

## **Beautiful Beginnings for Writers**

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### **Overview**

Children in the first grade are fledglings in most aspects of writing. At the end of August, first grade teachers are presented with the almost insurmountable task of making them writers. Some of these budding authors cannot even properly use the tools of their trade yet, while others lack many of the fundamental writing skills necessary to communicate ideas without an interpreter. Regardless of the students' condition at the beginning of the school year, the teachers will mold writers by providing them with a wealth of opportunities to practice writing and its related skills. Furthermore, by the end of the year, they will produce young authors that can convey messages on paper without a translator. This paper demonstrates one way to inspire authors to bloom in a primary classroom.

This proposal provides a rationale and a systematic format for teaching a series of first grade writings. These writing assignments will be aligned with the curriculum that Pittsburgh Public Schools have already instituted. The writing projects will provide students with the opportunity to write using different styles and for different purposes. All aspects of this process are designed to improve and enrich their communication skills and each experience will allow the students to present ideas in a way that is focused and purposeful.

Hopefully, this paper will provide a path for assisting emergent writers at all stages of writing using several genres, including expository, narrative, and informative. All of these writing processes can be utilized these children provided that the proper scaffolding is provided at each stage of their literacy development. I will attempt to provide a blueprint for teaching writing during the primary grades.

## **Rationale**

### Writing and the First Grader

The Pittsburgh Public School system has recently acquired a new Reading series published by Macmillan/McGraw-Hill. The reading series has received mixed reviews from the teachers that are implementing the new curriculum. Many benefits have been attributed to the new reading program. The testing format the publisher provides is similar to the PSSA standardized test that the state uses to judge students' competencies. This similarity allows students to familiarize themselves with the format before they encounter it in a high-stakes test. Another noted benefit is that the program provides frequent testing of skills. Also, the publishers provide students with the opportunity to read both fiction and nonfiction stories. They are exposed to many different genres in this series.

While this program has received many accolades, it has received criticism as well, specifically in the writing component. Writing prompts are provided to students weekly; however, there is very little focus in the writing prompts. They are vague. Although writing opportunities are abundant, the assignments lack depth. Thus, the text provides students with a lot of unfinished and underdeveloped writing experiences.

First grade teachers in the Pittsburgh Public Schools are expected help these children to accomplish miracles. Not the walk on water miracles, but tiny miracles. Many of the children have just learned sound-symbol relationships. Many of them are not very familiar with the sounds vowels make and often will attempt to write words only using the initial consonants in the words. However, they are making an effort to write, and this shows that they understand that words have meaning and that a relationship exists between reading and writing.

Many teachers use this time of emergent literacy to engage the students in dictated sentences. Often after a teacher writes the words that a child is trying to communicate, the child is instructed to read the writing several times aloud. This helps the child build a relationship between writing and reading. Also, teachers usually tell students to rewrite the message the teacher transcribed for them. This helps students recognize words and aids in the development of their fine motor skills. Sentence dictation is not taught in isolation. It is taught with phonics and the acquisition of sight words. Learning these two skills helps the writers to improve their ability to communicate dramatically.

After dictated writing students usually experience guided writing sessions; however, they may be conducted with slight differences. For example, when Lucy Calkins performed guided writing assignments, the children were encouraged to use phonetic spelling to tell the teacher how to write the words. The teacher wrote the words as the students sounded them out, and she questioned them in order to guide them in

spelling words correctly. However, when the students wanted to use a word outside their ability to spell the teacher would just provide the word. Lucy Calkins did not ask the students to spell it. This same, guided dictation method was carried out by Ruth Culham. Instead of providing the words the students did not know that were beyond their level, the students were encouraged to draw pictures.

At the beginning of the year the students' abilities to write vary greatly. Some children may write in scribbles, some use single letters to stand for whole words, while some children will be able to write many words correctly and spell others phonemically. No matter where our students are at the starting point, we have the same goal for all children. We want them to become proficient writers.

Teachers walk around with a grandfather clock dangling over their heads. While time is on their side, it always looms over them. At any moment the rope holding the clock is ready to give way and flatten them. Every moment of their professional day is scheduled. There is very little room for deviation or meandering. They often contend with curriculum pacing, block time, daily schedules, testing schedules, and a gauntlet of other demands. In this time shuffle, some things are given more time and attention than other things. In our Mathematics curriculum, opponents usually criticized the program for focusing on the concepts more than the procedures. However, in our writing, I believe that we focus more on procedures than on concepts. The processes that teachers teach in classrooms for writing are mostly standardized.

### Aspects of Good Writing

Six strains of writing have been identified as aspects of good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Of all six themes only one is stressed in the classroom. That trait is conventions. In fact, many English and Language Arts classes have been relegated to nothing more than conventions-focused classrooms. Spelling, grammar, and proper sentence structure (using capitals at the beginning of sentences and punctuation at the end of sentences) are taught in classrooms on a daily basis. Yet other important aspects of writing are ignored, or if not ignored, perhaps they are just orphans, left alone and undervalued.

#### *Ideas*

Yes, we all teach children that they should have an idea for their papers. Yet usually we provide the idea for them. When we dictate the subject, we deprive students of the opportunity to present writing that they can be passionate about. Instead we could allow them to be creative while we select a general theme for their writing. For instance, let's say the topic is summer time. Some teachers will write a prompt on the board that locks children into a specific way of addressing the topic. For example, a teacher may write "I really \_\_\_\_\_ summer for three reasons." To me this is not a bad prompt if you are examining the methods associated with a three paragraph, structured paper. However, a different type of prompt may yield more interest and creativity. How about if you said, "Close your eyes think about something that reminds you of summer?"

Another intriguing thing to say might be “What question would you like to ask about the summer?” Both prompts may yield interesting topics focused on summer time. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

<u>Thoughts about summer</u>	<u>Questions about summer</u>
I love swimming in the summer	What makes seasons?
It is too hot in the summer.	Will our neighborhood pool open up this year?
Last summer my birthday plans changed because of a freaky snow storm.	Why did it snow during the summer last year?
<u>I'm going to Kennywood.</u>	<u>What fun stuff can I do in the summer?</u>

All of the above prompts deal with some aspect of summer. However, letting students define their own prompts requires work on the part of the teachers and students. Teachers must teach the students how to focus their subjects instead of providing a focus. Although it is more work for both parties, I believe that the old cliché applies to this situation. If you give a man a fish you can feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish you can feed him for a lifetime. In short, the time spent is well invested in grooming good writers by helping them to develop and redefine their own ideas.

In the writing process, brainstorming is linked to the formation of ideas. During brainstorming, the main idea or topic is usually realized and supporting ideas are written. This written composition may take the form of sentences or words. Regardless of its form, it provides the bones of the composition. It will provide the content for a piece of writing.

### *Organization*

The second trait is treated a bit better than idea development. I would not consider this trait an orphan but a stepchild. The stepchild's name is organization. This trait appeals to many teachers' natures. We love to have things, organized, classified, and clear. Thus, first grade teachers teach children that they need titles, beginnings, middles, and ends of stories. We also teach them how to connect sentences together to make paragraphs and teach them how to make transitions.

All these organizational skills are relatives of ours because they are the things that we cherish and teach well. However, one of the things we do not stress enough in the first grade is balance. Many times students produce papers that have an excellent beginning, or middle, or end, but one excellent part may make the paper lopsided. Often we are so ecstatic because they have accomplished so much in the writing realm that we do not push them for more. Yet, perhaps a little push could help them make a balanced paper.

Organization is considered part of the drafting process for writing. In this phase of writing, sentences are composed and arranged to allow the writing to flow. During the

drafting process, organization is addressed on several levels. First, the structure of word placement is important. Sentences will either become active or passive based on the placement of words. The arrangement of the sentences also is considered during drafting. Each idea should connect to the previous one. Paragraph structure is also an essential for a paper to be well organized.

### *Voice and Word Choice*

The next two traits of writing might be described as third cousins from another state. In the world of primary education, they are talked about seldom and usually ignored. Those two traits are voice and word choice. I believe that their poor treatment is due to several factors. First, they yield very few benefits during formal assessments at this time. Most tests pay attention to only conventions in the primary grades. Also, voice is difficult to teach to children. Finally, word choice can present a problem during assessment.

Word choice is one of the factors that determine the writer's voice. However, let us examine voice independently. How does one help a child find his/her voice? This is perplexing especially considering many adult writers have a hard time finding theirs. Many of us are guilty of telling instead of showing when we talk about how we feel. In addition, we simplify emotions to four basic ones. They are happy, sad, mad, and afraid. When students do this, I believe they do not know how to describe the emotions they are feeling. Being able to connect and identify their feelings will allow them to express those feelings in their writing. Once these feelings are identified, they have to be matched with their audience and the purpose for writing in order to create a piece of effective written communication.

The other distant relative is word choice. I believe that this trait is a double-edged sword. Students come into first grade with an enormous lexicon of oral vocabulary. This vocabulary continues to grow rapidly while they attend first grade. However, their written vocabularies are very limited. Limited encoding and phonics skills are responsible for the differences in the two vocabularies.

Many times I have talked to children during a prewriting stage about the paper that they were intending to write. Usually the conversations and the papers seemed like they produced two completely different things. Conversations like the following are typical of what happens in first grade.

An example of oral and written vocabulary:

“Malik what are you going to write about?”

“I'm going to write about Kennywood.”

“Okay tell me all about it.”

“Well, I always go to Kennywood in the summertime. It's so exciting. My mom packs us a picnic basket full of fried chicken, deviled eggs, and macaroni salad. It's delicious! Then we go off to ride the rides. My favorite ride is the pirate ship. I ride it like fifty million times when I go to Kennywood. Usually, I ride it with

my big sister, Mary. When I'm on the ship, my stomach drops to the floor, and I can imagine having Barf-aroni fly out of my mouth all over my sister, Mary. But if I ever threw up on her, she would beat me up."

Malik's story sounded great and I could not wait for him to capture his thoughts on paper. Yet, when I read his paper it was just a skeleton of the Kennywood story. The written version went like this:

"Kennywood by: Malik

Kennywood was fun. I ate a lot of food. It was good. I like to ride the pirate ship. I ride with my sister, Mary. Kennywood is fun."

Most of Malik's voice was cut out of the story, and his word choice became very limited. Usually, students reduce their writing to the barest minimum because they fear spelling words incorrectly. They eliminate the beauty in their written language to ensure accurate spelling. As educators, we must provide an environment where students feel like they can be risk takers. Students must be told the focus of the assignment is word choice and voice integration, rather than spelling. This will allow us to preserve their unique expressions and ideas. Spelling can be revisited during the editing phase of the assignment.

An interesting image is conjured by Malik's telling of his story. The word barf-aroni. This made-up word is a blending of two words. Barfing and macaroni. It provides a powerful image of a young boy vomiting macaroni during a ride at Kennywood. Yet, is this kind of word play encouraged? Or do we as teachers stick to rules? Thus, would we say this is not a word? Or, even worse, will this child's attempt be misunderstood as a spelling error?

**Sentence Fluency.** As teachers, we inadvertently teach formulas for writing. Many of the sentences we teach children have a subject and a predicate. They are usually five to eight words long. This is not done overtly; it just happens. Typically, we do not model one and two word sentences or phrases, yet they can be very powerful. I almost believe it is because the one and two word phrases/sentences contradict English lessons. Sentences like Stop! And Oh, goodness! These words express strong feelings and voice emerges. In first grade, we do address one aspect of sentence fluency. We help them make sentences longer by adding conjunctions. I believe we must help children determine the purpose of the task and allow them to dictate the length and structure of their sentences.

Voice, word choice, and sentence fluency can all be addressed in the drafting and editing process. Perhaps each part will be revisited during both segments of the process. In truth, there is no recipe for great writing. It is not a linear process. Instead, it will vary according to the writer's style.

## **Objectives**

Students will experience rich and varied writing opportunities. They will learn to develop their ideas and make their writing fulfilling. Students will have an opportunity to write for various reasons and address different genres.

## **Strategies**

My objectives will be fulfilled by taking the six, themed reading books used in our curriculum and designing one major writing project for each one of them. The types of writing that are consistent with this grade level's objectives are descriptive, persuasive, and expository writing.

Two techniques will be beneficial in helping students construct essays for themes. The first technique that I would employ is Write Tools. Write Tools color codes sentences in order to teach students to write an effective, multiple paragraph paper. Three colors outline paragraphs: green, yellow, and red. Green is the introduction and the summary sentence of the paper. Yellow sentences are the main ideas of each paragraph. Finally, red sentences provide support for each paragraph.

Another important strategy for assisting students is the use of graphic organizers. The organizers will allow them to order their ideas in ways that make sense and bring clarity to a paper. It will allow the students to have a main idea, topic sentence, and details. With the proper support, the students will create a logical and structured paper.

## **Classroom Activities**

All aspects of this writing project will be aligned with the six thematic units in the first grade curriculum. Unit one of their reading series is a collection of stories entitled, "All About Me." Using this book as the platform, the students will write a descriptive essay about themselves. The strategy they will use for this assignment will be graphic organizers to scaffold their writing development.

In unit two the students' major theme is animals. The students will write a descriptive paper about their visit to the zoo. They will discuss three aspects of their zoo trip. They will use Write Tools in conjunction with a visual graphic organizer to assist them in this process. (See Appendix 1.)

Unit three will provide the students with an opportunity to write a persuasive piece of writing. The students will read stories about pet stores. They will be asked to write an advertisement persuading someone to buy a pet from them.

The fourth unit will prompt the students to produce a sound research report. The students will select a bird, find information about their bird, and write about it.

Unit five is an assignment requiring writing to inform an audience. The students will write a how-to paper.

The sixth and final unit will engage the students in writing a mystery. The students will read the story Dot and Jabber. Next, they will use the story as a platform for developing their own mysteries.

## Assignment 1

### Day 1

The students will use index cards and write an adjective describing themselves. They will use the white cards in describing their appearance. Then they will be instructed to use the yellow cards to describe their personality, and the blue cards can be used to write their hobbies and interests. They do not need to write whole sentences on the index cards. Instead, they can write key words or phrases. The students will volunteer words to describe themselves. These words will be categorized into groups that describe different features. This word bank can be utilized by the entire class when it is time to construct paragraphs.

Model adjectives: short, brown skinned, female, wooly, hazel

### Day 2

Require the students to write a sentence for each adjective they wrote describing their looks.

Model paragraph: I am a female. Although I am an adult, at 5'3" my height is miniature. My skin is a caramel color in the winter, but in the summer, it glistens with a rich shade of rosewood. Wooly and brown are the two words that best describe my hair. The light pupils in my eyes change colors constantly, and sometimes, they are hazel.

### Day 3

Tell the students to make a sentence for each word used to describe their personalities.

Model adjectives: kind, friendly, hilarious, loud

Model sentence: I am a very kind person. Friendly is a word that can be used to describe me. My friends think that I am hilarious. Most of the time I am a loud person.

### Day 4

Instruct the students to write at least one sentence supporting each adjective describing their personality. They can do this by providing examples of times when they showed the listed characteristics.

Example: Kindness

I do kind things for people. Also, if someone needs help I will try to assist in any way I can.

Example: Friendly

Sometimes I sit around with a silly smile on my face. When new people are around me I usually introduce myself to them.

Example: Hilarious

Most of my friends think I picked the wrong profession. They think I would make a great stand up comedian.

Example: Loud

Unfortunately, I can be very loud. I have occasionally been shushed at the library.

#### Day 5

Students will write a list of their favorite activities. My example that I would show the class would include snow tubing, swimming, shopping, and painting. After completing their lists, the students will be told to write a sentence about each of their hobbies and interest, on the back of each index card.

Example:

Snow tubing replaced skiing as my favorite winter activity. However, swimming has always remained my favorite summer activity. I love to shop. Also, painting makes me feel better when I'm unhappy.

#### Day 6

The students will be asked to write all the sentences in paragraph form and add transition words. The title of this piece will be: "Who am I? The papers' introduction sentence will be" I have many characteristics that make me unique and interesting."

Example:

I am a female. Although I am an adult, at 5'3" my height is miniature. My skin is a caramel color in the winter, but in the summer, it glistens with a shade of rosewood. Woolly and brown are the two words used that best describe my hair. The light pupils in my eyes change colors constantly, and sometimes, they are hazel.

I am a very kind person. I try to help everyone. Also, if someone needs help I will try to assist them in anyway I can. Friendly is a word that can be used to describe me. Sometimes I sit around with a silly smile on my face. When new people are around me I usually introduce myself to them. My friends think that I am hilarious. Most of my friends think I picked the wrong profession. They think I would make a great stand-up comedian. Most of the time, I am a loud person. Unfortunately, I can be very loud. I have occasionally been shushed at the library.

Snow tubing replaced skiing as my favorite winter activity. However, swimming has always remained my favorite summer activity. I love to shop. Also, painting makes me feel better when I'm unhappy.

## Day 7

The seventh day will be devoted to proofreading and examining word choices. Students will revise their writing to make it more descriptive and robust. After every aspect of their paper is examined using a rubric, a closing sentence will be added to the paper. "Have you guessed who I am?" will be at the close of every paper.

## Assignment 2

The students will receive a graphic organizer (see Appendix 1.) which will be color coded using the Write Tools system. The students will be encouraged to write "zoo" as the green main idea. The yellow circles that are attached to the center idea will be the main idea of the three paragraphs. I will tell the students that at least one of the three yellow ideas should be about an animal they observed at the zoo. The red ideas should support the main idea. The graphic organizer should only contain words that outline the paragraphs. They should be used to assist the students with creating a structured paper.

(Ideas for the three paragraphs are: Kids' Kingdom, the aquarium, and elephants.)

Example:

I have marvelous memories of my visit to the Pittsburgh Zoo.

Moments after I arrived at the zoo, I encountered the impressive elephants. There were three gigantic packadremms parading on the prairie and playing near a steam. Two adults and one juvenile were in the enclosure. The gray wrinkled child played tug of war with an adult using a twisted y- shaped branch.

Brilliant colored fish flashed by the glass as I walked in the aquarium. Zoom! Zing! Zoom! They whizzed by. All types of fish live here. Some fish mimic other things in nature. Also, I was allowed to touch the slippery, slimy, sting rays in the water.

Hippy, hoppity, kangaroos come over and allowed you to touch them in Kids' Kingdom. You could also pet other animals there. Kids' Kingdom had lots of activities. They had several different types of slides. They had two different kinds of mazes for you to play in. I felt like a fly when I got tangled up in the spider web part of the playground.

There is no other place like the zoo!

## Assignment 3

This paper is the student's opportunity to persuade someone to purchase an animal from them. They will discuss persuasive techniques. In order for them to advertise their products well, they must provide an adequate description of the animal.

Example:

I am seeking a home for a beautiful, brindle bunny named Thumper. She loves to thump and play. Thumper loves to be held and cuddled. She has the softest fur you've ever felt. Her favorite activity is playing with rattles and other toys. She is such a sweet bunny, and she can be yours for \$5.00. Thumper will make a great addition to your family.

#### Assignment 4

After reading the fourth theme, "For the Birds," the students will author research reports about a particular bird. They should incorporate their vocabulary words into their reports. Some of the words they should utilize are: habitats, unique, classification, and description. The students will receive a fold style graphic organizer, and this will assist them with organizing their paragraphs.

#### Assignment 5

The students will write a How-to paper. This paper requires that children know certain words associated with the parts of kites. Therefore, we will have a mini lesson diagramming the different pieces of the kite. The students will have to write this paper in a sequential manner. In order to eliminate confusion and assist the students in remembering the steps, several identical kites will be assembled for them to observe the process. Kites were chosen for this activity because they are a major theme in this unit. Also, the steps for the kite assembly are not too complicated.

#### Assignment 6

After reading Dot and Jabber and the Big Bug Mystery, they will read several other mysteries. Some of the mysteries the students will be able to read independently, while others will be read aloud. When they are immersed in the genre of mystery, the students will attempt to write their own mysteries. The students will all select an object that will be the item that goes missing. The pupils will discuss distractions and how authors mislead the readers. Finally, they will discuss problems and solutions. Also, the students will be able to assist the teacher in writing several mysteries.

Example:

It was time to go to lunch so I went to my locker to get my Scooby Doo lunch box. When I opened my locker I did not see it. Where was my lunchbox? I took my yellow ruffled jacket out of my locker, the lunch box was not under it. Where was it?

The students will make up characters and misleading hints. Finally, they will come to some kind of resolution of the problem. After they construct a few mysteries together, they will have an opportunity to write one by themselves.

The writing process is not a linear process. It meanders and merges with ideas.

Organization, voice, word choice, sentence, fluency, and conventions are all tributaries in the process. Each section contributes a portion to allow the ideas to flow. My hope is that this paper helps you navigate through the stream that we call the writing process.

## Works Cited

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This book contains practical information concerning the enrichment of students' reading, writing, and oral communication skills.

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This book discusses the writing process and provides suggestions for teaching writing.

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This book discusses how children learn to write. The book provides insight into how children from ages three to thirteen acquire the prerequisite skills that are essential for becoming effective writers. In addition, the book provides suggestions for strategies that support the development of children's writing.

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This article discusses how to make writing more interesting through word choice during the revision process.

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suggestions on making a print-friendly environment, obtaining parental support, and improving writing instruction.

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This paper examines the connection between vocabulary and academic success. In addition, it gives creative ways to teach vocabulary.

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This article examines how using unexpected words in a piece of writing can make it interesting and come alive.

Slagle, P. (1997). "Getting Real Authenticity in Writing Prompts." The Quarterly (19) 3.

The author attempts to compare scripted writing to writing for a purpose.

Stafford, K. (2003) "Sentences as Rivers and as Drums." The Quarterly (25) 3.

This article discusses how style is influenced by sentence length.

Tyner, T. (1998) Writing Voyage Belmont. Wodsworth Publishing

This book describes the writing process. Its emphasis is on revision of sentences and paragraphs.

Wilder, Stephanie. (1997). "Pruning Too Early: The Thorny Issue of Grading Student Writing." The Quarterly (19) 4.

This article examines how delaying the grading process may produce better writing products. The author believes that by delaying grades, students are more willing to try in the face of adversity. Also, she believes that the delay allows students to revisit and improve their work with an open mind.

## **Standards Addressed**

1.4.3 Types of writing.

1.4.3.A Write narrative pieces.

Include detailed descriptions of people, places, and things.

1.4.3B Write informational pieces.

This includes reports and instructions.

1.5.3.A Write with a sharp, distinct focus identifying topic, task and audience.

1.5.3.B Write using well- developed content appropriate for the topic.

Use a series of related sentences or paragraphs with one central idea.

1.5.3.C Write with controlled and or subtle organization.

Include a recognizable beginning, middle, and end.

1.5.3.D Write with an awareness of stylistic aspects of composition.

Use descriptive words and action verbs.