

Review: *Powerful Writing Structures: Brain Pocket Strategies for Supporting a Year-long Writing Program* by Adrienne Gear (Pembroke Publishers, 2020. 197 pp.)

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In her seventh book, *Powerful Writing Structures: Brain Pocket Strategies for Supporting a Year-Long Writing Program*, Adrienne Gear shows elementary school teachers how to implement a comprehensive, process-based writing program. Throughout her book, Gear draws on her 25-year experience as an elementary school teacher in Vancouver as well as from the content in her two previous books on nonfiction: *Nonfiction Writing Power: Teaching Information Writing with Intent and Purpose* (2014) and *Writing Power: Engaging Thinking Through Writing* (2011). Using these resources, Gear shares her approach to setting up workshops that focus on three types of writing: personal narrative, non-fiction, and short stories. In each chapter, Gear overviews a different genre, and she provides instructor resources, including mini-lessons, student activities, lists of model texts by established authors, developmental assessment rubrics, and student planning worksheets. Gear's text is ideal for elementary school instructors who teach grades 1-5; however, instructors who teach older students will likely find less useful the notion of "brain pockets," which Gear uses throughout her book.

Gear introduces the analogy of "brain pockets" (p. 8) in Chapter 1, and she uses the idea to help young writers compare their minds to pockets that hold different kinds of information. As

Gear explains in an introductory lesson for students, “Our brains are powerful places in our body that store all our thinking our brain stores our thoughts in three big pockets: Memory Pocket, Fact Pocket, and Imagination Pocket” (p. 12). Gear associates the “memory pocket” with personal narratives, which emphasize “personal experiences, memories, and feelings” (p. 37). She associates the “fact pocket” with nonfiction writing because it focuses on factual observation, instruction, explanation, and persuasion (p. 10). She also associates the “imagination pocket” with short stories, which require the invention of characters, the development of plot and dialogue, as well as the use of literary techniques (p. 168). Gear uses the notion of brain pockets to help young writers ultimately understand that different genres are written for different purposes and require different kinds of information and structures. Additionally, Gear uses the notion of “brain pockets” to organize each of the four chapters in her book. Chapter 2, for instance, shows instructors how they can use the “memory pocket” to teach two kinds of personal narratives: “walking stories” (p. 37) and “event stories” (p. 57). Chapter 3 provides guidance on how to use the “fact pocket” to teach six non-fiction genres, including description, instruction, persuasion, comparison, explanation, and biography. The final chapter demonstrates how instructors can use the “imagination pocket” to teach short-story writing.

Whether or not they choose to use the analogy of “brain pockets,” elementary school instructors will certainly appreciate many of Gear’s minilessons, which are used to teach writing craft to young writers in creative and engaging ways. For example, in Chapter 2, while teaching “walking stories” – personal narratives that describe people, places, or things (p. 37) – Gear uses the idea of “triple-scoop words” (p. 40) to demonstrate the importance of word choice in her primary students’ narratives. She begins with a visualization activity: Gear asks her young students to visualize being in

an ice cream parlor and looking at all of the bins of ice cream with various flavors. Suddenly, they view a waffle cone with three different scoops of ice cream and they secretly hope that their parents will purchase it for them. But, when they get to the counter, their parents purchase for them “a half a lump of ice cream in a yellow Styrofoam cone” instead of the “bubblegum, cotton candy, and sticky chewy chocolate” that they’d hoped for (p. 40). Gear compares her students’ disappointment to a reader’s experience when writers use “single-scoop words,” such as “good, nice, bad, sad, mad, stuff, big, [and] small” (p. 40). She tells students that these “‘little lumps’ of words . . . are not very interesting.” As a secondary activity, Gear divides her students into groups. Each group gets a list of “single scoop” words, and they brainstorm alternative, more descriptive “triple-scoop” words that could be used instead. They also create individual and class “anchor charts” with their “triple-scoop” words. Gear extends this activity over several weeks by reading from model picture books (which she calls “anchor books”) that emphasize strategic word choice. Recommended anchor texts include Kate Banks’ *Max’s Words*; Peter Reynolds’ *The Word Collector*; Roni Schotter’s *The Boy Who Loved Words*; Rebecca Van Slyke’s *Lexie the Word Wrangler*; Jessica Hutchings’ *Delores Thesaurus*; and others. Once students are familiar with the concept of word choice and its importance in writing, Gear encourages her students to set a writing goal by including more descriptive “triple-scoop” words in their practice writes (p. 41).

Similarly, to teach her young students about paragraph organization, Gere uses the analogy of drawers. Gere begins by drawing a chest of drawers on the board, and she invites her students to visualize the drawers in their own bedrooms. She then engages students in a discussion about the purposes of the drawers (i.e. “to keep clothes organized” and “to group all the same types of clothes together” (p. 45). Gere explains that just as people need drawers to keep their clothing organized, writers need

“invisible drawers”(i.e. paragraphs) to keep their writing organized. Gere models this idea by explaining that she will write a “walking story” about her dog. Using the chest of drawers that she initially drew on the board, Gere writes “My Dog” at the top of the chest of drawers. Gere models for students the “contents” that she might include in each individual drawer: Information about the dog’s appearance might go in the top drawer. In the second drawer, she might talk about the dog’s food. The third drawer would include information about the dog’s personality, and the fourth drawer would include information about how much she loves her dog. She then models for students the kinds of details that should go into each drawer. For instance, the drawer that contains the dog’s appearance might include details about the dog’s color, fur type, and ear size. The drawer that contains information about the dog’s food might include details about its favorite food and treats, etc. After modeling paragraph organization, Gere provides her students with a graphic organizer (shaped like a chest of drawers), and she has them plan and organize content for a practice write.

In addition to the text’s minilessons, elementary school instructors will likely love the 63 graphic organizer handouts that Gere includes in the text. These student handouts vary. Some are assessment summary sheets, which allow students to track their strengths and weaknesses; others provide quick activities on how to hook readers in introductions or on how to determine differences between facts and details. A majority are also essay and story planner heuristics to help students generate ideas for and organize their writing. Additionally, Gere provides lists of more than 250 model texts that instructors can use to teach genres, such as instruction, persuasion, comparison, biographies, personal narratives, short stories, and explanation as well as to teach concepts such as personification, similes, word choice, transition, and description.

Elementary school instructors will also find Chapter 1 useful because Gear carefully outlines how to establish a structured, year-long writing program. Gear encourages instructors to reflect on the key elements they want to include in their writing program as well as on approaches for integrating them. Gear suggests adding elements such as formative assessment; writing joy; writing goals; routine writing process; mini-lessons that model structure, writing, and word craft; independent writing practice; model texts; and student-instructor conferences (p. 13-14). Gear systematically integrates these elements by adapting Donald Graves' writer's workshop, so that the workshop environment is easier for her and for her primary students to manage. To do so, Gear follows a weekly class writing schedule that emphasizes planning, drafting, and revising/editing. For example, on one day, Gear introduces and models a writing structure. On another day, students plan their writing and share their plans with each other. On drafting days (and before students begin writing), Gear teaches mini-lessons that relate to the specific genre students are learning. Depending upon the genre, mini-lessons might focus on organization, voice, elaboration, transitions, style, word craft, or writing effective introductions and conclusions, etc. Students use the remaining weekdays to share their writing with other students and to revise it. Gear also suggests conferencing with students twice during the term (p. 20) to address student writing goals, progress, and attitudes.

Although Gear's text is ideal for elementary school instructors, middle school and high school instructors will likely find her text less useful because they will need to significantly supplement and adapt Gear's lessons to meet the needs of older students. For instance, some of the writing terminology that Gear uses will need to be adapted for older students, who will use very specific writing terms in high school. While terms such as "brain pockets" may help younger students, older writers should learn the term "genres" (which Gear never actually mentions in her

book). Other terms that Gear uses with young writers, such as “move along words” (p. 61) for transitions and “magic words” (p. 42) for subordinating conjunctions will not transfer to middle or high school writing classes.

Similarly, because she is working with predominately elementary school writers, Gear often presents text structures as simple “formulas” (p. 9), which if followed, should produce effective elementary school writing. For example, to teach comparison, Gear uses a “Both - Same - Different - End” formula (p. 136). As she suggests, students should first provide a sentence that “introduces both topics.” (p. 136). Then, they should provide “2 or 3 examples of similarities” followed by “2 or 3 examples of differences.” Finally, they should summarize their key points at the end. Such formulas are too simplistic for older students, who should be taught multiple ways of structuring comparisons based on audience needs, contexts of use, their own purposes and messages, and delivery modes and media. Additionally, to meet the needs of older students, instructors will also need deeper coverage of research-based writing, summary, paraphrase, citation, note-taking, the rhetorical triangle, revision and editing, thesis statements, and topic sentences among other skills. To be clear, Gear does touch on many of these skills, but older students will need deeper instruction on them.

Despite its limitations for older students, Gear’s book does provide a comprehensive, process-based writing program for elementary school students. The program Gear presents encourages explicit, clear instruction; responsiveness to students as people and as writers; and strategic pedagogical and programmatic reflection. Perhaps most importantly, Gear’s program

fosters in students the desire to be thoughtful, strategic, and creative writers who actually *enjoy* writing. Isn't that our hope for student writers, regardless of their grade level?