



# TEACHER'S GUIDE

with Common Core Standards

## Write Back Soon!

Adventures in Letter Writing

by Karen Benke



Roost Books | Trade Paperback  
978-1-61180-268-9 | 199 pages | \$16.95

### INTRODUCTION

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*Hello, Teachers!*

I know how busy you are and don't want this guide to be another box you have to check off to meet some set of standards. I do want you to know that you can cross reference my books—*Rip the Page! Leap Write In!* and *Write Back Soon! Adventures in Letter Writing*—to help your students r-e-l-a-x around the writing process, have some fun, and play on the page while gaining practice and insight into the writing process. And, yes, get comfortable with meeting those common core standards. In my 20+ years as a Poet in the Schools and Creative Writing teacher, I've written with all ages.

I still remember being a shy elementary and middle school student using my pen to connect with friends...and being eager to write poems and stories in high school but not always knowing how to get started. Thank you for all you do to bring the magic of writing into your students' lives! I bow down to my English teachers and to you. You hold the power to instill in your students a belief that they have something unique and important inside of them to say and share with the page.

With inspiration and my thanks,

*Karen Benke*

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This teaching guide features prompts for the classroom setting appropriate for grades 6-12. Each prompt is aligned to the Common Core English Language Arts

Standards for Writing (indicated to the right of each exercise) and also includes other writing exercises from *Write Back Soon!* for further exploration.

## PROMPT #1

What is your favorite part of the day?  
Seeing your friends at school? Working  
on a new science project? Taking time to  
read on the bus to school?

Write a note or letter to a classmate  
or teacher and support your claim for  
a favorite light-filled part of your day.  
Maybe reach for something humble the  
way Karen suggests on p. 18 like a paper  
bag. As you handwrite, support your  
claim with reasons, evidence, original  
details from your original life. This might  
change your and someone else's entire day.

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### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1, CCSS.ELA-  
LITERACY.W.7.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons  
and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of  
substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and  
relevant and sufficient evidence.

*Find more activities that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- Something Shared p. 16
- Sixty-Five Opportunities for More Light p. 18
- Another Name to Write With p. 69
- Write to Delight p. 86
- Dear Younger / Older Me p. 117
- The Boy With Red Hair p. 130

## PROMPT #2

Choose a topic in the news that  
makes you think of a member of  
your family. Maybe there's a political  
candidate that is making headlines,  
an environmental issue that's being  
debated in your home city, or a sports  
team that's on a winning streak.

Read a few different articles and  
write a letter to that family member  
explaining the news event or issue and  
why it made you think of that person.

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### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2, CCSS.ELA-  
LITERACY.W.7.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and  
convey ideas, concepts, and information through the  
selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and  
convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly  
and accurately through the effective selection,  
organization, and analysis of content.

*Find more activities that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- Catch Some Dialogue p. 25
- Another Name to Write With p. 69
- Write to Delight p. 86
- Summer on the Hudson p. 88
- Dear Younger / Older Me p. 117
- Anniversary of a Friend's Death p. 134
- Hello from Peace Rally City p. 145
- A Letter Never Sent p. 184

### PROMPT #3

Choose one of the four activities below from *Write Back Soon!* Be sure to include relevant descriptive details and construct a careful structure for the sequence of your narrative.

The Day We Met p. 35

Do You Remember p. 37

Another Name to Write With p. 69

Write to Delight p. 86

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3,  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

*Find more activities that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- So Much to Be Done p. 8
- Finding Images p. 15
- Sixty-Five Opportunities for More Light p. 18
- Arrive Late, Leave Early p. 20
- Catch Some Dialogue p. 25
- Scarytales p. 34
- Anniversary of a Friend's Death p. 134
- Hello from Peace Rally City p. 145

### PROMPT #4

In "Summer on the Hudson" (p. 88), Karen Benke suggests writing to someone younger than you. Choose a neighbor, friend, or someone in a class below you and give that person advice about what to expect when they are your age. What do they have to look forward to? What are some of the challenges you've faced this year in school?

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

*Find more activities that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- So Much to Be Done p. 8
- Finding Images p. 15
- Something Shared p. 16
- Sixty-Five Opportunities for More Light p. 18
- Another Name to Write With p. 69
- Write to Delight p. 86
- Summer on the Hudson p. 88
- Falling in Love Through the Mail p. 88
- Dear Younger / Older Me p. 117
- The Boy with Red Hair p. 130
- Anniversary of a Friend's Death p. 134
- What You Taught Me p. 137
- Hello from Peace Rally City p. 145
- Dear Life p. 162
- Start with Where You're Living p. 169
- A Letter Never Sent p. 184

## PROMPT #5

In “What Makes Your Heart Swoon” (p. 155) Karen Benke suggests that you “ask someone to read something they’ve taken time and care to write—a poem or a story—not to offer a critique but to get closer to this person’s heart. Ask him to send it to you, then type your response to let him know what you genuinely appreciated.”

Trade your creative writing with a classmate and find out what made his or her heart swoon in your writing.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Alternatively, you could also write a letter to your favorite author and tell that person what makes your heart swoon about their work.

## PROMPT #6

Interview your parents, siblings, or family friends about an elderly relative in your family.

What are their favorite memories of that person? What did the elderly relative teach them?

Use multiple interviews to put together a letter to that relative describing how much they are appreciated and loved.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

*Find more activities that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- Find a Story in the Dictionary p. 28
- You Supply the Middle p. 30
- Another Name to Write With p. 69
- Write to Delight p. 86
- Your Most Important Question p. 174

## PROMPT #7

Choose a lead-in from *Write Back Soon!* and write a three-page letter to a friend or a family member that you wouldn’t mind sharing with a classmate.

Write an outline of the major points you’d like to cover in your letter before you start. When you are finished, give it to the classmate to read. Consider your classmate’s suggestions for ideas to add or sections to rewrite.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Do you take time to write every day—perhaps in a journal? As Karen Benke suggests in *Write Back Soon!* frequent letter writing is a wonderful way to keep in touch with friends and family members. It can also calm us down or lift us up after a hard day, and writing lights up parts in our brains associated with creativity, memory, and empathy. Much more so than email, handwritten letters have a lasting impact on the recipient, and you may even start up a correspondence with someone and experience the thrill of finding some replies in your mailbox.

Could you make letter writing a regular practice? Try taking the time in school to write one short letter during the first 15 minutes of each class period for a few weeks and put it in an envelope then add an address and stamp as soon as you finish. After a few class periods have a class discussion about how letter writing made you feel and find out if anyone received a letter in return!

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



#### 100 WORD STORY

Need someone to write to? Turn to page 33 in *Write Back Soon!* and read about the 100 Word Story project. Submit yours at [www.100wordstory.com](http://www.100wordstory.com).

*Find more exercises that meet these Common Core Standards in Write Back Soon!*

- Send it in Seventeen Syllables p. 5
- A Hello the Length of a Line p. 6
- Letter Lead-In p. 8
- Finding Images p. 15
- Sixty-Five Opportunities for More Light p. 18
- Arrive Late, Leave Early p. 20
- Pushing Words Toward Each Other p. 22
- Catch Some Dialogue p. 25
- Writing on Scraps p. 26
- The Day We Met p. 35
- Do You Remember p. 37
- Three Hundred Sixty-Five Thank-Yous p. 50
- Another Name to Write With p. 69
- Write to Delight p. 86
- Summer on the Hudson p. 88
- The Kindest Thing p. 90
- Specific Days of the Year to Write p. 91
- Small Poems for Every Season p. 96
- Falling in Love through the Mail p. 106
- Dear Younger / Older Me p. 117
- The Boy with Red Hair p. 130
- Anniversary of a Friend's Death p. 134
- What You Taught Me p. 137
- Hello from Peace Rally City p. 145
- A Traveling Notebook and Chocolate Care Packages p. 152
- What Makes Your Heart Swoon p. 155
- What Do You Miss? p. 158
- Dear Life p. 162
- Start with Where You're Living p. 169
- A Letter Never Sent p. 184
- 100 Word Story p. 33



*Your books offer a treasure trove of writing prompts, wise advice from authors, inspiration, and life lessons along the way, such as how to cultivate gratitude, how to write to one reader at a time. How did you assemble this vast collection of writing exercises and magical prompts?*

As a creative writer and poet-teacher, I spend a lot of time with elementary, middle, and high school-aged kids. I've thought a lot about how I felt as a student sitting at my desk, holding my pencil in school...and how I learned to write best when offered open-ended prompts and possibilities to explore my inner and outer life. I thought about the teachers I learned best and most creatively from (my English teachers!) and the books I wish I had for companions as a young writer with many feelings and images swirling through me. When I became a mom fifteen years ago, my son and I read often together. I kept notes on our favorite passages and authors. When I began assembling my collections, I wrote to these authors and asked for notes of encouragement, reasons why pen and paper matter. The response was immediate and generous.

*What has surprised you the most during your journey teaching kids creative writing?*

I'm continually surprised about how hungry kids and teens are to play on the page, to be given permission to pay attention to their lives and write from their truest center. I've learned that a simple invitation and knock-out example poem/story/memoir excerpt/letter that genuinely wows me too is often all that's needed by way of a gentle nudge to get them started. There's so much that student writers need and want to express beyond the narrow margin of greatness they too often get measured by. We all blossom when given space to be strange, surprising, real on the page.

*When did you fall in love with poetry/creative writing?*

In Cleo Gambetta's class at Mercy High School. And then again my freshmen year of college in poet Gary Thompson's Introduction to Writing Poetry. I've always thought in pictures and learned best through images, through kinesthetic modes, through narrative and lyric and the sound of someone's voice. Gary was sensitive when critiquing my early attempts at poem-making. He read to us and pointed out places in poems that meant something to him. He knew how far to push and when to back off. Often after class he'd invite a student to mosey over to the post office with him. I learned a lot on those walks to mail a letter or poetry submission. He was a fine example of a working poet/creative writer. My fate was sealed.

*What's the best writing advice you've ever received?*

Allow for strangeness and be willing to be surprised by both yourself and by the poem. My teacher in graduate school, Jane Hirshfield, said this to me often.

*Do you believe in Writer's Block? And if so, what's the cure?*

I don't believe in Writer's Block. I do believe that we all have these monkey minds that like to convince us—trick us—into believing there's this thing called Writer's Block, to keep us from just fooling around with words. Sometimes all we need is to change locales for a spell, to get up and dance, take a bike ride, walk down a new street, doodle in the margins, fold a square of paper into an origami frog...then return to the assignment at hand refreshed and ready to write.

*Where do you seek inspiration?*

From watching and listening to people talk, especially to children...from deep sleep and paying attention to my dreams, from traveling far and getting lost in New York City to staying close to home and going on Sa-NEAR-is. When my son was five, he loved staying home all day in his pajamas and not going far. “I don’t want to go on any more Sa-FAR-is, Mom, I want to go on a Sa-NEAR-i.” I go on Sa-NEAR-is now to find inspiration: stay home and look at a book off the shelf I haven’t paid attention to lately, look at the dog’s paws, the cat’s whiskers, sit in a corner of a room or on the roof and notice what I notice from a new vantage point. Writing in different locations cannot be emphasized enough. Ditto creating a day for mischief, music, wandering in wonder, and of course writing a letter and mailing it right away....

## CLASSROOM & LIBRARY USE

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“The Executive Director of Junior Leadership Development Program, the Principal of Inspire School of Arts and Sciences and I are in discussions to utilize *Rip the Page!*, *Leap Write In!*, and *Write Back Soon!* in our school’s English classes. I can envision an English curriculum modeled around the principles in Ms. Benke’s books as her approaches make writing a lively and enticing experience. Thank you, Karen Benke, for the magic key! More young writers soon to be unleashed!” —*Grant Branson, Program Development Director, Junior Leadership Development Program*

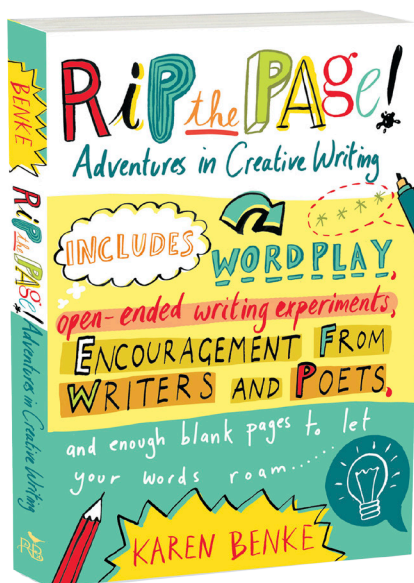
“I use *Rip the Page!*, *Leap Write In!* and *Write Back Soon!* for class visits to Poets House Library all the time. They are invaluable resources for sparking the creative mind and pretty much live on my desk.” —*Mike Romanos, Children’s Room Director & Education Coordinator, Poets House, New York City*

“I am so excited about Karen Benke’s creative writing adventure books and will be purchasing them for all our campuses. She sees young people in all their dynamic magic.” —*Grace Colman Losada, Director of Education at Fusion Education Group*

“I guess I knew my book club kids were smart, but it wasn’t until I started reading the stuff they wrote using Karen’s prompts that I realized just how bloody brilliant they could be.” —*Betsy Bird, NYPL Librarian, SLJ Blogger at A Fuse #8 Productions*

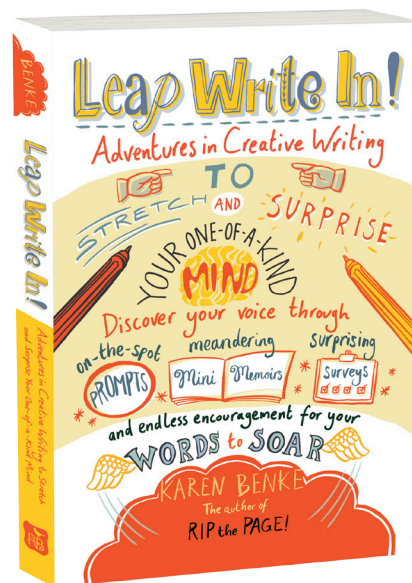
“*Rip the Page!*, *Leap Write In!*, and *Write Back Soon!* are vital resources when searching for more ways to enhance those moments of joy and inspiration when writing with my students. By playing with words and ideas we challenge our understanding of language and communication, helping us remember the power of authentic voice. I look forward to each new book” —*Carrie Oretsky, Teacher, Oakland, California School District*

## ADDITIONAL READING



Roost Books | Paperback  
9781590308127 | 256 pages | \$14.95

Now in a third printing, here are the ideas, experiments, and inspiration to unfold your imagination and get your writing to flow off the page!



Roost Books | Paperback  
9781611800159 | 288 pages | \$16.95

Created especially for tweens, teens, and other earthlings, this book provides you with a chance to create imaginative poems, stories, fragments, and real-life on-the-spot sketches.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Susan Adler

Karen Benke is the author of a poetry collection, *Sister* (Conflux Press, 2004), and three popular books on creative writing adventures—*Rip the Page!* (Roost Books, 2010), *Leap Write In!* (Roost Books, 2013), and *Write Back Soon!* (Roost Books 2015). The recipient of grants and awards from Poets & Writers, the Marin Arts Council Fund for Writers, the Hedgebrook Foundation, and the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, her books have been featured in *Family Fun Magazine*, *Marin Magazine*, *Kids Book Review* (Australia), *Children's Book Review*, and *SouleMama*. She is the creator of The Museletter, a writing mentor,

a workshop leader for kids and adults, and a long-time teacher with California Poets in the Schools. She lives north of the Golden Gate Bridge with her teenage son, a magic cat, and a rescue dog. She prefers letters delivered to her physical mailbox, although she can be reached at her website (<http://karenbenke.com>).

We would love to hear from you if you decide to use Karen Benke's books in your class.  
Email [ckelley@shambhala.com](mailto:ckelley@shambhala.com) and let us know!