1996

Supporting the emergent writer in grade 1

Donna Wakeland Stark

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SUPPORTING THE EMERGENT WRITER

IN GRADE 1

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Education: Reading Option

by
Donna Wakeland Stark

March 1996
SUPPORTING THE EMERGENT WRITER

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Date: March 1, 1996
ABSTRACT

This project was developed for the purpose of supporting teachers of emergent writers. It focuses on the first grade teacher with a literature-based reading and writing program using a process approach--where the process is valued as well as the product.

This project provides a discussion of the theory and research on emergent writing. It also includes a handbook to aid teachers in developing activities and procedures that will guide first graders through the emergent level of writing.

The teacher's handbook is divided into three sections. Section one describes ways to overcome the reluctance that some children have to begin the writing process. Sections two and three discuss ideas for designing activities that facilitate the writing process. Section two focuses on whole-group activities while section three describes centers which first graders can do independently.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Patricia Tefft Cousin for her guidance throughout the writing of this project and Dr. Joseph Gray for being my second reader. I also thank my husband John for his constant interest and encouragement during the many hours I spent researching and writing. I also thank my daughters Susan and Kelly for helping me re-type the literature review when it was accidentally deleted from the computer! And thanks to the excellent teachers who shared their classroom successes with me.
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INTRODUCTION
AND
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In America today more and more primary teachers are changing in the way they view the teaching of language arts. These teachers are at many different points on the journey toward a literature-based reading and writing program using a process approach--where the process is valued as well as the product.

Research continues to validate the effectiveness of such classrooms and the exciting results they are seeing in children. But change takes much time and effort on the part of the teacher. I have been moving along this path for several years and I am still learning and always searching for new and better ideas for my classroom.

Every time I am with other primary teachers, who are using a literature-based, process approach in their classrooms, I gain new insights and ideas that add to my knowledge. Who better to gain practical ideas from than those are are using them right now? It is many of these ideas and insights which form the basis for this project.
Teaching with a process approach at the beginning levels is difficult and demanding. Once children actually begin to make their first attempts at reading and writing, a giant hurdle has been conquered and growth begins to slowly take place. But until children gain some confidence, it is still often difficult to keep them going. I believe this is the reason I have heard so many teachers say, "I just don't want to teach first grade."

This project provides a support to first grade teachers using the literature-based, process approach to the teaching of reading and writing. It is further narrowed to focus solely on the writing aspect. In my experience, writing seems to be the more difficult of the two literacy components to get children to begin.

This project focuses on children engaging in the actual process of writing. It also includes activities that teach sound-symbol relationships (phonics). Contrary to what many people think today, this is an important part of a balanced literacy classroom, as evidenced by the writings of Clay (1987), Cambourne (1987), Dyson (1989), Graves (1983), and many other authorities in the field. Obviously, for children to write the word make, they must know that the letter m represents the sound at the beginning of make.
They learn this in a variety of ways in such a classroom. After being taught the sound of the letter \( m \), children observe the teacher using it during shared writing...they consult the alphabet on the wall with the picture of a monkey under the \( m \)...they sing a fun alphabet sound song as they read the room...they ask their classmate, "What letter makes this sound, \( m-m-m-m \)?" as they are writing their story...their attention is called to the \( m \) at the beginning of \textit{mom} in their guided reading book, and on and on. Activities which reinforce children's knowledge and use of sound-symbol relationships are simply too numerous to mention. The balanced literacy classroom is rich in such activities throughout each day.

Teachers of emergent writers are in a unique position. They have before them a challenging and often difficult task. But, at the same time, the rewards they can experience are among the greatest in teaching. This handbook was created with the specific needs of the teacher of emergent writers in mind. I trust it will be a help to both those who are just beginning this process approach to teaching writing as well as those who are experienced, but always looking for new ideas.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature on emergent writing indicates that much research has formed the basis for today's balanced literacy classrooms and their support of the emergent writer. The literature also provides abundant information for classroom teachers in search of greater knowledge that will improve their classroom environments.

There are many aspects to consider when thinking of children's earliest attempts to write. In this review of literature I have chosen to concentrate on six of these areas:

(a) how the conditions under which children learn to talk relate to their learning to write,

(b) the use of pictures to prompt beginning writers,

(c) how children understand the alphabetic representation of the language,

(d) the interrelationship between reading and writing,

(e) the purpose and value of using invented spelling,

(f) the emergent writer's use of spacing.
How the Conditions Under Which Children Learn to Talk

Relate To Their Learning To Write

It is not difficult to argue that learning to talk is a very impressive learning feat. Cambourne described the conditions under which children master this most spectacular enterprise (Butler & Turbill, 1984). At any given time there are millions of toddlers, with very "immature" brains, successfully learning the thousands of complex "conventions" of their language. Moreover, Cambourne contends that the following seven conditions are relevant to all kinds of language learning, including learning to write and spell.

Condition 1 is immersion. From the moment they are born, children are immersed in oral language. They are surrounded by the proficient users of their language who speak to them continually in meaningful, purposeful and whole contexts.

Condition 2 is demonstration. This is a term which essentially means modeling, although demonstration also implies interpretation by the learner. In the process of learning to talk, children receive thousands of demonstrations (models or examples) of the spoken form of the language being used in functional and meaningful ways. For instance, the child sitting in the high chair at breakfast hears his
father emit a stream of sounds and observes that the sugar bowl is passed in response.

Condition 3 is expectation. Children are expected to learn to talk by their parents and all those who surround them. It is as simple as that. If you ask parents, "Do you expect your child to learn to talk?" they will be puzzled that the question is even being asked. Of course, children learn to talk. Parents' expectations are then unconsciously conveyed to their children who in turn respond positively to these subtle messages of confidence.

Condition 4 is responsibility. When learning to talk it is left to the children to take responsibility for what they learn about their own language. As Cambourne monitored his own children's language development, he found that they mastered different grammatical structures at different ages. Children quite naturally take this responsibility instead of having their parents teach them concepts in a certain sequence.

Condition 5 is approximation. Young children are not expected to use the language with perfect accuracy from the beginning. It is both expected and acceptable that they will make attempts that come closer and closer to being right. For example, a toddler points to a cup and says, "Dat Daddy cup." The parent never responds, "You stupid
child. That's not how you say it." On the contrary, these primitive attempts are the normal, natural way the child learns to speak and the parent welcomes them.

Condition 6 is employment. Children have plenty of opportunity to use their speech throughout the day. They are not confined to certain periods of time when they may practice their speech. Instead, it is a constant opportunity. Whenever they need to speak, they speak.

Condition 7 is feedback. Remember the toddler above who points to a cup and says, "Dat Daddy cup?" Not only is this approximation accepted, but it is met with very helpful feedback, "Yes, that's Daddy's cup." The child's message is received ("Yes") and the conventional adult, expanded form ("That's Daddy's cup") is given back in a non-threatening way. So not only does the child understand that his message is understood but he hears it returned to him in the correct form.

As we look back over these seven conditions under which children successfully learn to talk, it becomes readily clear that we as teachers often fail to provide these same conditions in our classrooms as children are learning to write. Instead of facilitating their natural progress by encouraging approximations in writing, by providing writing opportunities throughout the entire day, and by modeling
correct writing ourselves, we squelch their willingness to try by expecting a mastery of the isolated skills in their first attempts.

The Use of Pictures To Prompt

Beginning Writers

The value of using pictures in the effort to encourage small children who are just beginning to write is widely acknowledged. Pictures are both familiar and non-threatening to young children. They have been looking at and fascinated by pictures ever since their eyes could focus on them, not only in books but on labels, on television, on signs and many other places.

Dyson (1989) stated that given the opportunity to create imaginary worlds, most children's forte lies in their dramatic play and in their drawings. Perhaps that is why, in the common school task of drawing pictures and writing "stories," it is the drawing that generally receives the greatest attention. Children's written texts sometimes seem to be simply afterthoughts to their drawing and talking.

Teberosky (1990) explored a traditional learning activity in beginning reading and writing--writing linked to pictures. This study which was conducted in Barcelona, Spain recognized the importance of
allowing children to have diverse models of written texts, not simply
the models traditionally offered by the teacher. Pictures used were
from sources such as logos, ads, labels, photographs, signs, and
newspaper texts. The children were four- to eight-year-olds.

In considering activities involving "writing with pictures,"
Teberosky (1990) had to decide what kind of pictures and what kind of
instructions from the teacher would
elicit the best responses from the children. The following classroom
activity was observed:

The teacher distributed cutouts of labels from magazines and newspaper
headlines to five-year-old children so that, in pairs, they would write ads,
slogans, news or whatever else the cutout suggests to them.

Teacher: Choose one you know so you can write about it.

Didac-David: Which one should we get? Only one.

David: (Chooses the Fudesa label, a food product) Writes: Frudesa is very
good.
Joseph-Gemma: (Chooses Coca-Cola) Writes: *Coke is, it's to drink.*

Gemma: (Chooses a text containing Ibiza) Writes: *Ibiza is a country.*

David-Didac: (Chooses Scalextric, a brand of toy racing cars) Writes: *Scalextric is for racing.*

In carrying out the activities of "writing with pictures," Teberosky (1990) demonstrated that the selection of the pictures and the instructions given by the teacher directing the task were important. By incorporating the graphic diversity of printed material found in the real world, we are creating conditions similar to those that children experience outside of school rather than attempting to control children's responses.

This work suggested that children draw their conclusions not only from the written texts but also from the contexts which are supplied by their experience. Thus, the use of this familiar and enjoyable medium (drawing) is a perfect tool to use in prompting young children to write.

By using Fisher's (1991) simple format for writing during choice time, I have virtually eliminated the "I don't know what to write" problem in my classroom. Children respond well to her four-step
instruction: (1) Draw a picture, (2) Write something about the picture, (3) Write your name, (4) Stamp the date with the date stamp. The difficulty many children encounter putting pencil to paper to begin writing is somehow eliminated when they are allowed to draw a picture first.

How Children Understand the Alphabetic Representation of the Language

Clay (1975) suggested that, sometime between three and five years old, children begin to understand that the marks adults make on paper have meaning. As children discover that speaking (with which they are familiar) can be conveyed by print, they must try to understand the many conventions which we as adults accept so readily. Their attempts to write tell us something of the things they are noticing in print, although we must always remember that their writing is not a complete representation of what their minds are noticing.

Similarly, Dyson (1989) stated that while children may understand many social functions of written language in a general way, they do not necessarily understand specifically how it is that the
black-and-white squiggles on the paper communicate between them and other people. When children begin to grasp this function of print—that graphics not only represent meaning but can mediate the reading or recall of a specific spoken message—they begin to invent ways to differentiate one squiggle from another.

Ferreiro (1990) discussed research done on the psychogenesis of the interpretation systems children build in order to understand the alphabetic representation of the language. Children progress through the developmental levels in this process. In the first level they begin to consider strings of letters as substitute objects (instead of an actual drawing of the object itself), and they thus make the distinction between drawing and writing.

In the second level children begin to look for differences in the strings of letters that justify different interpretations. For example, as children come to a noun they want to write, they sometimes try to test the following hypothesis: Perhaps the variations in the number of letters are related to variations of aspects of the referred objects (more letters if the object is big and fewer letters if it is small; more letters for a group of objects and fewer letters for a single object; more letters for an older person and fewer for a child).
The third level corresponds to the "phonetization" of the written representation. One of the most important pieces of written information at this level is a child's own name. Children begin to look at their written name and wonder: Why those letters and not others? Why that number of letters and not more or less?

At this level children may start looking for similar letters in order to write similar "pieces of sound". The resulting sound-to-letter correspondence is not the conventional one. But, for the first time, children begin to understand that the written representation tied to the alphabetical writing system needs to focus almost exclusively on the sound pattern of words.

When children finally arrive at this third of the three levels described by Ferreiro (1990), they have understood the intrinsic nature of the alphabetic system, but they still cannot deal with all the specific features of the language (such as punctuation marks, blank spaces, upper and lower case letters). They have just understood that similarity of sound implies similarity of letters.

Of course, this is not the end of literacy development. From this point the children start through the stages of invented spelling, beginning with the use of only the initial consonant to represent the word. With much writing practice they gradually progress through to
the final stage of conventional spelling. These stages are explained more fully on page 19.

The Interrelationship Between Reading and Writing

It is a generally recognized fact among the major theorists and researchers in the field of literacy learning that reading and writing are reciprocal processes. DeFord (1991) elaborates by explaining that as readers and writers engage in one of the processes, they learn about the other as well. It is this process of learning about and through language to which children are so well adapted.

When young children write, the reading/writing process is conveniently slowed down. To form messages and print, children must work on a variety of levels. They have to think about what they want to say, what they hear and how to represent it, what they expect to see if they can't hear it and it doesn't look right, where they are in their message, and how they can make their message clear to the other readers (DeFord, 1991).
Young children must learn to balance the act of writing (a very slow process) and the conventions of print with their thoughts and intents (which are very rapid). Teachers must constantly help the beginning writer focus inward (learning how print operates) and outward (how messages work and will be received). The only way to accomplish this is to make the writing events purposeful, shared, and used over time. In this way, writing is an integral part of the reading program as well as a communication process children learn about as they write (DeFord, 1991).

Children's attempts to write tell us something of the things they are noticing in print, although we must always remember that their eyes may perceive more than their hands can execute. In fact, before the end of their first year in school, the children who are making good progress develop a power to read which outreaches their capacity to write (Clay, 1975).

A classroom that revolves around the use of reading and writing offers invitations for children to become apprentices with their peers and their teachers. Young children who may not have had a wealth of literacy experiences benefit most from these invitations. They learn the personal strategies they need to use to continue to develop as readers and writers. They also learn how to solve their own problems
and the value of books as sources of information as well as enjoyment (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988).

Often the first reading children do is of their own writing. For many students, their own writing provides the foundation for success in learning to read. The interrelationship between reading and writing has seemed particularly significant for those students who have been called learning disabled (Routman, 1988).

Routman (1988) told of Franklin, a student who was repeating first grade after "failing" at another school. Franklin believed he could not read or write, and his self-esteem was badly damaged. It was through the writing process that his reading skills developed. Because his own language was meaningful and memorable to him, with practice and support, he could read it. He loved the stories he heard all day and adapted many into his writing. He began to see himself as a reader and writer and was dismissed from the learning disability program at the end of the school year, not a typical occurrence.

Routman (1988) described other activities in which the reading-writing connection is evident. One is the shared book time where shared reading leads into shared writing, with the teacher and students collaborating on a text. Another such activity is note writing, which can be set up within the classroom or on a schoolwide basis. The
children are thrilled to get mail and, as they are writing and receiving notes, they are also reinforcing and improving their reading skills.

As you can readily see, many classroom activities lend themselves to the strengthening of both the reading and writing processes. Anything that is read can be written about. And anything that is written needs to be read, at least by the writer and preferably by others as well.

The Purpose and Value of
Using Invented Spelling

Invented spelling is precisely what its name implies--children invent the spelling of a word as they write, using whatever knowledge they have. Graves (1983) referred to it in an equally descriptive way, calling it spelling under "game" conditions. In other words, when children are writing a story, they have left the isolated spelling tests behind and now work with spelling in the midst of the many other processes employed when a child composes.

Clay (1987) described this process further. Wanting to write a word, children say the word slowly to themselves and try to find letters to write for the sounds they hear in the word. They do a careful
analysis of the sounds in the words. From what they know about English words and letters, they construct what they think the spelling will be. Children get very good at this process.

Graves (1983) described this process with a specific child. Jesse wants to write made. He writes an m, says the word again slowly and writes a d. He now has md on his paper. But there is an imbalance in his mind between what he has written and what he thinks made looks like. So he goes back and writes a in the middle. Now his word looks like this: mad. This kind of problem-solving goes on constantly with children engaged in the writing process, and their ability to correct more and more complex imbalances increases. This is real growth.

Although spelling is but one process of many others when a child composes, sadly, many children who have problems with spelling feel their information is poor, or their knowledge of topics nonexistent. They hate to write because for several years they have heard that they don't know how to write because they can't spell (Graves, 1983).

Graves (1983) described five general stages of spelling invention. As background for these stages he explained that in the beginning, children have never seen the word they are composing. Therefore, their ears are the dominant modality used. Consonants are more reliable (consistent) than vowels and become the foundation on which
words are made. When vowels do appear, they usually appear in long-
sound positions between the consonants where vowels would go, yet
they may not necessarily be correct. Clay (1993) added an additional
reason that children use consonants first--vowels are simply harder to
hear and require more experience with reading and writing.

The following is a brief description of Graves' (1983) five general
stages of invention, using the word grass as the example:

STAGE I: Initial consonant (G)

STAGE II: Initial and final consonant (GS)

STAGE III: Initial, final, and interior consonant (GRS)

STAGE IV: Initial, final, and interior consonants, and vowel place holder.
Vowel is incorrect but in correct position. (GRES)

STAGE V: Child has the full spelling of
the word, with final components from
visual memory systems and better
vowel discrimination. (GRASS)

Variations of these stages have been written by others and
arranged in different formats. One such variation is found in The

This form, called Development Spelling, is included on the next page.

It has been very helpful to teachers at my school in explaining to parents how a child progresses through the normal stages of learning how to spell with invented spelling.
## Developmental Spelling

### Beginnings

**Translation:**

My mom took us to the store to get some tomato juice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One letter, usually the first one heard, is used to represent the word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Translation:**

I went out in a boat and caught a fish this big.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial and Final Consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The first and last sounds are represented.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Translation:**

The next day some more flowers grew.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel/Consonant Combinations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consonants and vowels start to appear in the middle of words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Translation:**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All syllables in the words are represented.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Translation:**

You woke up when everybody left. You are clumsy. You were snoring. Zzz.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children begin to build a repertoire of spelling patterns and add to their store of sight words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Translation:**

Once upon a time, there was an old, old woman who had a dog. The dog's name was Sally. Sally was a quiet dog, except when she was hungry. So Polly knew what Sally wanted when Sally barked.
Children who invent spelling are actively trying to master the complexities of writing. They make "mistakes" because they want to try out their analysis of sounds, words, and symbols. Their self-correction is based on discovery of a better set of rules and a desire to "get it right." They arrive at correct spelling through trial and error in the course of writing down things that matter to them (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1985).

Of course, the teacher works from the first day to lead children toward correct spellings. This is done by continually pointing out what sound-symbol correspondences are correct in their writing, encouraging them in their invented spelling efforts, and providing correct spelling for high frequency words either in their personal word books or on the wall (Graves, 1983).

Cambourne and Turbill (1987) drew on their observations of a group of five- through twelve-year-olds over a period of five years. They related that the idea that approximating is an acceptable strategy to use when creating text did not appear to take hold with the majority of these children until approximately one month into the first school year.

In some of these classrooms the teachers decided to demonstrate the various strategies which could be used in writing an unknown
word. Before writing the conventional form of the class daily news, the teacher would write a rough draft in front of the children, "thinking aloud," asking questions such as: "How does 'going' start? Go-ing; g-o-ing; g-. That's what I need. Now how do you write a 'g'?" (Cambourne & Turbill, 1987)

This teacher demonstrated that temporary spellings really are temporary--by erasing them from the chalkboard when they were no longer needed. This also demonstrated that "public" writing needs to be conventional so that we can read it (Cambourne & Turbill, 1987).

In summary, the value of children using invented spelling when they begin to write is that it allows them to place the emphasis on meaning. They can do their creative writing without being constrained by a requirement that they use only correct spellings. It also greatly increases the messages children can write. Without it, children may only write the stilted and limited messages that are made up of the words they already know (Clay, 1987).
The Emergent Writer's
Use of Spacing

When words are to be combined into word groups, a space must be used to signal the end of one word and the beginning of another. Spaces indicate that the letters found between them make up one single word, and the spaces enable readers to notice initial and final letters more easily. But, most importantly, they assist with visual perception and make a text readable (Clay, 1975).

Some children take a long time to learn the value of spaces. This is due to the difficulty they experience in knowing which groups of letters are actual words, their lack of metalinguistic awareness, their lack of understanding of the function of the spaces, and their lack of skill and coordination in producing the appropriate spaces (Clay, 1975).

Time and experience in the processes of reading and writing are the key factors in making children competent in the correct use of spaces. To know that the words *want* and *to* are separate words and not one (*wantto*), children must hear each word many times in combination with other words. But in addition to this, children must actually see them in print.
Bisex (1980) drew attention to the fact that the boundaries between words are not indicated by pauses in speech and so must actually be seen by children in print for them to begin to learn where they go. During observations of the literary development of Bissex's own son, he was observed writing A PAN A TIME for upon a time. With only the auditory to use, there is nothing to indicate that upon has a different structure than a time. His writing of A PAN A TIME indicated his use of sound patterns to determine segmentation.

When attention to the space is a learning point for a particular student, Clay (1975) suggested that the teacher's models could exaggerate the space between words. Another method which is used in Reading Recovery with those children who are having difficulty understanding that words are separate entities with spaces in between is an activity which uses physical objects. Three to four objects (such as keys, pencil, and scissors) are laid on a table with large spaces in between them. The child actually "feels the space" with his/her hand as the teacher talks about the "separateness" of the objects and then shows the child how this is similar to the "separateness" of words in a book.

Another way that children become convinced that spaces are necessary is by having to read their own writing to the teacher. With
the entire message clumped together without spaces, a child has trouble pointing to the words and reading the message. This is an excellent teaching moment, a time for the teacher to say, "It's hard to read without spaces between the words, isn't it? Let's go back and use spaces and see if that helps."

In the beginning stages of using spaces, children's messages often have one correct space and the rest of the message jammed together. This is an excellent opportunity to put into practice one of the most effective strategies of good teaching--focusing on what is right with children's work. We must resist the temptation to talk only about the missing spaces and instead praise the one space that is there. As Carroll (1993) so eloquently puts it, "There is joy in finding all that is right with a student's paper. Too often and too long we have looked only for what is wrong."

There are many factors involved in children's earliest attempts to write. By looking at the six discussed in this literature review, we see that the process children go through in becoming good writers is a complex and fascinating one. Children can begin their first grade year knowing very little about the alphabetic representation of the language and how to translate their thoughts into written symbols. By the end of this same year, those children can become proficient young authors.
Facilitating this achievement is the privilege and responsibility of those who teach this important grade.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX:

A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS OF EMERGENT WRITERS
(GRADE 1)

by

Donna Wakeland Stark

30
INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to help first grade teachers who have predominantly emergent writers in their classrooms. Too often I have bought teacher idea books, especially for center ideas, which turned out to be too advanced for most of my first graders. They contained activities that most of my students, especially in the first semester of first grade, simply could not do. By contrast, this handbook will focus on activities which can be used from the first month of school and which will teach beginning skills for emergent writers.

Those children who enter first grade with a great reluctance to even put pencil to paper to write are a great challenge to teachers. Helping children, who would not even attempt a word, blossom into independent writers excited about their work is truly an exhilarating experience. A first grade teacher can witness some truly incredible turn-arounds.

There is no one strategy or set of teaching procedures which work with every reluctant writer. Children are different and respond to different approaches, all of which are based on our knowledge of how language develops. Teachers who are successful at moving children past the reluctant stage and on through the emergent level are
teachers who persist in trying one approach after another until each child responds.

This handbook is a compilation of strategies and approaches gathered from the literature and from experienced teachers of balanced literacy classrooms. Its goal is to assist first grade teachers who are always looking for additional strategies to enhance their writing program.

The handbook is divided into three sections. Section One describes ways to overcome the reluctance that some children have to begin the writing process. Sections Two and Three discuss ideas for designing activities that facilitate the writing process. Section Two focuses on whole-group activities, while section Three describes centers which first graders can do independently.
SECTION ONE:
OVERCOMING CHILDREN'S RELUCTANCE
TO BEGIN THE WRITING PROCESS

Getting many first graders over their reluctance to write independently and moving them along the path from scribbling to recognizable print is a real challenge. Some of these reluctant writers come from kindergarten classrooms where the children were not encouraged to write...some have moved around from school to school so often they have missed out on any ongoing routine of writing...many come from homes where they seldom see anyone reading or writing.

Whatever the reason, there are reluctant writers in nearly every first grade classroom. It is our job as teachers to create an atmosphere and engage in activities that will remove that reluctance and enable every child to experience the joy of writing. This section focuses on a few of the important things a teacher can do to help these reluctant writers.
The Value of Demonstration
(Matilda)

Ask teachers if a particular concept has been taught and we may readily answer "yes" when it would be more accurate to say we have told the children about the concept. For many children, certain concepts require an additional step past the telling. They require specific demonstration. These children need to "see themselves" in a demonstration of the practical use of the concept.

For the past few years, during the first week of school I have used the same demonstration as an introduction to writing. I play the part of a little first grader named Matilda. Matilda supposedly attends another school but has come over this morning at Mrs. Stark's invitation to tell the class about her first day of writing. A collective giggle is heard as Matilda shyly walks from behind the partition. The giggle is because the children know it's just Mrs. Stark with her hair quickly put up in ponytails.

Matilda is super excited and she picks up a marker to show the children what she wrote in her very first story. She sets the stage by telling how her teacher asked the class to write a story. She continues in an animated voice:
I was so nervous! I thought, "I don't know how to write those words!" But then my teacher told me she didn't expect me to know. She just wanted me to try my best. She said to say the words slowly and write down what I think I hear. So I did, and do you know what my teacher said when I showed her my paper? She said, "WOW! That's great!" Well, I was so excited, I've been writing stories every day since then. Let me show you how I wrote my story...

Matilda then says her words slowly, listening for the sounds she hears and spelling her words using invented spelling. The children usually "forget" it is really Mrs. Stark and start trying to help Matilda think of what letter store begins with.

Each year this simple demonstration has gotten a few more children over the hurdle of making that first attempt. And once those children are praised for their effort and encouraged to continue, the process has begun for them. Any similar demonstration which allows children to identify with the person should be effective with at least some of those reluctant writers.

The Importance of Praise

"What good space you're leaving between your words, Jesse!"
"You heard the 's' at the beginning of 'sun,' didn't you, Melissa? Good for you!"

"I like the way you said that word slowly to hear the sounds, Jason. That's what good writers do!"

"WOW! Look at what a long story you're writing, Joanna!"

So go the constant praises of the first grade teacher as her students begin their adventure in writing. Although some children write with greater ease than others, they all need to feel the teacher's pleasure and excitement for their own personal writing. And, although it may take a bit of creativity, teachers can always find something to praise about a child's writing—even at its earliest stages. This must always be our goal—the benefits are too important to miss.

Children can also be trained to join in the praise. When sharing time comes around and volunteers read their story to the group, the teacher can train the children to answer a question like: "What do you like about Mark's story?" or "What did Mark do well in his writing today?" At first their observations may not be very profound, but soon they will be noticing things like, "He left good spaces between his words," and "He heard the b at the beginning of balloon."
Copying from the Walls
Right or Wrong?

One of the characteristics of a balanced literacy classroom is its print-rich environment. The walls are filled with text—children's work, poems, charts, lists, labels, alphabets, and more. If the text is used by the teacher, and not just left to gather dust on the walls, it will be used by the children, too. This can be a comforting source of help for the reluctant writer.

An interesting fact, however, is that the teacher needs to assure the children it is okay to copy from the walls. Somehow there are always those children who think they are not supposed to look on the walls. I usually start a mini-lesson on this by taking a vote: "How many of you think it is right to copy from the walls? How many of you think it is wrong to copy from the walls?"

After taking the vote, I announce that both of their answers are correct. It is good to look on the walls for a particular word they need in their story. But it is not good to just copy a whole text instead of writing their own story. Then we take a tour of the walls to remind them of all that is there for their use.

One of the most valuable charts is the "Words We Use a Lot" list. It is best to have this list compiled as a joint project, with the
children adding high-frequency words gradually during shared writing and shared reading. When the list reaches a workable length, I have found it helpful to alphabetize and color code it. The alphabetizing helps me to glance up and find the word they ask for quickly. The color coding makes it easy for the child to find it when I say, "They is number five on the blue paper." Here is a sample chart:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words We Use a Lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pink Paper) (Yellow Paper) (Blue Paper)
Sharing with the Class Is Optional

A worry for some children at the beginning of the writing process is, "Am I going to have to share my story with everybody?"

Although letting children read their stories to the group is extremely beneficial, it should be made clear from the beginning that this is optional. Most first graders love to share their work from Day One. However, the totally inexperienced writers may look at what everybody else is writing and be reluctant to share theirs.

After establishing that sharing is not required, however, I have yet to see a student who does not eventually (and usually very quickly) decide to join in the sharing. This is another area where the enthusiastic praise of the teacher and/or the students can help. When these reluctant writers experience praise for that one space they remembered to use...or that one letter they wrote well...or that great picture that illustrates their story, they quickly change their minds and volunteer to share their story with the class, too.
**Interaction with Peers**

*Busy* is probably the best word to describe the look of a classroom if you step inside the door during writing time. The children are not all sitting silently at their desks writing. Samantha is asking Greg how to spell *the*, Daniel is up pointing to the *g* on the wall chart in answer to David's question, "How do you make a *g***?" Janette is showing Melissa the cat she just added to her picture. Brooke is showing her paper to Angela and asking, "Is that how you write *can***?"

Interaction with peers is beneficial to all who participate in it---both those who ask for help and those who give it. It is also a comfort to the reluctant writers. They quickly see that they are not the only ones who need help. Everybody seems to ask for help at one point or another.

There must be a certain amount of talk allowed by the teacher during these writing times. At first the teacher may need to quietly remind some students that their talking needs to be about their writing, not other things. But as the children grow accustomed to the procedure, these reminders will become less and less necessary.

Cambourne & Turbill (1987) said that this constructive interaction is simply a consequence of the setting. Children with a
common task, seated in such a way that they are close enough to interact and talk and given the freedom to do just that, will begin to make the best of the situation and draw on the knowledge and information of their peers.
SECTION TWO:
DESIGNING GROUP ACTIVITIES THAT FACILITATE
THE WRITING PROCESS

Although the first grade classroom where children remain seated for class lessons most of the day is a thing of the past, short whole class activities still play an important part in an effective balanced literacy classroom. These times are essential to provide the modeling and the teaching of skills and strategies that children need. They should always be interesting, attention-grabbing sessions where good classroom management is in effect. This section will describe a few such activities.

**Filling in the Missing Letters**

Having the teacher and the children collaborate to fill in missing letters on a pre-written text is an effective way to teach certain sounds or to help the children hear sounds in a certain position (i.e., beginning or ending sounds). There are many different names for this activity. I call mine "mystery messages" and ask the children to help me solve the
mystery of the missing letters. The following is an example of a "mystery message" focusing on ending sounds.

In the boo_ we just rea_ Jake was a little ki_ who always made a me_. His mom and dad and brother and sister trie_ to clean things up, bu_ then Jake came along and ruined everything. I be_ they wish he would take a na_.

Another variation of this activity is to take a familiar big book and put post-it notes over letters or entire words. As the teacher and the children read the story in unison, they collaborate on missing letters and the teacher writes them on the post-it notes. This can also be done with specific sounds or positions of sounds as the focus (i.e., cover up all short vowel sounds or all beginning sounds). A page from a big book might look like this:
Sally's cat had a long tail. Every time he took a nap, someone stepped on it. It was not very sore!
After telling the teacher the beginning letter and seeing it written on the post-it note, children love to see the post-it note torn off to reveal what the book had. "Did we get it right?" "Yes!"

Shared Writing

Shared writing (also called modeled writing) is a crucial ingredient in the effective balanced literacy first grade classroom throughout the entire year. Instead of simply filling in the missing letters on a pre-written message, shared writing has children collaborate with the teacher to write a message beginning with a blank sheet of paper.

The following is an excellent example of a shared writing activity taken from The Wright Group's The Story Box Level 1 Teacher Guide (1990). It is a Daily News activity where the children share anything they wish with the class. They may simply share information or they may bring in objects to show and share. Using chart paper to record on, the teacher begins the day's news report.

Teacher: Who can tell me what today is?
Children: Monday.

T: Good. Who can show me where we begin writing? (Child comes up and points to upper left.)

T: Today is Monday. Who can tell me what the word today starts with?

C: T. (The teacher writes the letter T.)

T: Can you hear any other letters in today?

C: D. (The teacher writes the d in the appropriate space, then fills in the rest of the word.)

T: And what do we remember to leave before we start our next word?

C: A space.

T: Good. The next word is is. Does anyone know how to spell is?

C: S.

T: That's right, and there's a little i in front. (The teacher begins writing the word Monday.) What word am I writing now?
C: Monday.

T: So, what do we want our news to be about today?

(For this day the children choose to write about a newspaper article that one of the children shared; the article is about a sick seal.)

T: Would someone like to tell me what I'm going to write about?

C: The sick seal. (The teacher begins writing, and the children read the words as they are written. The teacher writes The sick seal has, but notices that many of the children say was instead of has.)

T: (Guiding the children to use graphophonic strategies) It could have been was, but it starts with an...

C: H!

T: Good! And what does the sick seal have?

C: A torn flipper.

T: (Continuing to write the sentence) What letters can you hear in torn? What is a flipper?
(The children respond with various answers. The teacher and children continue to write the story together in this manner. When the story is complete, they are ready to read it together.)

T: Everyone please look to the front so we can read. Who can tell us where we begin, which way we go, and where to go when we get to the end of the line?

(A child comes up to the chart paper and points to the appropriate places, then all the children and the teacher read the news story together.

If it is a fairly short message it is helpful to train the children to go back to the beginning and read after each word is written. In this way they end up reading the message many times by the end of the lesson. This not only helps them practice their reading skills, but it trains them to do this same re-reading procedure when they are writing their own individual messages at their seats.

The Daily News is, of course, only one of many shared writing opportunities. This procedure can be used to write an innovation (the children's own variation of a story they've read), compile a list (of such things as ingredients for a recipe), write a letter...the possibilities are endless.
This activity is also a perfect opportunity to cause a low-achieving child to shine. If you know that Daniel has just learned to write the word to, turn to him and say, "Daniel, tell us how to write to, please." Never mind that everyone else could have told you too. Daniel needed that moment in the spotlight.

A variation of the shared writing activity is interactive-shared writing. Here the same procedure is followed except that the teacher does not do all of the writing. A child actually comes to the chart paper and, using the same marker as the teacher, writes a letter or word. The end product is a combination of the teacher's writing and the children's writing.

This is very valuable, but since it does take much longer, many teachers have found that it should be done for shorter periods of time. The children's attention begins to wander with too much "down time" of volunteers walking back and forth and forming the letters.

**Free Choice Writing**

Although we often want children to respond to a specific piece of literature or an event like a field trip in their writing, there are other times when "free choice" is beneficial. The children can choose
anything to write about. This could be in their journals or on different types of paper.

For a long time my rule was, "Write first and then draw your picture." I thought I had to do it this way or they would never get to the writing. But through reading the literature and talking with other teachers, my thoughts have changed.

Much has been written about the value of pictures to stimulate children's writing. By changing my format during "Free Choice Writing Time" and allowing children to draw their picture first, the "I don't know what to write" problem has been virtually eliminated. We start the time with a brief review of the following chart from Joyful Learning (Fisher, 1991) which is kept out for them to see:

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1. Draw a picture.

2. Write something about your picture.

3. Write your name.

4. Stamp the date.
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After this they spread out in the room wherever they want to sit with crayons, paper, pencil and eraser (and a clipboard if they choose to sit on the floor). Most begin by drawing a picture, although a few began to ask, "May I write first?" to which I replied, "Sure." I wander around the room talking to students, commenting on their pictures, and asking questions. Fisher (1991) has refined this interaction to include the adding of detail.

Sometimes I encourage the children to add details to their drawings to tell their story, so that as they write stories they will add details in words to clarify and enrich their message. Sometimes they edit their work by adding to their drawing as they tell their story, and sometimes I ask what they could add to their drawing for clarification.

Mary tells me about a walk she took with her mom. "Oh, I forgot to put our dog
in the picture," she says as she picks up a crayon and begins to draw him. "He went with us and kept on barking."

"I can tell that he was important to your story. I didn't know that until you drew him in. Tell me about the barking. Is it important for you to tell about that in your story?" (Fisher, 1991)

Since the children are starting and finishing their writing at different times it allows me to interact a lot with them and to have them read their finished stories to me. I do not usually spell words for children when they ask. My responses vary.

"How do you think it is spelled?"

"Say it slowly. What sounds do you hear?"

"Is that a word on our word chart?"
"Just do the best you can."
The children gradually stop asking for spellings once they know that it is their responsibility and that their best efforts will be accepted.

On the other hand, Routman (1988) reminds us that we must also recognize that spelling does not always improve without some teacher guidance. A child who is repeatedly inventing high frequency words may be ready to spell them conventionally. Routman says something like, "I notice you have been using the word when a lot in your writing." She neatly pencils in the conventional spelling saying, "This is how it looks in books."

Occasionally, I need to gently remind a few children that it is time to finish up their picture and move on to their writing, but that is easy to keep an eye on as I walk around. Before they put their writing away I ask them to check the chart to see if they have done all four things, including writing their name and date stamping their paper.

Composing Text for Wordless Books

Wordless big books provide a ready-made forum for another form of shared writing--composing your own text for professional illustrations. This activity can begin with a discussion about how
authors write children's books. Do they write the story first or do they
draw the illustrations first?

This activity can also include a discussion about books that are
written by one person and illustrated by another versus books that are
written and illustrated by one author. Let the children figure out how
that information is conveyed on a book cover and title page. This is a
particularly interesting idea to children. Thereafter, they will watch
for it in your big books and exclaim, "Look, that author wrote the story
and drew the pictures!"

Children are then told that as a group they will become the
author for this beautifully illustrated book. White correction tape or
strips of paper should have already been taped into place where the
text will be written. First a thorough "picture walk" through the book
is taken together, discussing the pictures, what seems to be happening,
what happens in the end, who the characters are, and any other
discussion the pictures stimulate.

When conducting this activity for the first few times, it can be
helpful to ask the students if it would be all right for you to write the
first page. (When asked nicely, they always say "yes!") In this way the
teacher can set the tone for the story, using language that will lend
itself to the children re-reading the book easily.
After the first page the teacher chooses volunteers to give their ideas and writes the story under the pictures. The goal is to stay as close to the children's language as possible but also work to keep the text from getting too complicated. After all, a dual purpose of this activity is for the children to be able to re-read the book often.

The teacher writes the text in the collaborative method described above in the Shared Writing section. Last, but not least, comes the writing of the authors' names on the book. This can be done as a group ("by C-3") or the children can sign their names to a paper that is then taped into the book. The finished product is then placed in the reading corner where the children can read it themselves. These same beautiful books can be used year after year by just removing the taped-in text.

Making Words

Making Words is a strategy which applies the principles used in the one-on-one Reading Recovery lesson to a group setting. This activity, developed by Cunningham and Cunningham (1992), is an
excellent way to give children hands-on practice in putting together the sounds that they hear in a word.

The teacher chooses a word like spider, and gives each child these letters, each on a separate square of paper: s, p, i, d, e, and r. The capital letter is on one side of the card and the lower case letter on the other side. A management suggestion is to have designated children give one letter to each child. Let the passer keep the recloseable bag containing that letter and have the same child collect that letter when the lesson is over. It is also helpful to give each child a laminated strip of construction paper on which they will make their words.

The vowels are always on one color paper (pink for our purposes here) and the consonants on a different color. The teacher also places a larger copy of these letter cards in a pocket chart or chalkboard ledge at the front.

The teacher holds up and names the letters on the large letter cards in the pocket chart and has the children hold up their matching small letter cards. The teacher then gives the first word, red, and tells the number of letters in the word. The children are instructed to say the word slowly several times, listening to the sounds they hear, and then make the word on their laminated strip.
A child who has the word made correctly is chosen to come forward and make the same word with the large letter cards in the pocket chart. Those children who did not make theirs correctly can then correct it.

The activity continues with several more words. Before telling them the last word, spider, ask "Has anyone figured out what word we can make with all our letters?" After a few of these lessons the children look forward to this last step and work hard to guess the word.

The activity can be expanded several ways. Since the vowels are a different color, children can get used to the fact that every word must have at least one vowel (pink letter). Some of the words will also be names, like Ted, and children will become accustomed to using the capital letter side of their cards for these words. The lessons will also lend themselves to teaching letter combinations like ea. Here are a few sample lessons:
Children enjoy this hands-on activity and begin moving their letters around from the moment they get them, trying to figure out words. They are especially eager to figure out the word that can be made using all the letters. Once the lesson begins it is fast-paced and
keeps the children involved. By beginning every Making Words lesson with some short easy words and ending with a bigger word that uses all the letters, the lessons provide practice for the least sophisticated learners as well as challenge for all.
SECTION THREE:
DEVELOPING CENTERS THAT FACILITATE
THE WRITING PROCESS

Developing centers that facilitate the writing process but that can also be done independently by first graders is a challenge. There are many center idea books, but the center activities are often simply too hard for the average first grader to be able to do without help.

Over the years I have found fellow first grade teachers to be the best source for center ideas. Each one has found an idea here and an idea there and compiled their own list of valuable centers. The goal of each center is not only that it can be done independently but that it will strengthen the children's skills. For the purposes of this handbook we will look at only those which will enhance children's ability to write.

Mailboxes

Children love to get mail, and mailboxes are a wonderful incentive to write. After all, if you are going to receive mail, you usually have to send mail, too. The mailbox system can either be set up internally within the classroom or schoolwide. Our school is
fortunate to have an upper grade class that decided to initiate and manage a daily schoolwide mail system. Two fifth-graders come by each afternoon to pick up and deliver our mail.

In the absence of a schoolwide system, however, a classroom set-up is just as exciting. All that is needed is a personal space for each child's mail. Anything from professional "cubbies" to cardboard, shoe organizer boxes to large envelopes will do. Once the teacher has done the initial set-up and given explanations, examples, and purposes for the mailboxes, there is little ongoing maintenance needed.

In introducing mailboxes, the teacher might want to place a short, personal note in each child's mailbox. A time of explanation is necessary where the importance of writing the person's name clearly on the front is stressed. In the beginning, most of the notes are brief. In fact, they may only have the sender's name and the person's name they are sending it to (with perhaps a picture). But messages become increasingly long with time and practice.

The post office can be a perpetual center where children can go to write notes to friends. About the only maintenance needed is to keep it stocked with paper and writing materials. Special paper like pink around Valentine's and orange around Halloween is always a fun change. It is also helpful to have a class list at the center so the
children can find the name of the person to whom they want to send their note.

The reading-writing connection of this center is obvious.
Children are not only writing notes, but they need to read the notes they receive. They can often be observed asking a friend to help them read a word in a letter they just got.
Making Lists

Making lists is a valuable use of the whole group shared writing time already mentioned. It can also be transferred to a center after the children have become familiar with the process during the whole group times. Regular eight and a half by eleven sheets of paper cut lengthwise in half make perfect "list paper."

Children will be able to think of many items of which they can make lists, or the teacher can post the category they are to use. They can make a list of:

- things that are yellow
- their friends
- the characters in a story
- ingredients for a favorite recipe
- gifts they received for their birthday
- their favorite foods

The possibilities are endless. This is another low maintenance center.

With list paper and writing materials kept handy, it is ready to go.
Racing at the White Board

One of the techniques used in Reading Recovery when teaching students new words or reviewing words they still need work on is "racing" at the chalkboard. The teacher races with the student to see who can write the word first. This is repeated several times at a fast pace. As you might guess, teachers can sometimes be notoriously slow at writing the word in order to make sure the child has a chance to win.

Well, this activity is perfect for a center using the chalkboard or a white board, whichever is in the classroom. It works effectively with two students or three, depending on the size of the board. Each student takes a turn calling out one of the high-frequency words they are learning. After giving the others a second to think, this student says, "Go!" and the race is on. Even though a score could be kept, children do not seem to need the scorekeeping to hold their interest. Just the fun of racing is enough.

A supply of cards with high-frequency words written on them can be kept at the center. If the children cannot think of a word, they can draw a card from the stack. If the caller gets to see the card,
however, the other students at the center must be shown the card too, if they desire, before the race begins.

At the beginning of the year, this same center can use letters instead of words. At this stage many first graders are still working on learning how to form the letters. Practicing them in a racing format can speed up this learning, also.
Go Fish

"Go Fish" is a children's card game that most of us probably played when we were young. Three children at a center can easily play. Materials will include a set of handmade cards (three-by-five cards work fine), each having a high-frequency word on it which the children are learning. There will be three cards of each word (i.e., three cards of the, three cards of to, three cards of can).

The children distribute an equal number of cards to each player face down, leaving some cards in a face-down pile in the middle, also. The children then pick up their cards into a "hand," like a regular card game. The object is to get all three thes, for example, by asking one of the other players, "Do you have the?" That player must give you any card he has with the on it or, if he has none, he replies, "Go fish." This answer means the asker must draw one card from the pile in the middle.

Each time a child collects all three of one word, he lays them down face-up on the floor or table. At the end of the game (when a player runs out of cards in his hand), the player with the most sets of three is the winner. With a little explanation and demonstration in the whole group time, children catch onto the game quickly.
Although this center does not involve the children directly in writing, it is extremely important to first graders' writing ability that they know some high-frequency words. These "anchor" words not only help them read but help them write their messages with confidence.

Responding with Writing

There are a variety of centers which can be set up for the purpose of providing a stimulus for writing. The following have been successful centers in various first grade classrooms. The children are taught that they are required to write something about what they see or do at the center.

An exhibit of something the class is doing in science (i.e., a magnifying glass and a leaf)

A selection of pictures from magazines or even some photographs the children bring to share

An overhead projector with blank overlays on which the students draw a picture and write a story
A table of stick puppets for whom the children write dialogue

A familiar big book with blank sheets of paper taped in the back for students to record their comments about the story

A selection of stencils or rubber stamps to create the picture for the story they will write at the center

Once the children become accustomed to the requirement that they write at a given center, that center's value to the children's literacy development is greatly increased.
CONCLUSION

As with just about anything in the first grade, the way activities are introduced is the key to their success. If a teacher introduces a group activity or center with excitement and enthusiasm, first graders will be eager to try them. Enthusiasm is *caught not taught*.

Teachers are also the ultimate "refiners." They take an activity, try it in their classrooms, and then make little adjustments (refinements) to make it even more effective for their particular students. That is what I trust you will do with these activities. Use them, but then refine them so that they fit your own group of students perfectly. The goal is to make each day count in enabling our children to become confident independent writers by the end of the first grade.
RESOURCES


