

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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Research Monograph # 20

How can teachers make writing fun and motivating, so that even reluctant writers want to write?

Storytelling and Story Writing

“Using a Different Kind of Pencil”

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“As you tell a story, you make stuff up along the way ... and when you ask people for ideas they give you good ideas. Then you can write a story.”

– Grade 4 student

Research Tells Us

- Oral language is the foundation of literacy development.
- Classroom discussion promotes higher-level thinking and problem solving, fosters deeper literary awareness and enhances communication skills.
- Sharing writing in conversations and conferences with peers and teachers increases the motivation to write and the desire to improve writing.
- The social nature of writing requires that students learn to write inside a community.

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Educators often assume that there is a link between storytelling and story writing, that telling stories can provide a foundation and a rehearsal for writing them. By analyzing the written and spoken words of students in a Grade 4/5 class over a period of two months, we were able to explore the connections between oral rehearsal – including storytelling – and story writing. We found that the use of storytelling and peer talk stimulated significantly more writing and higher-quality writing.

Effective instruction in a writers’ workshop setting, we believe, fosters the growth of a community of authors, where participants read, talk and write together. Committed to this belief, we embarked on a team-taught project to inject new life into a writers’ workshop^{1,2} by infusing storytelling, oral rehearsal and discussion of stories into activities before, during and after writing. We found that this approach had a huge impact not only on engaging reluctant writers but also on motivating fluent writers to continue to improve their writing skills.

Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) results in previous years have indicated a need for focused attention on writing. Recent improvements in Grade 6 results show this attention to writing instruction should continue.³ With this important priority in mind, we report on both our own study and on other research about storytelling and story writing.

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Engaging a Community of Writers

Barbero writes that the “social nature of writing requires that students learn to write inside a community” (p. 380).⁴ The use of peer talk and discussion in the classroom to rehearse for writing, and the use of drama to create stories, have all been well researched. Armbuster and colleagues⁵ explore the use of writing processes in elementary grades to articulate and clarify learning, and the value of peer talk to rehearse and revise writing. Townsend and Pace⁶ show that discussion fosters deeper literary awareness. Van Woerkum’s⁷ research emphasizes the links among oral language, writing processes and creativity.

These studies and others strongly support the use of writers’ workshop to create a community of writers.⁸ Sharing writing with peers and teachers increases the motivation to write and the desire to improve writing.⁹ Booth¹⁰ and Gallagher¹¹ support the importance of rehearsing story writing using drama, and Wilson¹² writes about the usefulness of holding “write-talks” to stimulate writing.

Our study builds upon this research, providing specific reference to the use of storytelling and story discussion to motivate and enhance story writing.

What Teachers Can Do to Get Their Students Writing

Storytelling is a powerful tool to get students writing because it provides “opportunities to identify important details and dialogue, understand and recall stories and story elements, and practise oral language skills such as vocal expression and exaggeration” (p. 218).¹³ Over the course of our two-month study, we found that engaging in storytelling and talking about stories enlivened the process of writing for a group of junior students, most of whom were reluctant writers. We modelled storytelling, and we engaged with the students as they rehearsed, told and drafted their stories. We talked about their stories with them and listened to them discuss their stories with one another. This feedback led them to either revise their stories or to realize when they had a good story and why.

Some approaches to teaching writing assign the same topic(s) to everyone in the class, regardless of individual interests or personal experiences. In contrast, our method makes use of two oral communication strategies: the traditional art of storytelling and classroom talk. These practices provide opportunities for young authors to rehearse and receive feedback throughout the writing process.

“Using a Different Kind of Pencil”

Many students struggle with the process of writing. They may begin the pre-writing stage using a graphic, then jot down a few initial ideas and feel they have written a complete story. David’s story illustrates the reluctance of many students to revisit their first drafts. During a conference with the teacher, he said the story was “done.”

“One day I wanted to build a tree house but I had no wood. So I had a lemonade stand and after a week or two I got wood and my Dad helped me.”

Even when students produce a more detailed story during the drafting stage, they are often reluctant to spend time revising and/or editing. As one Grade 5 student commented:

“I don’t like revising, like when my story is too long and it starts to not make sense, and it takes a lot of time to change it. And I don’t like editing. It’s boring.”

Getting Started with Writers’ Workshop

1. Mini-Lesson – 10 to 15 minutes

Day 1: Teacher tells a story. (We used “The Name of the Tree,” “Tipingee, Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock,” “Lazy Jack” and “The Rough-face Girl”, as well as personal anecdotes.)

Days 2 to 8: Explicit instruction (modelling) based on student need. Topics could include conventions such as punctuating dialogue or paragraphing; writer’s craft, such as sentence combining, writing good beginnings and endings, and using “juicy words”; and revising and editing skills.

2. Status of the class – 2 to 3 minutes

Teacher circulates with class list, recording who is at rehearsal/drafting/ revising/editing/publishing stages.

3. Writing time

Students rehearse, then write independently while teacher circulates and conducts conferences.

Phase 1: oral rehearsal with partner – 10 minutes

Phase 2: sustained writing – 25 minutes

4. Authors’ sharing time – 10 to 15 minutes

Students present works in progress at any stage of the writing process, including oral rehearsal, for audience feedback and group problem-solving.

Further details about how to organize and structure writers’ workshops can be found in the Ministry of Education’s 2006 publication, *A Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Vol. 6 – Writing* (pp. 18–28). Access online at: <http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/>.



The challenge for some is the actual physical act of writing. They need a “different kind of pencil” as Omar’s friend says in *Omar on Ice*. It is chiefly listening to stories and oral rehearsal of their own stories that nudges them into producing full-fledged stories. A complete story is a better model for writing a story than a template such as a story map. Folk tales make particularly good models because of their obvious beginning-middle-end structure, clear characters, simple settings and well-defined problems and solutions.

Storytelling as a Bridge to Story Writing

Many teachers observe that the masterful storytellers are often the children who are not confident readers and writers and that “the comfort zone of the oral tale can be the path by which they reach the written one.”¹⁴ Sometimes, “the best response to a story is another story” (p. 14).¹⁵ Our strategy, implemented using eight-day cycles, involved telling students a story and then leading them through the process of altering the story by changing one or more elements. In the case of the folk tale, “The Name of the Tree,” for example, the students were asked to re-tell the story to a partner or small group by changing the setting.

“I get ideas when I listen to a story first. And when I tell my story to my friends, they say ‘You can add this...’ And when I listen to their stories, I get ideas for my story.”

We used other folk tales to focus on plot and on character: the students engaged in dramatic retellings and re-enactments, created visual representations of settings, made storyboards and shadow puppets to display plot sequence, and told anecdotes putting themselves in the role of various story characters. After these oral and visual activities, they went on to compose their own versions of the original tales. Once they had a story in oral and visual form, they felt like authors, even before pencil was put to paper.^{16,17}

Integrating drama and visual arts with the writing process grounded the students’ writing in their own personal actions and experiences. This enriched both writing process and product. David Booth refers to this as “writing within a concrete framework” (p. 85).¹⁰

We adapted the typical structure of writers’ workshop by including storytelling and oral rehearsal just before independent writing time. The students used notebooks to record drafts, drawings, revisions and notes on the process of using storytelling as part of writing. Students were invited to participate in an author sharing time at the conclusion of each workshop.

How Storytelling Made a Difference

After three eight-day cycles of writing and storytelling integrated with drama and art, David, who wrote about his “tree house,” was starting to write longer, more detailed stories. Instead of writing three or four lines accompanied by a drawing, he was beginning to fill three-quarters of a notebook page. More significantly, he was beginning to demonstrate the use of story language and structures.

By the second month, David had made dramatic progress. He rehearsed and then composed a three-page draft that began:

“Once upon a time in a small village there was a handsome prince. Now this prince was looking for a wife. The only way a girl could marry the prince was to pick an apple that would turn to gold. Only the girl who was beautiful and kind inside would turn an apple to gold.

“In a small house just a couple of miles outside the village lived three sisters. Two of them were beautiful but they had hearts of stone. The other sister wasn’t so beautiful but she had the kindest heart in the village. She had a heart of gold ...”

“Using a different kind of pencil”

- Make regular use of an author’s chair – or what we call “authors share” – as an integral part of the writing process.
- Use storytelling and oral rehearsal as pre-writing.
- Create opportunities for talk at all stages of the writing process.
- Integrate writing with drama and visual art activities.

Next steps

- Extend the use of “authors share” for specific work on writers’ craft, for example, revising for stronger introductions and conclusions or using correct conventions.
- Use small, guided writing groups for targeted instruction to address next steps. (Whole-group mini-lessons are not always necessary.)
- Use oral storytelling and authors share for assessment.
- Try a similar writing process (incorporating oral rehearsal and discussion) for non-fiction writing.

“We see that everyone has a story, even those who thought they did not.”

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Throughout the writing process, the use of an author's chair, which we called "authors share," contributed to collaboration and to the appreciation of one another's stories. The students became increasingly articulate about specific elements and strengths of their peer's stories, using phrases such as "I liked the beginning because ..." or "I liked the words you used when you described ...". They used authors share time for ongoing self-assessment and for final feedback.

"I love seeing the look on other people's faces when they hear my story. I like getting help from my friends. It helps make the story better."

Discussing stories with one another helped students identify which writing strategies were most effective, which aspects of their stories were most interesting and which passages needed to be revised. These discussions led the students to an increased awareness of audience and voice.¹⁸

In sum

Storytelling and talking about their writing allows students to rehearse and revise stories, and creates an atmosphere for free writing, circumventing the "I hate writing" attitude. It frees reluctant writers from the constraints and conventional expectations for "school writing." For some, the physical act of writing makes it difficult to get anything down on paper. When the expectation is simply to tell a story, we see that everyone has a story, even those who thought they did not.

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