

Using Writing Contests to Prepare Students for State Writing Tests

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Danielle DeFauw (University of Michigan/ Dearborn) acknowledges the need to prepare students for cold writing prompts in state assessments, despite the fact that students usually get to select their own topic when they write in school. DeFauw suggests a way to “teach to the test” that really helps students: submitting their work to writing contests. Entering a writing contest, she says, shares three characteristics with writing in a state test: (a) they have to respond to a prompt; (b) the audience is distant and unknown; and (c) it’s about competition, evaluation, and perhaps enjoyment. Here is her recommended procedure for 2-5 days of writing workshops:

- *Stage 1: Genre exploration* – The class reads winning contest entries together, using them as mentor texts.
- *Stage 2: Modeling* – The teacher chooses a contest prompt, reads the guidelines, rules, and rubric, selects a personal topic, and thinks aloud as he or she responds to the prompt.
- *Stage 3: Students write* – The teacher provides students with a writing contest prompt and has them apply what they have learned about writing to produce a draft, self-evaluate based on the contest guidelines and rubric, and decide whether to submit their work.
- *Stage 4: Sharing and feedback* – Students read each other’s writing with a partner, in a small group, or to the whole class, and the teacher then collects and gives students feedback on the writing.

DeFauw concludes by recommending ten websites that have no-fee writing contests or publishing opportunities (many of them post winning and exemplary entries):

- *Creative Communication: A Celebration of Today’s Writers* for grades 3-12, essays up to 300 words, deadlines in February, August, and October: www.poeticpower.com
- *The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration* for grades 4-8 – Students interview family members about events that happened before the student was born, 275-500 words by February 1st each year: www.thegrannieannie.org
- *The Legacy Project’s Listen to a Life Contest* for students 8-18 years old writing about an interview with a person who is 50 or older about his or her life experiences, dreams, goals, challenges, or successes: www.tcpnow.com/contests/winners.html
- *Letters About Literature*, Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, for grades 4-10 writing personal letters to an author, living or dead, whose work has influenced their view of the world or of themselves: www.lettersaboutliterature.org

- *Magic Dragon* from the Association for Encouragement of Children's Creativity for elementary students; not a contest, but poems, stories, essays, or artwork on any topic may be published: www.magicdragonmagazine.com
- *Optimist Club* for students under 19 by the end of February, 700-800 words, sharing an opinion through persuasive, explanatory, or narrative prose in response to a prompt: www.optimist.org/e/member/scholarships3.cfm
- *PBS Kids Writers Contest* for K-3 students, a story with at least five illustrations, 50-200 words for K-1 and 100-350 words for 2-3: <http://pbskids.org/writerscontest/contest.php>
- *Scholastic* has multiple contests through the website and magazines (*Scope* and *Storyworks*): <http://clubs2.scholastic.com/programs>
- *The Writing Conference* has a January deadline and welcomes all students to write in narrative, poetic, or expository genres to a specific prompt: www.writingconference.com/contest.htm
- *Young Voices Foundation: Mentoring Young Writers* has an annual poetry contest and three themed fiction/nonfiction contests for K-2, 3-6, and 7-12: www.youngvoicesfoundation.org/youngvoiceshome.html

“10 Writing Opportunities to ‘Teach to the Test’” by Danielle DeFauw in *The Reading Teacher*, April 2013 (Vol. 66, #7, p. 569-573), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.1161/abstract>; the author can be reached at daniellp@umd.umich.edu.