

## WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

*Tapping the Writer Within* is an essential guide to restoring joy and purpose in the writing classroom. I couldn't imagine a timelier resource: In this rapidly transforming literacy climate, as AI models churn out impeccably organized essays in a heartbeat, this book reminded me that the only reason children will need to write themselves is if they **want** to—if writing is an actively delightful, playful experience. Cultivating joy in the writing classroom is therefore not “icing on the cake” but the most foundational element of all. Fletcher offers tools, prompts, and systems that empower children to “feel in the marrow of their bones” that they are writers from the inside out and to always remember that they have beautiful, important ideas to contribute to our world. This deeply moving, often funny, practical book belongs in every classroom.

**Lily Howard Scott**, author of *The Words That Shape Us*

For the past thirty years, Ralph Fletcher has been helping me teach writing. In *Tapping the Writer Within: Practical Ways to Help All Students Claim Their Wri-dentity*, he gives writing teachers the inspiration and practical classroom advice they need. His focus on wri-dentity reminds us of the power of positioning students as writers, and he helps us see how to put writers at the center of the writing classroom. Through it all, Ralph's personal stories and classroom strategies feel like, once again, a friend and colleague is helping me teach writing.

**Beth Rimer**, Ohio Writing Project Director,  
Miami University

As Ralph Fletcher always does, he has written a book for teachers that regrounds us and reminds us what is most important in the teaching of writing. By exploring writer identity as a key to supporting writers, he helps us see what is possible when we commit to seeing each and every child as a writer, so that they can begin to see themselves as writers.

**Franki Sibberson**, literacy consultant and author of  
*Classroom Design for Student Agency* (NCTE, 2023) and  
*In Community with Readers* (Stenhouse, 2024)

*Tapping the Writer Within: Practical Ways to Help All Students Claim Their Wri-dentity* by Ralph Fletcher validates my own identity and core beliefs as a writing teacher. He prioritizes knowing students, celebrating productive struggle, balancing support with challenge, and keeping authenticity at the center of their writing lives. With his unwavering commitment to all students seeing themselves as writers, Ralph shines a light on the importance of writing and provides powerful, practical ideas for building students' competence, confidence, and worth.

**Melanie Meehan**, founder of The Writing Clinic,  
co-author of *Foundational Skills for Writing*,  
and former curriculum specialist

Ralph Fletcher's work has shaped the way I think about writing, and this book will do so again. His insights into helping students discover their wri-dentity remind me why I love teaching writing. This is a must-read for teachers who want to help students see themselves as lifelong writers.

**Sara Pommarane**, Distinguished Teacher in Residence,  
University of Wyoming

Cut through curriculum clutter with Ralph Fletcher's simple, joyful practices for building classrooms where children become writers for life. Ralph blends his stories, sample drafts, and trusted expertise with a chorus of wise educator and student voices telling us what kids need to be skilled, confident, and especially, happy to write.

**Katherine Bomer**, literacy consultant and author of  
*The Journey Is Everything: Teaching Essays  
That Students Want to Write for People  
Who Want to Read Them* (Heinemann)

Ralph Fletcher, one of the most trusted voices in the teaching of writing, centers the essential role of developing an identity as a writer. *Tapping the Writer Within* is a thoughtful, specific, and practical guide for helping students develop their wri-dentity and igniting a lifelong passion for writing.

**Lester Laminack**, author and consultant

# Tapping the Writer Within



# Tapping the Writer Within

Practical Ways to Help All Students  
Claim Their Wri-dentity

Ralph Fletcher

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# Contents



Foreword	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
About the Author	xix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Chapter 1. Wri-Dentity: What It Is and Why It Matters</b>	<b>5</b>
<hr/>	
On Writing Identity	7
Why Wri-dentity Matters	9
Building Wri-dentity in the Classroom	10
<b>Chapter 2. Establish Regular Routines</b>	<b>13</b>
<hr/>	
Time	14
Establishing Space and Structure in the Writing Classroom	17
<b>Chapter 3. Create a Writing Community</b>	<b>21</b>
<hr/>	
The Power of the Group	23
Healing a Rift in the Classroom Community	24
Fostering Helpful Peer Response to Student Writing	25
The Place for Rituals	26

<b>Chapter 4. Build a Common Language</b>	<b>31</b>
Language About Writing Invented by Students	35
Envisioning Language	36
<b>Chapter 5. Nurture Our Own Wri-dentity</b>	<b>39</b>
Claiming Our Own Wri-dentity	42
Sharing Our Wri-dentity in the Classroom	43
<b>Chapter 6. Promote Pleasure</b>	<b>47</b>
Pleasures Large and Small	52
<b>Chapter 7. Give Voice to Choice</b>	<b>55</b>
Challenges to Choice in Today's Classroom	57
<b>Chapter 8. Confer With Students One-to-One</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Chapter 9. Use Mentor Texts to Build Vision</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Chapter 10. Turn Up the Volume</b>	<b>79</b>
On Writing Practice	81
Quantity Matters	83
<b>Chapter 11. Connect Them to an Audience</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Chapter 12. Give "Never-Writers" a Fresh Start</b>	<b>97</b>
Meet the Never-Writer	99
<b>Chapter 13. Let Them Mess Around and Play</b>	<b>109</b>
Greenbelt Writing	114

<b>Chapter 14. Invite Reflection</b>	<b>119</b>
When and How to Invite Reflection	120
Encourage Reflection That's Honest	124
<b>Chapter 15. Lingering Thoughts About Building Wri-dentity</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>137</b>



# Foreword



As a writing consultant, I spend a lot of time in early childhood classrooms, and I often launch book making right at the beginning of the year. On these days, it always strikes me how easy it seems for young children to build a writing identity. All it takes is to give children prestapled books and markers and let them have at it. Children move quickly from “I can’t write” to “I guess I *can* write” to “I’m a writer.” But even though it looks easy for children to build a writing identity, it’s actually the result of the very specific decisions teachers make. Teachers who create writers

- believe children can write, even before they believe it themselves.
- honor their approximations of words and illustrations and are comfortable with them doing it the best they can.
- allow them to have ownership of what to write.
- show them how writing is fun, joyful, and playful.
- see beyond what’s on the page and respond with wonderment and awe to children’s incredible thinking.
- understand that writing includes composition, not only phonics and spelling.
- make writing easy and achievable.

It also strikes me that there are similar factors that impact adults’ writing identities. For example, I’m not a very confident writer, something that surprised Ralph when we started talking about some of the ideas in this book. (Amazingly, he still asked me to write this foreword).

But while I'm not very confident, I do have a writing identity. I write frequently, on a regular basis, and I see myself as a writer.

So how did I develop this identity despite doubting my skill as a writer? I can point to similar factors that impact four and five year olds. I was fortunate to have editors like Kate Montgomery and Zoe Ryder White and a friend like Katie Wood Ray who nurtured me as a writer, in much the same way teachers support their students. These mentors

- saw me as a writer, even before I did.
- nurtured my emerging identity by noticing my strengths as a writer.
- built my strengths with small nudges forward, careful to not overwhelm and hinder my emerging identity.
- supported me in becoming a better writer incrementally, bit by bit over time.
- honored my approximations of writing.
- valued my ideas and composition, beyond my ability to write in a conventionally correct way.

And I had mentors in the form of professional books and authors who provided a pathway for me to envision what I wanted to do. I had mentors like Ralph Fletcher, whose books supported me as a teacher and principal, but even more so as an author.

Ralph realizes that the factors that impact writing identity—or, as Ralph calls it, *wri-identity*—hold true for anyone, adult or child. He knows how important it is for children to develop strong writing identities. Identities that make children eager to write about personally important topics. Identities that make children eager to share their writing. Identities reinforced by engagement that makes them more skillful and improves the quality of their writing.

Ralph also knows how easy it is for children to lose their writing identity. The big and small decisions teachers make over time either support or diminish children's identities. That's what makes this book so important.

Wri-identity is especially important given the educational environment today, in which more and more students encounter writing programs

that needlessly crush their writing identities. Programs that never let students choose their topic or genre. Programs that don't allow students to write authentic pieces, in which their teacher is their only audience. Programs that rely on misguided, one-size-fits-all instruction that assumes all students need the same thing, same day, same time.

Ralph shows us how to counter this unfortunate trend. Throughout *Tapping the Writer Within*, Ralph shows us how to nurture children's identities, in big and small ways, regardless of the structure of the writing program or approach to writing. Every teacher will find ideas they can use in their class right away.

Further, Ralph implores us to back up our beliefs about identity with actions. As Ralph says in Chapter 6, "Sometimes you need to take a stand. Sometimes you have to close your door and do what you know is right." We have to take Ralph's advice. He's not saying to ignore curriculum and standards or jeopardize your job, but he is saying that we have to balance what we might be required to do with what we know about how children learn.

To help us do this, throughout the book, Ralph shares specific examples from teachers who are doing this work every day. Ralph has interviewed teachers from a wide variety of contexts who all value the importance of supporting children's identities. It provides us with a sense of a community of teachers who are in this together. If they can do it, we can too.

Ralph brings his extensive expertise and a unique perspective to thinking about identity. He writes from his experience as a writing consultant and author of professional development books and as the author of picture books, poetry, and novels for children. The immense volume of beautiful writing Ralph has created allows him to share ideas that he has used with children and that have also impacted him.

Ralph shows us the role of published mentor texts in supporting writing identities, and he also emphasizes the importance of writing ourselves. It's difficult to support writing identities if we don't have that identity ourselves. Ralph also shares his own formative, playful writing that demonstrates how easy this can be. Importantly, he gives us permission to be comfortable with our own approximations as writers. Ralph says, "Think of yourself as an *imperfect mentor* for the young writers in your

class. It may seem counterintuitive but it's true: it's your imperfection that make it possible for them to learn from you" (Chapter 9).

Ralph shares too many powerful strategies to name here, but I do need to call out one more. The title of Chapter 13 says it all: Let Them Mess Around and Play. Writing can be messy, something children don't always see or understand. They see beautiful, funny, clever writing and think it just came out that way. They don't realize how much authors tinker and revise and, well, . . . play. Ralph advocates for an immediate release of control, so that children are so eager to write they jump in and give it a try.

In their essay in *The Teacher You Want to Be*, Peter Johnston and Gay Ivey start by noting that, "When lists of 'standards' for schools are made, nobody seems concerned that happiness is not on the list" (Glover & Keene, 2015, p. 51). They make the case that student well-being has an impact on learning. What would happen if there was a standard that said, "Children will enjoy reading"? If it was valued and measured, it would certainly impact what occurs in classrooms.

Ralph makes the same case for writing identity. How would schools change if we valued and measured writing identity? What would happen to students and their writing if we prioritized identity, engagement, and confidence? What if we used identity as the foundation for supporting more skilled, accomplished writers? Fortunately, Ralph isn't waiting for standards to change. By following Ralph's wise lead, we can impact the children we work with, as well as start conversations that impact broader, schoolwide change. We can help our students see themselves as—and truly become—writers.

If we value children's writing identity, then we must support it. As teachers we need support as well; *Tapping the Writer Within* is exactly what we need.

Matt Glover  
Author and Literacy Consultant

# Acknowledgments



“Jordan Peele has a new movie,” a friend says. Impressive! But when you see the film, and watch the credits, you realize that hundreds of other people were involved in creating it. The Jordan Peeles and Greta Gerwigs of the world, however talented they might be, can’t do it alone. And the same principle holds true here. I may be the author of this book, but many other people contributed their time, efforts, and wisdom. Without their help, this book wouldn’t exist, period.

I conversed with many educators: Katherine Bomer, Colleen Cruz, Donna Santman, Lynne Dorfman, Angela Faulhaber, Georgia Heard, Martha Horn, Peter Johnston, Ellin Keene, Barry Lane, Melanie Meehan, Tom Newkirk, Katie Wood Ray, Stacey Shubitz, Jeff Wilhelm, and Alan J. Wright. Thank you, guys! I respect you so much. Our back-and-forth dialogues helped me shape and reshape my thinking.

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# About the Author

---



**Ralph Fletcher's** books for young readers include *Fig Pudding*, *Flying Solo*, *Marshfield Dreams: When I Was a Kid*, and *The Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within*. Ralph has published many books for writing teachers including *Joy Write: Cultivating High-Impact Low-Stakes Writing*, *What a Writer Needs*, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*, and *Focus Lessons: How Photography Enhances the Teaching of Writing*.

Ralph believes in student choice, authentic voice, and writing as a form of self-discovery. He frequently visits schools and speaks at educational conferences around the world, helping teachers find wiser ways of teaching writing. [www.ralphfletcherbooks.com](http://www.ralphfletcherbooks.com)



# Introduction

---

I was coaching a fourth-grade soccer team. It was the last game of the season, and we really needed the win. We were down 5–4 with about ten minutes left in the game. I made eye contact with our three best players—Justin, Rachel, and Devon—sitting on the bench. I knew that they knew that I knew they would be absolutely crucial if we were to pull this game out.

I put them into the game. Two minutes later, Rachel streaked down the right side and tied the score.

We had another player, Abby, sitting on the bench. She had limited skills and, as a result, lacked confidence. Abby was most comfortable playing defense where her limitations wouldn't stick out. But when Devon turned an ankle I needed a healthy player, so I sent Abby in to substitute for him. She gave me a dubious look.

“Really? You want me to play forward?”

“You can do it,” I told her. “Be aggressive.”

A few minutes later we had the ball near the opposing team's goal. Suddenly the ball squirted out and rolled in front of Abby.

“Shoot!” I yelled. “Shoot!”

Abby raced in and took the shot. The ball hit the near post and bounced aside. We lost the game 6–5. Afterward Abby came over to me. She looked dazed.

“I almost scored,” she murmured. “Did you see that? I almost scored!”

“You came that close!” I agreed.

As she looked up, I saw her expression change.

“That was really cool,” she told me. “You know, I should have played on offense more. I wish I had.”

I still think about Abby. She wasn’t a strong player. She didn’t see herself as a soccer player and, to be honest, neither did I. She seemed like a kid who was content to wear the uniform and otherwise stay in the background. But look what nearly happened when she got the chance to play offense! I realize now that I sold that kid short. I should have believed in her. She might have resisted, but I should have pushed her, at least a little, to discover what she had to offer.

A few years later, I visited a fifth-grade classroom in the Bronx, New York. I had never met the teacher before. She greeted me when I walked in and touched three students on their shoulders.

“These are my writers—one, two, three,” she said. “The rest of them are strictly average. Not a superstar in the group.”

Ouch. That moment will haunt me forever. It must have been empowering for the three kids whose shoulders she touched, the ones she endowed with heightened status by declaring them writers. How nice is that! But what about the other kids? How must they have felt? What was their pathway to claiming that identity?

Seeing yourself as a soccer player shouldn’t be reserved for the very best players on the team. And being declared a writer shouldn’t be a special gift bestowed on a lucky few, either. I say spread the wealth. I’m channeling Oprah Winfrey: Everybody gets a juicer! Everybody’s a writer!

Unfortunately, we’re miles away from that. I feel for kids in today’s writing classrooms. Even in elementary school where students are having their first encounters with writing, the writing I see is mostly academic: essays, compare-and-contrast, argument speech. What about real-life genres that most kids actually like to read? What about fairy tales and fantasy? How about fiction and poetry? Those players, the writers who might love those genres, have to sit on the bench. They’ll be lucky if they ever get into the game.

The writing kids produce in school has very little connection to the writing we see, read, and value in the world at large. According to the National

Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Position Statement on Writing Instruction in School (2022), “The ubiquity of standardized assessments, including high-stakes standardized assessments, perpetuate a limited view of composition. . . . Writing instruction often mirrors test preparation, with students filling in templates and following formulas rather than making important and intentional decisions about writing for authentic audiences and purposes.”

How can children find their stride as writers if almost all they do is academic writing? An unrelenting diet of academic writing works against the goal of this book, which is to ignite passion in our students so they see themselves as writers.

I feel for writing teachers, too. Many teachers acknowledge that they don’t feel confident about teaching writing. Most never took a preservice course on how to teach writing. In many districts, teachers are given a program and instructed to use it with fidelity. In other words, follow the script. There’s little wiggle room, little chance to personalize it, to make it their own. At the same time, writing teachers must somehow juggle and satisfy a bewildering number of standards, competencies, benchmarks, district goals, and so on.

In his iconic trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, JRR Tolkien conceived of “one ring to rule them all.” That got me thinking. What if there was one overarching goal in the writing classroom? One goal to rule them all, one goal to contain all the others?



# Wri-Dentity

# 1

## What It Is and Why It Matters

---

Nurturing the writing identity of students must remain at the forefront of teachers' words and actions every time we enter the classroom.

—Alan J. Wright, literacy coach

My grandson Solomon, age five, wanted me to read to him.

“Can we read that book about when you were growing up?” he asked.

“You mean *Marshfield Dreams*?”

“The one with the kid who always has to sleep under the kitchen table,” he said.

“Oh, you mean *Fig Pudding*! Sure, but that’s a chapter book.”

“That’s fine. Mom and Dad read lots of chapter books to me.”

So we climbed on top of the bed, and I started reading *Fig Pudding*. Solomon giggled, enjoying the antics of the Abernathys, a family loosely based on my birth family. Afterward, Solomon stayed upstairs to read on his own while I went down to have lunch. I was eating a sandwich with his mother, Jess, when he came down to join us at the table.

“When Grandpa dies,” Solomon announced, “I’m going to write a book about my childhood.”

I half-choked on my grilled cheese sandwich.

“Wait—what?”

Jess chuckled and looked at Solomon. “You don’t have to wait til Grandpa dies. You can write it right now!”

“Really?”

“Sure!”

So Solomon sat down to write. (See Photo 1.1.)



**Photo 1.1**  
Solomon writing  
the story of his  
childhood.

At one point, Solomon wanted to write the word *show* but wasn’t sure how to make the *sh* sound.

“When you put S and H together it makes the *shhhhh* sound,” I told him. (Note that he reversed the letters when he wrote them in his story.)

Solomon and I had a couple of impromptu writing conferences while he worked on his book. He had noticed that *Fig Pudding* was broken into chapters, each with its own title.

“When I’m done,” he told me, “I’m going to go back and make a title for each chapter.”

“Interesting. What title do you think you’ll use for the first chapter?”

He thought for a moment before declaring, “Beetlejuice!”

That made me smile. Beetlejuice is a wonderful word, for sure, even if it seemed totally random. It struck me that Solomon didn’t yet grasp the idea that the title of a particular chapter should be aligned with the contents of that chapter.

Solomon worked on his book for nearly an hour and borrowed a few text features from *Fig Pudding*. He noticed that in my book I had used a series of three asterisks as section breaks, and he did the same thing in his book. Later, Jess shared her perspective on her son’s writing experience.

“I think Solomon was really struck by the fact that you had turned stories from when you were a kid—the kind of stories our family tells each other out loud when we’re just hanging out together—into a real book,” Jess said. “He already knew you were an author, but I think that reading *Fig Pudding* with you and knowing that he’d met some of the people in the stories made the possibility of being an author seem real and present. It’s not just something that grownups can do because he already can tell the same kind of stories as you did in your book.”

Later that day Solomon proudly read his book to me. When he finished, he beamed a big smile.

“I can be an author even when I’m just a kid.”

Solomon was playing with a powerful idea: his identity as a writer. He hadn’t claimed it yet, not quite, but he was trying it on for size.

## On Writing Identity

In this book, I have combined the words *writing* and *identity* to create a new term: *wri-dentity*. It means *seeing oneself as a writer*.

In recent years, *identity* has become a charged word, one often used with extreme care and even caution: *How does he identify?* Or, *What was the role of identity politics in the election?*

This book doesn’t deal with identity in the cultural, social, or political sense of the word. Rather, I intend to explore identity in the most practical sense. In this book, *identity* refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of a group. *I’m a surfer. I’m a knitter. I’m a brother.*

At its core identity is about belonging, and humans take great pleasure in joining one group or another. If you happen to be in Boston and stroll around the TD Garden arena before a Celtics game, you’ll get swallowed by a sea of green. Everybody is wearing Celtics merchandise: hats, sweatshirts, jackets. I saw one guy wearing a T-shirt that proudly proclaimed I BLEED GREEN. Those fans are part of a club, eager to celebrate that sense of belonging and to connect with others who feel the same way.



In this book, I have combined the words *writing* and *identity* to create a new term: *wri-dentity*. It means *seeing oneself as a writer*.

Wearing swag for a favorite sports team or beloved rock star is one way to express your identity, but those external indicators only take you so far. Consider the world of photography. You can buy Sony’s top-of-the-line camera with all the accessories—a telephoto lens, gimbal head, tripod, flash unit, plus a ThinkTank backpack to carry it all. All that gear may impress your friends, but it doesn’t make you a photographer.

The same holds true for writing. A teacher could purchase an I AM AN AUTHOR! T-shirt for every student in class. That might create wonderful group photo, but thirty kids all wearing I AM AN AUTHOR! T-shirt doesn’t make them authors or writers.

Turns out there’s no shortcut for creating wri-dentity.

Turns out wri-dentity must be developed from the inside out.

Before I prove to you that I’m a writer, I must prove it to myself.

Carl Anderson, author of *How to Become a Better Writing Teacher* (Anderson & Glover, 2023) and *Teaching Fantasy Writing* (Anderson, 2024), learned this lesson the hard way when he tried to impose writing identity on his eighth-grade students.

“At the beginning of the year I told every one of my classes that they would all be writers,” Carl says ruefully. “Throughout the year, kids continued to poke fun at my declaration. One boy drew a caricature of me pointing at the class, saying, ‘You are all writers.’ My favorite student, Jasmine, wrote a poem that describes a lovely daydream she was having, one that shatters when I suddenly appear saying, ‘You will all be writers in my class.’ Those eighth graders made it clear that their identities were up to them and weren’t going to be shaped by decree by their well-intentioned but misguided teacher!”

This may seem obvious—of course we want our students to see themselves as readers and writers. But schools haven’t done a great job of helping students see themselves as writers. Several studies have shown that students don’t enjoy writing (National Literacy Trust, 2024). And the aversion to writing doesn’t end when they graduate. Kids bring their negative feelings about writing into adulthood. If you tell a group of adults, “Raise your hand if you are a reader,” most hands will go up. But if you tell the same group of adults, “Now raise your hand if you are a writer,” only

a few people will raise their hands. Most people don't identify as writers, even though we use writing in many different ways.

Some literacy experts argue that the way writing is taught in school prevents kids from identifying as a writer.

"In too many classrooms children simply do not get the opportunity to write," says Tasha Laman, author of *From Ideas to Words* (2013). "And when they do write, they are prescribed a topic or prompt. There are still too many 'one and done' writing activities. These kinds of controlled writing situations send a clear identity message to students: *Writing is hard; you don't have anything worthy to write, so I will tell you what to write.*"

Wri-dentity is powerful, even transformational, but it is also fragile. Getting vaccinated for diphtheria when you're young will protect you from the disease for the rest of your life. But wri-dentity doesn't work that way. Students can see themselves as writers one year, but that wri-dentity can disappear the next.

In mid-October, I visited a school in Queens, New York, where I had worked as a writing consultant the previous year, doing demonstration teaching in writing instruction. A student called out to me:

"Mr. Fletcher! Mr. Fletcher!"

I stopped to peer at him. His figure made a silhouette against the bright light from the far window, and it took me a few moments to clearly see him: a slender boy with curly hair. I searched my memory but still couldn't place him. The boy took a few steps toward me.

"Carlos, from last year," he said, giving me a searching look. "Don't you remember? I was an author last year."

## Why Wri-dentity Matters

Wri-dentity is an inside-out belief in yourself: *I'm a writer*. And it's not just a pretty notion—wri-dentity grounds students, gives them a firm foundation, creates a durable context for learning. Students who identify as writers are kids who have written a lot. They have created texts for a variety of purposes. These writing experiences help them build the flexible thinking that will be essential when faced with new writing challenges.

Writing great Don Murray said, “I don’t teach students to write. I teach them how to reread their drafts.” Kids with robust wri-dentity know their strengths (*I’m good at coming up with exciting plots*) as well as what they struggle with (*My stories can get confusing*). This helps them to be thoughtful and strategic as they reread their work and decide whether and how to revise it.

Kids with abundant wri-dentity aren’t naïve. They understand that writing isn’t easy. Sometimes it’s a royal pain in the butt. Frustration and failure are part of the deal. Those kids know from experience that there will be good days and bad days when they write, but they have the grit and persistence to persevere when the writing is difficult.

### Building Wri-dentity in the Classroom

This book is based on the philosophy of constructivism—Piaget’s seminal idea that knowledge is socially constructed through experience. First and foremost, students will claim their wri-dentity by writing and by living in a community of writers.

“I can say I have an identity of myself as a marathon runner,” says Matt Glover, author of *How to Become a Better Writing Teacher* (Anderson & Glover, 2023). “But to actually have that identity I have to get out and run some marathons. In order for students to have an identity as a writer, they need to write a lot.”

This doesn’t happen automatically. A writing teacher can play a pivotal role. And although teachers can’t guarantee that every student will see themselves as writers, we can provide conditions that will make it more likely for this to happen.

“Children’s writing identities will either thrive or fail to bloom according to what happens with the writing experiences encountered in the classroom,” says Alan J. Wright, Australian-based literacy consultant and writer.

In this book, we’ll look at practical steps teachers can take to build wri-dentity in the classroom. We’re going to get granular and specific about exactly how to do that, but before we do, I’d like to put forth a few broad principles of wri-dentity:

- **Abundance.** The belief that *I am a writer* shouldn’t be limited to a chosen few. Every student must be included.

- **Quantity.** Finding your stride as a writer involves a great deal of writing. Every writing teacher wants to see quality writing, but it turns out that quantity—volume—is a prerequisite.
- **Pleasure.** Kids will develop their wri-dentity if they experience the pleasure of writing. It's got to be fun, at least some of the time.
- **Diversity.** We tap the strength of any community when we tap its diversity. Each writer in your classroom is different; consequently, we must embrace the notion that every student's wri-dentity will be unique. And we have to roll out the red carpet for the "funds of knowledge" that every child brings into the classroom.

A student's wri-dentity is not some obscure trait but an integral part of their overall identity (i.e., their sense of who they are, how they think, how they learn, their place in the world). In their book *Writing for Pleasure*, Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson (2021b) put it like this: "Through writing and being a writer, children say, 'Hey world, here I am. This is me. This is what I think, feel, know, imagine and want to share with you'" (p. 163).

Claiming wri-dentity involves a transformation that's internal, not external. It happens when students feel it in the marrow of their bones: *I'm a writer.*

