

Kate Strassman

My name is Kate Strassman, and I am a third grade teacher in the USA. I came to Aikiyam School for three weeks in July to do a writing project called "Real and imagined Ancestors" with the 6th, 7th, and 8th standard classes.

The basic steps taken to realize this project were for students to pick a person in their family from long ago, ask their family questions about this person, and then combine these facts with what they imagine about that person. The result was a vivid paragraph about an ancestor who becomes very meaningful for the student because the project connects them with their own family history. We made the past come alive through writing. The method of teaching I used for the writing project is called the writing process.

The first step called prewriting involves getting ideas to write about by using charts and questionnaires. We also drew a family tree during this prewriting step. Students gathered their facts, and also went on a guided visualization where they met their ancestor. From here, students write the first copy of their paragraph called a first draft. I modelled, by giving a personal example, how to take their facts and imaginings, and weave them together using sentences that flow in a logical sequence.

After the first draft was completed, we revised it. To do this, I read all of the papers, and gave each student a positive point to be proud of, as well as some points that they could make better. Students also read each other's paragraphs at this stage (peer feedback) to give extra comments. I modeled how to fix common grammar errors, and students then worked to locate their errors and make their writing better.

They then wrote a second copy, called a second draft. I went through each student's paper carefully with a red pen, and edited them for grammar, punctuation, spelling, sequence, and other errors. The last step is called the final draft, and students wrote their paper one last time, fixing all of the editing marks by writing carefully with their best handwriting.

Altogether, this process took two weeks! You may think that two weeks is a long time to write one paragraph, but the result was an excellent piece of writing from each student. As teachers, we need to teach our students that in order to make something really good, we need to fix our mistakes, make changes, and put in some extra time.

After the writing was completed, the students created portraits of their ancestors. I showed them famous portraits from artists like Picasso, Matisse, Frieda Kahlo, and David Hockney. We learned how to draw a proportionate face and also how to layer many colors of oil pastel to create realistic skin tones. Because we talked about how the background of a portrait can tell the story of a person, many students included the Tamil landscape in their portraits.

At the end, we had an exciting showcase of all the work in the dining hall after school. It was a gorgeous and colorful show, full of vitality! I am truly proud of all the students at Aikiyam who completed this project with me.

I also conducted a Saturday workshop for teachers at Aikiyam, and went through the steps of the writing process with them. Teachers practiced their writing and went through a mini version of the writing process themselves. The results were truly wonderful pieces of writing. I'm convinced we have some authors teaching at Aikiyam! Teachers thanked me for having them write, and said they would never have experienced this unless they had been asked to try it. It was a positive and new experience for all.

Thank you for your generosity in allowing me to come for such a short period of time to teach. Being at Aikiyam was a privilege and something I will never forget.