

A classroom workbook companion to **Louisa Learns to Write: Louisa May Alcott Creates 'Little Women'**
by Kate Hannigan, illustrated by Sofia Moore (Calkins Creek/Astra Books for Young Readers; January 2026)

Ten Habits for Becoming a Writer

Since *Little Women* was published over 150 years ago, Louisa May Alcott's beloved novel has never gone out of print. But Louisa didn't always meet with success. She struggled for years to learn how to write well. What follows are ten habits writers like Louisa developed on the way to becoming authors, as well as "writing sprints" to help build writing muscles!

1.Read: Pick up a book and get lost in a story.

When we read, we build new connections in our brains! These pathways help us learn information and decode language. Reading not only makes us smart, it builds our emotional intelligence too!

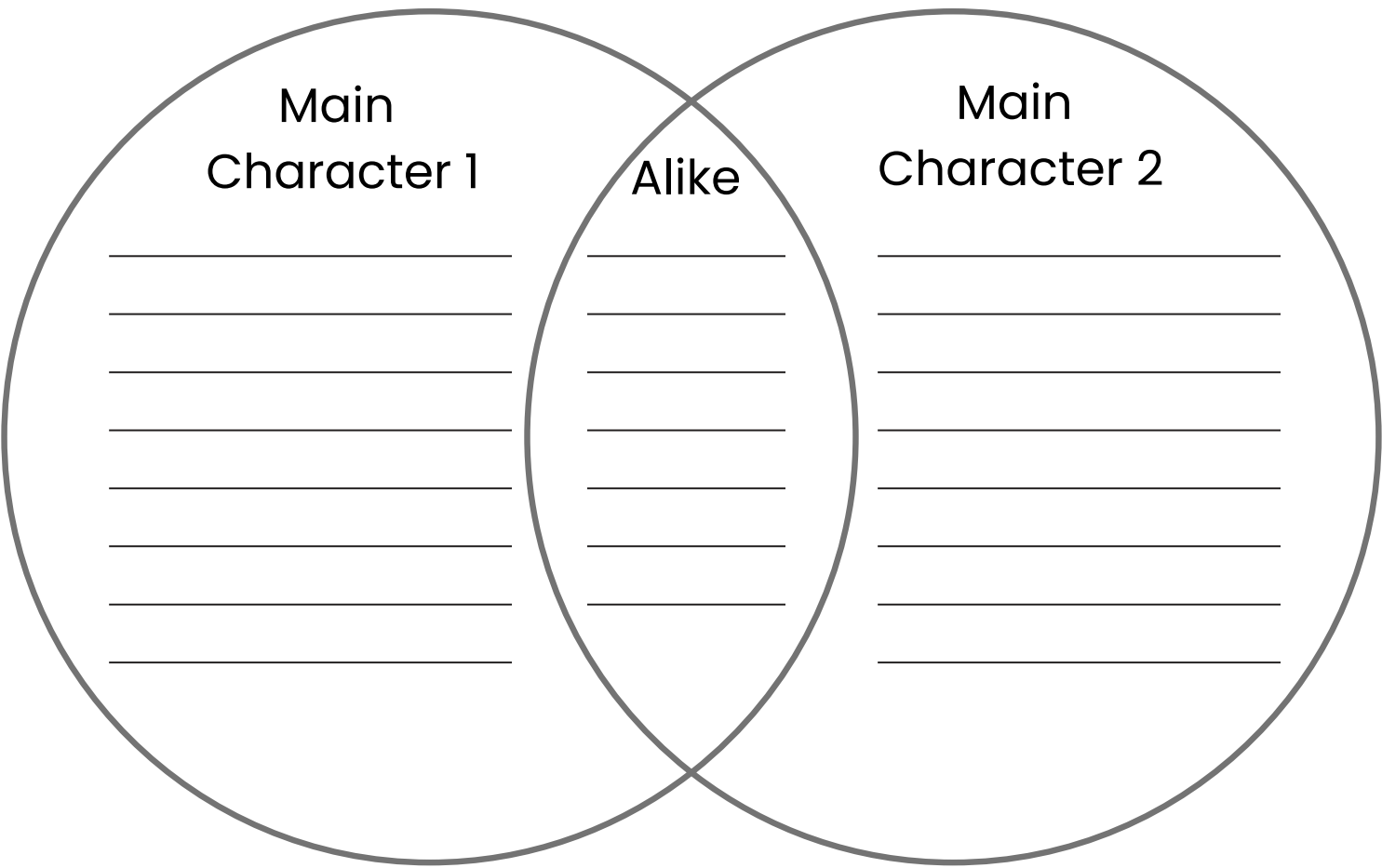
Writing Sprint! *Grab your pencil and paper!*

Think of a favorite book you've read. How did the story make you feel? Name the book and describe what moved you—to tears, laughter, frustration, or even relief.

How did the author stir your emotions? Through dialogue? Figurative language?



Now think about a second favorite book you've read, and let's compare the two using a Venn diagram. List traits of the main character in Book 1 and traits of the main character in Book 2. In the middle, list the traits they share and how they are alike.



Share a few reasons why you like one book more than the other book.

Why did the authors write their book? Who was their intended audience?





2. Write: The more we put pencil to paper, the easier writing becomes.

As with anything we're learning, repetition is important. Whether we're understanding how to play the guitar, bake a cake, or sink a ball into a net, we have to devote time to our task. And that goes for writing too! The more we write, the easier it becomes.

Writing Sprint!

- **Embarrassment is a powerful emotion**—so powerful that sometimes we remember an embarrassing moment our entire lives! Think about a time when you were embarrassed. Now set the stage for us, describing the details that led up to the moment. What thoughts raced through your mind? What sounds played in your ears? What was your expectation before the moment? What happened as it all played out? Give us details, but keep the action moving!



- **Laughter demonstrates another powerful emotion**, and often it comes about because of a surprise. Think about a time when you felt joyful and laughed deeply, from your belly. What made this moment different from an ordinary day? What were you originally expecting, and what actually happened? Were you alone or did you share it with someone?

- **Everyone feels sadness now and then**. Sometimes it's because of something that happens directly to us, other times it's because of something that's happening to someone we care about. Think about a time when you wanted to cry. Were you witnessing an injustice? Were you missing something with your whole heart? Now describe what your eyes were doing, your bottom lip, your nose, your hands. Was your chest tight? What about your throat? Was it easy to speak or difficult?



3.Observe: Use all five senses to notice details both large and small.

A big challenge of writing is *showing* what's happening rather than *telling*. So authors try to imagine a scene in their minds and begin making observations about it, the way a detective would. When we use our five senses — **seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, feeling** — we can make interesting observations that add pizzazz to our writing.

For example, instead of simply stating “He was hot,” we can observe how our feet feel when we cross a 100-degree parking lot on a summer day and bring that to our writing: “The heat rose through the soles of his sneakers, and his toes began to sweat in his socks. With every step, his feet weighed heavier, and the black tar seemed to bubble like lava.”

Writing Sprint! Use your senses for these quick writing exercises:



Seeing:

Imagine a stray dog arrives at school, and you are in charge of taking care of it the whole day. As it sits in class at your feet, you notice it staring up at you with adoring eyes. You gaze back, filled with adoring too.

Write about what you see. Its eyes? Ears? Coat? When it wags its tail, what does it look like to you? A windshield wiper? A drum?

But wait, you notice something else — moving on the dog's head. Is it a bug? No, not just a bug. It's a dozen bugs. This dog is covered in ticks! Write about the moment.



Smelling:

Imagine walking into your home when cookies are baking in the oven. The aroma is so delicious, your feet lift off the floor and you begin to float toward the kitchen. Describe the way the wonderful smell pulls you through your home.



Tasting:

You sit down with a pile of warm french fries, dip one in the nearby sauce, and pop it into your mouth. *Uh-oh!* That wasn't ketchup! It was hot sauce, and now your mouth feels like it's on fire. Describe what's happening on your tongue? In your head?



Hearing:

Sit as still as you can and let the world settle around you. What do you hear? Is a bird chirping in a tree nearby? Is it singing to its partner? To the baby birds in its nest? Describe the sounds. Do you ever hear family members singing at home? Describe that!



Feeling:

A teacher introduces you to a shy new student, and the two of you shake hands. In that moment, you feel the rough calluses on his palm. For being so young, he has the hands of a grownup. Describe what the calluses feel like and a time when you worked so hard that you developed rough hands too.

4.Play: World-building is a form of storytelling.

We've been storytellers our whole lives. Whenever we play and use our imagination, we are creating the structure of a story. It's just alive in our minds instead of on the page. All we have to do is sit down with a pencil and paper, and write it down for others to enjoy.

Writing Sprint!

Draw two action figures and name them.

Name 1: _____

Name 2: _____

Next draw what's around them. Are they among trees in nature? Standing beside a long-ago castle? Inside a current-day house?

Setting: _____

Now think about what one of them (the protagonist) wants more than anything else. Make the other (the antagonist) stand in the way of that goal.

Hey! Look what you've done! You've set up the elements of a story:

Protagonist:

Setting:

Antagonist:

Conflict:



Once you're done drawing everything, get ready to write down the details. Imagine you are explaining it all **to a younger cousin** who needs a bedtime story. Write one sentence at a time and choose vivid language. And make sure to keep it interesting before your little cousin climbs out of bed!



Hot tip: Have fun with what you're doing!



5.Explore: Discover different kinds of books and ideas.

Stand in the center of your favorite library. **First**, walk to the section where you typically find the books you love (graphic novels?). Choose one book off the shelf. **Now walk away!**

Second, head over to a different section where you don't typically visit (historical fiction?). In this library area, choose another book off the shelf. With two books in your hands, now venture to a **third** section (picture book biographies?). Select a book from this area.

Writing Sprint!

Holding your three books from three sections, read the first ten pages of each one. **Open book, open mind!** Then write down something you like about the story, the writing, and the characters.

Book 1:

Book 2:

Book 3:

Once you've finished all three books, take a few minutes to write a quick summary of each. Fill out the "Someone, Wanted, But, So, Then" exercise.

Book 1

Someone: _____

Wanted: _____

But: _____

So: _____

Then: _____

Book 2

Someone: _____

Wanted: _____

But: _____

So: _____

Then: _____

Book 3

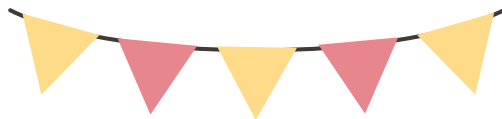
Someone: _____

Wanted: _____

But: _____

So: _____

Then: _____



Host a Book Auction!

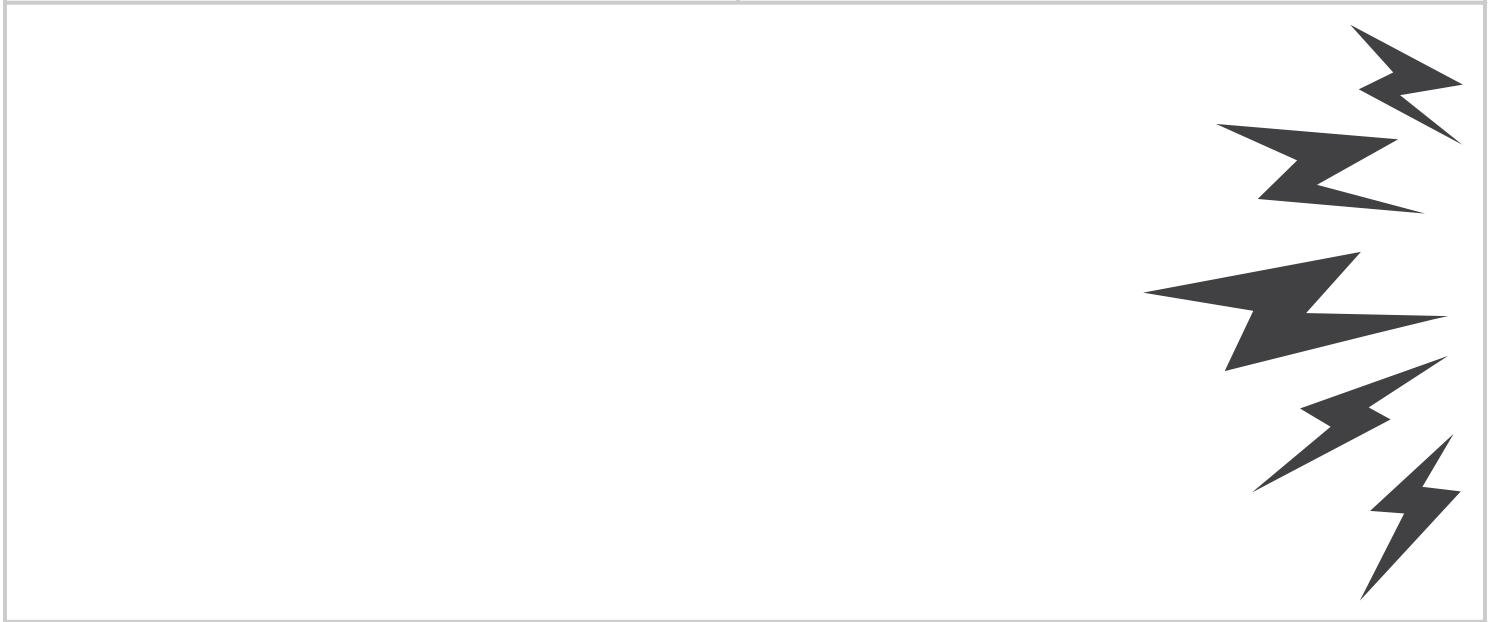
With your teacher's permission, host a **book auction**, where you try to persuade your classmates to "buy" your books. Share what you liked about each one, and really sell 'em. Then snatch up a new title that your classmates recommend!

6.Dream: Quiet time frees our imagination.

Slow down let your thoughts wander. Sometimes the best writing ideas come when we're relaxed and simply looking out the window on a car ride. Like billowy clouds, stories can drift in and take shape in our mind.

Writing Sprint!

Use this three-panel grid to create a graphic novel. In **Panel 1**, draw the main character from a book you like. In **Panel 2**, draw yourself. What would you say to the main character? How would the main character respond to you? Think about how you might dress, talk, eat, feel if you were in the story together. In **Panel 3**, you both are suddenly surprised to hear a *GROWL* off panel! Show how the two of you react. Keep adding panels to tell the story.

7.fail: Don't be afraid to see what works—and what does not.

With every attempt, we gain knowledge. Things might not turn out the way we wanted, and maybe we start to think we're just not any good. But everybody feels that way once in a while. And failing is a part of the game. We don't sweat it—just turn the page (metaphor!) and try again.

Writing Sprint!

Let's work on dialogue. First off, ummmm . . . what is it? Dialogue is the conversation between two characters. It's not just wallpaper in a scene! It should add depth, revealing the **characters' feelings**, **clues to the plot**, and even layers to the **setting**. When writing dialogue, remember:

- New speaker, new line.
- Quotation marks contain the spoken words. "Like this!"
- Punctuate the spoken words INSIDE the quotation marks. "Like this," said I.

Now write this scene of dialogue between you and Aunt Bertha:

A shoe sits on the floor near your front door. It's completely destroyed, the leather chewed to bits, and you know who did it: the adorable bunny rabbit you found yesterday and are currently hiding under your bed. Aunt Bertha owns that shoe, and now it's ruined! She wants to get to the bottom of things, but you don't want to admit your rabbit's guilt and risk Bunny getting kicked out.

YOU: "Shoe? What shoe?" I asked.

BERTHA (Use descriptive language about the shoe): " _____
_____, " Bertha said. " _____!"

YOU (Use words that reveal your emotions): " _____, " I began. " _____
_____."

BERTHA (Use a simile to describe the shoe's condition): " _____
_____, " shouted Bertha.

YOU (Use a metaphor to describe how the shoe smells): " _____
_____, " I told her.

BERTHA (Use words that reveal the setting): " _____, " Bertha said.
" _____."

YOU (Use words that reveal a plot twist): " _____, " I replied. " _____
_____."

Read your dialogue **out loud** with a classmate. How can you improve it? Mark up your work and write notes where it could be stronger and the language could be more interesting. Draw a line through words that are repetitive or unnecessary. **Keep revising** the scene to make the words snappier and the tension clearer. As you make your changes, don't *lose* hope! Instead, *find* what works!

Don't sweat that it's not all perfect. We're learning, right? Now that we can see what works and what doesn't, write the scene again. Only this time make it better than ever!

YOU: " _____," I began.

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8. Experiment: Try different styles of writing.

Maybe you're the kind of person who likes long sentences that flow like a kite in the wind, dipping and swooping, then soaring majestically in an exciting burst. Or maybe not.

Writing Sprint!

Imagine your favorite dessert sits in front of you. Write three words describing how it looks.

Write three words describing how it tastes.

Now write three similes (comparisons using the word "like"; "I slept like a rock") about how you feel when you eat this dessert.



String all those descriptions together and use them to **write a poem** in free verse.

Then start again and **write a descriptive passage** that creates a colorful picture in words, using short sentences that are tight, powerful, and direct.

Write again for a third time. String those descriptions together as **a persuasive argument** for your classmates to vote your dessert as the world’s greatest.



9. Persevere: Keep at it, even when things get tough.

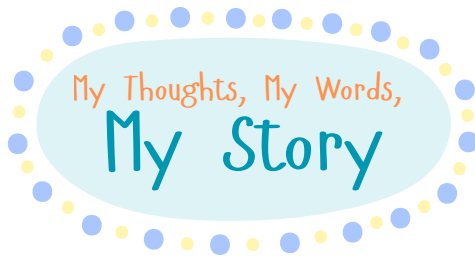
The more we write, the easier the act of writing becomes. Like a baby learning to walk—we didn't just sit down and quit when our itty-bitty selves tried to get across a room. We toddled, we tripped, and we tried again! And again and again.

Writing Sprint!

Think about a time when you were really tested. When things felt bleak, but you didn't give up. Now describe it. Layer in things that play to our sense of seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and feeling. Add language that focuses on a single emotion, like joy, sadness, or embarrassment. Try different writing styles like punchy sentences, zippy dialogue, or colorful descriptive language. Show how you persevered and kept at it!

Write some more. And some more. And some more. And remember that when it comes to **the story of your life**, you hold the pencil.





Written by _____

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

10.Dare: find the courage to reach a little bit higher.

Once you get your story out of your head, down your arm, through your pencil, and onto the paper, take a moment to enjoy it. And celebrate that the thoughts ping-ponging through your one beautiful brain are now on a page and in the world. Way to go!

There are lots of ways to share your writing. With your teacher or librarian or even with your clever classmates, you can:

- **Build a “Writing Wall”** in your school library to showcase student work
- **Create an online writers club** where students read their writing aloud
- **Publish your stories** in your classroom, creating book covers and binding pages together; display them on a “Classroom Authors” bookshelf for students to check in and out
- **Keep challenging yourself** to read more, write more, and reach higher



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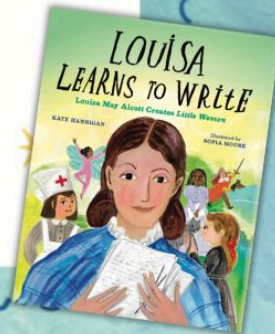
Try different styles of writing.

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This workbook was created by elementary school teacher-librarian **Anita DeValk** and author **Kate Hannigan**. To book an author visit, writing workshop, and more, go to KateHannigan.com

