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Creating Spaces for Whole-Class, Small-Group, and Individual Work

Throughout Traits Writing, students will be engaged in independent, small-group, and whole-class work. Arranging the classroom to facilitate these activities will increase student collaboration and time on tasks and minimize disruptions. The most successful writing classrooms are those in which students know what to do and where to find the resources to do it. Keep the following principles in mind when arranging furniture and creating work spaces in your classroom.

1. Organize student desks in clusters of 4–6. This will facilitate the small-group and partner work necessary throughout the program, such as when students meet to provide feedback on their classmates' writing pieces (Days 1–4) or during the Partner Conventions Check (Day 5). This also allows for an easier flow of movement around the classroom because it eliminates narrow pathways between desks. This enables you to quickly and easily monitor student work or provide one-on-one conferences.
2. This cluster arrangement of desks also works well for whole-class lessons and discussions. Just be sure the whiteboard is placed where all students can easily view it. You'll want students to talk as they work; sitting together in small groups can encourage that happy hum of writing activity—a balance between absolute silence and distracting noise.
3. You might also wish to establish an open space in the front of the classroom for use during student presentation of writing (e.g., sharing final unit projects during Reality Checks).
4. For independent work, set up a writing center in the classroom. Stock the center with writing supplies for use during all writing assignments, but especially for creating final pieces for presentation.
5. Designate a wall in the classroom to showcase student work, such as examples of finished writing assignments reflecting each student's best work. Make the wall inviting, colorful, and interactive. For example, place self-stick notes near the wall so that students can leave messages, sharing what they like about their classmates' work.
6. Create a classroom library near the writing center. Stock the library with a wide range of books and other reading materials. Use beanbag chairs, large pillows, and other soft pieces of furniture to create a cozy and quiet atmosphere. You can also use bookshelves to partially separate the space from the rest of the room. The classroom library should be a place where children want to curl up and read a good book or write on their own.
7. Make sure all writing materials—pencils, paper, art supplies, or other frequently used materials—are easily accessible. Also keep an electric pencil sharpener readily available for students to use as needed. Students should not be waiting in line to collect materials nor lose any time before beginning assignments. Therefore, make the classroom space work for you.
8. Remember, you can always change your classroom layout if spaces aren't working as effectively as you like or need them to. Your classroom space should facilitate learning with easy flow patterns, greater organization, and increased opportunities for teacher-student and student-student interactions. Evaluate your classroom arrangement at the end of each unit and modify it, as appropriate. Ask yourself: Does every space in the classroom have a purpose? Does the space help or hinder what my students and I are doing? Are students' work and progress reflected in displays on the classroom walls? Are there resources available that spark curiosity, creativity, and communication? Is the space uncluttered? Is there a part of the room that doesn't work as well as it can or should?