



# DISCOVERING SMALL MOMENTS, AS ANGELA MIGHT

## GETTING READY

- ▶ *Joshua's Night Whispers*
- ▶ 2" x 1" tiny topics notepads, one for each child; buy spirals and cut them in thirds
- ▶ Construction paper that will fit neatly on the covers of the tiny topics notepads; write each child's name on a cover and paper clip these onto the spiral notebooks; have extras on hand
- ▶ Markers, pens, glue sticks, and other materials for decorating covers
- ▶ Paper for writing stories
- ▶ Letter to parents explaining the tiny topics notepads
- ▶ Books to read aloud preceding the minilessons: *The Other Way to Listen*, *The Wise Woman and Her Secret*
- ▶ Large, clear packing tape
- ▶ See CD-ROM for resources

THIS SESSION REPRESENTS THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH *for your author study*. You will want to create ribbon-cutting excitement, and to make your children feel as if they are embarking on a whole new chapter in their writing lives. This will be a challenge because for the first few days of this study you'll ask children to resume writing *Small Moment* narratives as they have been.

You'll want to consolidate the instructional ground you have already traveled so that this unit's new work can build on (rather than replace) previous instruction. Then your author study of Angela Johnson can help children make reading-writing connections.

When you introduce Angela Johnson, you'll stress not only that she's great, but that she writes just like your children do. You will want your children to adore Angela Johnson and also to identify with her. Then you'll encourage children to follow Angela Johnson's model by living wide-awake, attentive lives, and by recording tiny topics in their new, tiny notepads. This notepad will embody your new emphasis on living like real authors. By using Angela Johnson to encourage students to slow down and take note of their own lived lives, you'll help students write better.

In this session, then, you'll help students notice that Angela Johnson finds tiny moments to write about, and you'll help them try to do that themselves, as they have in the past.





## THE MINILESSON

### Connection

**Tell children that you recently found an author who writes just like them.**

"I was in the town library this weekend and I found this book," Amanda held up *Joshua's Night Whispers*. "I read it, and I thought, 'This is *just like* the books you kids write!' Let me read it to you." Amanda read the forty-three-word book lovingly.

In the nighttime the wind brings night whispers, so I follow them . . . past my toybox . . . and out my door . . . then down the hall. Night whispers all around. At last Daddy's holding me warm and safe and we listen together to the night whispers.

"When I find a book that's a lot like books I'm trying to write, I sometimes say—'Wait a minute. Maybe this author could be a teacher, a mentor for me. I could see *how* she does this kind of writing, because I'm trying to do the exact same thing!'"

"I suggest that for the next few weeks, we take Angela Johnson as our mentor, our teacher, and we try to learn from her (because we're a lot like her). What do you think?" The children nodded with vigor.

**Reread the author's work, pointing out that the author has written a text that is like what the children write. In this instance, Angela Johnson has written a Small-Moment story like those the children have been writing.**

"I'm going to reread this book and this time when you listen, notice that it's a Small-Moment story just like the stories you've been writing." Amanda reread aloud *Joshua's Night Whispers*.

In the nighttime the wind brings night whispers, so I follow them . . . past my toy box . . . and out my door . . . then down the hall. Night whispers all around. At last Daddy's holding me warm and safe and we listen together to the night whispers.



*Amanda and I selected Angela Johnson because Joshua's Night Whispers is a perfect exemplar text for Small Moment writing.*

*We don't begin the unit by laying out all Angela Johnson's books and saying, "Go to it." Instead, we draw children close around this single text. If our author study had been Ezra Jack Keats, we'd focus similarly on The Snowy Day and if it was Donald Crews, we'd look at Shortcut.*

*Amanda gets right to the heart of this unit and does so using simple, straight words. "I suggest we take Angela Johnson as our mentor." She doesn't detour into a long definition of mentor but does include a synonym at just the right moment.*

*We again tell children how we want them to listen before we read aloud in a minilesson.*

**Tell children that today they need to choose topics and get started on new pieces. Explain that when you have a mentor author (as they now have Angela Johnson), she teaches you lessons like how to choose topics and how to get started.**

“We were on vacation so we missed writing workshop for two weeks. I know you all are dying to write. So, today we’ll choose topics so we can start our new writing pieces. Today I want to teach you that a mentor author like Angela Johnson can give us tips on how to come up with ideas for writing.”

## Teaching

**Tell children that Angela probably first thought of a big general topic and then decided to focus on a tiny aspect of that topic.**

“I’m pretty sure that when Angela sits down to write (like we’ll do soon) she probably has a few big, huge topics on her mind. I think of them as watermelon topics.” Amanda used her hands to visually illustrate the big size of a watermelon topic. “She probably thinks ‘I *could* write about my vacation’” Amanda’s hands showed this would be a watermelon topic, “‘or all about my son Joshua (another watermelon topic). . . .’”

“Angela could have written *everything* she had to say about Joshua: how he found an acorn that looked like a man on his walk yesterday, how he loved to make pancakes shaped like a *J*. . . .” Amanda’s voice accentuated that this would have resulted in a scattered, on-and-on, list-like sort of piece. “But Angela decided not to write about a watermelon topic—like ‘all about’ her son—and instead she took just one tiny seed, one tiny topic. So she wrote just about the time when Joshua heard night noises and got out of bed.”

*You will want to decide how the author you have selected can help children with the very beginning of their writing process. You won’t want to say, “Angela Johnson wrote about the sounds of one evening and you can write about night sounds too,” because you are hoping children learn strategies (not topics) from authors they admire. You could help children emulate Angela’s process of mining her ordinary home life for topics. Amanda decided to focus not on helping children know what they could write about, but on reminding them to zoom in on tiny, specific topics*

*This metaphor has been helpful in lots of K–1 classrooms, but a few children interpret the term watermelon topic literally and write about watermelons and seeds! Be mindful that metaphors can be confusing to children who are English language learners. Don’t bypass metaphor, but do explicitly tell them what you mean. “You know how watermelons are big? Well, when I say a ‘watermelon topic’ I mean a big topic such as. . . .”*

**Tell children you think Angela Johnson probably uses a notepad to record the little details that later become stories.**

“I’m pretty sure that to write this, Angela Johnson probably heard Joshua get out of bed in the night, and she probably said to herself, ‘I could write about that.’ Then she probably wrote the idea in a tiny topics notepad like this.”

Amanda held up a tiny spiral notepad. “Maybe she wrote ‘Joshua—up in the night.’ Then later when it was writing time, she probably saw the idea she’d written and thought, ‘That’d make a good story!’”

## Active Engagement

**Ask children to think of a big topic and to tell that topic to their writing partners. Then ask them to think of one tiny, tiny story idea—one seed—inside that big watermelon topic.**

“Right now, think of a big watermelon idea . . . my trip, my dog, playing with my friend, and tell that topic to your partner.” They did so in twenty seconds. “Now think of a tiny, tiny seed idea, one detailed story inside that big *watermelon* idea. Angela’s watermelon idea was to write about her son Joshua, and she actually wrote about the tiny, tiny topic (the size of a tiny seed) about one time when Joshua got out of bed because he heard night noises. She wrote that in her tiny topics notepad. Turn to your partner and tell your partner your tiny topic.”

Alissa turned to Anthony, “I can write about how, when I went skating, the ice was slippery. I almost fell. My sister held my hand.” She gestured to show how her outstretched arms helped her maintain her balance while skating.

“I am going to write about when I was with my dad in the park and I was trying to knock icicles down from the trees.”

“Did you get any icicles?” Alissa asked, but before Anthony could answer, it was time to reconvene with the class.

*It takes imagination for the author study to inform children’s work because all we have to go on is the author’s final text, not the author’s process. This is okay because we can help children imagine what the author probably did to write. This works because we can surmise that the author probably did whatever it is we want our kids to do! Amanda and I emphasize the lifework of writing not because of our study of Angela Johnson but because we think that after a semester of writing in school, it is time for children’s writing lives to spill over into their homes. We use the author study, then, as a forum for teaching that writers live differently.*

*Every unit of study adds a new tool, and each new tool becomes a concrete representation of that unit’s new concept. During the revision unit, children had revision pens of a different color. Soon you’ll give them tiny topic notepads and these will be concrete representations of the fact that writers consider the details of their lives worth noticing, and live differently because they write.*

Whispering, Anthony said, “Yeah, ‘cause my dad put me on his shoulders! Then I could reach.”

## Link

**Show students that writers record their ideas. Give students tiny topics notepads in which to collect tiny details they might write about.**

“I was thinking you all might want to live writerly lives just like Angela. I’ve got something very special for each of you.” Amanda held up one of the tiny notepads. “Before we can write in these tiny topics notepads, we need to make them our very own, so I have a cover page that I’ll give to each of you. Today let’s decorate our covers, and then I’ll attach the cover to your tiny topics notepad. If you have more time after that, you can open up your tiny topics notepad and write the story idea you just had or others. Then you can get a booklet and begin to write one of your stories.”

“So let’s fancy up these tiny topics notepads. Would the table monitor from the red table come and get your covers and notepads? The table monitor from the blue table. . . .”

## MID-WORKSHOP TEACHING POINT

**Intervene to remind children to jot ideas for topics in their notepads—and not to write whole stories there.**

Once a few children had finished decorating their covers and were ready to write, Amanda reiterated what goes in the notepads. “Writers, may I stop you? Alissa’s notepad is all set to go, and now she’s going to write ‘almost falling on the ice’ on one page because that’s one tiny topic she could write. She already wrote ‘too small coat’ because last night she tried on her winter coat and the sleeves came to here on her. So right on this page,” Amanda said, holding up Alissa’s notepad, “she wrote ‘too small coat.’ If she decides to turn that into a story, will she write the whole story here, in her tiny topics notepad?”

“Nooooooo!”

“You’re right. She’d get a booklet like this for her whole story, right?”

*It is important to notice whether any children have taken your metaphor literally and are talking about watermelon and honeydew melon. If this happens, be patient and continue to move between the metaphor and the concrete meaning, as when you say, “Angela Johnson didn’t write ‘all about’ her son, she didn’t write about a huge watermelon-sized topic, did she?”*

*All the kids won’t totally “get” the idea of what to put into the notepads (a phrase capturing their topic idea, as in “knocking down icicles”) versus the four-page booklets (the Small-Moment story, like those they’ve written all year). You may need to confer or lead strategy lessons to help them. For now, they will have no trouble getting started decorating their covers.*

*As children complete the illustrations on the cover of their books, use clear packing tape to tape the covers onto the books in a way that effectively laminates them to the existing spiral notebook covers.*

*It is very important that the notepads are tiny. We often buy very small spirals (with wire loops along the side) and cut each of these into three even-tinier notepads. In the next session, we use lanyards to turn these into necklaces.*

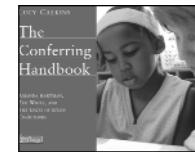


## TIME TO CONFER

You will have your hands full today. For ten minutes, your children will be absorbed in an effort to decorate their covers. You can supervise and manage, supplying new pieces of construction paper to children who worry that they messed up their first efforts and taping completed covers onto the spirals. While you do this, talk up the purposes of the tool. "Once you're done, you'll want to carry this with you everywhere just like I do with my notepad. Yesterday, I was in the midst of patting my dog and all of a sudden I got an idea for a tiny topic." See the conferences cited at right from the *Conferring with Primary Writers* book.

As soon as children begin to write, you'll need to guard against them writing their whole stories in these notebooks. If you catch a child filling up page after page, that's a good sign that they're doing just that—race over immediately and remind the child to record just a note, rather than the whole story. If you don't do this, the notepad will be filled up in no time. If a lot of children reach this point, convene a strategy lesson or bring Session II's mid-workshop teaching point into today.

Most of your conferring time will be usurped by the mechanics of today, but if you have chances for real conferences, use the Small Moment conferences as guides.

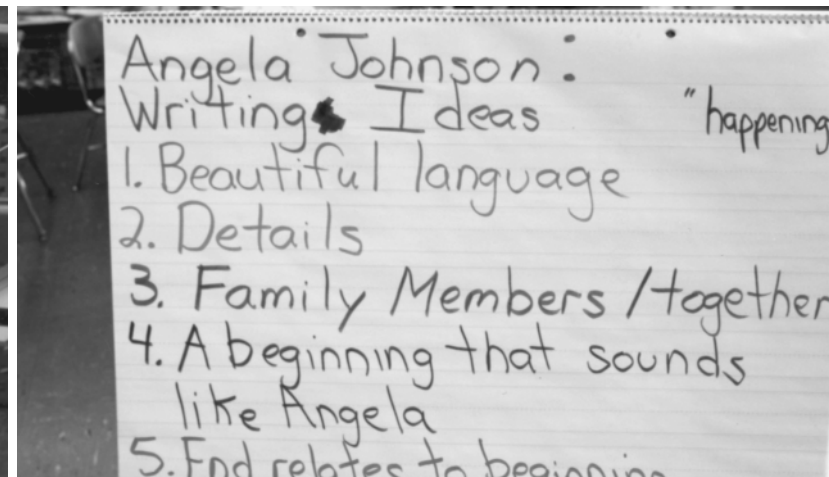


These conferences in *The Conferring Handbook* may be especially helpful today:

- ▶ "Will You Touch Each Page and Say What You'll Write?"
- ▶ "Let Me Help You Put Some Words Down"
- ▶ "As a Reader, I'd Love to Hear More About That"

Also, if you have *Conferring with Primary Writers*, you may want to refer the following conferences:

- ▶ A Strategy Lesson on Keeping a Tiny-Topics Notepad
- ▶ "Are You Stuck?"





## AFTER-THE-WORKSHOP SHARE

**Show the class the writing a few students did. Use these examples to teach how to use the tiny notepads**

“Many of you have been showing me the tiny topics you recorded in your tiny topics notepad. We know Angela Johnson probably wrote, ‘Joshua—up in the night’ in her tiny topics notepad. Ben wrote, ‘purring on the chair.’ That note reminds him of a whole story about his cat coming to sleep beside him. Rachael wrote, ‘Mom left’ and that topic reminds her of a Small-Moment story about when she thought her Mom had left without saying good-bye. Eric wrote, ‘cherry pie’ and I can almost taste it right now!”

## POST-WORKSHOP TEACHING POINT

**Convene students. Reread *Joshua’s Night Whispers*. Have students talk with their partners about how Angela probably lived her life to write this book.**

“Before you go, I’m going to reread Angela Johnson’s *Joshua’s Night Whispers* one more time. This time, I want you to think about the kind of life Angela probably lives to write like this because before you go home, I want you to think about living, tonight, like an author.”

**Have students think about how Angela Johnson lives her life in order to write as she does. Elicit a few responses.**

Amanda read the book aloud. “What kind of life do you suppose she lives to write like this?”

Damon said, “It’s a good story.”

“Yes, it is a great story. But Damon, what I asked was this. What kind of life do you suppose Angela lives to write like this?”

“That she loves her family?”

“That’s a smart observation. How do you suppose she remembers tiny moments like this one?”

“Maybe she puts stuff in a notepad to tell what her kid does.”

*We actually don’t have any evidence that Angela Johnson keeps a 2” x 1” notepad for topic ideas, but she’s assured me that we can take this poetic license! Children benefit from multiple and very specific examples of the sort of thing you hope they will do.*

*Notice this is a Before-you-go-home minilesson! The architecture—connection, teaching, active engagement link—is almost, but not quite, present. At the start of this intervention, Amanda names what she’ll teach and how this fits into their prior work.*

*We do children no favors if we ask a question and then accept responses that can’t address the stated question. Notice how Amanda handles Damon’s responses.*

“Or maybe she sits in her house and thinks about Joshua.”

“It’s like she remembers everything. She remembers all the noises and places he went to find them.”

**Tell students what you heard them saying.**

“I heard you guys say that Angela really loves her family and pays attention to them. She noticed how her son climbs out of bed to find the night noises. What Damon said is so true—it *is* like she remembers everything! Writers *do* find stories in the little everyday things like going to bed and waking up. They find stories in the morning sun, the lost mitten that no one can find when it is time to leave for school, and the walk in the rain with one’s sister.”

**Remind students to watch for little things that could become stories and to record these in their tiny topics notepads.**

“We’re going to be leaving for home soon and tonight I have an assignment for you. I want you to live like writers. Today we learned that writers like Angela Johnson *write* with details because they *live* with details.”

“Collect little, tiny details that you can later turn into stories. For example, earlier I looked at those bird tracks out our window and I wrote, ‘bird footprints.’ So tonight, look at the small things in your house and write a few that matter into your tiny topics notepads. Be like Angela Johnson. Listen and look closely. Tomorrow you’ll all write with details because tonight you’ll live with details.”

*Details convey worlds more than generalizations. Amanda says, “Writers find stories in the lost mitten . . . the walk in the rain . . .” rather than simply saying “Writers find stories in small details.”*

*Notice that the Active Engagement phase of the minilesson is missing. Amanda is trying to set the children up to work well at home, but she wants this minilesson to go more quickly than the one earlier today.*

*The parallel construction in this sentence makes it easier to absorb. Writers write with details because they live with details.*





## IF CHILDREN NEED MORE TIME

Although most minilessons are tightly organized to introduce, demonstrate, and provide practice on a very specific skill, today's minilesson—like most first minilessons in a unit—instead provides a big-picture overview.

You'll "unpack" this minilesson over the days that follow. Among other things:

- ▶ You'll want to keep your own tiny topics notepad and be very public about the times when you write in it. If the goldfish dies, tell children that you realize you could write a story about this and record it in your tiny topics notepad. If someone says something funny or sweet or worth remembering say, "Can you guys wait one second, I have to do something" and pull your notepad out without making an explicit lesson or obvious fuss over what you're doing. They'll notice all the more!
- ▶ Meanwhile, you can also give children opportunities throughout the day to identify watermelon topics and seed-like tiny topics for each other. When they come in from recess, say, "If Sophia wanted to write about recess, would that be a watermelon topic or a seed-like tiny topic? What about if she wrote about swinging so high she almost touched the tree branch—would that be a watermelon topic or a seed-like tiny topic?"
- ▶ The children's books mentioned in Getting Ready will fit perfectly into this minilesson. They are precious jewels—don't miss the chance to share them with your children.