

HELPING CHILDREN BE THERE, THEN. HISTORICAL FICTION AS A BASE FOR CHILDREN'S FICTION WRITING

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Did you worry that Saul may be conscripted against his wishes into the Czar's army (Blaine, 1979)? Did you hold your breath in fear as Sarah tried to elude Sister Agatha's anger (Yolen, 1981)? Did you wonder anxiously how William would escape the public beating (Levitin, 1973)? If you were thus caught by the writer's ability to create characters, settings and plots that were believable, compelling and memorable, you responded because the writer's skill helped you be there, then. How does a writer accomplish this? How can teachers help children develop writing skills enabling them to take their readers there, then?

A LITERATURE APPROACH

One way is to use children's books as the basis for writing sessions. Examples here are historical fiction, an often neglected genre (Robertson, 1975), despite the useful suggestions available about involving students in writing both fiction and nonfiction based on this genre (Webb, 1989). The focus here is specifically on writing fiction after reading and listening to historic fiction. Given the methodology described, however, teachers can draw from other

genres as well, implementing these ideas in classrooms at various levels.

Teachers can base writing experiences on literature because if children know and understand good literature, there is the opportunity for them to transfer something of what they know into what they write (Silberman, 1989). Immersed in literature and encouraged to talk about it, they may use literature as models on which to build (Moss, 1984).

In this approach teachers must read to the class every day. This means not only at the primary level, where the practice is fairly common, but also at the intermediate level, where it is less common (Huck et al., 1987). Twenty minutes per day spent reading to children results in better writing as they unconsciously assimilate aspects of what they are hearing. Fisher and Terry (1990) point out this relation between reading and writing.

Since a major component of this approach is literature, teachers need to know children's books of many kinds, so what they select will advance program goals. Teachers familiar with all types of literature, as well as with the specific goals of this program, can choose books that are both enjoyable and beneficial in helping children improve their writing.

TREATMENT OF LITERATURE

Though this writing approach is literature-based, it does not involve teachers dissecting what they read, belaboring aspects of construction, style, figurative language, and vocabulary choice. Indeed, such procedures can spoil children's appreciation of what they are hearing. Some literature will be discussed; other selections will simply be read and enjoyed. Still other books will later be used consciously as a basis for specific writing experiences. But in leading any discussion, teachers remember to draw out from children their reactions to what they read. Start informally with very young children:

- What part of the story did you like best? Can you tell us why?
- What part was most exciting or interesting?
- Which of the people in the story did you like best? Can you tell us why?

Later, the questions become more complex:

- Why do you think we don't like that character?
- Why do you think the story happened where the author made it happen?
- How did the author convey the relationship between the characters without simply telling us? (Stewig, 1990)

CHARACTERIZATION

On this reading base, children experience a sequence of writing problems: one major concern is characterization.

Who can ever forget the delight of knowing Caleb, "homely and plain," (MacLachlan, 1985), brave Konje, who "could smile at a charging lion," (O'Dell, 1989) or perceptive Margery, who understands "how really nice a silence could be" (Jones, 1982). They are memorable, for the authors brought them to life from the printed page. They ceased being simply characters and became, instead, living, vital beings about whom we cared. Caring, we remembered them. The ability to create a character that remains with the reader after the story is finished is one mark of a successful writer.

Often characterization in children's writing is flat, presented in general terms or types, as for instance occurs purposely in old folktales. Such limited characterization is acceptable in folktales, where the plot receives major emphasis. Similarly, in children's writing, character description is often limited. We do not want children's ability to stop here, however. Our goal is writing in which physical and psychological descriptors build a unified, memorable entity. To accomplish this we plan a sequence of experiences with characterization.

In such a sequence the teacher reads books that present a variety of characters: male and female, young and old, rich and poor, real and imaginary. The books are read to children and savored. Sometimes the selections are discussed; at other times they are not. Individual teachers need to decide how much discussion is important and at what times, given their own understanding of children's previous experience and analysis of current expressions of interest.

We are not content with simple physical description only, as children can explore more involved dimensions of personality. It is critical to consider such questions as:

- What is the character like "inside"?

- How does he/she feel about things that happen in the story?
- How does he/she react to people, ideas, and events?

For this reason, we share examples of characterizations which exemplify authors dealing with such questions.

LANGUAGE AND CHARACTERIZATION

In many instances character is created and further delineated through dialogue. To help children think about how dialogue enlivens characters, read to and discuss with them the work of Lenski (1945), a skilled creator of characters through language. In many of her books, characters are distinguished from other characters because of the language they speak. Marguerite de Angeli (1940) also wrote books useful for studying how language defines characterization.

Some characters' language changes; *Abraham Lincoln* provides an example. The author gives samples of the dialect Abe spoke as a child:

“One two three-I drapped one, Pappy.”

“Kaint we go now?”

“Kin we start tomorry?”

This contrasts with the polished, slightly formal dialect he spoke toward the end of his life.

“Are you not overcautious when you assume that you cannot do what the enemy is constantly doing?” “If I know my heart . . . my gratitude is free from any taint of personal triumph.” (Judson, 1950)

This is adult language, of course, different from the child's shorter sentences. It is also, however, highly polished speech, learned by Lincoln who knew his home dialect was not appropriate in the different world into which he had moved. Older children enjoy trying to create and maintain characterization through language. They can learn about creating language in dialogue appropriate for occasion and audience (Gregory, 1990).

POINT OF VIEW

Much literature is written in third person, in which a narrator tells what is happening. A different approach is first-person writing, with the author assuming a character's persona; this allows much freedom as well as providing some restraints. Children should hear both types of narration so they will begin to see the range of possibilities and the inherent disadvantages of each. Children can rewrite part or all of the story from one character's point of view.

Second grade teachers used *Martin and Abraham Lincoln* (Coblentz, 1947), fiction about a poor family struggling to survive after the father is captured during the war. A chance encounter between young Martin and Lincoln makes the family's life easier. After listening to this third-person narration, children rewrote it as if they were one of the characters. Nancy assumed the main character's role:

One day I was wearing my new army suit. It was very bright color blue. I was walking around the block when I saw my friend Snowden. I asked him if I could go along to Washington with him. He said, "Why do you want to go?" I said, "Because my father is in prison, and maybe someone has heard about him." "O.K., then, come with me." When he got to Washington, Snowden tied his mule to a tree and said, "Stay here and watch the capitol. Maybe someone will come out who has seen your father." I waited and waited, and then I went over to the capitol steps and sat down. Then Abraham Lincoln came out. I stood up and saluted. Then Abraham Lincoln said, "Now boy, what brings you here?" I did not answer him. He said, "You know what? I have a nail in my shoe." And I said, "Let me try to get it out." So Abraham Lincoln took off his shoe. I got two stones and pounded the nail out. Abraham Lincoln put his shoe on, and we started to talk about my father.

Several characteristics mark this as impressive writing for a second grader. Nancy was able to very satisfactorily restate the author's sequence, while selecting only part of the story to retell. Doing this gives her more space for detail elaboration, though the segment retold is satisfying in itself. More importantly, this writer can maintain this first person voice very effectively. Note particularly

the convincing use of dialogue, which is not simply verbatim repetition of the author's words.

One fourth grade teacher shared the story of *John Billington* (Bulla, 1956), an obstreperous little boy whose family came to America on the Mayflower. Ted recounted the long adventure of John when he was taken to an Indian village.

My name is John Billington. I'm always getting into trouble. One day I said to my mom, "I'm going to live with the Indians." "You won't like it, John Billington," she said. "I don't care. I'm going to tell Squanto," I said. So I told him. He said I wouldn't like it. He said, "Indians not live the same as white men, food not same, clothes not same, you not like it." But I still ran away.

That day I heard something behind me. I looked but no one was there. Then I heard something again. This time there were two Indians in back of me. They took me on a trail. We got to the water. Now I knew where we were. The Indians pulled a canoe out of the underbrush. We got in the canoe. They were going the wrong way. I kept on pointing toward Plymouth, but they kept going to Cape Cod. Then I thought to myself, "When the canoe gets to shore, I will jump out before the Indians can get out." Well, it didn't happen like that at all. The Indians got out before I even moved a leg. They took big steps so it was hard to keep up. Just then I saw the Indian village. When everyone saw me they looked at my clothes, my hair, my shoes. Just then I saw a man eating deer meat. Then a person gave me some deer meat. That night I slept in the chief's house.

In the morning my shoes were gone. I looked outside. There was a little Indian boy wearing them. I got into a fight with him, but I got my shoes back. The chief made a sign for me to come to him. He patted a mat beside him. "Thank you," I said, and sat down to put my shoes on.

Everyday I tried to tell them I wanted to go home. They listened and shook their heads. I couldn't make them understand. I lived in the chief's house, but I missed my mom and dad. One day I walked out of the Indian village hoping to find the seashore. A strong young brave brought me back to the village. I didn't know how I would ever get back home again.

I had been with the Indians almost a week when I saw all the excitement in the village. A woman led me into a house. She hung a mat over the door. I tried to look out, but she pulled me back. I heard a man outside, talking in Indian language. I knew the voice. Before the woman could get me, I pushed the mat away and ran out of the door. "Squanto," I cried. There was Squanto talking with the chief. "Take me home," I said. "Yes, yes," said Squanto. Squanto and the chief talked together awhile. Squanto went away. The chief and some of his braves made ready to take me. They put beads around my neck and feathers in my hair. Two tall braves put me on their shoulders. Chief Aspinet walked behind us. They came to the shore, where there was a boat. In it were my father, Master Hopkins, Governor Bradford, and Squanto. I wanted to run to the boat but I couldn't. The Indians waded into the water and put me in the boat. Then Chief Aspinet gave a long speech. Then we exchanged presents and were off on our way home.

These compositions illustrate the strength of first-person narration: it is direct, simple, and fresh, because it is the character him/herself talking. More personal information can be presented in shorter compass than if such information had to be described. The disadvantage is that nothing can be included that wouldn't logically have been thought or spoken by the narrator. These stories show children beginning to understand this technique. More practice is needed, but initial attempts are encouraging, showing children beginning to decenter, to be able to take on the thoughts and feelings of someone else. That ability is certainly useful in the creation of character. Many books of historic fiction, or parts of longer books, can serve as a base for such first person rewritings as these.

AN EXCITING PLACE TO BE

Another crucial composition skill is the ability to create setting. Have you ever tramped through the woods on Haw Bank with Keith and David (Mayne, 1967)? Or did you hesitate as you stepped into the dark hold of the ocean liner with Millicent (Yarbro, 1986)? Or did you notice the sun-washed field by the side of the dusty, copper road as you walked with Marty (Herlihy, 1988)? If you've delighted in any of these experiences, you'll never forget the specific sense of place the author created. Each environment

is so distinct that the memory lingers long after the book has been read.

One writing task we set for children is describing environments. To help children learn to write effective setting descriptions, we read literature that evokes setting through a variety of means, and talk with children about how the writer created a sense of place.

Some authors evoke by providing settings memorable visual images, and this technique can be pointed out to children. Enright (1957) describes an old house: "On one of the square porch pillars a crop of fungus stuck out like turkey feathers." When young Virginia Dare, renamed Ulalee by her adoptive Indian mother, is fleeing her promised suitor, Old Cipo, in the company of her real love, Okisko: ". . . suddenly a silvery light burst all around them, blinding them for a moment. When they recovered their sight, they recoiled in horror. Old Cipo was standing before them. And they were surrounded by a ring of fire!" (Hooks, 1988). Throughout the short book the author's fine language evokes many memorable visual images, reinforced by the full page paintings by Dennis Nolan.

Some writers give clear, distinct sound images. In *Fitchett's Folly* (Rodowsky, 1987) we hear Mrs. Trell's noisy objection to Reba and Sara-Ann's "all this hoopin' and hollerin'." Throughout the book there are vivid sound images, the "high, fluty voices" of the young girl guests, the snapping of pillowcases drying in the wind, and Sarey calling to the bay pony "in a voice that was soft and silky and didn't sound like mine at all."

Less often do authors provide spatial images. For spatial images, read *Storm Bird* (McCutcheon, 1987). This gives both exterior and interior space descriptions. When Jenny travels to the seaside, she notices that "the landscape looked melancholy. . . . All that emptiness without people or houses!" Later we read a description of the "crowded kitchen." A different kind of space is that in the dinghy, Roller, which is deep enough so that Jenny won't be seen if she will "squat down in the bottom of her," as Josh tells her to.

Olfactory aspects of settings are less usual than other descriptors. Enright uses this device effectively in telling us that "The breath of the house came out to them. It smelled old" (Enright, 1957). Riddell (1988) includes many olfactory images, some brief, some more extended in *Haunted Journey*, historic fiction set in Tennessee in 1931. Brief images include the sweet hickory scented

smoke from Bas's fire. When Bas and Obie take shelter in a cave, Bas comments, "This here place don't smell too awful good." The image of Obie imagining oranges goes on for three paragraphs, including: "The orange-colored oil sweetened . . . his nostrils. He took in deep breaths, trying to force the scent through his body and into every pore."

For an historical fiction assignment, teachers read the setting described in *The Red Petticoat* (Palmer, 1969), a revolutionary era story. After hearing the first chapter, third grade children discussed the author's images of Eliza's house. Children identified ways her home was like and unlike their own. Students were asked to observe one room in their home that evening, and the following day write a description of the room. Margo wrote:

Clip, clop, clip, clop. That's the sound you hear when you walk up the stairs to the bedrooms. The first room is loud red, and really sticks out. Next is a soft warm yellow room, and it's a quiet room. My room is the best. If you listen real hard, you hear the heat go bump, bump, bump. The windows have light brown, paneled, crisscrosses on them. You can hear the wind howl and the snow blow. My room is so cozy that I think at night for almost two hours I will sit on my cozy bed, lay back on my cozy pillow and read my cozy, cozy book and suddenly fall asleep.

In this writing, note how Margo moves methodically back and forth between sound and sight. She opens with sound, then switches to sight, back to sound, then to sight, and so on, throughout the piece. There is this sequence repetition, but also word repetition, in the reuse of the words *clop*, *bump*, and *cozy*.

DEVELOPING PLOT

Interesting characters and evocative settings are of little lasting interest unless something exciting happens. Children, fond of action, are interested in plot problems. Writing tasks can be planned to give students conscious insights into ways plot may be manipulated.

A simple, effective way to develop understanding of plot is to introduce *parallel plot construction*. After telling or reading a simple story, the teacher helps children recall what happened. Summarizing is a skill children find useful in reading programs;

developing this also helps them understand plot as an element of story structure. After reviewing the plot, children dictate their own version.

Fourth grade children listened to *The Bears on Hemlock Mountain* (Dalglish, 1952) and afterward analyzed the plot. The main character, sent a distance to fetch something needed, accomplishes the task but on the way home encounters a danger, from which the character is saved by an adult. The particulars of the story are summarized abstractly. This provides a facilitating framework within which children can develop their own details.

Heidi intersperses parenthetical statements in talking directly to the reader, to provide addition explanatory information she didn't feel was directly necessary to the plot. In this, and other ways, her writing demonstrates a sophisticated use of parallel plot.

The Horrible Adventure

One day a long time ago there was a little girl who was four years old. It was summer and the family was very poor. But at least they could pick berries and nuts, and kill the poor little creatures of the woods. The girl's name was Amy and she was happy in summer because she didn't have any chores. Amy ran around all day with the sun beating down on her. The flowers were always gay and bright around the little tan house, and at night they all sat around the cozy fire.

One morning it wasn't the same as usual, because her lazy father was cooking and her busy mother was in bed. Everything was topsy-turvey. Finally she found out that her mother was ill, and that she had to go into the deepest part of the woods to pick berries or else they wouldn't have any fruit. (Amy's father hunted all day, but usually he didn't catch anything because he didn't really try.) Amy was horrified when she heard that she had to pick the berries, because ferocious mountain lions, cougars, and boars roamed there. Her mother always used one of the rifles that hung over the door, but Amy couldn't use one, so she had to be careful.

It was a sunny morning and she was skipping through the woods part of the way to cheer herself up. (Back home her father was just leaving for the woods worrying about her.) She finally came to the place she wanted. Frantically she looked around for a berry bush, but no berry bush could

be seen. Then she had an idea. She looked around at the trees and there was a tree with the ripest berries she had ever seen. She didn't have any trouble climbing it, because she had climbed trees since she was two.

Amy had to hurry because she didn't want to meet any hungry animals. The bark of the tree stung her little feet, and when she got to the branch with the most berries she began picking like mad. In exactly three minutes her basket was full.

She climbed down the tree and started home. All of a sudden, Amy heard a grunting noise. Out of a thicket came a wild boar. It started charging at her. When it stumbled, Amy ran with all her might, but the boar was still close behind her. Amy climbed up a tree and the boar kept on, going straight ahead. Amy jumped down and ran the other way and bumped into her father. (He had come to take her home because he had found five animals. He had tried today because Amy's mother was sick.) The boar had found out that he had been tricked and had turned around. He was crashing through the woods when Amy's father shot him. He dragged him home without meeting any other animals, and they had boar meat for supper.

Heidi's writing is also noteworthy for the helpful contrast drawn between the first paragraph (life as it was usually) and the second (this particular, unusual day). Her overall story structure is enhanced by her skilled word choice in using adjectives (like *ferocious*) and verbs (like *roamed*).

Plot completion experiences work well with all ages. When writing an ending to a story, students are challenged to fit details of characterization and setting into a logical sequence of actions.

Writing by third graders shows how effectively they can create a sense of being somewhere else, at another time. Teachers shared the story of *Cowslip* (Haynes, 1973), a young black destined to be sold with her sisters on the auction block. It was a busy day, the town square was crowded, and through carelessness, Cowslip was not shackled with the other slaves. Suddenly she realized no chains held her. What would she do?

Lenore's completion incorporates noteworthy realistic dialogue, as shown in the excerpt from her long story:

Cowslip decided she was going to escape! She went quietly out the door, across the street when she suddenly saw Colonel Sprague. She ran behind a rock and waited until Colonel Sprague went away. Now she would have to be very careful and if she saw anyone coming she would hide behind a bush, or a rock, or anything to hide behind. When she finally couldn't walk any longer she sat down on a log nearby. As soon as she had rested her legs she heard someone crying. When she came a little closer, she saw it was a slave boy crying. She walked a little bit closer but the boy didn't notice.

"What's the matter?" she finally managed to ask. "Well, me and my father . . ." "My father and I," Cowslip corrected, but the boy didn't pay any attention to her. "Me and my father ran away and they caught him, and now he's going to be hanged." "Well, why don't you come with me?" Cowslip suggested. "O.K.," said the slave boy with tears trickling down his cheeks. So they walked together.

Once they came to a woods that had nice clean water in the rivers, and big juicy berries that grew on bushes. Once they almost got caught. Cowslip and the slave boy heard some hoofbeats. It was probably a white man! "Quick, let's hide behind a rock or something!" said Cowslip in a panic. "There is no rock or something," said the slave boy. Cowslip thought in panic what they could hide behind. "Run, run as fast as your legs can go!" shouted Cowslip. They ran pretty fast but the white man saw the last of slave boy's foot turn the corner. "Run-away slave," thought the man. But when Cowslip turned the corner she saw a pile of leaves. "Quick, cover yourself with these leaves," said Cowslip. Meanwhile, the white man thought to himself, "The slave is probably going to trick me and go the other way, so I'll just wait here and trick the slave." And then when he saw that the slave wasn't coming, he left (Stewig, 1988)

SUMMARY

This approach to writing presents a sequence of composition experiences designed to motivate children to write fiction based on historic literature. The program is based on the hypothesis that conscious attention to the composing process will result in better

writers and writing. After wide-ranging experiences with literature, students respond to writing problems including characterization, setting, and plot, among others. Specific exercises relating to point of view, describing environments, parallel plot construction, and plot completion lead to deeper understandings of how to write fiction. Literature examples used here are historical fiction, though other genres can serve equally well.

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