing when maybe they can't control a whole sentence yet.

Anna Geiger:

Would you do something like maybe fill in the blank, like you provide a sentence stem with just a single word missing maybe at the end? If you're learning about plants, you could say, “The part of the plant that takes in water is the…” and then they would just fill that in. Would that be something you would do?

Shauna Cotte:

Absolutely. I'm thinking about the life cycle of a plant that I saw recently in a primary classroom. They had these small observation books, little half sheets of paper, and the teacher stapled them on the left-hand side. They were doing observations, and they had the stems of “I see…” Then they were writing, “the green plants popping up,” or whatever.

She had another one where they each had their own cup. “I need to…” So they wrote, “I need to water my plant.” And some of it's phonetic spelling. It’s exactly what you were saying, they had that initial part of the sentence: I like, I see, I need to. Then they had a chance to finish that using what sound symbol knowledge they had.

Phonetic spelling was certainly at play, but that's absolutely an example of kind of low stakes way that doesn't take up a lot of time to get them writing.

Anna Geiger:

So kind of a final question here. If we're not grading every Quick Write, which that's not the point, right? How are we checking them and building accountability so that students are doing their best?

Shauna Cotte:

Yes. We kind of have this mantra where if you're grading everything they're writing, we know they're not writing enough, and we haven't even been in your classroom yet.

But yet if students aren't accountable, two things happen. One, stuff gets optional real fast, and then number two, quality goes down and you're not maximizing the potential of what could have happened even with that quick brief time.

One classic one is some level of turn and share strategy that you can put in place in your room. They can stand and walk their admin ticket over to a partner and share. They can share at their table. They can turn and talk.

Also this turn and share strategy, whatever that the details of that approach would look like for your grade level or classroom, it builds oral language. It creates confidence in students, especially if there's a whole group share that follows. They've had that turn and talk piece.

It also shows their writing matters because now they are sharing their idea with somebody, even if it's not the teacher for feedback or for commenting.

Any type of turn and share strategy, you see those a lot because they are powerful.

Another idea we like to think of is how do you spotlight? I'm going to spotlight one, two, or three responses. It adds a little bit of positive pressure that your work could be highlighted, or could be drawn, or you could be called on. It helps show students that their writing is seen.

Some type of spotlights where you might pull the popsicle stick. We're big believers in the warm call, not cold call, and they can pass and it can come back to them. You don't want to have that opt out. I can just opt out every time, but have a way in which you will spotlight.

You can also circulate, find a highlight, and check in with a student. “Hey, can we share that one?” Spotlighting helps.

I think that idea too of collecting occasionally, not to grade everything, but if there were post-it notes that they put on the door on the way to lunch, or there was an exit ticket and you did actually collect those. I often would take all those post-it notes and fan through them, or I would take all those exit tickets that I collected and those inform my instruction.

When I start the lesson the next day, I would hold them up. “Do you know what your post-it notes told me yesterday? That we need to go back over… And Anna had a great point with her question.”

They're like, “Oh my gosh, she looked at all those, she reads those.”

Or “Your exit tickets let me know we need to start here today. And one of the things that Anna highlighted in her exit tickets…”

Then they think, “Oh my gosh, okay, she needs these to figure out what's driving the lesson.”

It’s that occasional spot check.

I also think a final one is to walk around when they're writing them, circulate. You can do a check mark or a little smiley face, it’s that touch point that they're doing a good job.

Then I even spotlight that way. “I'm looking for students who could expand their sentence today by…” “Anna's doing a great job over here in the way that she's…”

They're looking and thinking, “Okay, she's watching what we're doing, even in the 90 seconds.”

It's not limited to those, but those are some ideas of, back to your point, you do want that accountability, that the writing is mattering, it's going to someone. It could be my partner to the left or the right or the small group, or this is what creates the discussion in this room and I'm accountable to this learning environment, or it's what gives my teacher the information for where we're going next and it's valued.

Anna Geiger:

Well thank you very much that was a very comprehensive look at Quick Writes and it'll be super practical and helpful for teachers.

Do you have any advice for teachers on where to go to learn more about teaching writing?

Shauna Cotte:

The Keys to Literacy website has a free resources tab, and in that free resources tab you can find templates, printables, and recorded webinars.

In addition to our free resources tab, you also can sign up for the Literacy Lines blog that Joan Sedita maintains. You can also search it archive-wise by writing topic, and that has quite a number of great blog posts that Joan has done over time about writing instruction with lots of links to other resources.

One exciting thing that we have going on at the moment is Reading Universe. If your listeners are familiar with the Reading Universe website, they have excellent free resources for teaching reading. One of the things that makes that website gold is the great work they do around the classroom videos. If you get that recommendation or that template or that printable or that lesson plan, then you can take a peek at what does it look like when someone's executing this in a classroom? Can I get a little insight into that? We're helping them build out a writing portion of that website.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, wonderful.

Shauna Cotte:

On the reading universe website, there are free resources, and we are developing skill explainers for writing. Right now you can go on there and get simple sentences, sentence expansion, and we're about to publish sentence combining.

Anna Geiger:

This is great!

Shauna Cotte:

Yeah. It's all on that kind of K-5 level at the moment, but there are a lot of great resources on there as well.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thanks for sharing all that. I'll make sure to link to that in the show notes.

Anything else you want to share before we sign off?

Shauna Cotte:

Just that writing is complex work. It's complex to write. Teaching writing to others is even harder, but this work matters and it's worth it. The Quick Writes can help you feel like tomorrow I can go in and get a win and start integrating writing more. It feels really doable when writing can feel overwhelming. It's hard work, but it's worth it.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much, Shauna.

Shauna Cotte:

You're welcome!

Anna Geiger:

Thanks so much for listening. You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/210. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.