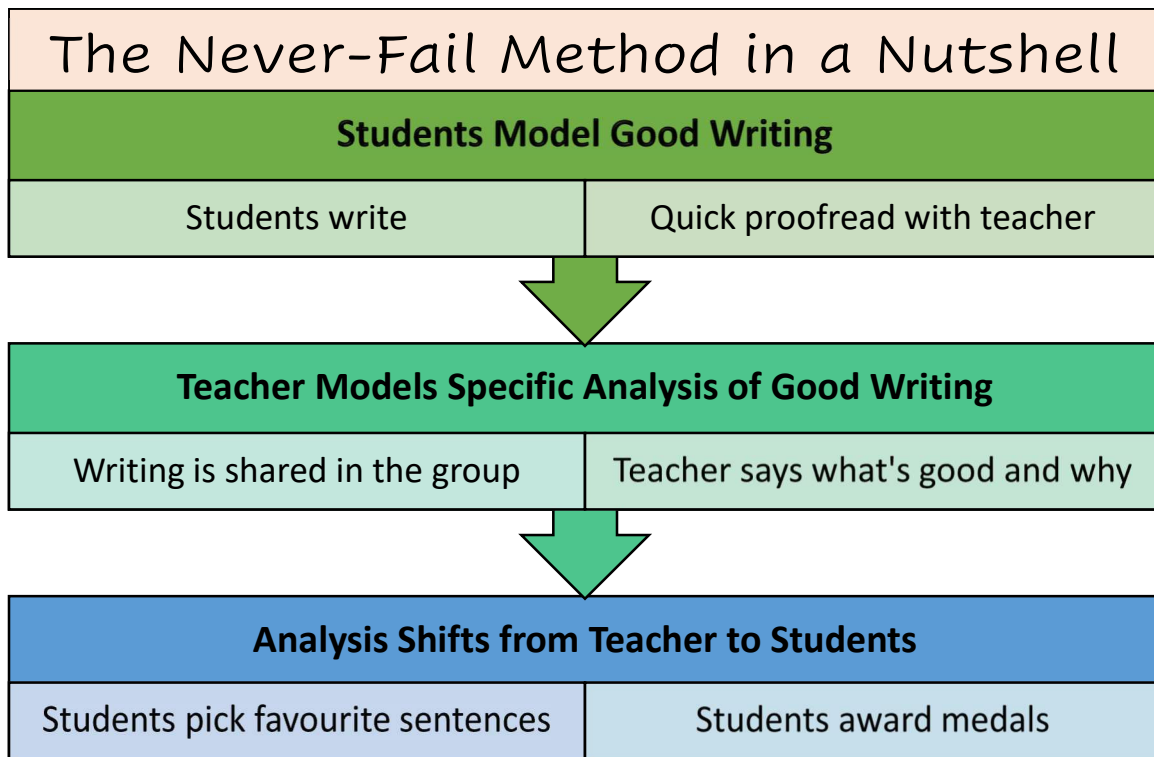


The Never-Fail Writing Method

Kate Nonesuch

I developed and used the Never-Fail Writing Method over 20 years of teaching adult literacy. It works. There are three deceptively simple steps: First, students at whatever level, with whatever skills they may have, write. Here is where the examples of good writing will be found. Second, the teacher points out what is good about their writing. Next, the teacher models a clear analysis of writing. The teacher starts the analysis; later students follow the teacher's model.

Finally, ignore bad writing. It will go away.



The Never-Fail Method is based on the idea that people get better at writing when they get specific feedback about what they are doing well. I assume that they make mistakes because they do not know how to avoid them; I assume that they do not maliciously hand in shoddy work, and that they will work hard to do well if they are confident that they will be able to do well.

Working with Groups, and One-to-One

The method outlined here is for working with a group of students. However, it is easily adaptable for tutors working with a single student. The principle of pointing out what is good about the writing is exactly the same, and the examples of how to do that fit perfectly in the one-on-one setting. Giving medals can be done by tutor and student together.

The tutor will have to seize on every opportunity for the learner to share writing with others, but it is possible to make such opportunities when tutors and learners come together at end-of-year or holiday celebrations. A collection of learner writing to give away on such occasions provides incentive for writing and editing, and for reading other learners' work.

Seems Simple Enough

The Never-Fail Writing Method looks surprisingly simple at first glance. It is simple to implement; there are few steps, so students get used to the routine fairly easily. Because it is simple, teachers can implement it slowly or quickly as they like. Yet underneath that simplicity of structure is a complex, nuanced, artful practice that smoothly moves students towards a goal of being thoughtful, capable writers who know what makes a piece of writing good, and can implement those techniques in their own work.

Part 1: Students Model Good Writing

Any of your usual writing assignments can be used in the Never-Fail Writing Method.

I ask students to do a quick proofread with me before they hand their work in to check for end punctuation and missing words so that it is easier for others to read when it is shared in the writing group. I don't comment on any errors or make suggestions for improvement.

I notice out loud all the places with correct end punctuation, and compliment the student on their proofreading skills if they make a correction as they are reading it with me. For an example of doing this kind of proofreading see "Berniece Shows the Way."

<https://katenonesuch.com/2012/06/28/berniece-shows-the-way/>

Students Model
Good Writing.



Students write



Quick proofread
with teacher



Prepare writing
for sharing

Part 2: The Writing Group

In this first phase, teacher models an analysis of good writing by giving very specific feedback on what is good in a student's writing. I comment on a couple of things that are good in the piece. *Every student gets the same number of comments, and the same amount of time spent on their writing*. Mistakes are not mentioned, *ever*. There are *never* suggestions for improvement.

Of course, when you look at it, you will see all the usual errors. But somewhere in there, even if it is riddled with errors of every kind, there will be something that is correct, that is effective, that moves you or makes you think. That is the bit, even if it's only a couple of words, that you pick out as an example of how to write well.

Then each student in turn reads out their favourite sentence from the piece. So does the teacher.

Then on to the next student's writing, and repeat.

Giving Specific Feedback

How can we give specific feedback about what's good in student writing? This seems like a difficult task to many teachers. Our training has been to focus on errors, with perhaps a gesture towards saying something generally positive.

Start by finding something that is effective. Read it out loud. Say it is good. Say what effect that particular thing had on you: for example, "It made me laugh, cry or wonder..." or "It helped me understand what was happening in your story."

Then, as specifically as you can, say what the writer did to have that effect on you. This is where you get to teach specifics of good writing: organization, an introductory "hook," a strong ending, variation of sentence length, use of figurative language, parallel structure or other devices.

Your students will provide examples of such things in their writing, whether by accident or by plan. Your job is to point them out and explain how they

Teacher Models a Specific Analysis of Good Writing.



Students share writing in the group.



Teacher says what's good.



Everyone reads out their favourite sentence.

work. In this way it becomes clear that good writing is a skill people can learn, not just a gift that some people have and others don't.

The following table is a short guide to the kinds of things you can say to give students some insight into how specific writing techniques work.

What to Say about What's Good

What to look for	What to say	Examples from learners
Vivid Details	<p>make the ideas or the action clearer;</p> <p>“paint a picture.” Can you feel, see, hear or smell what the writer experienced?</p> <p>(A good detail is usually the easiest thing to find in a learner's piece.)</p>	<p>“My body feels like a grumpy bear.”</p>
Clear Organization	<p>makes the thought or actions clear;</p> <p>can be used to make the point stronger, for example, saving something surprising until the end.</p> <p>You could comment on paragraphing, or a clear sequence of events.</p> <p>There are many ways to organize a piece of writing: in the order things happened; most important to least, or vice versa; compare first one person/thing, then another; start at the end and circle back to the beginning; moving from a wide distant view to close-up, or vice versa (similar</p>	<p>Can't give an example here without quoting the whole piece of writing. When working with students, the teacher points out how the student's piece is organized and says how that organization helps get the student's message across.</p>

What to look for	What to say	Examples from learners
	to camera distance in film or video).	
Strong beginning	reaches out and grabs the reader’s attention; prepares the reader for what is to come.	“It was really touching to hear Linda speak.” This was a good beginning because it led into a piece that was all about what Linda said and how it touched the reader.
Strong ending	lets the reader know the piece is over; leaves the reader with something to think about; An ending that echoes the beginning sets up a “spiral effect” that brings back everything in the piece into the reader’s mind.	“Well, we got our message to the people.” “So I am happy I made the step and went back to school.”
Suitable title	introduces the piece; fits just right—not too broad or too narrow; catches the readers’ interest.	“Silence and Noise” “My Summer”
Correct punctuation	makes the meaning clear; makes it easy to read; lets the reader concentrate on the meaning instead of trying to figure out what is being said.	“I am tired. I get tired of thinking. I am used to working. Can I borrow your thinking cap?”

What to look for	What to say	Examples from learners
Humour	makes the reader laugh.	“I am tired. I get tired of thinking. I am used to working. Can I borrow your thinking cap?”
Repetition	<p>makes the point stronger;</p> <p>A variation in the repetition prevents boredom.</p> <p>If the reader was not paying attention the first time, the repetition gives a second chance to get the information.</p> <p>Shakespeare often repeated the important things three times, first in ordinary language, then in more poetic language, then in a rhymed couplet.</p>	<p>“Sometimes I wish it would take one day at school and then I would be out there with the working people making money! money! money!”</p> <p>“The room was full of people. She went white. The dentist was in a coffin. The lady said, ‘You went white.’”</p>
Variation of sentence length	calls attention to the point made in the sentence that is different; for example, in a series of sentences that are long, long, long, short, the attention is focused where the rhythm changes, and that should be where the important point appears. appeals to the ear.	“When I woke up this morning I felt lazy. I wanted to stay home and hang out with my animals and my kids. I dozed off until my phone buzzed with a message from my boss. “You’re fired.” I guess I was late one time too often.
Use of conversation	brings the reader on the scene;	And then I heard the kids scream out loud, “What is that, Dad?”

What to look for	What to say	Examples from learners
	<p>may slow down the action so reader has time to be aware of what's happening;</p> <p>provides a break for the eye;</p> <p>appeals to the ear;</p> <p>provides a change of voice from the writer's voice.</p>	
Appeals to the heart	<p>make the reader want to be on the writer's side;</p> <p>use emotionally charged imagery and ideas.</p>	<p>"This time of year is really hard for some people because they can't be with their loved ones for one reason or another. These people can feel lost and all alone at this time of year, which is sad."</p>
Questions	<p>provide a change of rhythm;</p> <p>ask the reader to think.</p>	<p>"For my medicine wheel this is the way I look at it. Am I living in balance?"</p>
Smooth transitions	<p>guide the reader through the piece;</p> <p>prepare the reader for changes in thought or emotion;</p> <p>can emphasize points being made.</p>	<p>"When we got home ..."</p> <p>"In the next room..."</p> <p>"On the other hand..."</p>
Quotations from an authority	<p>back up the writer's point;</p> <p>bring a different voice into the piece.</p>	<p>"I wasn't sure what to do, but the doctor said, 'Take her to the emergency ward.'"</p>

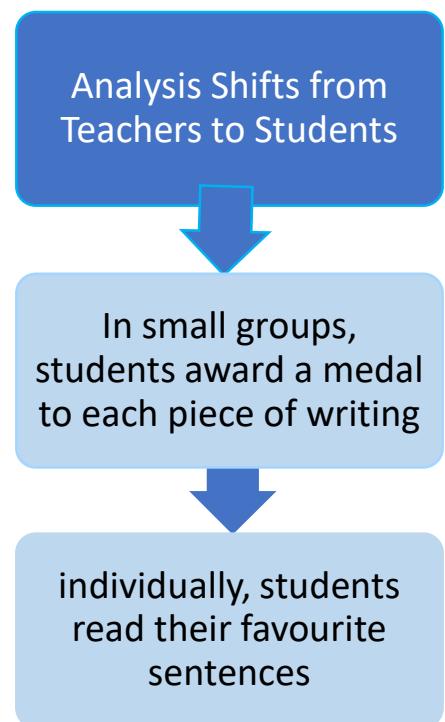
What to look for	What to say	Examples from learners
Appeals to the head	make the reader agree intellectually with what is being said; use rational argument.	"I feel that animals have to leave the big city so they could be free from the pollution. I feel all animals should not live in the big city with all the bad pollution. They're all safer in the woods."

Part 3: Awarding the Medals

In this phase, *the onus on giving specific feedback shifts from the teacher to the students*. Although I am no longer giving that immediate feedback in front of the whole class, I take the opportunity to do it in private; while the students are writing, and when they proofread it with me before they hand it in, I comment on the things I like, just as I did in front of the class in Part 1.

Students write and their writing is prepared for the writing group, as before. The first student reads their piece aloud, as before. *With no comment on the writing*, the teacher divides the students into groups of four, and asks each group to be a panel of judges. They must agree to jointly award one medal to every piece of writing that is brought to the writing group.

Their instructions: "Your group is a panel of judges. You must give one medal to this piece of writing. You can give a medal for a good beginning, a good ending, good organization or good details. Your group must agree on which medal to give. You can only give one medal.



“When you have decided on which medal to give, each of you can pick your favourite sentence. You do not have to agree on the favourite sentence.”

Students go to work as a panel of judges

As I circulate while the panels of judges are working, I hear the kind of comments I previously gave during the writing group. (E.g., “I think we should give the medal for a good ending. It surprised me and made me think.”) It does not matter what medal gets awarded by any group. The purpose of the group work is to get students analyzing and talking about writing. If there is a lively discussion in a small group, I count that as a success.

The panels of judges report back

Each panel of judges reports back to the whole group, and I keep a running tally of all the medals awarded. Occasionally I ask the group to say why they made the award, especially if I know they have had a good discussion. If several panels of judges made the same reward, I might take a minute to look at the piece again. “Oh, so many medals for the ending of this piece. Let’s look at it again to see why so many judges thought it deserved a medal.”

Individual favourite sentences

After every panel of judges has reported the medal they gave, I ask each student to read their favourite sentence aloud. The reading of individual favourite sentences continues to be important. It makes sure that every student has to make an individual assessment of what is good, even if they don’t partake very much in the medal-giving discussion, or can’t make their choice prevail. Sometimes a student with strong opinions finds that others in the group will not agree with her. She wants to give the medal for the beginning, but all the other students think the ending is the best thing about the piece. So she goes along with the small group about the medal, but reads the first sentence as her favourite sentence in the large group, perhaps adding her reasons at that time.

The process is repeated with the next student’s writing.