

## Reading, Writing, and Designing: Getting Students on the Path to Thinking Like Designers

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**ABSTRACT:** New technologies are rapidly expanding the communication opportunities for our students, allowing our students to compose in endless print and digital formats. After realizing that her instruction was not matching students' digital literacy experiences outside of school, a teacher chooses to transform her writing workshop to a designing workshop. This article attempts to specifically describe several lessons supporting students in seeing themselves as designers. Using a workshop model and units of study as frameworks, the teacher approached all lessons from a design lens as students considered the audience, purpose and genre of various digital applications, and the application's templates. These lessons can be easily differentiated for different age levels. The lessons can also be used with various technology applications and can be implemented as stand-alone lessons or in conjunction with one another.

**Keywords:** digital literacy, design, technology, workshop



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When it comes to writing, I often scribble on post-it notes and write the occasional shopping list, but the vast majority of my writing is done electronically. I text my husband throughout the day, send e-mails to communicate with my students' families, and type flyers advertising events for my school. In creating these digital compositions, I can easily make simple changes like replacing a font color or adding some clipart, but I can also add a voice memo or digital image to make my message more explicit.

Reflecting on my own and my students literacy practices, I found inspiration for transforming my own classroom pedagogy. When looking back, I loved writing as an elementary and middle school student, but my interest in writing decreased throughout high school and drastically in college, as the writing I was required to submit no longer seemed relevant to my life outside of school. It was during this time that I created my first Hotmail account and began chatting with friends from around the country on AOL's Instant Messenger. New technologies were opening the door for new ways to read and write. It seemed like the world outside of education recognized that the Internet was transforming communication, but my high school teachers and college professors failed to notice. I once again fell in love with the art when I became a teacher and was energized as I prompted my students to see themselves as writers, but the students and I were communicating outside of school using new media like cell phones and computers.

In my classroom, I realized I was restricting my students to traditional print-bound books and writing and illustrating on paper. The disparity between the communication that was occurring at school and the communication we were using outside of school became more and more apparent.

Furthermore, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) College and Career Readiness ELA Anchor Standards state that students will “use technology,

including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). With these understandings, I chose to attempt to modernize my writing assignments for my students. While teaching a group of third graders this year, I began my pursuit of making their literacy experiences in school more authentic and aligned with their literacy experiences outside of school. By transforming my traditional writing workshop to a designing workshop, my goal was to honor the textual and visual modes, equally honoring all modes of communication (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). I

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conducted a larger study looking at teacher pedagogy in the designing workshop and students' process as they designed informational texts using iBooks Author. In this *Voices from the Field*, I describe several specific lessons where technology

was infused to help them read and write like designers.

### What is a Designing Workshop?

Kress (2003) believes that we all designers as we are constantly using words, gestures, voices, pictures, actions, and more depending on what, where, how, and with whom we are communicating. Design is the process of using all available modes of communication, including those modes afforded by technology, to convey your message (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Bomer, Zoch, David, & Ok, 2010). I chose to approach our workshop through a design lens because I wanted my students to consider all of their communication options and determine how they could best convey their message. I went so far as to change the name of my workshop from “Writing” to “Designing” to emphasize this point to my students.

As Bomer, Zoch, David, and Ok (2010) believe, “to ‘write’ as a designer is to bring together the resources and habits of the writer, the artist, the

choreographer, the impresario, the musician, and the engineer into one textual event” (p.10). Designers begin by composing with all of these tools in mind, rather than using technology as an add-on or an afterthought, and in this case, allowed students to use the most modern of tools to make meaning, embracing recent technological advances. Designers begin by composing with all tools, such as video, images, words, voice, charts, and all other modes, in mind. Although the workshop model is a framework for instruction often used in terms of the Reader’s Workshop and Writer’s Workshop (Ray, 2006), the model can easily be adapted to encompass design (Hicks, 2009).

Instruction in the writer’s workshop often consists of genre studies of printed materials such as books, newspapers, magazine articles, and picture books. This teaching focuses on traditional literacy, honoring the textual and visual modes. The designing workshop includes an exploration of the genres included in both traditional printed material and digital texts such as videos, slideshows, and eBooks. While the traditional printed material contains images, text, and text features, the electronic book offers all of the above and may include digital video, sound, interactive components, and links to other Internet pages and sites (see Figure 1 in Appendix A).

In both the Writer’s Workshop and Designer’s Workshop, teachers use mentor texts, conference with students, employ the writing process and focus on the audience, purpose, and situation. However, the designer’s workshop expands and emphasizes the designer’s options of craft, mentor texts, modes, audience, and how they receive feedback (Hicks, 2009). In transforming to a designing workshop with my third graders, I ultimately wanted my students to design interactive electronic books using [iBooks Author](#) (student examples of *All About Space*, *Bats*, and *Cats, Cats, Cats* available [here](#)). I spent the majority of the fall semester teaching them to make informed design decisions while simultaneously building their capacity for working with various technology applications (see Table 1 in Appendix A for lesson ideas).

We began by analyzing themes in the slideshow application Keynote, discussing how the themes

would be most effective with specific audiences, purposes, and genres. Students also looked at design choices of published informational texts, including traditional print bound books and eBooks. They designed layouts and looked at the affordances and constraints offered by all modes and applications. Below are specific lessons that supported student in their transition from writers to designers.

### Lessons in Becoming Designers

The following lessons attempt to highlight some of the classroom activities in my designing workshop.

#### Analyzing Slide Show Themes

Early in the school year, my students sat in our school technology lab. In this one-week project students would design a slideshow about themselves (see Table 2 in Appendix A for the lesson sequence). They chose to title them, “Ten Things about Me!” While many teachers use slides shows, this lesson differs in that students approached the project as designers, analyzing each aspect and choice offered by the applications. On day one, I asked them to open the slideshow application Keynote. When students opened up the application, students were able to see miniature title slides of each theme. Although Keynote calls this page the “Theme Chooser,” PowerPoint refers to it as the “PowerPoint Presentation Gallery.” [Prezi](#) prompts users to choose a “Template.” However, any slide show application will work for this lesson. Each application offers designers various themes to create unique experiences for the user in color, font, and format.

Although students were eager as ever to begin their next project, I told them to browse through the themes for a minute ([click to view the themes available in Keynote](#)). I next asked them what they noticed. These third-grade techies began by stating the obvious. Their answers alluded to the themes having different colors, different fonts. They noticed that some had pictures and others did not. Next, I asked them to choose their favorite. One student said his favorite was the “[Sedona](#).” He liked it best because it was brighter than the others, had a red background—his favorite color—and the yellow streak across the middle reminded him of a lightning

bolt. I celebrated this answer and encouraged students to try and best explain what they truly liked about their chosen theme and how it stood out to them in comparison to the others. The students got very excited and quickly wanted to convey why their favorite was the best, as if it were some sort of contest.

I then gave them some scenarios. If you were designing a slideshow for kindergarten students about book characters, which of them would you choose? Why? If you were designing a slideshow for a large company (such as a hospital) about their budget, what theme would you choose? Why? What theme would you not choose? The conversation continued in this fashion for several scenarios until I asked them to hover their cursor over the theme “Fun.” The title slide of “Fun” contains two shades of bright orange, uses a whimsical font, and has abstract stars in the corners. I continued, “What would you use this theme for?” I asked them to specifically consider their audience and their purpose, something we had been working on in our class. Mary responded that she would use the theme “Fun” to advertise a school event because the color would attract people’s attention, and she would want kids to know the event would be really fun.

**The students’ understanding and ability to identify these intentional design choices allowed them to think critically about how they would communicate in their own when composing on paper and in digital formats, especially as they designed their own informational texts.**

After this initial lesson, students were supported in identifying a theme that they felt represented them in order to create a slideshow, “Ten Things about Me” ([click here to view a student sample](#)). While students could have easily put a slide show together in one or two class periods, I walked them through each step of the design process, modeling the explicit choices that are made each step of the way (see Table 2 in Appendix A for a sample lesson sequence). We took pictures of ourselves using the computer’s built in [Photo Booth](#) application and designed the placement and border of the image. Students continued designing the content and layout of their remaining 10 slides. As I conducted design conferences during students’ work sessions, I

continually asked them to justify their design choices, monitoring their thinking and understanding.

### Investigating the Design of Informational Text

After a week of learning and celebrating their slideshows, I put my students in a circle on the floor and laid out a variety of mentor informational print-bound books. I asked students to examine the pages in front of them and identify design decisions the authors and illustrators made in publishing the books, just like the design decisions they had made when designing their slideshows. Using chart paper,

I began making a list of their observations ([click here to see chart](#)). Students began by pointing out the obvious choices that authors make such as headings and images. When a student asked if paragraphs “counted,” I replied, “If you think the designer made a conscious decision when choosing to end one paragraph and begin another, then, yes, it counts.” And, then, within seconds, the room was abuzz with mentions of italics, subheadings, and

captions.

The next school day, students sat in the same circle, the books from the day before lay off to the side while I presented an additional set of mentor informational texts. Today’s texts, eBooks, were housed in the [iBooks app](#) on the school’s iPads spread in front of them. Once again, after giving students the opportunity to explore the books, I had them choose a digital interactive book that interested them and open to a page. Just like the day before, I wanted them to recognize the design decisions made, but I wanted students to consider the two very different containers of a traditional book and an electronic book. Students quickly recognized that the authors made many of the same choices in the traditional books and in the eBooks

like organizing the content in chapters and sections and using graphs and diagrams, headings, and subheadings. The eBooks offered more, such as links to websites for more information, movies that the viewer can watch, and multiple-choice quizzes. The students' understanding and ability to identify these intentional design choices allowed them to think critically about how they would communicate in their own when composing on paper and in digital formats, especially as they designed their own informational texts.

Over the course of these two days, the students had created an extensive list of all the design decisions offered in both the printed and digital mentor texts. I typed their list that night and cut the words apart for students to sort. I split my class so that they were working in groups of four. Individual groups were instructed to split their designated butcher paper into thirds. I modeled sorting by distributing my bag of words into three categories: (a) Organizational Text Features, (b) Graphic Text Features, and (c) Formatting Text Features. During the sorting process, the students articulated why they felt that a glossary, index, and table of contents were organization; why tables, diagrams, and paintings were graphic; and why bullets, picture credits, and titles were formatting. In our lesson closing, students made this connection that every design choice an author makes has a specific purpose in terms of the three types of text features: organizational text features, graphic text features, and formatting text features (see Table 3 in Appendix A).

### **Designing on Paper**

I knew my students were starting to grasp the concept of design by Halloween when I overheard two students debating the design of candy bar wrappers. Students had been having some great discussions on font such as type, color, and size. After a discussion about content experts, I challenged my students this day to consider themselves content experts of design as I handed them a list of Halloween facts and information, and sheets of 11 by 16 inch graph paper ([click here for student samples](#)). Acting as the content expert of information, my goal was to give them the words to use and for them to consider how to best present it

to their readers. For example, one fact was about candy sales and how much is spent each year on certain types of candy. I wanted them to consider if this fact would be best communicated by writing out the fact, creating a graph, drawing an image, or by other modes afforded by the paper container, whether visually, textually, and spatially. Students also needed to consider the layout of the page such as where they wanted to draw the reader's attention, how to make the page interesting, and how to logically present the information. Before diving in, we reviewed several double page spreads from our mentor informational texts. The students pointed out the lack of white space, and the variety of text and images that intrigued the viewer. I gave them their workshop time to design their own double-page spread for our class Halloween book that we would publish for our school library.

As one student was designing a section of his page on Trick-or-Treating, he chose to draw a Snickers bar and announced to the class that he could not believe how boring a Snickers wrapper is. This comment sparked an impromptu conversation among students and a celebratory moment for me as their teacher because I knew they were beginning to see themselves as designers. I continued to listen in as several students decided that the makers of Snickers and Milky Way could sell more of their candy bars if they made their wrappers more interesting. Several students held a strong belief that the wrappers were "boring." One student chimed in that you could not make a Snickers wrapper bright and colorful because it is mostly chocolate. The colorful wrappers are used for candies like Skittles and Nerds. In the end, the students decided that it was appropriate to use colors like browns and oranges for chocolate candies, and that the designers could work much harder to make the wrappers more fun with designs and a new font. As a teacher, I was most intrigued with my students' ability to critical analyze and articulate their beliefs on the design of a candy icon. They were able to defend their opinions as they considered the audience, purpose, and genre of a food wrapper.

### **Recognizing the Design Options Afforded by Each Application**



Over the course of the semester, students composed using a variety of digital applications and containers such as Keynote, [Pages](#), [Comic Life](#), [iMovie](#), and iBooks Author (see Appendix A for online resources for getting started with these applications). They also designed using web applications [Weebly](#), [Animoto](#), and [Voki](#). For each of these design tools, we created an anchor chart in our classroom depicting the design options afforded by each. These posters not only became colorful reminders of our work, but powerful teaching tools. As students' depth and understanding of design increased, they added to the posters during lesson closings. I first introduced Keynote toward the beginning of the school year and students' Keynote Design Choices listed "image" until November. Before Thanksgiving, a student mentioned that image included far too many choices, and we needed to be more specific. The students spent over 10 minutes brainstorming the components of an image and the intentional decisions a designer makes when choosing an image, such as its size, content, and type (photograph, drawing, clipart, etc.), effects, such as sepia or thermal, whether the image has a frame or contains text, and so forth. This exhaustive list covered an additional sheet of chart paper and demonstrated their grasp of design and the options expanded by technology. While they previously considered an image to simply be what image, they quickly realized the possibilities and options of manipulating the image to portray a more specific message.

Students came to understand that writers and designers are intentional in the modes they choose to convey information. Similarly, they are intentional in the digital applications and tools they choose based on their audience, purpose, and genre. As students reflected one day, I overheard, "Oh, that's why we used iMovie when we learning about 'how to' writing." When I asked him for clarification he answered, "Well, when you're teaching someone how

to do something, it's just better when you can actually show them on video." Although this may seem obvious, he was correct in that video-editing software allows the designer to integrate video, image, text, and sound to explain specific directions.

To continue our reflection, students worked in small groups to think about their interpretations of the difference between writing and designing. They brainstormed on chart paper and I had them use the online video creator, Animoto, to demonstrate this understanding of the similarities and differences ([click here to view student samples](#)).

### Final Thoughts

In transforming my writing workshop to a designing workshop, I wanted my students to truly consider and honor all modes of communication available to them when composing text, whether traditional or digital. Just as I had coached students through a study of informational text in my previous writing workshop, the designing workshop situated our inquiry as students came to understand their choices of modes and media to best convey their message. No longer readers and writers, students transitioned to consumers and composers of multimodal text, whether paper or digital. These conversations supported students in understanding the intentional choice designers, including themselves, have in every step of their composing. Just as students considered their slideshow templates and colors of a candy bar wrapper, there is great intention in every design decision. As technology influences our lives outside of school even more, we must continue to support students in school with how to consume and compose with evolving media. Whether designing movies, cartoons, electronic books, or slideshows, there are unlimited opportunities for 21st century teachers to expand the publishing opportunities in our classrooms.

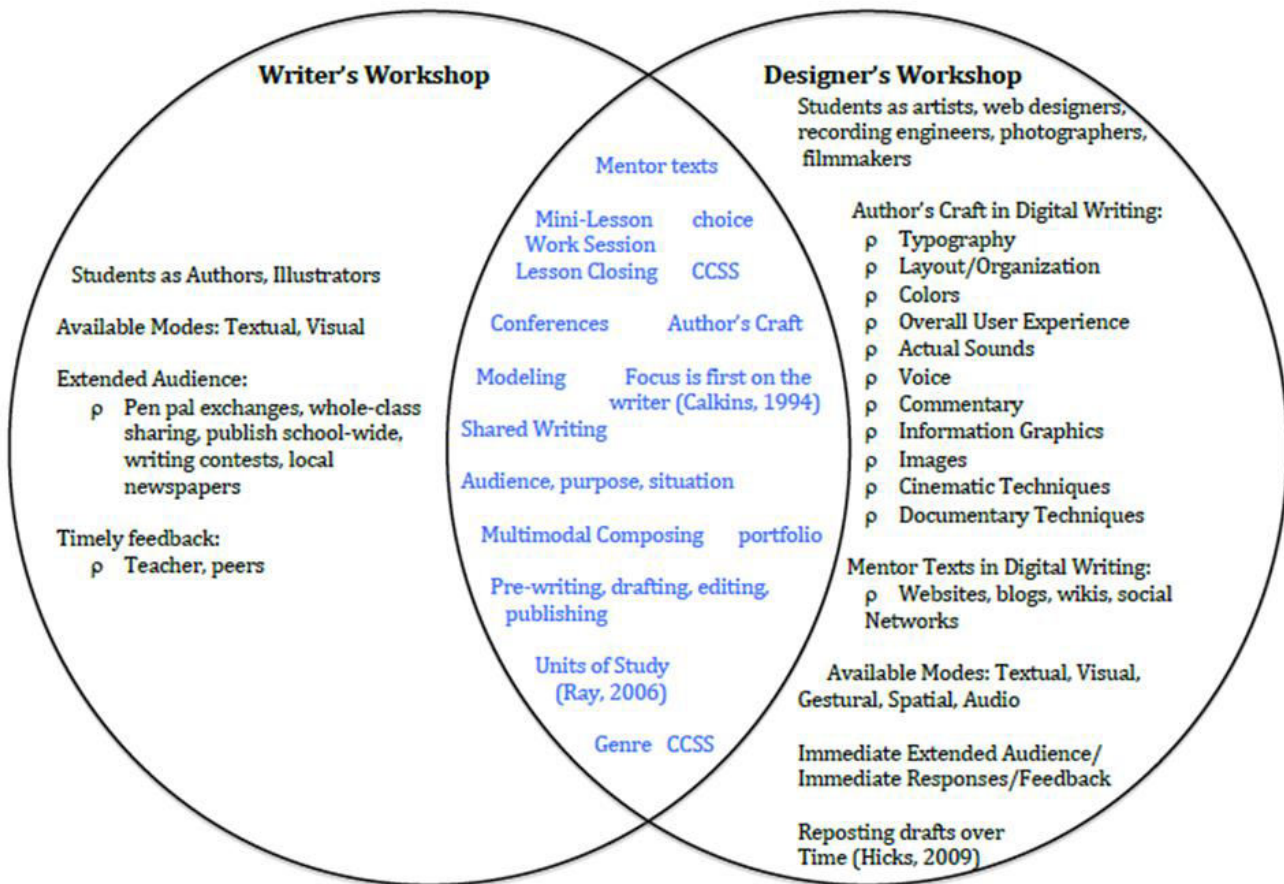
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## Appendix A Writer's Workshop vs. Designer's Workshop



**Table 1: Designing Workshop Lesson Ideas**

<i>Computer Application</i>	<i>Lesson Idea</i>	<i>Lesson Details</i>
Slideshows (Keynote (Mac), Power Point, Prezi)	10 Things About Me	Students use text and image to describe themselves
Desktop Publishing (Word, Pages (Mac))	Characterization	Students use text and image to create newsletters, business cards, obituaries, etc., of the characters they are reading about
Built in Webcam (Photobooth (Mac))	Reading Responses	Students use the webcam to record their reading responses
Video Editing Software (iMovie (Mac), Windows Movie Maker, Animoto, Powtoon)	“How To” Movies	Students use text, image, video, voice, and more to teach someone how to do something
Weebly	Digital Portfolio	Students create websites to house their digital projects and share with others

**Table 2: Lesson Sequence for “10 Things About Me” Slideshows**

<i>Day</i>	<i>Lesson</i>
Day 1	<p>Introduce slide show templates; discuss themes for specific audiences, purposes and genres;                      Outline task and show teacher exemplar (mentor text)                      Support students in choosing theme that represents them                      Use webcam to take photographs                      Create title slide (font (type, color, size), background, image placement, image border, etc.</p>
Day 2	<p>Review mentor text                      Model adding slides; changing slide layout and appearance (change master slides)                      Model finding and uploading images                      Model formatting font, background, image, etc.</p>
Day 3	<p>Model inserting shapes                      Model integrating transitions</p>
Day 4	<p>Model animating text and objects                      Celebrate!</p>

**Table 3: Organization, Graphic, and Formatting Text Features**

<i>Organizational Text Features</i>	<i>Graphic Text Features</i>	<i>Formatting Text Features</i>
Facts	Charts and Tables	Headings and Sub-headings
Glossary	Labels/Cutaway	Captions
Table of Contents	Diagrams	Timeline
Appendix	Photographs	Bold Font
References	Maps	Sidebars
Index		Italics
		Bulleted Lists

**Appendix B**  
**Online Support and Tutorials for Digital Tools**

<i>Digital Tool</i>	<i>Online Support/Tutorials</i>
iBooks Author	<a href="http://help.apple.com/ibooksauthor/mac/">http://help.apple.com/ibooksauthor/mac/</a>
Keynote	<a href="https://help.apple.com/keynote/mac/">https://help.apple.com/keynote/mac/</a>
Prezi	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8Yu_qp9FFo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8Yu_qp9FFo</a>
Photo Booth	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZA7rv4-7Dgg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZA7rv4-7Dgg</a>
Pages	<a href="http://help.apple.com/pages/mac/">http://help.apple.com/pages/mac/</a>
Comic Life	<a href="http://plasq.com/education/take-comic-life-to-school/http://help.apple.com/imovie/mac/">http://plasq.com/education/take-comic-life-to-school/http://help.apple.com/imovie/mac/</a>
iMovie	<a href="http://help.apple.com/imovie/mac/">http://help.apple.com/imovie/mac/</a>
Weebly	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu50A7sZPCQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu50A7sZPCQ</a>
Animoto	<a href="https://animoto.com/blog/news/creating-your-first-animoto-video/">https://animoto.com/blog/news/creating-your-first-animoto-video/</a>
Voki	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FunBew6S4Bk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FunBew6S4Bk</a>