

Excerpted from: Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: Writing, Reading & Learning with Adolescents*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998. 120-132.

Cynthia Rylant's autobiography *But I'll Be Back Again*, or the short story "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes. And I launch the workshop.

I've initiated writing and reading workshop in many different ways, and I continue to tinker with the first lessons in search of methods that are generative—that help students produce substantive material to begin working with. I also want an introduction that suggests what is possible, in all its depth, breadth, and idiosyncrasy, and one that reveals me to my kids as a writer, reader, and grown-up who knows some things. I hope to construct a foundation that individual writers and readers can build on until June—and maybe for the rest of their lives.

I launch the workshop by exploring my spheres of interest as a writer and reader, out loud in minilessons, then inviting students to identify and lay claim to their own interests, concerns, and areas of expertise. I call these our *territories*. When I present our territories as a writer and reader to my students, I demonstrate, as explicitly as I can, all the ways that writing and reading matter in the life of their English teacher.

Writing Territories

Figure 5-2 shows the latest version of the running list I keep of my territories as a writer. These include subjects I've written about or might like to, genres I've written in or would like to try, and audiences for whom I write or would like to. The list of territories represents my self-portrait as a writer. Because I use it as a model for kids to learn from, I try to make it personal, specific, diverse, and unpretentious: ideas of mine that might generate ideas of theirs.

I reproduce the list on overhead transparencies and talk from it in the first writing minilesson of the school year. Students come to the circle with their new writing-reading handbooks, and we begin. Last fall I started like this:

I'm ready to start. Make sure you can see the overhead from where you're sitting and also write in your new notebooks at the same time. You may want to write in your lap, or you can get a clipboard over here.

To people who are new to the group this year, my students often take notes during minilessons. What you're creating with the notes you take during our time together at the start of class is your own writing-reading handbook. It's a place for both recording information that we create and keeping track of ideas you might want to use in your writing:

dreams, topics, goals, projects, genres, audiences, places you might get

FIGURE 5-2 Ms. Atwell's Writing Territories

Topics:

- My students—what they do and what it means (*In the Middle*, second edition)
- My dog, Books, who died this year at age sixteen
- Anne—all the days and stages
- London—my special place; how I feel when I'm an ocean away from my life
- Adolescent girls and their relationships and dreams
- Toby—twenty-six years of adventures, being together, working things out, plus how we met
- Roman Catholic childhood—fainting at the Communion rail; picking a confirmation name; scapular medals; rosaries as jewelry
- Dreams of Grandma Lang—the comfort I derive from them
- Taking care of Grandpa Lang
- My namesake—Grandma Atwell—and her unhappiness in America
- My mother—the changes in our relationship and in her as she ages
- My father—who I am because of him
- Others' writing (e.g., Maureen Barbieri's book)
- Spring in Buffalo—the only thing I miss about western New York
- Books for teenagers
- Songs that speak to me and for me in pop music; the best play I ever saw in London: *Ferry 'cross the Mersey*
- Adult female friendships versus the friends of my youth
- CTL—its philosophy, history, methods, curriculum
- School business—grant proposals, parent handbook, reports on students, etc.
- Chocolate
- Motherhood
- Snow forts—the more creative collaborations of my childhood
- Making peace with Glenn, my brother, in our forties
- Ice-skating with Mom at Dieners' Pond—her free of her cares for once and figure-eighting backwards like a girl
- Exercise and why I HATE it
- How I read and write and why
- How I teach and why
- Pre-Raphaelite art and why I love it in spite of myself
- Writing
- Reading
- Literature
- Growing up and what that means to me
- My high school reunion—the cool clique was still a clique but not so cool
- Preschool dreams of teachers—the nightmares that begin every August 1

- Responses to American history—people, events, theories

Genres:

- Memoirs
- Book reviews
- Short stories
- Literary criticism
- Poetry
- Gifts of writing
- Essays
- Parodies
- Letters to the editor
- Feature articles
- Research articles
- Letters to Anne at camp, friends, Mom, other relatives, my editor and publisher
- Letters to my students about their reading
- Notes to Ron
- Thank-yous
- speeches
- Documents for my students about writing and reading
- Fan letters
- Sympathy notes
- Reactions to readings and other academic and artistic experiences
- Résumés and vitae
- Grant proposals and reports to foundations
- Guidelines and policy statements for CTL
- Letters of recommendation
- Lists of all sorts
- Lesson plans
- Evaluations of students

Audiences:

- Myself
- Toby
- Anne
- mom
- My students
- Their parents
- Other teachers' students
- My friends
- Women my age
- Adolescent girls
- Niece and nephew
- Sister and brother
- Other relatives
- Ron
- Teachers at CTL
- Teachers in general
- Specific groups of teachers
- Readers of newspapers
- my community
- My elected representatives
- Other officials

- My editor and publisher
 - Foundation officers and trustees
-

published. So it's both a personal notebook and a class notebook. Your first entry in your writing-reading handbook will be personal.

Maybe the most important thing for you to know about me is that I write. I write a lot and for lots of different reasons. I call the things I do as a writer my *territories*. They include genres that I write in or would like to try, subjects I've written about or would like to, and potential or real audiences for my writing.

Before school started this year I revised my profile of myself as a writer. The list of my writing territories appears here on overhead transparencies. This is how I'll ask you to begin your year of writing workshop, by brainstorming your own territories as writers.

My list gives me a window on who I am as a writer, person, woman, teacher, learner, mother, wife, and daughter. It also gives me a place to go when I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to write about next. It's my ideas bank. It's my big prompt, to remind myself, "Oh, yeah, I wanted to do that as a writer." And when I have an idea, and I know I'll lose it if I don't write it down, this is where I capture it.

I've been keeping a list like this one for the last couple of years, and it has helped me be more organized as a writer. It's my reminder of who I am and what I know and care about.

Here's what I'd like you to do. I'm going to talk from my list for ten minutes about the ideas, audience, and genres I come up with when I brainstorm my writing territories. I'm going to ask you to write that phrase—"My Writing Territories"—right now at the top of the third page of your writing-reading handbooks. Later on, the first two pages will become your table of contents.

While I'm describing some of my territories, if anything I say rings a bell and makes you think of something that's in your repertoire as a writer, or something you think you'd like to try someday, jot it down on the list in your handbook. When I'm done, you'll have ten minutes to continue your list and then interview each other, followed by time to write some more. I'll ask you to make these lists as long and complete as you can before you leave here today. Don't lose any germ of an idea that comes to you while I'm talking. Listen and write at the same time.

One of the things I write about a lot are my students, what you do and what I think it means. I wrote a book, *In the Middle*, in the 1980s, and now I'm writing a second edition about things I see and do differently as a teacher today. I started my data collection two years ago and I'm continuing it this year, because next summer I've got to finish writing the second edition. It will be a lot of work, but I like it. I am endlessly fascinated by what my students do, as writers, readers, and people. You guys have been a major topic on my territories list for almost twenty years now.

Right up there next to the major topic of my professional life is my dog Books and what she meant to me. She died in the spring at sixteen.

In many ways she was the best friend I ever had—the most accepting, loving, and loyal. nobody looked in my eyes like my dog looked in my eyes. My relationship with her was one of the central ones in my life, and I dream about her all the time. Recently I read a poem in *The New Yorker* about a woman dreaming about her dead dog. I cried for half an hour, then realized I have a poem in me, about dreams of petting Books, when I wake up and my hand is still warm.

Last spring I met Rachel's twin-sister fifteen-year-old dogs. I couldn't believe it. I know what an effort it takes to keep one dog alive that long, and then I think about doing it for sister dogs...Rach, I hope you jotted down your girls on your list. Everyone? Your own pets?

My daughter, Anne, is on my list—all the days with her and all the stages she goes through and what it's like as a mom, watching her become this person.

London is on my list because in the world it's my special place, the place I can go and be absolutely free and myself. you know how I talked at morning meeting today about how at lunch time, when you're all outside—or are supposed to be—the teachers have this little twenty-minute window of opportunity when we can pretend we're not teachers, and just let down? London is my metaphor for forgetting the responsibilities of my teacher life and my principal life and just being. It also happens to be the best city in the world, with endless bookstores, gardens to walk in, and plays to see.

I'm also interested in the topic of adolescent girls, their relationships with each other, their dreams and goals, and their roles and voices in our culture. I've been trying to write a short story about this, which I've almost finished. It's my first attempt at short fiction. I expect it's a genre you'll attempt this year. I'm going to send my sort story off to a magazine for girls like *New Moon* and try to get it published.

I'm interested in my husband, for all the obvious reasons. We've had twenty-six years of adventures, of being together and in love, of disagreeing and working things out. I like being married to him. I'd like to write about the experience of this marriage, but also tell the story of how we found each other in the first place. he was my teacher when I was in college in buffalo; it's a romantic story—to have a crush on your teacher, then find out your teacher has a crush on you.. Of course, we were both consenting adults, and I was no longer his student, so don't panic.

Another thing I'd like to write about is my Roman Catholic childhood, which was both devout and neurotic. When I grew up, the Catholic Church was strict and complicated, in terms of its rules and rituals. For example—my brother just reminded me of this—I'd go to the rail at the front of the church to receive Communion and I'd be so wrought-up—and hungry, because we had to fast—that, I would faint. He reminded me that the mother of a friend of his carried me out of the church on several occasions

because I'd passed out again, through some combination of religious fervor and hunger.

I remember the thrill of picking my confirmation name. You can actually choose a third name when you're twelve or so, and the choices were great. It was all we talked about—a debate that went on among Catholic girls for a good six months or so. Would I become Teresa, Monica, Bernadette, Agnes, Veronica, Lucy, Magdalena, Beatrice? (I went with Mary, my mom's name.)

I also remember scapular medals, those cloth pictures that you had to wear all day under your clothing and when you went to bed at night. They were attached to long pieces of ribbon; you were one picture in the front and the other one in the back. I was paranoid that I was going to be strangled in my sleep by my scapular medals, but I was equally paranoid that I'd die in my sleep without them and burn in hell forever—or at least suffer in limbo, which was God's waiting room.

And rosaries. Rosaries were like jewelry for Catholic girls: beads chained together, each representing a prayer. We collected rosaries in different gems, in our birthstones, and traded them.

So I have a series of anecdotes about the arcane rituals that are a big part of my memories of my early childhood. A lot of writers go back to early memories of their childhoods, the beliefs and rituals of the time, and explore this territory, for themselves and others, in memoirs. I hope you will, too.

One of the most important people in my life was my Grandmother Lang, who died when I was a senior in high school. I dream about her all the time. In my dreams we sit at her kitchen table and talk. That phenomenon, her coming back in comforting dreams, is something else I want to write a poem about. After she died I took care of my grandfather, who was a gruff bully, and pretty much deaf. I moved in with him during my freshman year in college and had to deal with him and cook for him, at the same time that I was sleeping in my grandmother's bedroom and missing her very much. That contrast is something else I'd like to explore.

I want to write about my mother, who I fought with for years. It was seriously bad. I was always grounded for life. When I turned twenty, it all changed. And now it's changing again as she ages. So there are these stages: intense love, intense hate, intense love, and now wondering how to take care. Relationships with parents—for you, too—are some of the crucial ones to explore in poems and memoirs and essays.

I also write about other writers' work. For example, I wrote a review of Maureen Barbieri's book, *Sounds from the Heart* about her perspective on how teachers need to meet the needs of adolescent girls. I gave it a rave. I like to look at what other writers have done and think about it, and a book review is a genre that lets me do that. It so happens that Maureen co-edits *Voices from the Middle*, a journal for middle school teachers that publishes

reviews of books for kids your age, written by kids your age. That's something you'll want to jot down as a potential territory: a review of a favorite book to submit to *Voices from the Middle*.

Another of my territories is books written for teenagers. I read a lot of adolescent novels, so I can introduce them to you in booktalks, but also because I write about them for teachers who are looking for good books for their students.

I'd like to write about springtime in Buffalo some day. Other than my family, the only thing I miss about western New York is the real springs they have there, unlike Maine. It's nice to go back to Buffalo during the first week of may, when everything is yellow and green and bright and it smells like spring should.

I'm really interested in popular music, by which I mean rock. I wish I were interested in classical music, and I have tried. I like rock because the songs speak for my life and my feelings. They resonate in ways that continue to surprise me. So I'm interested in writing about the songs that mean something to who I am and how I feel and figuring out why.

I'm interested in my adult female relationships, which seem to revolve around shopping—Nancy Tindal and I are going to Camden on Saturday to shop for shoes—versus the friendships I had with girls when I was young. In many ways, my junior high and high school friendships were more intense than my marriage. I was so close to those girls. I'm interested in how a woman's relationships with other women change as she grows older.

I also write about CTL, its philosophy and history, the teaching methods we use here, and the curriculum for the school. It's part of my job as the director. You'd be amazed at how much writing people do at their jobs, every kind of job. In fact, in most cases, the more successful adults are, in terms of their work, the more writing they do.

Then I have this yucky writing. Part of my job-writing territories include grant proposals, the weekly newsletter, revising the parent handbook every summer, writing thank-you notes for donations to CTL, and filling out paperwork for the state.

But other territories can be things like chocolate. I need to write an ode to chocolate this year. It's my third favorite thing in the world. *Dark* chocolate. Although M&M's are also fine with me. Butterfingers—those are great, too. Godiva is obviously the best, but I really don't care. It is an extraordinary thing to live on a planet that includes chocolate.

Snow forts are on my list, too. In my childhood we didn't have a lot of money—the major creative outlet among my brother, sister, and me every winter was building snow forts on the front lawn. The whole Christmas vacation we built tunnels and towers and turrets, with places you could drop

in and slide down, and compartments to hide in or stow a cache of snowballs.

Another topic will be my brother. He's a historian, two years older than me, and we competed with each other our whole lives up until about five years ago, when it stopped. Now he's one of my best friends. The intensity of my relationship with Glenn and how it has changed is another of my interests as a writer.

I told you we didn't have a lot of money when I was a kid. My father and mother worked hard and didn't have much leisure time. But one of the best memories I have of my mother is discovering that she was a wonderful ice-skater. She borrowed an old pair of skates from somebody one day, and she and I walked to Dieners' Pond, down our street. While I was skating she pulled on these borrowed skates, floated onto the pond, and started to do figure eights backwards, like this bird on the ice—my mother, who I mostly saw scrubbing floors. I couldn't believe it. She looked like a young girl, filled with such grace and energy. There's a poem, there, I think—maybe a gift poem for her—about the contrast between the scrub woman that I always saw and this glimpse I suddenly had of what my mother must have been like as a girl.

I have a funny piece going about exercise, which I'm trying to do right now, again. I did ten sit-ups about two weeks ago, and I think I ruptured something. I *hate* exercise, but I know I have to do it. Your muscle becomes fat when you hit forty; you have to start exercising or you turn to jelly. One of the things I think I can do is make fun of it, now that I'm doing it every morning and trying to find diversions so I don't go crazy from the boredom of it.

I'm also interested in exploring how I read and write, as I'm doing right now, here, with you, and learning from that, so I can read and write better, with even more satisfaction, and teach better, too.

I'm interested in Pre-Raphaelite art. Of all the kinds or schools of art, this is what I like best, and it's pretty embarrassing. Remember last year we read "The Lady of Shalott" and looked at a copy of a painting by John Waterhouse? It's from the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Pre-Raphaelite art is very romantic—the colors are jewel-like and the subjects are usually women from mythology and legend, painted beautifully—and it's kind of hokey. This is something I'm interested in writing about. Where did the appeal for me of this style of art come from? The pictures of saints on holy cards? The illustrations from my favorite book of fairy tales? Why does it resonate for me as a grown-up? Where do our tastes in art come from?

I'm interested in the whole notion of growing up and what that means. When I went to my high school reunion, the dynamic I saw there amazed me. The kids who were cool in high school were still thinking they were cool, still hanging together, and still ignoring the people who they'd

regarded as nerds in high school, who are now doctors and heads of departments at universities. I was unsettled because I had been on the fringes of the cool group, and I realized that there was much about us that was not cool.

Another thing I need to write about—because I’ve been conducting an informal survey—are the dreams teachers start having every year on August 1: nightmares about school. You know how sometimes, when you know you’re going to do something that makes you anxious, you’ll dream about it? Teachers begin to feel anxious on August 1, like clockwork. I dreamed one night last month that I had a pet elephant: I loved it dearly, but I spent all night nursing it, petting it, feeding it, washing it. I was exhausted when I woke up; I’m convinced the elephant’s name was CTL. Another night I dreamed that you all came to school and the furniture was gone and we couldn’t find it. I dreamed that the two wings of the building had fallen off overnight and we had to put seventy-six kids into two rooms. One of the things I’d like to try is a funny op-ed piece, for one of the teacher journals or maybe even a large-circulation newspaper, cataloging the ways that teachers’ anxieties take shape as pre-September dreams. They’re way worse than waitress dreams, something else I know about.

My writing about these subjects will take lots of different forms. The genres include memoirs, book reviews, and literary criticism, poetry, short fiction, essays, articles, parodies, letters of all kinds, speeches, guidelines for you and CTL, grant proposals, reports, lists, and plans.

And I’ll direct my writing to lots of different readers. My audiences include me, Toby and Anne, my mother and other relatives, you and your parents, other students, my friends, women my age, the teachers and staff here at CTL, the teachers who buy my books or hear my speeches or subscribe to the journals I write for, the whole midcoast community, people who read newspapers, elected and government officials. Something will happen with almost everything I write: I write to be read.

Now it’s your turn. Will you take ten minutes to begin, or continue, a list of your territories? See how much you can capture. Go for quantity. What are the subjects you have explored? That you’d like to explore? What genres have you worked in? Which would you like to work in? Who do you write for? Who would you like to write for? Use the next ten minutes to sketch self-portraits of yourselves as writers.

After ten minutes, or when I see that enough wells have run dry, I ask students to partner up with another writer—if possible, someone who knows them—and read aloud what they have so far. The goals are for a friend to hear what may be missing from a writer’s list and for writers to be inspired by the ideas their friends have captured.

For homework students select one of the ideas on their lists and start drafting: the assignment is to write for half an hour and see where it takes them. The first status-of-the-class conference, at the start of the next day's class, will be about these drafts.

Students add to their lists of writing territories throughout the school year, both independently, when an idea occurs to them that they might want to work with some day, and in response to prompts from me. For example, at the beginning of a new trimester I'll conduct a topic-search minilesson in which I ask the group questions to get the juices flowing about where they haven't been yet as writers, and they scribble additions to their list in response:

- What are your earliest memories?
- What have you seen that you can't forget?
- What do you have strong opinions about?
- What problems need solving in your life or the world you live in?
- Who might have solutions?
- What do you know about?
- What would you like to know more about?
- What are your tastes and preferences?
- What's a kind of writing you'd like to try?
- Who could you write for that you haven't yet?

Figure 5-3 (see pages 130-131) shows a seventh grader's list of writing territories for a whole school year. As with my list, each entry on Jonathan's is shorthand for an idea, genre, or audience that resonates for him. During seventh grade he completed thirty-two pieces of writing. A good three-quarters of these had their roots in his list of territories. Jonathan often had a hard time making the transition from a completed project and launching himself in to a new piece of writing: "I don't know what to do now," was a frequent refrain. Each time I reminded him to sit quietly with the list in his writing-reading handbook and explore his territories, and most of the time he found new ground there that he wanted to cover.

I also show students, in minilessons, how some of their favorite authors discover and cover the ground of their territories. We look across a published writer's oeuvre, read interviews with the author, tease out links, patterns, and anomalies, and sometimes make additions to our own lists of territories. For example, one week we discussed some of the ways that author Cynthia Rylant draws on her experiences and imaginings:

Figure 5-3 Jonathan's Writing Territories

- Memoirs
 - Short stories
 - Squirrel Island
 - Sebago Lake
 - Traveling
 - Sports
 - Friends
 - Family
 - Boating
 - Fishing
 - Hunting
 - My pets
 - Poems
 - Holidays
 - Book reviews
 - marine life
 - Animals
 - Mom
 - Dad
 - School—coming to CTL
 - Teachers
 - Magazines
 - Letters
 - Postcards
 - Letters to teachers about my reading
 - Hobbies
 - News articles
 - Vinalhaven
 - Other islands I've been to on the coast of Maine
 - Clearcutting ban
 - Science
 - Peace
 - TV
 - Sleep
 - Grandfather's death
-

FIGURE 5-3, continued

- Dog's death
 - Dreams
 - Technology
 - Ollie
 - Pool
 - Florida
 - Sailing
 - Tennis
 - Baseball
 - Why I hate soccer
 - Hockey
 - Swimming—YMCA team
 - Biking
 - Basketball
 - Lacrosse
 - Lobstering
 - Being in Europe for the first time
 - Plane ride over the Atlantic
 - Switzerland—memoir
 - Driving
 - Music—Smashing Pumpkins, Nada Surf, Rage Against the Machine
 - Why I like the 7th-8th grade class
 - How my sister and I get along better
 - How my parents and I get along better
 - Matterhorn—poem
 - Skiing into Italy
 - View of the Alps
 - *Boy's Life* and other great novels—book review
 - *Fallen Angels; Somewhere in the Darkness*—reviews
 - Editorial—local channel preempts pro basketball games
 - Maine Yankee
 - Someone moving away that I liked
 - Parents' stories about my birth
 - my earliest memories
 - Poem for the eighth graders for graduation
-

Topics:

- Growing up with grandparents in Beaver, West Virginia (*When I Was Young in the Mountains*)
- The region in which she grew up (*Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*)
- A young child living with older relatives (*Missing May*)
- Her neighbor in West Virginia, Miss Maggie Ziegler (*Miss Maggie*)
- Visits from her family when she was a child (*The Relatives Came*)
- Sounds of the night in the countryside (*Night in the Country*)
- Her early religious experience (*A Fine White Dust*)
- A girl who loses her father (*A Blue-Eyed Daisy*)
- Her son, Nate, and a big dog named Mudge that she used to know (Henry and Mudge series)
- A teenager's observations of small-town life (*Soda Jerk*)
- A friend's experience in World War II (*I Had Seen Castles*)
- The first twenty years of her life and love for the Beatles (*But I'll Be Back Again*)

Genres:

- Picture book
- Early reader
- Novel
- Poetry
- Memoir
- Autobiography

Reading Territories

Through discovering and naming who I am as a writer, I learned to articulate my identity as a reader, too, and demonstrate it to my students. In some ways my list of reading territories feels the more personal of the two: quirkier, more faceted, longer-lived. It gives me enormous pleasure to create and re-create it, to think with fondness about each of the writers or works that has shaped my imagination, politics, sense of language, sense of humor, perspective on the experiences of my life, memories, and relationships with other readers, including old friends and new ones, teachers and classmates at Bread Loaf, students in my classes over the years, colleagues at CTL, my mother, my sister-in-law, and especially, Toby and Anne.