

No More “I’m Done!”

Fostering
Independent
Writers
in the
Primary
Grades



Jennifer Jacobson

Copyright © 2010 by Jennifer Jacobson. All rights reserved. This guide may be photocopied for staff development use only.

No More “I’m Done!” is designed to help primary teachers set up an effective writer’s workshop, one that not only will meet a wide range of needs but also will help all students to write with authentic engagement. Jennifer guides teachers from creating a supportive classroom environment through establishing effective routines, shows teachers how to set up a writer’s workshop, and provides an entire year of developmentally appropriate mini-lessons that build confidence and, ultimately, independence. This study guide is designed to facilitate discussions with colleagues about the ideas in the book. Each chapter segment of the study guide offers three sections: Discussion Questions, Group Activity, and Before the Next Meeting. Use the suggested discussion questions to help guide your conversations. The group activities will help keep your study group meetings relevant and interactive. If you use this study guide over a series of study group meetings, you can prepare for each meeting using the suggestions at the end of each chapter segment.

Contents

Introduction & Chapter 1: Letting Go	1
Chapter 2: Spaces That Support Independence	2
Chapter 3: Routines That Support Independence	3
Chapters 4 & 5: Mini-Lessons That Build Independence and A Year of Mini-Lessons for Growing Writers	4
Chapter 6: A Secret to Independence	5

Introduction and Chapter 1: Letting Go

Discussion Questions

- Which of the two writing sessions presented (Hannah's or Stacey's) most closely resembles writing time in your classroom? In what ways?
- What are the significant differences between a traditional writing program and writer's workshop?
- Do you believe that primary children are developmentally ready to participate in writer's workshop? Why or why not?
- Jennifer writes: "Nevertheless, I've come to believe that primary teachers, with the very best of intentions, inadvertently train their students to be dependent rather than independent writers." Do you agree?

Group Activity

Examine the chart on page 9. Do any of the practices on the left-hand side of the chart describe you or your students? If so, identify the beliefs behind these practices. For example, you might provide your students with prompts because you believe one or more of the following:

- My students struggle to come up with their own topics.
- My students lack the daily experiences necessary to come up with topics.
- I need to prepare my students for standardized tests, which provide students with prompts.

Once you've identified the beliefs behind the practice, imagine and record the counter-beliefs:

- My students are capable of coming up with their own topics.
- All students have experiences that are topic worthy.
- I can still prepare my students for testing without giving them prompts every day.

(As you try this exercise, you may discover that you don't have any firmly held beliefs behind the practices—they may be simply the way you were taught or what you and your colleagues have always done. This, too, is good to realize.)

For now, tuck these beliefs and counter-beliefs away. As you read the book, reflect on your thinking. Has it changed? Have you willingly tested any of these viewpoints? What were the results?

Before the Next Meeting

- Observe your writing class and identify one or two ways in which your students are dependent upon you during the drafting stage.

Chapter 2: Spaces That Support Independence

Discussion Questions

- Which concepts, ideas, or methods in this chapter did you find most interesting or informative? Why?
- Which concepts challenged your thinking?
- When discussing students’ desire to erase (pages 19–20), Jennifer challenges us to pay close attention to those ideas we resist, and points out that we often give students conflicting information. Can you identify times during your writing period when you encourage students to do one thing but praise them for the opposite?
- Did you read about ideas you wish to try? If so, what do you require to put new ideas into practice? Do you need additional support? From whom?

Group Activity

As Jennifer mentions, publishing student work does not mean asking them to copy it over. Discuss students’ need for audience, and then consider the ways in which your students might publish authentically. Examine the list on page 26. Which of these ideas would work for your class? Together, brainstorm additional ways that students could publish within your community.

Before the Next Meeting

- Make one change to your classroom layout or writing management system. Share the effect of the change with your group.
- In Chapter 3, Jennifer suggests we read aloud books that capture students’ everyday experiences, since these models often help students to recognize writing subjects in their own lives. Choose a favorite picture book that captures the simple pleasures or concerns in a child’s life, and prepare to share the book at the next meeting.

Chapter 3: Routines That Support Independence

Discussion Questions

- Examine the list of writer’s workshop practices on page 27 and discuss how each supports student independence. Which of these routines do you currently have in place? Which would you like to introduce or increase?
- Have you tried implementing writer’s workshop in the past? Was it successful? Why or why not? Would you consider reintroducing some of the components of writer’s workshop? If so, what would you do differently?
- Do you write during Quiet Ten? Why or why not? Why is it so important that we write alongside our students?
- Have you used mentor texts to model craft? If so, have you seen any connections between the models and your students’ understanding of what makes fine writing? Which are your favorite mentor texts?
- Instead of providing students with topics, Jennifer suggests presenting mini-lessons that help students develop strategies for coming up with their own topics. Do you agree with this approach? What are your favorite lessons for helping students to discover their own topics?
- What portion of your writing time do students spend actually writing? Are you pleased with this ratio? If not, how could you increase the amount of time your students spend writing?
- Do you currently conference with students during writing time? Do you stay in one place or move around the room? What are the pros and cons to each approach? Are there ways in which you would like to make your writing conferences more effective?
- Were there any concepts presented in Chapter 3 that raise further questions or require clarification?

Group Activity

Write for ten minutes on a topic of your choice. (You might present the mini-lesson “Idea Map,” on pages 64–65, before writing.) Then divide into pairs and conduct writing conferences using three of the procedures presented in this chapter: reflect, point, and question. What did you discover while trying this format?

Before the Next Meeting

- Choose one of the practices on page 27 and make it your goal. Make a list of the small steps that must occur before this goal can be met. Tackle as many of those small steps as possible on your way to establishing this practice.
- Choose a favorite picture book to bring to the next meeting.

Chapters 4 and 5: Mini-Lessons That Build Independence and A Year of Mini-Lessons for Growing Writers

Discussion Questions

- Jennifer writes: “It’s important to say that your students’ writing development—their needs—should drive your planning.” What does this planning look like? How do you follow a sequence of instruction and at the same time allow your students to influence the direction of the writing curriculum?
- The organizing principle of mini-lessons in this book is the six traits of writing. What guides the sequence of your writing instruction? Do you focus on one or two skills at a time, or do you present the “buffet method” of writing?
- Jennifer writes: “Too much emphasis on conventions will prevent your students from becoming fully engaged, independent writers.” Do you agree? How do we teach conventions, and help our students to apply them, without overemphasizing their importance?
- Five instructional strategies are presented on page 56. Which of these strategies are you currently using? Which one(s) would you like to try or use more?
- One strategy for providing students with a vision of success is projecting and discussing writing samples (not your students’ writing). Where can you find these samples to share? How can you work as a group to pool resources?
- Have you tried any of the mini-lessons in these chapters? What were the results?

Group Activity

Although it’s nice to have lists of suggested mentor texts, often the books on the list are not in the school library, or it’s difficult to guess how the person who chose the book actually used it with students. Instead of relying on lists alone, consider choosing books that you know and love to model fine writing. Examine the picture books you brought to this meeting and identify the ways in which these books could be used as mentor texts. Take turns giving a three-minute presentation of the books and the traits you would highlight.

Before the Next Meeting

- Choose one of the mini-lessons from these chapters (preferably one that uses a technique that’s new to you) and try it with your class. Be prepared to share your results at the next meeting.

Chapter 6: A Secret to Independence

Discussion Questions

- How has your teaching changed as a result of reading this book?
- Have you tried the techniques presented? What are your successes?
- What obstacles have you encountered when trying these techniques?
- Jennifer writes:

Initiative, motivation, and self-esteem. These are powerful tools we're handing out to our primary students—tools that will serve them well throughout their school career. And they're a gift we give ourselves. Once your students have grown into independent writers, you'll find that they transfer the skills they've learned to other subjects, during other times of the day. Everyone in your class will learn more because you have moved away from being traffic control officer to genuine teacher.

What are your thoughts about this quote?

- What are your next steps?

Group Activity

Share the results of the mini-lesson you tried, or present a favorite writing mini-lesson with your colleagues.