

# AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK DIAMOND: HELPING WRITERS

Originally published at Education News' website in October, 2008

## 1. What is "Writing to Command Attention!" all about?

Ten years ago, I left public education to develop **WRITING TO COMMAND ATTENTION! WORKSHOPS**, out of frustration with the twin bureaucracies (school systems and ed publishers) that provided teachers and students with ineffective and inefficient writing instruction. As a lifelong professional writer, I was furious to find that educators who were required to teach writing were inundated – actually overwhelmed – with lengthy, boring and ineffective strategies and texts from the educational publishing giants. I witnessed the editor of one of them actually espouse their philosophy of curriculum materials adoption: "Whatever publisher offers the tallest pile of \*\*\*\* wins." After hearing that, I decided that my philosophy of writing instruction would be "Less is more." Tips, tricks, secrets and shortcuts. Cutting through the hedges, instead of going all the way around the block.

Writing to Command Attention! Workshops present a collection of original methods I developed over ten years while serving as a creative writing specialist at an at-risk public school – with no curriculum. These methods feature maximum bang for the buck in the genres of narrative, persuasive and informational writing. In other words, I stress writing elements that are bound to make a major difference in catching and commanding the reader's attention. I've created these easy and effective methods by deconstructing superlative writing examples from our finest contemporary magazine, newspaper and literature writers, and then building the methods up from the ground.

**The goal of my workshops: To provide teachers with the tools and confidence to be enthusiastic and effective teachers of writing, without burdensome planning and assessment.**

As it so happens, teachers and principals alike claim that these methods also dramatically raise their schools' writing assessment scores.

## 2. What are some tricks to "Persuasive writing success" and why do students need to write persuasively?

More than people of any age, kids *want* things. Sometimes they want to *get* something. Other times they want to *get out* of doing something. Sometimes they want *you* to do something, or want you to *stop* doing something. Either way, they are usually much too demanding in the way they express themselves. And although persuasive writing is presented as a verbal boxing match, I propose that the best examples of the genre promote a win-win situation for both the writer and recipient or intended audience, in which the one being persuaded is convinced that the writer has explored and rebutted most possible issues/objections.

### 3. What do you mean by “narrative writing”?

Narrative writing is story writing, either fiction or non-fiction. Most student narratives are so incredibly boring that no one, not even the students themselves (not to mention the teachers), want to read them. That’s because kids usually tell the main happening first, instead of placing that event (which I call the Wow! Moment) at the end of the middle section. Sometimes kids will even state the main happening in the narrative’s title: “The Day My Dog Died.” To command the reader’s interest, we should not hear about the dog dying until the Wow! Moment. Part of the problem is that often, especially in the lower grades, journaling is the predominant form of weekly writing. Think about it: Journaling is ALL middle section, where the main happening occurs, with no beginning or ending sections. So kids get used to spilling the beans at the beginning of their writing, ruining it for us readers. By the way, it’s also the reason many kids write such short pieces – they’ve already told the main thing at the beginning, and have nowhere to go from there.

### 4. What do you mean by “informational writing”?

Informational writing (also called expository writing), is writing to inform. Often, this type of writing takes the shape of reports – book reports, science reports, history reports, etc. Again, most student reports are so flat that most kids HATE writing them, not because they are hard, but because they KNOW they are bad. Weak organization is mostly to blame, so my planning methods produce pieces that place the most stimulating and fascinating information toward the end of the middle section. In informational writing, it’s the HOW! Moment. In persuasive writing, it’s the POW! Moment. Kids also need to be taught to integrate narrative elements into their non-fiction writing to keep it fresh and commanding. Many popular non-fiction books now read like narrative fiction, except that they are absolutely true!

5. Should students be asked to write book reports and at what age?

Book reports can be dictated to older students beginning in Kindergarten. It's never too early for kids to begin forming their responses to what they read, or are read, in properly organized ways that command the reader's attention. They also love hearing their thoughts and sentences read back to them!

6. Should high school students be required to write term papers? Why or why not?

Check back with me if you find out that colleges have stopped assigning term papers. Until then, high school serves as a proving ground for this extended and formally notated type of informational writing, in which the elements of research, analysis, organization and writing are fully synthesized.

7. Have you done any research to show your programs effectiveness?

The effectiveness of my workshops and 6 Tricks writing instruction guides (*6 Tricks to Student NARRATIVE Writing Success*, *6 Tricks to Student PERSUASIVE Writing Success*, *6 Tricks to Student INFORMATIONAL Writing Success*, and *6 Tricks to Student WRITER'S ORIGAMI Success*) has been validated in testimonial after testimonial from classroom teachers who now enjoy teaching writing for the first time in their careers, as well as in classrooms of students who actually look forward to writing time because their pieces sound more and more like the books they read from the media center. Principals credit my workshops and these easy methods with dramatic improvement in their school's performance on state writing assessments. Many schools and school districts have adopted my methods due to their ease and effectiveness.

8. Do you have a web site where people can learn more about your ideas and programs?

Check out [www.anyonecanwrite.com](http://www.anyonecanwrite.com) to learn about my workshops, 6 Tricks Guides, student and teacher writing contests, helpful websites, rubrics and more. Also, be sure to email to receive my monthly e-zine of writing tips, notices and education news briefs that may impact your work and life – EdLine News.

9. Mark, do you do in-services to help teachers and students with their writing problems?

Other than writing one or two guides a year, faculty-training workshops is what I do! On-site, three or five-hour workshops covering writing foundations and narrative, persuasive and informational writing are available, and I currently offer off-site workshops in the Atlanta area, adding locations as interest dictates.

10. I know the remediation of writing is a time consuming, labor intensive endeavor. How do we help teachers with this process?

Despite the materials the big educational publishers put out there, effective writing is not brain surgery, and does NOT take years and years to develop. With the correctly targeted methods, a teacher or student who would normally sit and stare at a sheet of paper can be writing fully formed pieces in two months of instruction or less. Remember, less is more. Cut through the hedges; don't go around the block.

11. What distinguishes your workshops from the other ones out there?

From workshop feedback forms, teachers tell me that Writing to Command Attention! methods are clear, concise and concrete; suitable for any grade level and can be implemented immediately. Others add that due to the inspirational, dynamic, fast-paced and humorous presentation, the day goes by too quickly. Still others can't wait to get back to their classes to utilize the many motivational Writer's Origami models we create during the seminar. Finally, many teachers appreciate the writing they do near the end of the workshop, having fun and gaining confidence as they get a chance to live what their students experience when facing a blank sheet of paper.

Writing to Command Attention!, Anyone Can Write Books, 6 Tricks Guides, Writer's Origami; and Wow! Moment/Line, Pow! Moment/Line and How! Moment/Line are trademarks of Mark Diamond.

## COMMENTS

Comment #1 (Posted by Mickey Goodman) Rating: 5 Stars, top rating

I've heard Mark speak and found him to be lively, informative and interesting. His simple to understand methods make writing fun for students and teachers alike.

Comment #2 (Posted by Beth Richardson) Rating: 5 Stars, top rating

Mark Diamond's approach to writing is nothing short of magical. His techniques are simple, logical, and very powerful. They are easy for teachers to use immediately upon returning to the classroom and even easier for all students (gifted or struggling) to incorporate into their writing. After attending his workshop last year, it became my mission as my school's language arts chair to have every language arts teacher trained in Mr. Diamond's "More Secrets to Student Writing Success." We have already seen great results with our 8th grade Writing Assessment scores, and it will only get better with our vertical alignment (6th through 8th) of Mark Diamond's strategies. I highly recommend his workshops. -Beth Richardson, ELA Dept. Chair Otwell Middle School

Comment #3 (Posted by Cheryl Sarvis) Rating: 5 Stars, top rating

I am very familiar with Mark's workshops. They are excellent and they work! I am a retired Atlanta Public School Principal who had Mark come into my school to teach my teachers how to teach writing to our students. His methods are very practical and easy to use. He has a highly successful and motivating way to simplify the writing process. Our school had a high number of disadvantaged students who hated to write. Mark turned us into a proud faculty and student body when we excelled on the state writing tests. Every teacher should have his workshop as staff development. The teachers raved how great his methods were and what a difference they made in student achievement. Cheryl Sarvis Retired Atlanta Public School Principal

Comment #4 (Posted by Jan Mullis) Rating: 5 Stars, top rating

I was introduced to Mark's techniques last year. My students now feel that they have a "real" tool that is practical and easy to use. The kids love this way of writing and certainly I hated teaching writing as much as the kids hated learning it before implementing this method. Mark's workshop

was informative, engaging, and offered things that I could implement into my classroom the very next day. No recreating the wheel required! As for his new origami book- my students BEG me to do more origami with them. I use it as a reward in addition to using it as an educational tool.

Comment #5 (Posted by Michael L. Hall) Rating: 5 Stars, top rating

A few years ago I began a quest to learn how to teach writing to my students. Although I had many years of teaching experience, I was quite desperate to learn just how to teach writing. Yes, I knew how I was taught and how most textbooks approached writing, but I was not satisfied with my approach and methods. That all changed when I attended Mark's workshop. At the end of the workshop I returned to my school with a passion for teaching and immediately began using his methods and materials. It was pure magic! At the end of the year, I noticed that my writing scores were very good and that I had experienced real success with my students. Since then, I have attended another workshop and have once again returned to my school with a greater respect and appreciation for Mark's methods and materials. I am excited to see so many teachers and students passionate about their writing. Mike Hall, 4th grade teacher, Dawnville Elementary School, Dalton, GA