

Plan Boxes

A goal without a plan is just a wish.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Isn't it nice when students know exactly what to do at the end of a mini-lesson? It's even better when they can work independently for the entire period without seeking assistance from us or their peers. Having students who always know what to do and how to sustain themselves for stretches of time was something I wished for when I started teaching. However, my wish didn't come true right away because most of my students needed help self-managing their learning.

In September 2006, after learning about plan boxes from my professor Lucy Calkins, I began to implement them daily in my writing workshop. *What a difference these little boxes made!* After integrating plan boxes into writing workshop I cannot imagine how my students, or I, ever got along without them.

Plan boxes are tools that help students self-manage their independent writing time. I asked my students to create a plan that would help them determine what they would do during independent writing time. However, students need to receive explicit instruction about how to create a plan box (Figure 1.1), because planning ahead is not intuitive for many children. In addition, it is helpful to share other students' well-written plan boxes (Appendix A) so children can begin to get an idea about the ways in which their classmates are spending their independent writing time.

I have worked with and consulted with many teachers who have grown frustrated with the use of plan boxes after a couple of weeks. While having students plan for the way they'll use their time can start off slowly, and may feel arduous to check, I assure you that consistent use of plan boxes will help your students manage their time better, thereby becoming less dependent on you. Students who have trouble developing plan boxes can rehearse what they might do during the workshop by verbally telling you their plans. Once they get the hang of explaining how they'll use their time, you can transition them into writing their plan down.

You can transition students from the mini-lesson to independent writing by checking their plan boxes. I insisted on having my students wait quietly while I checked their peers' plans so I could converse with my students and ask clarifying questions when necessary. If a student's plan didn't make sense, I had them rework their plan and return to my chair once they revised their plan. If a student's plan reflected that they needed help, I had them write in their notebook until I was able to pull them in for a conference or a strategy lesson. Finally, if a student's

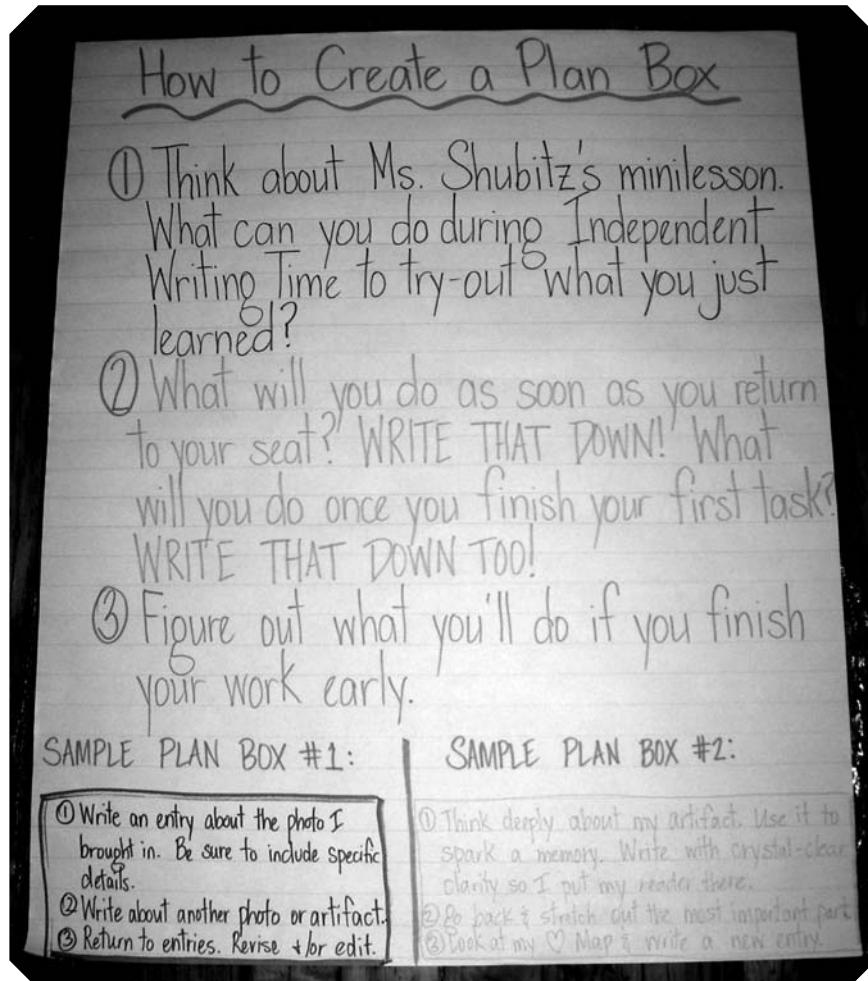


Figure 1.1

This chart was created in early September. It remained on the wall until mid-October and served as a reminder to students about the steps they needed to think about when they created a plan box at the end of each mini-lesson.

plan was on target, I put a smiley face on their plan box and said, “Off you go!” Checking plan boxes daily, before students left the meeting area, reinforced the necessity to manage one’s time efficiently.

Challenge: Set aside time to instruct your students about the importance of reaching their writing goals through careful planning. Guide them through the plan-making process by first having them think about how they’ll use their independent

writing time. Next, have them tell their writing partner what they'll do first, second, and third (if they finish early). Finally, have your students write down their plan in their notebook (either in the next blank space or in a separate "plan box" section of their notebook) and show it to you before they leave the meeting area. Your students' plans will not always be elaborate—some will be a simple list, while others may be a few sentences in length. As long as the child writes a plan that seems like it will sustain them for the entire independent writing time, approve it.

Reflective Practice:

- Did any of your students take more than three minutes to craft a plan for their independent writing time? How will you support them in planning more quickly going forward?
- Were any of your students not adhering to their plans? How did you get them back on track? How will you get them to stay on track with their plan during the next writing workshop *without* a reminder from you?

Be Honest!

Honesty: The best of all lost arts.

—Mark Twain

Honesty makes us or breaks us. It is such a basic understanding, yet it often takes years to grasp. Just like other people, writers value honesty. It is important to be honorable when claiming words and ideas as our own. Since this is a basic principle for writers, we ought to teach this in writing workshop.

The one thing that makes my blood boil is dishonesty. Losing my temper isn't an option in the classroom, however, so I ask children who have claimed someone else's work as their own, "What were you hoping to get by copying this work?" Their responses reveal a variety of motives behind plagiarizing, as well as provide insight in how to address academic dishonesty.

- ***"I asked for help and the person helping me wrote some of the words to show me how to make my writing better."*** In this case, the person helping could be a support person within the school, a family member, or a friend. Often when people work with reluctant writers, their help turns into doing, and the work is no longer the student's. It is important to have a conversation with the student to ensure her understanding of using her own words on writing projects. It is also imperative to have a conversation with the person "helping" so this form of plagiarism does not happen again.
- ***"I was researching for my feature article and found these facts. I included the Web site in my Works Cited list. I changed a few of the words."***