STEP UP Your Planning to
ENGAGE and ***INSPIRE*** ELA Students

READ IT WRITE IT LOVE IT

EMILY AIERSTOK

JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

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Write It
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To my biggest supporter and love, Kevin; to Ava, Max, and Cam, my whole world.

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About the Author

Emily Aierstok has been teaching in the Capital Region of New York State since 2000, first as a substitute teacher, then as a special education teacher, and finally as a high school and middle school ELA teacher. She has spent most of her career in the seventh-grade ELA classroom working to instill a love of reading in her students while helping them to find the power of voice in writing. Emily is a fierce advocate for her students and for public education, the mom of three strong children of her own, and married to fellow teacher, best friend, and colleague, Kevin Aierstok.

Beyond the classroom, Emily has written two books, presented nationally with Keeping the Wonder and Get Your Teach On, trained teachers locally as part of New York State's transition to new standards, worked as curriculum ambassador in her home district and the surrounding Capital Region, and coached and advised various sports and

clubs. Her greatest professional accomplishment is seeing each of her students grow up to be a successful and caring human being.

Emily's greatest joys are her family and friends. Emily and her husband have taught at the same school for their entire careers through two schools; he is Emily's biggest cheerleader, supporter, and the love of her life. Emily's three kids are her whole world, and she's had the magical experience of having each of them in class in her small school. Growing up, Emily's parents were deeply invested in public education as volunteers, which instilled her passion for learning to this day. Education and public schools are a family affair! Emily and her family love learning and are passionate about serving their quaint, picturesque, amazing community of Greenwich, New York.

The STEP Up Planning Technique: An Introduction

It Starts with a single moment—helping a reluctant student find their voice in writing, supporting a child as they use narrative writing as their therapy, making nouns and verbs something relatable and engaging. I see you in those moments, handing a stack of books custom-picked for the child who claims to hate reading. I see you grading for hours and hours because you know the value of feedback. I see you teaching a nearly perfect lesson and then reflecting on all the ways it could have been better. I see you welcoming a student into your classroom who struggled to behave the day before, and I see that the thought of supporting that student kept you up at night researching and thinking of a solution. As a teacher who has spent the past 23 years and counting in the middle school classroom doing the work, I see you, and I'm so incredibly proud of the work you're doing every single day.

The Magic of Teaching

If there's one thing I know about teachers, it's that their whole heart is in their classrooms. There is magic in teaching, and a big chunk of that magic is love—the relationships between kids and teachers—something that is built quite naturally through day-to-day interactions, through showing how much you care about your students, and through conversations and a simple, "How are you doing today?" But there's also

something else, another form of magic that can revolutionize your classroom and take students on the fast track to learning. This type of magic is not the kind that's romanticized in movies or in stories about your favorite teacher from growing up, but without it, the magic is a lot less possible.

What is this second kind of magic? Structure. It's the structure of a lesson that supports your students so they have the cognitive space to reach new heights. It's structure that makes lessons predictable in a way that makes students feel safe enough to take risks. It's structure that replaces traditional classroom management so you can focus more on teaching and building relationships and less on behaviors.

My first full-time teaching job was in 2001, out of my content area. I was hired as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, but the teacher in the position I was filling decided not to retire. I was crushed, but the district offered me something new—a position in high school special education. The school received special permission to allow me to teach out of my content area. I was terrified. That first year, I left school many days in tears. I had students whose parents were addicted to crack. I had students who were facing bullying and racism. I had zero budget, and my students did not have any books in their 12-1-1 classroom, a huge injustice and inequality for students who deserved a complete education. While I wouldn't describe that first year as magic, it was love that got my students and me through.

While the rest of the ninth-grade students were reading *Romeo and Juliet*, my students, who ranged in age from 13 to 18 with reading levels starting at pre-K, had zero set curriculum. I found an adapted version of *Romeo and Juliet* that was accessible to my students, and we made sock puppets modeled after the character descriptions, a Globe theater based on the history of Shakespeare's theater that we researched, and we acted out the entire play. My kids could access Shakespeare if they had a ladder allowing them to reach the same heights as their classmates. When the rest of the ninth grade had

access to novels, my students had none. The previous teacher used magazines for all of the students' reading lessons, but I knew the students in front of me deserved to experience novels in their hands. I begged and borrowed until I had a full set of the novel, *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. I hadn't figured out the structured elements of teaching, but I did know love, and I knew that kids, no matter their ability level, economic status, or social situation, deserved to escape into stories and find their voices in writing. They had stories to tell, and I had a passion for helping them tell their stories.

The next school year, I got married, and my husband and I moved to the district where we both currently teach, where our three children attend school, and where we hope to teach for the rest of our careers. I've been in the same classroom teaching middle school ELA, high school summer school, and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) since 2002.

In 2017, at the encouragement of my colleagues, I decided to use all of my classroom experience and my passion for researching and writing to help other teachers. I started *Read it Write it Learn it*, my curriculum writing and consulting business where I have published more than 170 standards- and research-based materials, lessons, and units. On my blog, `www.readitwriteitlearnit.com`, I share my ideas and detail my experiences in the classroom with the hopes of inspiring the next generation of educators by not only giving them ideas but also by saving them precious time so they can better focus on their students. You will find all of these ideas and my favorite resources that I use in my own middle school classroom in this book.

This school year, I had the magical opportunity to teach several children of students I taught my first year of teaching. I think back to that first year, and all I can reflect is. . . I had no idea what I was doing. When I reflect on who I was as a teacher and who I am as a teacher today, there are common threads—and love is definitely one of them. I've spent a lot of time building relationships, making sure my students

trust me, getting to know my students so I can tap into their prior knowledge and outside passions and motivate each student to learn, and working to ensure all of my students have access to learning. However, there are stark differences between my first year of teaching and now, specifically when it comes to practice—methods I've learned and grown as I've reflected and adapted year after year for more than 20 years of teaching.

The number-one difference and the number-one game-changer that has made my teaching complete is *structure*.

When I think of you, I know your classroom is a home you create for your students. I know you are an expert in your craft, even on the days you don't feel like it. Like so many of us, I also know you're constantly reflecting and improving what you do in the classroom. This book, *Read It Write It Love It*, is designed to bring teachers just like you to the next level, to a place where your classroom runs smoothly and effortlessly. This book is designed to structure the behind-the-scenes work that shapes your classroom, making management a breeze and allowing you to focus on what matters most—your students.

I'm excited to share my reflections and the lessons I've learned about combining a love of your students and of reading and writing with structure. With a few sprinkles of planning magic, you can reflect back knowing not only your classroom space has made students feel loved, but your teaching practices also allowed students to reach new heights in reading and writing.

When I look back on my first year of teaching, I see a classroom full of kids excited to learn. I poured every ounce of my love and energy into my teaching. Kids ate lunch with me every day. I coached and advised clubs and practically lived at school. Since then, I've learned a healthier balance to avoid burnout. I have a family and three kids of my own, and having a healthy life outside of school is an essential part of being the best teacher I can be. The planning and grading practices I share in this book will help you with balance, too. It is possible to show love to your students *and* to yourself, I promise.

Those early years of teaching, I read *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell and fully embraced reading and writing workshops; I was really good at getting my kids excited about reading and finding their voices in writing, but I struggled with classroom management. I loved my students and they loved me, but my students didn't always read. I knew some students were dishonest about their reading (one student infamously moved his bookmark without having read a word), but I wasn't sure how to balance their strengths, needs, and struggles with accountability and authentic learning experiences.

In those first years, I did everything in my power to engage my students and inspire learning, something I still do today, but I've learned that the most important elements of classroom management don't happen on the fly—they happen during planning. Having a clear, structured plan for every class period is where most of my classroom management takes place today. Anticipating students' needs based on data and samples I've collected happens before a lesson. The words love and structure might feel like a juxtaposition; however, it is the planning and structure of your lessons that will make room for the most magical experiences with your students.

Planning Is Love

When the Common Core standards were just released, I worked for New York State training teachers on how to adapt their curriculum. New York State released heavily scripted modules aligned to the standards, and most of what I did in teacher trainings was reassure teachers that they did not need to completely change their curriculum or philosophies—teachers did not want to exchange the magic that was happening in their classrooms for scripted curriculum, and my whole heart agreed. Instead of following the scripted curriculum, I trained teachers on how to adapt the amazing work they were already doing to target the standards and become better focused on key skills. That work of targeting standards in creative, authentic, and

meaningful ways has shaped the work I do today. Teachers—you—are the experts.

I am not a better teacher today because I have completely changed my curriculum or philosophies. The heart of my teaching is the same as it was my first year of teaching. What I have mastered, and what I'm sharing with you, is structure.

The STEP Up Planning System

Today, my lessons have a clear structure and focus. I have always had a passion for planning, and I've come to learn that planning is love. Through trial and error, I have developed the STEP Up planning technique that I use today. STEP is an acronym for Standard, Text, Engage, and Plan. Up is a reminder to get kids on their feet and actively learning because middle schoolers have Energy with a capital E that we can tap into.

Using the STEP Up technique, each lesson I write builds on the next and works toward students building mastery of North Star standards, the standards that, like the North Star, provide direction. There is purpose behind everything my students do, from the intensive writing units to the fun escape rooms, and that purpose is tied to a standard and that standard is both formally and informally assessed, reflected on, and transparent. Kids know why they're learning, they understand the process, and they have the opportunity to reflect, self-assess, and, if necessary, relearn.

There are so many initiatives in education that require extra work and time teachers simply don't have. The practices I share in this book will not only help you improve your technique as a teacher but also save you time. The STEP Up lesson planning technique gives you the ingredients you need to be successful, and they quickly become second nature. Not only does planning become easier, but with clearly mapped goals, grading also becomes easier and more efficient.

To many people, structure means order, and that's true in my classroom, but structure also gives my students and me the freedom to play. Once students have established a routine, something we begin working on from the very first day of school, cognitive space is freed up to explore and have fun in the classroom. With structure, classroom management falls into place, and you can focus on students and learning. Students know exactly what to expect and what they need to do, and they are largely in control of their learning within the frame of each lesson.

Think of units and lessons like the most delicious chocolate chip cookie. Every chocolate chip cookie recipe has the same essential ingredients that make the cookies melt in your mouth: chocolate chips, brown sugar, flour, butter, and a whole lot of love. A good lesson is much the same. There are common elements that make it work. When we have a recipe, planning becomes easier. Management becomes easier. Students are able to achieve more because lessons naturally build on one another, and every once in a while, you can throw in some coconut or walnuts to spice things up and make lessons fresh and exciting!

The STEP Up Framework

Before I hand out a syllabus to my seventh-grade ELA students, the first thing students learn is routine. Behind the scenes, our routine is directly tied to the structure I use to plan our lessons: the STEP Up planning system. STEP Up is an acronym that drives my lessons and units and helps to ensure every lesson has the essential elements:

S: Standard

T: Text

E: Engage

P: Plan from the assessment

Up: On-your-feet activities

Within this frame, I can get creative by coming up with engaging topics students will love and by planning unique activities that will capture students' attention. By choosing standards as a focus, my North Star standards, I am able to structure lessons within a frame: Every lesson, no matter how different or creative, begins with a standards-based bell ringer, which is a three- to five-minute task students complete as the bell rings to start our class, and ends with an exit ticket, which is a task that measures students' understanding of that standard before students exit the class.

STEP Up in Practice

Picture this: A herd of 12-year-old children enters the junior high hallway on the first day of school. Lockers are slamming. Kids huddle in circles talking about their summers. New sneakers are squeaking down the hallways. The smell of body spray lingers in the air. Slowly kids stagger into their first-period classrooms, wrapping up their conversations as they make their way to seats.

As students enter their desks, they are greeted with a task displayed on the Smartboard and a five-minute timer. This is their first introduction to bell ringers. The first-day bell ringer typically involves putting names on supplies and labeling homework folders—it's meant to be simple, and it's meant to establish a clear routine.

After a few days, the bell ringer routine becomes second nature. Students move from the chaos of the hallway to the familiarity of their classroom routine. They sit down and open their Chromebooks to Google Classroom where they find their standards-based bell ringer, which is also displayed on the board. A five-minute timer ticks down. A list of necessary supplies for the day's lesson is also displayed. Students complete their bell ringer while the teacher circulates, supports, and takes care of administrative tasks: taking attendance, catching up with students who have been absent, and gathering or resetting supplies from the previous class.

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