

## **Developing Young Authors: Building Original Stories**

Many years ago I asked a roomful of people, "How many people here have ever sat in front of a piece of paper and not known what to write?" I was shocked when every person held up a hand. Since then, I have devoted much energy toward helping people with their writing. This next section will focus on developing young writers and techniques for using existing literature to support developing writers.

Developing stories for writing and/or telling is a simple three-step process.

**Step One:** Start with a Character and Look for a problem:

Make a list. At the top of the list put the word "person," "animal," or "thing." You can use collective nouns like "people," "animals," "a family," "a herd," "a flock," or a "class." If you are working alone, use a piece of paper. If you are working with a group, use the blackboard, newsprint, or a white board. If you are working with Kindergarteners, they will observe. If you are working with children grade one and up, let them have a piece of paper.

This activity is designed so that no one will fail. If a child falls behind, can't spell a word or gets lost in the lesson, the list is always on the board waiting to be copied.

Now, select a problem. Any problem will do. The tiniest problems seem to work best. The character's solving of a problem results in a story. Write the problem on the list below the character(s) and we have completed Step One.

### **Suggested activity: "A Box O' Problems!"**

If you are having problems coming up with problems, begin a problem collection. Keep your eyes and ears out for any problems that you see people or animals are having. Teachers, every problem in your class is a story waiting to be built. Include the problems you witness in class in your collection. Write each problem on a slip of paper and save them in a small box or a paper bag. These are story starters. When it's time for writing, just draw out a problem. As the character solves the problem, you will create a story.

### **Suggested Activity: Things That Bug Me!**

Write the words "Things that bug me" on a slotted box and cover the box with plastic bugs. Let children write down problems that "bug" them on slips of paper and place them in the box. During story time and writing time, you might use these problems as the basis for stories and writing. Remember, when you build the story it is fiction about a bunch of people or animals from somewhere else.

### **Suggested Activity: The Fabulous Fable Factory**

Ask your students to identify problem, behaviors and issues that impact your community. Community can mean the library, the school, or the neighborhood. A child's list may include bullies, pushing and shoving, sharing, etc. Select one of these issues and create a modern fable. You might want to select animals as your characters. Now, phrase the problem as a moral. Build the story as is suggested here and you have an original fable addressing a very real issue within your community. Further along in this guide there are suggestions for transforming writing into simple picture books. Here is a chance for you to create group picture books that can help transform your community. For those working with older students, you might break your group up into groups of three and let each group create a fable addressing an issue within your community.

### **Suggested activity: Look to your Favorite Writers for Problems**

What is the central problem in the story you are currently reading. Every story has a problem. Teach students to look for the problems, the conflicts in stories. It is amazing when you consider that THE WIZARD OF OZ is based on the problem: There was a child who wanted to go home or HAMLET: There was a man who could not make up his mind. Children need to see that stories are a process of working out problems. Solving problems help them give shape to their stories - solve the problem and the story is complete.

## **Step Two: Ask Your Imagination Questions.**

The only rule for Step Two is that when asking your imagination questions, you must begin each question with a question word. The question words are WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, HOW, AND WHICH. Why use question words?

First, when you don't use question words, all of your answers will be "yes," "no," or "maybe." Try it. Ask a question without using a question word. See what I mean?

Second, question words make imaginations work harder. When you ask an open ended question, who knows where the story will take you.

Your initial questions should sketch out the picture. Find out about the character(s). Ask anything you want. Every detail fits. Why? Details always fit. They are the fabric of the story. Some suggestions: Where is the character as the story opens? What is the weather like? What is the person doing? What time of day is it? The key is to make your answers as specific as possible.

**A Tip for Helping Students Who Get Stuck:** If a student can't answer the question you pose, simply switch the question to a color, a shape or a number. What color is the character's hair? How many times has this happened before? How tall is the character? Any child can answer a question related to color, shape or number.

For those working with very small children... Focus your story on color, shape and number. In fact, for the youngest children, the simplest form of story: "There and Back" always works well. There and Back is a story of a trip there and back. With this sort of a story a problem isn't even necessary. The problem is just getting there and back. In fact, some stories are just about getting there. Consider, MAKE WAY FOR THE DUCKLINGS.

### **A Tip for overactive imaginations and inappropriate responses:**

When a student gives you a wild or inappropriate answer, don't be frustrated. Simply say the words, "Keep it simple." Give the child a second to consider and he or she will automatically change the answer.

### **Last tip for guiding the story:**

If a child wants to add strange things to a story, he or she is just trying to make it interesting. For the sake of the story, ask the student, "Do you know this really happens?" If the child claims to have seen it on television, encourage the children to write about things that they really know first hand.

When you run out of questions decide how the character feels.

How does he or she feel right now about this problem? Any feeling word will do. A Special

Banning Good, Bad, Happy, Sad, Or Mad: The only feeling words that you shouldn't use are good, bad, happy, sad, or mad. Why? They are boring.

### **Suggested Activity: Make a list of feeling words.**

Teachers you might want to brainstorm out an entire list of feeling words. Post them. Every time a character uses a feeling word, cross it off and encourage children to replace it. If you run out of feeling word, it is time to break out the Thesaurus.

### **Suggested Activity: Feeling Patrol**

When you are doing a read-aloud, assign a student to "Feeling Patrol." When you come upon a new feeling word in a story, the student is charged with writing down the feeling word. Then, before your next read aloud session, the student needs to look up the word and write down the proper spelling and definition. At the beginning of your next read-aloud, the child is given a moment to share his or her findings and to add this new feeling to your story list.

Once you have the feeling, solve the problem.

To solve the problem, ask these three questions at least three times but you can ask them over and over and over.

- What does the character do to solve the problem?
- What happens?
- How does the character feel?

As these three questions are asked, the story works itself out. The moment you need the story to end simply ask, "What do they do to work it out?" The story will end at once.

### **Step Three: Tell it; then Write It**

Have everyone put down their pencils, pick up their papers and, on the count of three, have everyone in the room tell the story out loud. If you are working with younger children or language impaired students, have them repeat the list of words along with you as a way to warm up and then have them all tell it out loud. This is an oral first draft. It always works. Don't have them read the list, tell it like a story. If children are shy about this, you can prompt them by having everyone begin, "Once upon a time..."

### **A Tip for Working with reluctant or challenged students:**

As everyone is telling their story, walk about the class. Make sure everyone is trying it. If you come across a student who is struggling, "Scaffold" with them. To scaffold means to tell the story omitting the list words and allowing the students to say these words. Go through the first three or four ideas in the list and then point at a list word. Ask the students to say the word out loud. Now ask them to make a sentence featuring that word. Now, move onto the next word or phrase. Usually this serves as a jump start and the child takes up the telling of the tale.

### **Step Four? Further Tellings**

Right now all of the stories are the same. To stimulate creativity and to teach children about the shape of stories, have the students draw a circle around one of the ideas in the list; any idea will do. Now, have them tell the story out loud, except this time start with whatever they circled and jump around the list using up ideas as they wish. Use the count of three to get them started. This allows the children to develop their own versions of the tale. It also proves that a story doesn't have a specific shape, instead, it is up to the author to choose the shape of a story.

### **First Drafts and Revisions:**

Have students write one sentence for every clue on the list and you have a first draft. If your students still complain that a rewrite means write it neater, let them ask ten new questions regarding the story. These answers should be added to the list and to get those new ideas into the story, you will need a rewrite.

### **Activity: Using Our Favorite Writers to Help Us Become Better Writers**

#### **Beginnings**

#### **Ban the following words as the first word for any piece of writing:**

Hi, Hello, or Greetings

One Once There But And Because

and I

(Oh, very well, you can use "I" sometimes.):

When you ban these words your children will feel quite lost. In fact, I bet that nearly every piece of writing you receive from children begins with one of these words. Now, as a way to explore fabulous ways to begin stories, have your students bring in favorite books and just read the first sentence. Here is the key to a great first sentence: a first sentence is supposed to make the audience curious. It does not have to tell you much, just make the audience curious.

From now on, whenever you begin a new read aloud and reread the first sentence. You may want to take a second to examine it. Teach your children to always consider that first sentence. There are myriad ways to begin a tale.

Here is a list of ten wonderful first sentences.  
Do you recognize them?

"They say Maniac Magee was born in a dump."  
Maniac Magee - Jerry Spinelli

"Ba-room, ba-room, ba-room, baripity, baripity, baripity - Good."  
Bridge to Terabithia - Katherine Patterson

"It was a September morning hazy with summer and now with all the years between."  
A Year Down Yonder - Richard Peck

"When my brother Fudge was five, he discovered money in a big way."  
Double Fudge - Judy Blume

"Although he claimed all his life he was born in Appleton, Wisconsin, Harry Houdini was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1874."  
Houdini - Clinton Cox

"On Friday, June 12, I awoke at six o'clock and no wonder, it was my birthday."  
The Diary of a Young Girl - Anne Frank

"As summer wheat came ripe,  
so did I,  
born at home, on the kitchen floor."  
Out of the Dust - Karen Hesse

"It was a dark and stormy night."  
A Wrinkle in Time - Madeleine L'Engle

"I am riding the bicycle and I am on Route 31 in Monument, Massachusetts, on my way to Rutterburg, Vermont, and I'm pedaling furiously because this is an old fashioned bike, no speeds, no fenders, only the warped tires and the brakes that don't always work and the handlebars with cracked rubber strips to steer with."  
I am the Cheese - Robert Cormier

"You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer but that ain't no matter."  
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn - Mark Twain

## **Endings**

**Please ban the following ending as last lines of a piece of writing.**

...and they lived happily ever after.  
The End.  
It was all just a dream.  
...and he woke up.  
To be continued

If your writers are at a loss as to how to end a story, get out some novels and some non-fiction and consider how favorite writers end their writing. In most cases, something can be felt coming to a close but in most

cases, there is not some huge door closing at the end. The key to coming up with a satisfying ending for a story is to solve the story's problem in an interesting manner, hopefully a solution that reveals something unique about the central characters.

**Here is a list of ten final sentences of novels.**

"When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house I had only two thing on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home."

OUTSIDERS - S. E. Hinton

(It's interesting to note that this sentence is also the first sentence of the novel.)

"And she felt good having her mother back in charge."

ANASTASIA ON HER OWN- Lois Lowry

"I hear it in the air."

SISTER SIF - Ruth Park

"He had run into Slam"

SLAM - Walter Dean Myers

"Charlotte was both."

CHARLOTTE'S WEB - E. B. White

"I do Laura," said Pa. "I am sure of it."

LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE - Laura Ingalls Wilder

"My angel, my only"

HOLES - Louis Sachar

"Brian tried several times to tell his father, came really close once to doing it, but in the end never said a word about the man or what he knew, the secret. "

HATCHET - Gary Paulsen

"Come autumn I think I'll find out."

DOG WOLF - Alden R. Carter

"And he said it solemnly and joyfully, as if he said the word "Amen;" and he quickly followed it with the word "hooray.""

THEN THEY WERE FIVE - Elizabeth Enright

"I'm going home to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE - J.K. Rowling

"It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan."

MOBY DICK - Herman Melville

Sorry, it was just so dramatic. I had to use it.

**Activity: Creating Group Picture Books**

If you would like to create a group picture book, first, create a story making sure the number of entries on the story list equals the number of students. Give one clue from the list to each student. Have the student write a single sentence based on that clue. Have each student write the sentence across the bottom of a piece of drawing paper. (If you are working with very young children, you may want to write a "translation" of the sentence on the back of the paper.) Now have students draw a picture that reflects their sentence. You have the pages to an original picture book.

**Activity: Creating Picture books with Older Students**

Follow the same pattern as in the above lesson except, once the sentences have been written, have the students read them out loud one after another. Almost at once you will see that the story would be stronger if the order of the sentences was adjusted. Let the students keep the sentence they have been working on just assign numbers to them so that you can later follow the new order. You may also find that certain sentences are repetitive. If so, students may choose to change their sentences to include new details making the story stronger. What you are doing here is an oral rewrite/editing session. This is very helpful for students who don't yet understand rewrites.

**Activity: Walking Picture Books:**

If your picture book addresses an issue that is common within your school, you may wish to post the pages on the picture book along the wall outside your classroom so that your class can teach others a way to solve this problem successfully. This teaches children that their writing can be used to effect change in their culture.

**Activity: Publishing Picture Books**

The simplest way is to laminate each page, create a simple laminated cover and use a plastic binding. Laminators and simple binding devices are common to most schools. You can also log onto the web site: TomMcCabe.com, load in the pictures from a scan or a digital camera and copy in the text and a program on the site will merge the text and the picture and, with a color printer, you will have a lovely picture book.