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Lera, Debbie. (2009). *Writing Above Standard: Engaging Lessons That Take Standards to New Heights and Help Kids Become Skilled, Inspired Writers, Grades K-5*. NY: Scholastic.

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Reviewed by Jennifer Rose-Woodward  
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In the book, *Writing Above Standard*, author and executive director of LitLife West, Debbie Lera, offers a light-hearted, but solid approach to the teaching of writing in the K-5 classroom. Fully exposing the dilemma that so many teachers face of having to choose rigid state writing standards over the desire to facilitate a classroom that explores the sheer joy of writing, Lera presents a guide that promises to help teachers strike a proper balance that will provide maximum benefit to the students. As the subtitle would suggest, Lera firmly believes that the two can not only coexist, but can be integrated in such a manner as to facilitate higher writing achievement. First, by acknowledging the important role that standards play in the quality of instruction nationwide and by reminding us that standards provide teachers with much-needed

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direction, Lera continually asserts that standards need not be met with trepidation. Instead, she discusses how to work within the standards without losing enthusiasm.

Rather than a manufactured and detailed plan of what to teach throughout the school year, *Writing Above Standard* appears to be designed as a resource guide, meant to educate and inspire teachers to create writing lessons that are suitable and exciting to their students. Recognizing that reading and writing are irreversibly linked, Lera strongly advocates the use of age appropriate, authentic literature in the classroom as a basis for everyday exposure to real-world writing skills. Reasoning that students will naturally absorb many of the skills required by the state standards, Lera stresses the importance of incorporating writing into a well-balanced curriculum that is not solely skills-based. Included in Lera's passionate discussion are short example lessons, passed on by a multitude of experienced writing teachers, throughout nearly every chapter of the book. These lessons demonstrate the merging of standards with enthusiastic and cooperative writing activities, not only illustrating the author's point, but providing examples that can be taken and altered for use in any classroom. The lessons are designed in a brief and uncomplicated arrangement for utilization with both whole group and individual instruction. Additionally, the author supplies humorous anecdotes from her own classroom experiences to further demonstrate the validity of her beliefs, as well as to remind us, as teachers, to maintain our sense of humor in the classroom.

*Writing Above Standard* is presented in a simple two part format. The first part of the book lays the foundation for teachers to accept and understand that following the standards and the employment of active and enjoyable writing in the classroom are not mutually exclusive. Part two focuses more closely on developing usable units for the classroom, based upon the four critical writing skills of process, genre, strategy, and conventions, as put forth and detailed in the 2008 series, *The Complete Year in Reading and Writing*, by Laurie Pastore and Pam Allyn, also of LitLife. The section walks teachers through a step-by-step guide to planning lessons for the entire school year, integrating the standards in a design that allows for ultimate flexibility and teacher/student control. Sample units for K-5 study can also be found in part two, as well

as important tips regarding assessment. Most noteworthy, chapter eight offers some discussion of “new literacies”, more commonly known as technology-based reading and writing skills. Given the prevalence of technology in our society, new literacies can no longer be ignored, nor thought of as an afterthought by teachers. In the planning of a solid language arts curriculum, new or multiple literacies must be valued by those in education as a means of reaching students. Lera openly acknowledges that times are indeed changing and attempts to address the issue with suggestions for the integration of technology in the writing classroom, but does not incorporate them throughout the book. Many templates are provided at the end of the book to assist with unit planning and classroom management.

Taken as a whole, *Writing Above Standard* presents a passionate and inspiring guide for elementary writing teachers. It may be an invaluable tool for teachers who find it difficult to strike a balance between skills instruction and enjoyable classroom lessons. The book is uncomplicated and easy to read, offering humor and a human touch that makes it a pleasure.

## Reference

Pastore, L., & Allen, P. (2008). *The complete year in reading and writing: Grade 4*. New York: Scholastic.

## About the Reviewer

Jennifer Rose-Woodward M.S. is a doctoral student at College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska. She is currently finishing her dissertation and works as adjunct faculty in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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