



# THE TOOLKIT

## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH YOUNG WRITERS

### INTRODUCTION

We strive to create engaging writing experiences for our students. Whether we work with students for years, months, days, or hours, we hope they leave BFI with a positive attitude towards writing and a desire to improve their skills. To maintain that engaging atmosphere, we ask our writing mentors to use this toolkit when working with students. These are our guiding principles for working one-on-one or in small groups with young writers.

- **Be Creative** — Emphasize writing as a process in which students are invited to make creative or original/authentic choices at each stage. These stages may include:
  - Pre-writing
  - Drafting
  - Revising & Editing
  - Sharing & Publishing
- **Be Kind** — Establish a friendly and inclusive space for students to express themselves and share their ideas, whether individually or in groups
- **Be Fearless** — Foster a growth mindset for building writing skills

### BE CREATIVE — THE WRITING PROCESS

The writing process is everything you do from the moment you start thinking about a project until the moment you share your final piece with an audience. There are many different aspects of writing and of writing well. BFI emphasizes these five.

- Story & Ideas
- Audience
- Voice
- Structure
- Grammar & Syntax

A strong piece of writing will address all five of these aspects in different stages of the writing process. We identify these stages as Pre-Writing, Drafting, Revising (Styling and Editing) and Publishing/Sharing.

## PRE-WRITING – *Dream it.*

This stage is everything you do before you actually start to write in complete sentences. This is a time to generate ideas (brainstorming), think outside the box, dream big, and really have fun with the possibilities. Here are some ways we suggest to help students in their ideation stage:

- **Set a goal and make a plan for your writing or storytelling project!**
- Review the elements of story (character, setting, dialogue, plot, problem and solution)
- Make an outline of the story or essay
- Sketch a character, adding as many original details as possible. You might ask the student(s), What makes this character unique (e.g. what makes your unicorn character different than any other unicorn)? Or,
- Does this character have a big dream?
- Conduct an interview of a tutor or someone who interests you
- Draw a map of the setting for the story or essay
- Read, research, and recall what you already know about the topic that you are interested in writing about
- Free-write for 5 or 10 minutes
- Offer to record (in writing or using a phone) the ideas or stories so the student can focus on generating them.
- **If writing in groups:** ask students to turn-and-talk to generate ideas, encourage listening and adding to the previous suggestion (a ‘yes, and...’ approach), and/or have each student contribute an idea and then ask how those ideas might be combined.

Very often, students’ most compelling ideas will emerge late. Remember to be patient, offer lots of positive reinforcement and ask lots of open-ended questions.

## DRAFT – *Getting Started.*

The strongest writers understand that it will take them several drafts to craft strong pieces of writing. Knowing that can take off some of the pressure of staring at a blank page. On that first or ‘rough’ draft, focus on getting the ideas and/or main story down in sentences and paragraphs. BFI encourages students to write their first drafts by hand because it helps writers more easily get into a ‘flow’ if they don’t spell-check and constantly refer to online dictionaries and thesauri. Reluctant and beginning writers may feel more comfortable dictating their ideas or stories to you, and that is okay. If they have momentum, hand them the pencil and let them take over while you check in with other students or simply “go get some water.”

## REVISING AND STYLING – *Making it better.*

This is where the work really happens. During revision, the focus is on making the ideas or story stronger and clearer. To do that, the writer may need to add words, cut others, move things around, etc. That can feel overwhelming, so break down revision into steps.

Here are some questions to guide students as they revise:

- What happens? What is this about? What is the big idea that you want to share? Often times, an oral telling of the story will help writers realize they can cut out unnecessary details.
- As a writing mentor, you can switch over to a reader role, and ask the student(s) to clarify moments that were confusing or inconsistent for you as a reader. Or you can read the story or essay out

loud together and play the ‘reader’ role together.

- Who are you writing for? What do they need to know? This helps the writer start to consider tone, style, and vocabulary.
- Who is your narrator and what kind of language or words would be unique to them? This is all about voice. Read the story or essay out loud so they can hear what this voice sounds like and ask whether it is appropriate to their task.
- Ask the writer to play the role of boring word detector. Can we replace any words with more awe-inspiring adjectives or vibrant verbs?
- How are you going to end your piece? Will this ending be satisfying to the reader? Does it have a sense of closure (or purposeful non-closure)? Did the piece convey the big idea that you set out to communicate?
- What would happen if we started this story/essay in the middle? At the climax?
- What if you changed the point of view? What if you retold this story from another perspective?

Revision is its own process. It is about strengthening your ideas, adding structure or sometimes changing the structure of the first draft. It doesn't mean that you sit down and read through your first draft once and make just a few changes or correct spelling. Almost all writers re-read their work multiple times during the revision process. At some point in this process, the writer should seek outside feedback from a peer or instructor.

#### REVISING AND EDITING – *Clarifying it.*

At BFI, we encourage tutors to hold off on editing until late in the writing process. Be mindful of the developmental stage of the student. We frame editing as the part of the process that considers the reader's experience. Will they be able to follow your story without the distraction of spelling errors, missing or unnecessary words, confusing verb tenses, etc.? Grammar and mechanics are important, but not until just before sharing.

#### PUBLISHING AND SHARING – *Sharing it with the world.*

This could mean printing and displaying student work, publishing it in a chapbook, publishing a fancy hard-cover book, performing the piece in front of an audience, or submitting it to a contest or literary journal. The important thing is that you have a finished piece that you're proud to share with an audience — even if you're still nervous about it! Be Fearless!

### APPENDIX OF GUIDED QUESTIONS

#### STORY & IDEAS

- What kinds of stories do you like?
- What is a book (or movie or show or video game) that you enjoyed?
- What questions have you been wondering about? What kinds of mysteries can we discover in our own lives (e.g. Why is Greenwood named Greenwood?)
- What secrets of the universe make you curious?
- Who would be an interesting character to follow around in a story?
- Who is an interesting person in your life that is interesting or funny or extraordinary in some way?
- What do you dream of doing one day?
- What is difficult for you?
- What inspires you? What discourages you?
- What is a challenge or problem that you would like to overcome? What challenges or problems have you overcome?

## AUDIENCE

- Who would you like to read this story you're writing? Friend? Sibling? School reading buddy? Teacher? Admissions committee? Total strangers you may never meet?
- Think of one person in particular. What part of your story will that person love? What might they skip over? • What would confuse them?
- Ask someone to read your story out loud while you listen. Does it sound the way you want it to?

## VOICE

- Who is telling the story?
- I/Me/We (first person)
- You (second person)
- Someone else/She/He/They (third person)
- Is the story being told as it happens? In the past? In the future?
- How formal should the vocabulary be?
- What tone or attitude does your word choice convey?
- What is the pace of the writing?
- For dialogue, do the speakers sound distinct from each other?
- Have you used sensory details to build this world?
- Where are opportunities to use figurative language like metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration, etc.?

## STRUCTURE / PLOTTING

- Does the writing have a clear beginning, middle and end? For essays, is there an introduction, body and conclusion?
- Are the transitions smooth or abrupt? Can the reader follow them?
- Is there a clear main idea? Where is that idea stated?
- What is the problem or conflict?
- What obstacles does the main character/ protagonist need to overcome to address the problem or conflict?
- How to the problem and conflict and obstacles change?
- How do time and the sequence of events work?
- How does the story end? Is there a sense of closure?

## GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

- Is the grammar appropriate and chosen for the story being told?
- Does the writing follow established standards for spelling, capitalization and punctuation?
- Are the ideas expressed completely and appropriately for the writing?
- Are the sentences and paragraphs constructed appropriately to convey the desired impact while preserving the student's unique voice?
- Do the tenses of the verbs meet the setting of the story?
- Do the verbs and subjects agree with one another?

Grammar and syntax get a bad wrap as the boring part of writing — the part where someone uses a red pen to tell you everything that doesn't meet the rules of good writing. But grammar and syntax are not about right or wrong; they are about caring enough about what you write to say it in a creative and meaningful way that also communicates clearly with your audience.

## BE KIND

Your first priority as a BFI Field Agent is to get to know the students you work with. The more you interact and build trust, the more fun you will both have. Start by learning a student's name and pronouncing it properly. A suggestion: write the student's name down as soon as they tell it to you in a little notebook or on a scrap of paper. Take on the student's perspective, and encourage them to take on other student's perspectives. Always keep your voice and words kind and respectful, and encourage students to do the same for each other, and you! Our goal is for our students to feel safe to write and share their stories together.

A word on kindness and writing in groups: When working in groups, start by having a short discussion about what kindness looks like when we work together. You might ask students to turn-and-talk or share out in response to this question. Encourage students to think about what active listening looks like and how to respond to the ideas of others with kindness. Set group expectations that everyone can agree to and refer back to them if needed.

Lastly, remember to be patient! Students may take time to find the thing that really inspires them to move forward in their narrative or essay. Brain breaks that include movement and/or conversation with friends or peers can be great ways to refocus in an intentional way. We encourage mindfulness breaks for writers of all ages (including for our writing mentors).

## BE FEARLESS

What do we at the Bureau of Fearless Ideas (BFI) talk about when we talk about Fearlessness? For us, fearlessness is not about the absence of fear or trepidation when taking on a new skill or project. It is rather an acknowledgement that we are all capable of learning new things. We are neither simply a good or bad writer. Being a fearless writer means embracing the writing process and creatively solving problems and challenges as they arise. At BFI, writers of all ages can learn together, take on challenges, and work through problems. We also get to read each other's work, and we appreciate it more because we have seen all the hard work that the writer has put into the process.