

Putting the

# power in action

Teaching young children "how to" write

by Rebecca M. Giles and Karyn Wellhousen Tunks

**T**o become writers, children need to understand the purpose and benefits of print as a means of communicating. With this understanding comes the realization that writing has two important functions.

First, it provides a way to share thoughts, ideas, and stories with others. When children draw and write about an event, they like to share it with others and enjoy the reaction of friends and family.

Second, a recorded event can be revisited and enjoyed at a later time. When children return to journal entries made days, weeks, or months earlier, they are reminded of past events that were significant to them at the time.

Once children begin to experience firsthand the pleasure of writing, their efforts are rewarded, and they are motivated to write more.

One way to introduce children to writing is to provide strong support initially and gradually encourage more independence as they gain the basic skills. Teachers accomplish this through the "I do, we do, you do" model.

The teacher models writing ("I do"), children are encouraged to experiment with written language with support ("we do"), and their early attempts to write are accepted as they continue to apply what they learn ("you do").

## "I do"

Teachers model when, why, and how adults use writing by demonstrating what writing looks like as well as purposes for writing. Teachers write for a variety of reasons, always emphasizing why and how writing will be used.

There are many authentic opportunities for modeling writing throughout the school day. For example, a voice on the intercom informs the prekindergarten classes that lunch is delayed 10 minutes and the children should wait before coming to the cafeteria. The teacher writes on the chalkboard: "Lunch is 10 minutes late. Leave the classroom at 12:10." As she writes, she explains why she is writing the message: "I'm writing this down so we can remember what time to go to lunch today."

After lunch, the teacher composes a letter to parents on the computer that she projects onto the wall. She explains the purpose is to convey important details for an upcoming field trip. She pronounces each word as she types it on the keyboard, and the children watch as the letters appear on the wall. Then she prints the letter and makes copies for each child to take home.

Before children leave for the day, the teacher writes individual "Happy Notes" for one or two children complimenting their behavior, an accomplishment, or a kind deed they did for another person. She invites the selected child to watch as she writes the note on stationery and places it inside a matching envelope. "Happy Notes" are a valued treasure that children take home to share with their families.

These are just three examples of ways teachers model writing and the purpose of writing in the classroom.

A popular method of "I do" writing is composing the morning message. Students who are learning to read and write make connections between spoken

and written words as they observe the teacher write. In this activity, children are exposed to the following concepts:

- Print is written (and read) from left to right and top to bottom of the page.
- Print carries a message.
- Punctuation is used at the end of a sentence or question.
- Space appears between words.
- There is a consistent correspondence between sounds in words and the letters used to represent them.

The morning message may follow a consistent pattern every day. The repetition assists children in learning basic concepts and sight words they can eventually use when they write.

For example, the teacher may use the following pattern:

Dear Class,  
Today is Friday, November 13, 2009. Our leader is Macolah. Her favorite food is pizza.

In this example, the pattern remains the same every day, while the date, leader's name, and favorite food change. This gives the teacher the opportunity to introduce new words and letter sounds while giving the children confidence in their ability to read the message.

Another approach is writing a message that does not follow a pattern. This approach can be introduced after the class has clearly learned the previous pattern and is beginning to learn new words. The

teacher can write on any topic that may be of interest to the children. For example, the teacher may write:

Friday, May 14, 2010

Last night, my son had a baseball game. Our team won with a score of 6-4. It was fun!

From this more advanced message, the children are exposed to punctuation, such as commas and exclamation points, as well as numerals incorporated into the text. For more ideas, including links to sites providing suggestions for extensions and variations, visit "Mrs. Hubbard's Morning Message" at [www.hubbardscupboard.org/morning\\_message.html](http://www.hubbardscupboard.org/morning_message.html).

### "We do"

Children composing *with* the teacher is known as a "we do." In this writing experience, the teacher asks children to suggest ideas or specific words that the teacher then records.

This type of writing includes interactive writing (Button, Johnson, and Furgerson 1996), sharing the pen (Tompkins and Collom 2004), and creating cooperative chronicles (Tunks and Giles 2007). All of these evolved from the language experience approach (LEA) introduced in the 1970s. Regardless of the terminology or specific strategy, writing *with* children is an effective tool for teaching young children how to write.

When teachers and children write together, children begin to see themselves as capable writers. They observe peers participating in the writing



activity and are rewarded by seeing their own contributions added to the story. Children observe the process of transferring oral language to written words.

They take part in problem solving, such as sequencing the order of events and deciding which details to include. Finally, they see a finished product they can enjoy later and share with others who weren't present when it was written. Pride from their accomplishment as writers serves as a motivator for writing independently.

Guidelines have been suggested to provide important and meaningful elements of teaching children how to write (McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas 2000; Tompkins 2005; Tunks and Giles 2007).

- 1. Provide an engaging and meaningful background experience to inspire children to write.** The experience can be planned such as a field trip, a talk by an invited visitor, an upcoming holiday, a unique object, or a quality children's book read aloud. Or the experience can be an unexpected occurrence such as a bad storm or an escaped classroom pet scampering across the floor!
- 2. Talk about the experience to generate ideas.** After the experience, the teacher leads children in a discussion, encouraging the use of oral language. The teacher can promote discussion by asking open-ended questions, such as "What can we write about this? What can we say about this in a story?" As children share suggestions and sequence the order of events, the group begins to organize ideas.
- 3. Compose the text on chart paper.** During the actual writing, children and the teacher negotiate the text by making cooperative decisions about what will be written. While writing, the teacher may refer to the ideas children presented. In some cases, the teacher may ask individual children to "share the pen" by writing an individual letter or whole word.
- 4. Revisit the text and make changes.** The teacher assists during the composition of the story by going back to the beginning and rereading what has already been written. This provides reinforcement and momentum for determining what will be included next. Once the story is finished, the teacher uses a pointer to point to text as she and the children read it aloud. Depending upon the children's skill level, the story can be revised and edited for sequence, content, and word choice.

**5. Publish the finished piece of writing.** After the piece has been read aloud and deemed finished, it is published to allow for repeated reading and sharing. Publishing can take many forms, such as individual word-processed copies, class books, wall charts, bulletin board displays, or Web postings.

In the "we do" strategy, teachers serve as a scaffold for emerging writers by providing varying degrees of support. This support ranges from the teacher writing children's suggestions to observing as children do the writing themselves.

## **"You do"**

"You do" opportunities provide children with the chance to write independently on topics of their own interest and choosing. Although the teacher may still play a vital role in recording their writing, children experience the satisfaction that comes from creating their own messages. As children gain confidence in their abilities as writers, they continue writing throughout their elementary school years and become less dependent on adults for support.

Young children are encouraged to engage in "you do" writing while playing in learning centers. Pretend play, in particular, holds significant implications for children's literacy development as children write grocery lists, address party invitations, make appointments, record food orders, and take messages over pretend phones.

Simply adding literacy props to play areas greatly increases the amount of time children engage in literacy behaviors during play periods (Stroud 1995; Vukelich and Valentine 1990; Strickland and Morrow 1989). Materials such as markers, small spiral notepads, recipe cards, coupons, envelopes, tape, adhesive notes, and stamps with ink pads all stimulate interest in writing. Print-rich environments with signs, symbols, and labels posted throughout the classroom provide students with models for copying or including in their writing.

Young children also engage in "you do" writing through the use of daily journals. Recording individual experiences in a journal format appeals to their egocentric nature as well as provides a chronological record of their writing development. Time is set aside for children to write in journals every day. Children are encouraged to record their own experiences or ideas rather than respond to a topic provided by the teacher. This prevents children from

becoming dependent on others for topics (Graves 2003).

Journals can take many forms. The recommended form consists of blank paper bound together in a book format. The cover is cut from a wallpaper sample book, and the child's name is written on it in bold, black marker. Each journal contains an appropriate number of pages for a designated period, such as a month.

Children draw and write in journals by turning to a new page every day in sequential order. A date stamp records the month, day, and year on each page. Journals are kept in a designated location, distributed to children, and collected daily. They are shared with parents during teacher-parent conferences and are given to students to take home and share with others.

When journals are first introduced, children draw their ideas and messages. Drawing is an appropriate means for emerging writers to convey a message on paper. When children use pictures to share their story, the teacher becomes a scribe, taking dictation as the child describes the drawing.

Taking dictation in this way is pivotal to introducing the purpose of writing. As the teacher takes dictation, the child observes the marks made and listens as the teacher reads the story back. This practice enhances the child's awareness of the speech-to-text connection (what you say, you can write). It helps the child understand basic sound-symbol relationships and introduces print conventions, including capitalization and punctuation (Tunks and Giles 2009). As a result, the child becomes more aware of print and how it's used and is motivated to attempt writing independently.

Eventually, children want to experiment with writing in some form to accompany the pictures they draw. The confidence gained from repeated experiences with an adult's taking dictation increases children's own attempts to write. The writing that first appears, though it may resemble print-like forms, is much different from the writing of adults and older peers.

Using the term *kid writing* to designate these spontaneous forms of print validates them as acceptable for young children. In addition, it reinforces children's early attempts at writing and lets them know that it's customary for their writing method to look different from that of adults (Tunks and Giles 2007).

Kid writing may take several different forms.

These include drawing, scribbles, letter-like forms, letter strings, conventional spelling, and invented spelling (Sulzby 1992; Sulzby, Barnhart, and Heishima 1989; Sulzby 1985). An additional form, appearing in young children's journals, is environmental printing (Tunks and Giles 2007).

These spontaneous forms of writing do not occur in any particular order and are not stages through which the writers progress. Children will use different forms for different purposes and may combine different types of kid writing in a single journal entry (Morrow 1996). (See "Forms of kid writing" for examples).

When children begin using spontaneous forms of

### Forms of kid writing

**Drawing.** Children draw pictures to tell a story or describe an event. Children often "read" their drawings to an adult with tone and intonation similar to that used when reading a story aloud.

**Scribble.** Scribble-type writing resembles the cursive writing of adults but no actual letters are formed. Wavy lines and loops are written across the page, often from left to right.

**Letter-like forms.** Children create forms that resemble actual letters. These forms are typically made up of circles and lines.

**Letter strings.** Familiar letters, such as those in the child's name, are repeated in a random order and written in a line.

**Environmental printing.** Children draw and write the logos they see for brand-name products, such as the Nike swoosh, and the bitten apple of Apple computers.

**Conventional spelling.** Children may memorize certain words, such as the names of family members and friends, because they hold special meaning.

**Invented spelling.** Children begin to use letters to represent the actual sounds they hear in words they are spelling. Whole words may be represented by a single letter, often the first letter in the word. With experience, more sounds are represented.

print, teachers use “under writing” to make children’s writing readable to others. As with taking dictation, translating kid writing in this way reinforces skills, such as sound-symbol relationships and punctuation, that children are learning (Tunks and Giles 2009; Tunks and Giles 2007).

For example, 4-year-old Samuel uses letter strings to write about his birthday party that took place the previous day. There is no sound-symbol correspondence between what is written and the story Samuel tells. Every time Samuel comes to the word *birthday*, the teacher asks him to help her with the beginning letter. As the teacher repeats the word, Samuel listens and says, “That is a B sound, I think.” The teacher acknowledges the correct response and Samuel watches as the teacher writes “b” and the remaining letters for the word *birthday*.

In reading through children’s journals at the end of the month, the teacher can use a simple rating scale, like the one shown below, to record the frequency with which children use the different forms of writing.

## A powerful foundation

The period in which young children begin to express their thoughts and ideas on paper is an exciting and rewarding time for teachers. Children learn to write by observing others, writing alongside their teacher and peers, and writing independently.

The simple “I do, we do, you do” model serves as a reminder that children need various encounters with writing as they are introduced to the craft. As children learn new information about print and how it works, they incorporate these skills into their own writing.

Providing opportunities for these three different types of writing experiences, along with other appropriate literacy events, gives children the foundation they need to be successful writers in elementary school and beyond.

## References

- Button, K.; M. Johnson; and P. Furgerson. 1996. Interactive writing in a primary classroom. *The Reading Teachers*, 49, 446-454.

### Journal writing rating scale

Name	Date		
	Usually	Sometimes	Not Yet
Uses pictures to tell stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses scribble-like writing and “reads” or tells what they mean	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses letter-like symbols and “reads” or tells what they mean	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses random letter strings and “reads” or tells what they mean	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses conventionally spelled words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copies words from the environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses appropriate letter for beginning sounds in words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uses appropriate letter for ending sounds in words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Takes risks in writing words using invented spellings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sees self as a writer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



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#### For further reading

- Learning About Print in Preschool: Working With Letters, Words, and Beginning Links With Phonemic Awareness* by Dorothy S. Strickland and Judith A. Schickendanz (International Reading Association 2004)
- Writing in Preschool: Learning to Orchestrate Meaning and Marks* by Judith A. Schickendanz and Renee M. Casbergue (International Reading Association 2004)
- Much More Than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing* by Judith A. Schickendanz (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1999)
- Write Now! Publishing With Young Authors, PreK - Grade 2* by Karyn Wellhousen Tunks and Rebecca McMahon Giles (Heinemann 2007)