Viewing Guide

Improving
Adolescent
Writers

Kelly
Gallagher

Contents

Improving Adolescent Writers featuring Kelly Gallagher is a three-program series filmed in Kelly's high school classroom in Anaheim, California. The school has a diverse population of approximately 1,900 students (67 percent Hispanic, 17 percent Asian, 13 percent Caucasian, and 3 percent African American, and more than forty languages are spoken on campus. Kelly's students primarily come from print-poor home environments. Sixty-five percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Kelly Gallagher is a full-time teacher and the author of *Reading Reasons, Deeper Reading, Readicide*, and *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, as well as the previous video series *Building Adolescent Readers*.

This guide is designed to help facilitators use *Improving Adolescent Writers* in workshop settings. The plans provided are flexible, allowing you to tailor the suggestions to the needs of your group.

Support materials for each section of the guide include:

- Topics for discussion
- Classroom and workshop extensions

Program 1: The Importance of Modeling

In this program, Kelly models how to find and develop a writing topic with his ninth-grade students. Students then complete a writing "blast" or "sneeze," and use this writing for a "question flood" with peers. On the second day, students use the STAR (Substitute, Take out, Add, Rearrange) revision strategy to improve their writing.

To prepare for viewing this program, you may want to have teachers read Figure 1, Focus First on Craft: What Good Writers Do, an excerpt from Kelly Gallagher's book *Teaching Adolescent Writers* (Stenhouse, 2008). In this excerpt, Kelly presents some of his beliefs about writing instruction and working with students.

Topics for Discussion

1. Kelly starts this lesson by sharing with kids, "Writing is never finished. It's just due." What message does this send to students about his expectations for them and their writing?

2. Kelly says his goal is simply for everyone to improve. Do you agree with this goal? Why or why not?

3. Do you use writer's notebooks? Why or why not?

4. Talk about the writing "blast" or "sneeze" activity. Have you tried this or something similar with your students?

5. Kelly chooses to write and think aloud on a topic he has never written about and dislikes. Why do you think Kelly does this? Would you do this? Why or why not?

6. Kelly provides an example of a bad introduction more than once and gives students opportunities to respond to the poor writing. Why is this an effective strategy?

7. Many of Kelly's routines require student collaboration. How does he check in to ensure the collaboration is effective?

8. Talk about the "question flood" strategy. Why do you think this is a strategy that Kelly employs often?

9. Kelly uses STAR as a way to help his students talk about revision. Is this something you might try with your students? Why or why not?

10. When Kelly circulates around the room as students work, it is clear that his students are comfortable talking about their reasons for writing decisions. What kind of talk is part of your daily workshop routines? How do you foster meaningful discussion about writing in your classroom?

11. Kelly does not mandate that students use STAR. Instead, he gives them time to mark their changes and to reflect. He says, "When you look at what you have up here, if you have most of one letter, you can think about using other ways so you don't rely on one way to revise." Why do you think he uses this approach?

Classroom and Workshop Extensions

1. Model your writing in front of the class in a way you haven't tried before; start with a topic selected by students, or demonstrate how you begin or revise a first draft. Bring notes back to the group to talk about what you have learned from the experience.

2. Try a "question flood" with your students. Discuss with your colleagues what went well and what you would adapt or change the next time you do the activity.
3. Brainstorm with colleagues how you might introduce STAR to students. In a follow-up session, get together and look at student samples of STAR in different writing assignments.

Program 2: Writing with Purpose

In this program, Kelly teaches a class of seniors how understanding the purpose of any piece of writing helps both readers and writers. He models how a purpose chart can be used to generate twenty-five different writing topics from one person's life. Viewers will also see the elements in place in Kelly's writing workshops, including mini-lessons, collaborative work, conferring, and whole-class discussions.

You may want to make copies for participants of the following figures, which are seen or referred to in this program:

Figure 2 Purpose Chart (Blank Template)
Figure 3 Sample Student Purpose Chart

Topics for Discussion

1. Students sit at tables in Kelly's classroom, not desks. How is this arrangement similar to or different from your classroom arrangement? What are the advantages of this configuration in a writing classroom?
2. Kelly helps students take responsibility for their work with phrases such as "It might help if you . . . ," "Have that conversation with your group . . . ," and "How long do you think . . . ?" How does this language promote student independence?
3. Before the whole-class discussion, Kelly says, "There could be some disagreement here, and that's healthy." What do you do to invite conversation in your classroom? When, where, and how can disagreement be healthy?

4. Before the small-group discussions, Kelly reminds everyone to take the time to thank each writer. What are some of the other ways Kelly integrates socialization into his writing instruction?
5. What did you notice about the ways Kelly balances the use of presentation/demonstration, conferring, and collaborative work?
6. When Kelly models the use of the chart with his own topic, he brainstorms with the class. How is this modeling of writing different from the Pokémon demonstration in the first program? What elements are the same?
7. Kelly models the activity with his writing and then gives students time to do their own thinking. He breaks the workshop into short chunks of demonstration, discussion, and practice. What do you notice about how he paces the instruction, and about his transitions between workshop components?
8. Kelly uses the 1=25 Purpose Chart as an effective strategy to push young writers to vary the style of their writing. Think about the writing tasks in your classroom. Which purposes from Kelly's chart are most common? Which are missing? Why is it important for students to recognize the various purposes of writing?

Classroom and Workshop Extensions

1. Try the 1=25 Purpose Chart in your classroom, and then review three writing samples—strong, average, and weak— with a teaching partner or your staff. Discuss what you learn about each writer from his or her purpose chart.
2. Try a different procedure in peer revision groups, based on something you've seen in the video (i.e., a new way of selecting who will receive responses or a different procedure for sharing with the whole group). Discuss with colleagues what went well and what you might change next time.

Program 3: Assessment That Drives Better Student Writing

In this program, Kelly works from the first drafts of his ninth-grade students' *Romeo and Juliet* essays to build a rubric. The rubric includes required elements for the whole group as well as individual components based on emerging student needs.

To prepare for this program, you may want to make copies of Figure 4, Moving Away from "Sucker Punch Grading," for everyone to read in advance. This is an excerpt from *Teaching Adolescent Writers* in which Kelly describes his beliefs about assessing student writing. You also may want to make copies for participants of the following figures, which are seen or referred to in the program:

Figure 5 *Romeo and Juliet* Writing Samples
Figure 6 *Romeo and Juliet* Rubric Student Example

Topics for Discussion

1. Kelly starts with a blank rubric and has students help him fill it in. What process do you use to design rubrics or other assessment tools?
2. Kelly found patterns of need in the students' first drafts and used those needs to design a mid-process assessment tool. Think back to a recent writing assignment. What patterns did you notice that needed to be addressed by several students in the class? How might these patterns be used in thinking through assessment? How does sharing these concerns with students mid-process help to drive better revision?
3. Kelly says, "I select two good examples because I want them to have a target." How does this strategy differ from choosing samples that do not meet the standard? Which strategy makes more sense to you, and why? Why do you think Kelly intentionally avoids showing poor examples?
4. Kelly uses "Turn and Talk" often in his classroom. He says, "When the teacher is the only one talking, this is a

classroom where kids aren't going to be stretched." What are the strategies you use to give students time to talk and stretch their thinking? How does the talk in your classroom drive better writing?

5. When Kelly is teaching about commentary, he color-codes to help students understand the difference between summary and commentary. Do you think this is an effective strategy? Did you notice other times in the lesson where Kelly merges skills instruction with building the rubric?

6. Kelly ends the lesson by telling students that, for three-fifths of the rubric, they all will have the same scoring guide. In addition, he writes individual issues on the bottom of each student's paper. Why does Kelly work hard to avoid a "one-size-fits-all" scoring guide? How might you use a strategy like this to improve student performance?

7. Kelly identifies students who have the same problems in their writing so he can group them for conferring. What are the benefits of small-group instruction? What are some strategies you use to group students?

8. Kelly shares that some of his groups focus on editing while others focus on craft. How do you balance instruction between editing and craft in your teaching and conferring?

9. Kelly uses student examples in his work with small groups and whole-class instruction. Why do you think he does this?

10. Think about the schedule and routines Kelly has in place. Did you see anything that might help you be more efficient with the limited time that you have for the teaching of writing?

Classroom and Workshop Extensions

1. Ask teachers to bring in rubrics or other assessment tools they have used recently. Discuss how they might be revised or adapted based on what was learned from the video.

2. Try to build a new rubric using Kelly's process of noting whole-class and individual needs. What went well? What was confusing for you or your students?

FIGURE 1 **Focus First on Craft: What Good Writers Do**

by Kelly Gallagher (excerpt from *Teaching Adolescent Writers*)

In many classes I have visited, there is often a heavy emphasis on responding to students' errors (which, to some degree, is of course necessary). Often, however, I have found that there is little or no focus on the craft of student writing. Always telling students what is wrong with their papers is a recipe for killing off young writers. When responding to student papers, I start by examining what good writers do. The following sections give five approaches that not only recognize my students' craft, but also help them to improve it.

Adopt the Stance of a Reader, Not a Grader

When responding to students' writing, either via written commentary or conferencing, I am careful to take a stance as the reader rather than as the grader. I will often use the following phrases:

As a reader, I wonder . . .
As a reader, I am confused about . . .
Will the reader understand . . . ?
What about this passage might confuse the reader?
Is this enough context for the reader?
What might still be missing for the reader?
What do you want the reader to take from this sentence/passage/piece?

Couching response through the lens of the reader rather than through the lens of the grader lowers the anxiety of my students. This, in turn, makes them receptive to commentary that will help them become better writers.

Read the Paper Through a Craft Lens

Traditionally, teachers collect their students' papers at the end of the writing process and it is only at that point that students receive feedback. Often, I will collect student papers mid-process—after an initial draft—and I will read them with a focus on craft issues. Mid-process is where the real growth potential lies; feedback at this stage almost always drives writing improvement better than feedback after the paper is completed (more on this will be discussed later in this chapter).

Providing feedback mid-process does not add another layer of work for the teacher—it moves the bulk of the end-of-paper response to the middle of the process. It is where I choose to give most of my attention to the papers, especially to craft issues. As a result, I respond as much as I can in the middle of the process, and end up responding much less to final draft papers.

"I Like . . ." Conversations

Often I will place a rough draft on the projector for the entire class to consider. (I cover the name to keep the paper anonymous.) We then have an "I like . . ." conversation. I ask the students to look at the paper and share what they like about it. I chart their responses on the projector (before I had the projector, I would make an overhead transparency of the essay).

Golden Line Exchange

A smaller-scale version of the "I like . . ." assignment can be achieved by simply having students exchange papers and read them for "golden lines." When they find something in the paper that they see as exhibiting craft, they highlight it in yellow. In the margin they write brief notes explaining why they recognize these highlighted lines as having a high degree of craft. I collect the highlighted papers and share golden lines by reading them to the entire class.

FIGURE 2 **Purpose Chart (Blank Template)**

1 Topic = 25 Topics

Purpose	Possible Writing Topics
Express and Reflect	
Inform and Explain	
Evaluate and Judge	
Take a Stand	
Propose a Solution	
Analyze and Interpret	
Inquire and Explore	
Seek Common Ground	

One Topic:

=

Figure 3 Sample Student Purpose Chart

Per. 2
11/14/07

One topic: | WaterPolo | =   1 Topic = 25 Topics

Purpose	Possible Writing Topics
Express and Reflect	• First time that practice started. • Who I felt about practice. • How important it is to be in shape.
Inform and Explain	• How to do eggbeater. • The difference between wet throw ball to a dry throw ball. • How to catch the ball. • The types of throws there is
Evaluate and Judge	• Best player in varsity • The worst player • The best game
Take a Stand	• Waterpolo is harder than wrestling. • Water polo is the best sport for getting torn. • Waterpolo is better than soccer.
Propose a Solution	• How to fix waterpolo players below a certain number. • How referees to do more than one sport. • How longer a waterpolo game is to volleyball.
Analyze and Interpret	• Why does waterpolo isn't faster girls than any other sport • Why play a sport no maker • Why isn't waterpolo so popular.
Inquire and Explore	• How did waterpolo first start. • How much time you spend in the pool. • How much waterpolo is.
Seek Common Ground	• How wrestling and waterpolo are similar. • How waterpolo is different from volleyball. • If wrestling is and waterpolo are hardest sports

FIGURE 4 **Moving Away from "Sucker Punch Grading"**

by Kelly Gallagher (excerpt from *Teaching Adolescent Writers*)

It has been my experience that if you want to see a student's writing improve, you have to provide the student with meaningful feedback *before* the paper is finished. What benefit is there for students when we suggest changes after their papers are completed?

Doug Reeves, in *The Learning Leader* (2006), calls end-of-paper grading "sucker punch grading" because it resembles "the blow delivered to the unsuspecting boxer who does not see the devastating punch until it is too late to offer a defense" (115). The metaphor is apt and can be extended when you consider that a boxer returns to the corner for advice between each round. To maximize performance, the boxer is continually coached. To be successful, the boxer makes adjustments as the fight unfolds. You would not last a day as a boxing trainer if you told your fighter before the match, "Fight your best. Good luck. I'll see you after the twelfth round."

Unfortunately, that is precisely what happens to young writers. After some pre-match instruction, they are thrown into the ring and advised to hold their own. The teacher has in essence told them, "Fight your best fight. I'll see you when the fight is over." This, of course, is not a very productive approach. If we want to improve the performance of our students, we have to offer them suggestions while the fight is still unfolding. As Tomlinson and McGighe (2006) note, "The most successful coaches and sponsors of extracurricular activities such as yearbook, orchestra, theater, and athletics recognize the importance of *ongoing* assessments" (71). With this in mind we need to be in our students' corners *during* their writing bouts. It does adolescent writers little good for the teacher to show up after the final bell has rung.

To help my students refine their editing skills, I adhere to the Ten Tenets of Teaching Editing Skills.

Tenet #1: Determine Editing Needs and Address Them as They Arise

I do not teach out of a grammar book page-by-page, unit-by-unit. Instead, I take notes as I read my students' papers to determine what grammar issues need addressing. The few whole-class mini-lessons I end up teaching are generated from my reading of their papers. Grammar issues arise organically and do not follow the chapter-by-chapter outline of any grammar book I have ever read.

Tenet #2: Teach Less to the Whole Class;
Teach More in Conferences

Though I still teach some whole-class grammar mini-lessons, these are reserved for a few key issues that seem to be problematic for most of my class (e.g., subject-verb agreement, fragments, run-ons). The problem with whole-class demonstrations is that I am wasting time of the students who have already acquired the skill. I have found it to be a much more productive approach to have two-minute conferences with individuals or small groups of students to help them identify their specific editing shortcomings. Later in this chapter I will outline how I set up conferences in my classroom.

Tenet #3: Instead of Using Grammar Books,
Make Them

My students construct their own grammar guides as part of their writer's notebooks. Each grammar guide is divided into two sections: craft and editing. When I conduct an editing mini-lesson, students record the lesson in their notebooks. I explain the rule, show a few examples, and then give them some practice sentences. When I conduct small-group conferences, I have each member of the group add the rule specific to addressing their problem into the grammar section of their writer's notebook.

Tenet #4: Keep the Focus Narrow

When teaching mini-lessons to the entire class, I keep the focus on one issue. If I see the class is having trouble with run-on sentences, for example, we will work on that skill repeatedly before we shift our focus to any other problem. They also might be having problems with both subject-verb agreement and lack of sentence variety, but I will ignore those issues until I feel the run-on sentence issue is resolved. (This is difficult because the English teacher in me wants to point out everything that needs improvement in their papers.)

Maintaining a narrow focus makes sense, doesn't it? Imagine learning to play the piano from a teacher who points out twenty-seven things you did wrong after your first lesson. Certainly, that would be counterproductive. The best piano teacher is one who starts by teaching the pupil one skill and does not move to the next skill until her student demonstrates improvement. The teacher is aware of the young musician's other deficiencies, but those are momentarily set aside so that progress can be made.

Once most of my students have demonstrated improvement, it is time to move on to a new whole-class focus.

Tenet #5: Teach the Big Eight

Don't worry about complex rules for struggling writers. Ron Strahl, the director of the South Basin Writing Project, advocates that before we assume anything, we must start by making sure our students can recognize the subject and the verb in any sentence. It may sound funny discussing this in a high school context, but it has been my experience that many incoming ninth-grade students, both native speakers and English language learners, have trouble consistently identifying the subject and the verb. This deficiency must be cleared up before any understanding of grammar will occur. Once students are clear about subjects and verbs, we must teach them to recognize what Strahl calls the "little words"—prepositions, coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and simple transitions.

When students can recognize the subject, the verb, and the "little words," the rest of the year is spent focusing on eight rules. Here are the Big Eight:

1. Identifying the difference between a fragment and a complete sentence
2. Understanding comma splices, semicolons, and colons
3. Understanding subject and verb with no intervening phrases
4. Understanding subject and verb with intervening phrases
5. Using pronoun case correctly, which again ties to subjects (and objects) of sentences
6. Using commas inside the independent clause
7. Understanding irregular verbs (and their three stems for the six tenses)
8. Correctly aligning the pronoun with its antecedent

If we direct our attention to these eight issues, Strahl argues, most of the editing issues will go away. We should be giving extended focus to these issues before we give any thought to teaching students more sophisticated rules (e.g., the correct usage of the infinitive phrase).

Tenet #6: Don't Drown the Paper in Corrections

One way to kill off young writers, especially those who are reluctant or struggling, is to mark a ton of errors on their papers. Developing writers are fragile, and overdoing error correction can break them.

When marking a student's paper, I point out no more than six errors. As I read the paper, I highlight sentences that have problems in them. If a particular sentence has two problems, I highlight it, and at the end of the sentence I

write "2" (or "3" if there are three problems, and so on). I do not comment on the problem; I simply highlight it. When I have highlighted six sentences, I stop. I have found that my students, upon getting their papers back, do not have the capacity to focus on twenty-two errors. Marking that many errors is a waste of my time and theirs.

When reading a student's paper, I will often see one major problem resurface throughout the paper. When that occurs, I try to highlight that problem repeatedly. If Greg, for example, has serious fragment problems, I will highlight mostly fragment errors. To do this I may have to ignore, for the time being, the capitalization error he made in the second paragraph or his incorrect use of quotation marks in his conclusion. I will address these eventually, but for today, I want him to have a laser-like focus on his most serious issue—in this case his fragment problems.

Tenet #7: Whole-Class Peer Editing Is an Ineffective Strategy

Every time I have asked an entire class of students to trade papers with one another to edit each other's papers, something unintended occurs: they often make each other's papers worse. Invariably, students will take sentences that are correct and "edit" them so that they are completely wrong. This does not happen once in a while. It happens to someone's paper every time I try this strategy. I am embarrassed to admit how long it took me to figure this out, but the whole-class peer editing approach is not a good idea. Instead, I now designate the top three or four student grammarians in each of my classes as Student-Editors. If a student wants some peer editing, it must come from one of these designated students, or the student must find time to conference with me.

Tenet #8: Make Students Track Their Spelling Demons

We all have spelling demons. I want my students to be aware of theirs. When I come across a spelling error in a paper, I highlight it in a different color than the color used for illuminating editing errors. (I use blue because I tell my students that it makes me blue that in the age of spell checkers they are still turning in papers that contain spelling errors.) I have students chart their errors on Spelling Demon Charts. As their list of spelling demons grows, they consult the list before turning in future final drafts.

Tenet #9: I Can Effect More Improvement in a Student's Writing via a Two-Minute Discussion Than I Can by Taking Five Minutes to Write Comments on the Paper

In my twenty-three years as an English teacher, this is probably the most valuable lesson I have learned when it comes to the teaching of writing. I need to structure my class so that each of my students gets some conference time with the most experienced writer in that class—me. Granted, this is easier said than done, especially considering the fact that I have 165 students, but in the next section of this chapter you'll see how I build in essential conference time with my students.

Tenet #10: Repeat After Me: "I Am Not Superman. I Am Not Superman. I Am Not . . ."

Confession time: I do not expertly implement all of the previous principles in my classes every day. Some days go better than others. Just typing these ten tenets is stressful! Therefore, in order to maintain a reasonable degree of sanity, I have granted myself permission to occasionally fail. I remind myself that learning how to teach writing is a process itself, and failure provides me with the opportunity to improve my craft. It also helps me to think about the challenges of teaching writing to adolescents in these terms: If you mixed the DNA of Donald Graves, Donald Murray, Nancie Atwell, Barry Lane, and Peter Elbow to clone the perfect English teacher, I would still doubt that teacher's ability to expertly implement every one of these principles every day to 165 divergent students. I take consolation in recognizing that my job is ridiculously *hard*.

FIGURE 5 **Romeo and Juliet Writing Samples**

Example 1	Example 2
Friar Lawrence, a man of God, commits the sin of deception, which has an enormous influence on the actions of Romeo and Juliet. Hoping the rivalry of the families will vanish, he accepts to marry them without the consent of their parents. However, this only makes matters worse when Juliet is forced to marry Paris. Friar Lawrence develops a plan that demands that Juliet fake her own death by drinking a sleeping potion. The Friar later admits, "Then gave I her, so tutor'd by my arts, a sleeping potion; which so took effect as I intended, for it wrought on her the form of death." (Act V, Scene III). His plan, unfortunately, does not work and becomes the root cause of the tragedy. But this could have been prevented, if only Friar Lawrence had given more careful consideration to the outcome. It is ironic that he tells Romeo and Juliet not to rush into marriage, yet the Friar himself rushes into the decision to come up with the fake death plan. He did not follow his own advice. His unwise actions are to be blamed because he did not take the necessary time to think through his decision.	One person who is to blame but is often overlooked is Romeo. Romeo makes a series of bad decisions. He loses his temper and kills Tybalt. He marries Juliet too quickly. He buys drugs from the apothecary. But of all the decisions Romeo makes, the dumbest is his decision to commit suicide when he thinks Juliet is dead. Killing himself didn't bring his love back. In fact, just the opposite occurs: it causes Juliet to really die. Suicide never solves problems. It usually creates new ones. Romeo's selfish act created pain for both families, because as a result of his bad decision, both the Montagues and the Capulets lost beloved children. Romeo is at the center of the tragedy.

FIGURE 6 **Romeo and Juliet Rubric Student Example**

Name NANCY

Date

Period 3

Scoring Guide For Romeo and Juliet Essay

Scoring Criteria	Exceeds Expectations for the Standard	Meets the Standard	Does Not Yet Meet the Standard
Effective Introductions	The essay has TAG. The thesis statement is clear (direct or implied). The intro is original (it doesn't sound like everyone else's).	The essay has TAG. The thesis statement is clear (usually direct.).	TAG is incomplete, missing, or confusing. Thesis statement is incomplete, missing, or confusing.
Level of Analysis	The paper analyzes in a way that creates new thinking and understanding.	The paper moves past summary and into analysis.	The paper summarizes ~~posted a~~ instead of analyzes.
Sentence branching	The essay exhibits sophisticated use of sentence branching.	The essay exhibits competent use of sentence branching.	The paper is written in mostly simple sentences.
Transitions	Transitions between the paragraphs are advanced.	The essay has clear transitions between paragraphs.	Transitions are missing or are rough.
Run-on sentences		Has few, if any, run-on sentences.	Has a number of run-on sentences.

Teacher Notes: