

Combing Writing Fluency and Vocabulary Development Through Writing Roulette

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Writing Roulette immerses students in a rapid fire, collaborative writing activity. The teacher sets a kitchen timer for a few minutes, when the timer sounds, students exchange papers and add to the previous students' compositions. After a third pass, students receive their original papers back to read and share with others.

Teachers from a variety of content areas in my classes experiment with Writing Roulette. The strategy steps that are described in this article are designed to increase not only students writing fluency but also their ability to use recently acquired content vocabulary. Before moving on to the strategy steps, a brief discussion will demonstrate how closely aligned Writing Roulette is with contemporary ideas about writing fluency and vocabulary development.

Writing Fluency and Vocabulary Development

Students' writing anxiety is directly related to worries about correct usage and form. Writing, when viewed from this perspective, becomes an onerous activity to be avoided at all costs. Writing Roulette places an emphasis on the composing aspect of writing, freeing students to explore their thoughts with little time for worrying about the mechanics of writing until ideas are there on the page to be shaped and polished.

Another important facet of writing fluency is the particular audience for writing. The teacher as examiner is often the dominant audience for student writing. When students write for teachers as opposed to their peers, they tend to be less explicit since the teacher presumably knows what they are writing about. Writing Roulette involves at least two other students as the initial audience and potentially a whole class audience in the final stages of sharing compositions. It shifts audience focus from the teacher to peers and thus encourages explicitness.

The ability to use content area terminology in speaking and writing requires a great deal of practice in nonthreatening activities. Readence, Bean, and Baldwin (2007) differentiated the difficult "expressive" use of technical vocabulary from the "receptive" process of knowing an unfamiliar word in listening or reading. In contrast to simply knowing a word in reading, being able to use a word requires greater risk, something most students avoid at all costs. However, if the new content word can be practiced in the familiar setting of a Writing Roulette story, students are more likely to risk using newly acquired words in the future. The Writing Roulette steps that follow combine the original purpose of encouraging writing fluency with this second purpose of providing a means for vocabulary development.

Writing Roulette Steps

In order to begin a Writing Roulette session, you need to provide the following guidelines:

1. Provide a simple structure for the story consisting of three major elements or divisions.
 - a. A setting and characters
 - b. A problem or goal for the main character
 - c. A resolution
2. Advise students that each section of the story must use at least *one* word from their content unit. These words should be underlined.
3. Set a specific time limit for the first story section (e.g., five minutes for the setting). Use a kitchen timer to alert students to the end of the time limit.
4. When time is up, have students exchange papers or collect and shuffle them such that a second author writes the problem or goal section. Set a time limit and advise students to read the paper they receive and continue the story.
5. Exchange papers one last time so the third author can provide a resolution for the story. Have students return the story to the original author.

You may find it helpful to provide students with a model story from a previous Writing Roulette session. In addition, you should write with students, modeling the process. Once the three-part stories have been completed, students can read and exchange them in small groups.

The following stories were written in a required course in content area reading for preservice teachers, using terminology introduced in the text and class lectures. Each of the three story sections was written by a different person, indicated by the subtitles.

CASE CLOZED

Setting and characters (Author 1).

Gertrude and Suzie were on the way home from school.

“Gertrude,” said Suzie, “that *anticipation guide* we used in history class was really great.”

“Yeh,” replied Gertrude, “and didn’t you just love the *graphic organizers*? I can’t wait to get home and call all of our friends to let them know about our class.”

Gertrude and Suzie continued on down the street chatting happily.

Problem or goal (Author 2).

The big history test was rapidly approaching. Gertrude reread her graphic organizer and called Suzie on the phone to discuss *study strategies*. She felt her *comprehension* had suffered because she did all of her reading in front of the t.v. She never missed a single video on M. T. V.

Suzie tried to help Gertrude fill in the blank spaces their teacher had left in the graphic organizer. They stayed on the phone for three hours in anticipation of the big test!

Resolution (Author 3).

The next day, Gertrude entered the classroom to face the test. She whispered to Suzie, “I hope he gives us an anticipation/reaction guide to help us with this test.”

The teacher came around and placed a *cloze test* on each student’s desk. Gertrude took a look at it and almost died. Every other word had been deleted.

Gertrude whispered to Suzie, “Do you have any idea how to do this test?”

Suzie said, “Sure, use your knowledge of *morphemic analysis* to slice the *response mode* which will require you to have fewer pieces of information. Then the *scope of information* search will be halved.”

Gertrude gave Suzie a blank stare. Suzie said, “Guess!”

Gertrude knew she would fail but fortunately for her, the teacher pulled the overhead screen all the way out of its roller onto his head. Class was terminated for the day and Gertrude went whistling out of the classroom, knowing she had escaped a fate worst than death.

This form of expressive writing and vocabulary review through writing roulette has well received by my students. They use writing roulette in a variety of content areas including physical education, agriculture, mathematics, English, history, science, and art. It becomes a great way to review material at the end of a five or six week unit plan. Indeed, the examples in this article represent a writing roulette review conducted before an exam in the content reading course.

The final example of a writing roulette story is one in which I had a chance to be a participant. Modeling this process as one of the writing roulette authors is just as important as modeling sustained silent reading.

THE PUSILLANIMOUS PROFESSOR

Setting and characters (Author 1).

High on the crags above the crashing waves, Professor Nexus woke suddenly. Shivering and rain drenched, he racked his *long term memory*, attempting to recall how he wound up on this harsh bluff.

Somehow, he felt out of *context*, certainly out of sorts. A party! The last thing he really remembered was the Halloween party at the local bar.

Problem or goal (Author 2).

He’d had considerable difficulty *decoding* the bartender’s withering glances, believing that he was still in the good graces of the establishment. What a mistake! If he had engaged in a little *directed listening*, he’d have heard the manager say, “That’s enough for him, throw the bum out!”

But now, here he was, feverish, tired, and hung over, trying to clear his aching head.

Resolution (Author 3).

He vaguely recalled betting his car that he could create a *word map* for the word *pusillanimous*. He also recalled some barfly driving off in his red Porsche.

She’d say, “No, you lose. The word means cowardly, not airplane wing.” He’d decoded it wrong. How could he make this mistake—an English professor, etymological guru! Famous lexicographer!

There was nothing left to do. His professional reputation was crushed. There was nothing left to live for. He would jump off the cliff and end it all. But he couldn’t. He was too pusillanimous. Too chicken, too cowardly. Hey, he thought, I *own* that word! Life’s okay. Who needs a red Porsche when you have a superior vocabulary!

Students enjoy immersing themselves in creative activities such as Writing Roulette. They also get a vivid picture of how to use technical terms in appropriate contexts. In the long run, the words they include in a Writing Roulette session are likely to be memorable terms that will be useful in future writing tasks.

References

Readence, J. E., Bean, T. W., & Baldwin, R. S. (2007). *Content area reading: An integrated approach* (9th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.