

GIFTED CHILDREN WRITE FROM LITERATURE

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Writing about writing has dramatically changed the nature of elementary school composition instruction in the last decade. Myriad scholars have studied the composing process, evolved new methodologies, and recommended evaluation procedures. Though most of this attention is focused on a broad range of student writers, there are specific implications for teachers who work with gifted youngsters.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Though interest in the final written product remained paramount until the early 1970's, most experts now focus on the process of composing. Many scholars have followed the example set early by the Bay Area Writing Project (Gray)—more recently replicated and disseminated through the National Writing Project sites. These scholars influenced imaginative and adventuresome classroom teachers like Milz who have implemented theoretical suggestions with groups of students, and reported enthusiastically about results achieved.

Graves has become a well-known spokesperson for the process writing approach, which advocates moving student writers, ranging from kindergartners through college students, through a series of steps. Beginning with prewriting and ending with preparation of final copies, the approach emphasizes editing (revising for content improvement) and peer conferencing.

A major component of process writing is topic selection. Advocates of this approach are adamant that student writers compose most effectively personal narratives, that is, accounts of real, direct experiences. The idea is that writers are most effective when writing about what they know first hand. The argument is that student writers

cannot write as well about teacher-selected topics as about self-selected topics. Topic selection goes far beyond the commonplace and dismal admonition "Write whatever you want," however. Process writing shows students how to: 1) develop a list of possible topics; 2) select the most appropriate from among those; and 3) generate additional information to support the choice.

In emphasizing student writers choosing, refining, and further developing a topic, process writing advocates either ignore or warn against vicarious motivations to write. This is despite the fact that this view is based on anecdotal evidence rather than extensive research efforts to compare vicarious with self-chosen topics. While authors like Murray and teachers like Silvers mention literature as an influence on writing, the specific ways literature can be used as a base for writing are seldom explored.

One problem with self-selected personal narratives is their potentially narrow range. Voos summarizes this concern vividly:

. . . teachers who accept this august dictum too literally condemn themselves to slogging through a dreary succession of baseball stories from certain ninth grade shortstops and grindingly monotonous chapters of a continuing horse ballad from certain fifth grade equestriennes. But what can be done? Children know baseball, they know horses. Do they know . . . the folkloric origins in "The Firebird Ballet"? Or Renaissance painting? No, of course not, but a modicum of imagination and I dare say, creativity, on a teacher's part can make them genuinely enough aware of experiences outside their immediate tactile range of knowledge to enable them to write on a gratifyingly wide spectrum of topics. (8)

What Voos is suggesting here is that careful leading of student writers to a topic is a valid part of the teacher's role. With that as a starting premise, I would like to describe one way of leading writers to a topic, specifically through the use of literary models.

WRITING FROM LITERATURE

Literature as a base for writing is seldom mentioned by process writing advocates. This is despite the fact that developed schemes for literature-based writing programs do exist (Stewig). Such literature programs suggest that teachers can: 1) select a piece of

prose or poetry to exemplify a particular literary element, and 2) plan a specific writing assignment to grow from the literature. Such approaches see literature-based writing problems as one of several strands in a full-range writing program, offering additional options to student writers.

Though literature-based writing assignments work well for all ability students, two types work especially well with gifted students. These are *derived plot patterns* and *point of view*. In intermediate grade gifted classrooms, students have written enthusiastically when these writing ideas were presented. The writing the students produced indicates gifted boys and girls can use these writing forms imaginatively.

DERIVED PLOT PATTERNS

Many opportunities exist when we study the plot of a story and extract the structure to serve as a framework within which children can compose. This is sometimes called *parallel plot construction*. Read a story to your group, and then help them think about the sequence of action in the story. The idea is to lift the level of abstraction from the specific details in this particular story to a more general organizational structure which children use in making a story of their own. To do this, students must analyze the piece of literature, a process Master feels is especially important for gifted children (163).

The story structure in "The Gingerbread Boy" provides an example. The particular detail is that an old lady makes a gingerbread boy. Lifted to the next level of abstraction, the structural element is that a person makes a food. Continue with this process until specific story details are gone, and what remains is a plot skeleton on which children can arrange the flesh of their own imaginative ideas.

In *The Cobbler's Reward* (Reid and Reid), we find a useful plot structure. Stripped of its particular details, the structure is as follows:

1. A poor person sets out to seek a fortune.
2. The person stops to befriend a group of creatures who seem insignificant but who offer to help the person if s/he ever needs help.
3. and 4. are a repeat of 2.
5. The person arrives at a place where there is something the person wants very much.

6. To get this, the person must perform three tasks, all of which are seemingly impossible.
7. The person does perform the task, with the help of the first group of creatures.
8. and 9. are a repeat of 7.
10. Having accomplished the task, the person lives happily ever after.

After reading *The Cobbler's Reward* to her group of gifted fourth graders, one teacher asked them to use this structure, extracted from the story, as a basis for their own stories. Chris wrote the following story, based on the book's plot pattern.

Once upon a time, a candlestick maker named Jacob lived deep in the jungle. He was very poor and hadn't eaten in days. So he set out to seek a fortune. If he were to travel to the nearest village, he would go through the treacherous jungle. On his way he met up with a group of anteaters. They were being threatened by vicious army ants. Jacob saw this; he pulled a piece of sugar cane out of the ground and threw it to the ants. The ants went away from the anteaters. The oldest one of them all stepped forward and said, "Thank you kindly, brave one. If there is ever anything we can do for you, just call out our name." Jacob thought, "What could they ever do for me? Oh well!" He went on.

A while later he was looking up in the trees. He saw a panther ready to jump at a toucan. Jacob quickly climbed the tree and grabbed the toucan, then took it to a safer spot. The toucan thanked him gratefully and said, "If you are ever in need of help just coo." He thought to himself, "How can he help me?" He went on his way.

When he was almost to the end of the jungle, he had to climb over a mountain. On his way he saw a gorilla stuck on a rock slide. Jacob was very strong. He pulled and tugged at the rocks. Within no time at all he got the rocks off the gorilla. He thanked him deeply. Then the gorilla said, "If you are ever in need of help, beat on your chest." Jacob thought, "How can he help me?" Then he went on over the mountain.

On the other side of the mountain he came to a village. Many people were gathered around a hut. This happened to be the evil witch doctor's hut. One of the men told him that

the doctor had taken the chief's son. Anyone who can perform the three tasks will set his son free. "What's in it for me?" asked Jacob. The man replied, "You will get a million rubies or become chief. You may choose." "I am very strong and very fast. I will try to release him." But the man said, "If you fail the tasks you will be thrown in quicksand." "I will try anyway," Jacob said.

So Jacob went to the hut door, and shook the chime by the door. The door flew open. Jacob stepped in. No one was there. The door flew shut; a man appeared. He said, "Did you come to set the boy loose?" "I did. I'm Jacob from the deep jungle." The man replied, "You must perform three tasks, if you are to succeed." "I am ready for the first task."

"For the first task, I have taken panther oil and oiled down a tower on all sides. By dawn you must have the coconut from inside, or else!" Jacob knew panther oil was very slippery. He thought, "How could he?" Then he remembered about the toucan, so he started to coo. After awhile of cooing, the toucan came. He asked Jacob what he wanted. Jacob said, "Up in the tower is a coconut; bring it to me." "Well done, sir!" The toucan flew up to the tower, brought the coconut and left. When dawn came, the witch doctor came. Sure enough, Jacob had the coconut on his lap.

"For your second task, I will put you in a pit infested with ants. By one turn of the hourglass you must still be alive." "I am ready," said Jacob. He was dropped into the hole. The ants were fire ants. He knew that they could bite like a cheetah. Then he thought about the anteaters. He called out, "Anteaters, O, anteaters!" The anteaters came running. One stepped forth, then said "What help do you need?" Jacob replied, "If I don't hold back the ants, I will be eaten." "We can help." As soon as the ants came, the anteaters ate all the ants. Then they marched back to the jungle.

After the time was up, the witch doctor came back. But he didn't let Jacob out. He told Jacob the hole was 50 trees deep. "By dawn, you must be sleeping by the tree." Jacob was thinking and still thinking when he remembered about the gorilla. As quick as he could he beated on his chest as hard as he could. The gorilla was sleeping, but heard it anyway, and came quickly. He brought with him some monkeys, just

in case. He saw Jacob down in the hole. He knew why Jacob called. The monkeys grabbed each other's tails and the gorilla took the monkey's tail. He put the monkeys down into the hole. Jacob took hold of the first monkey's hand and was pulled up. In the morning the witch doctor came to the tree. Sure enough, there was Jacob. He had done all the tasks and the chief's son was free. Now Jacob was a rich candlestick maker, who lived happily ever after.

This, and the other stories gifted students wrote as a result of this motivation, seem to support Raimo's assertion that providing a ready-made structure so children can "concentrate on one aspect of writing at a time" is helpful (127).

POINT OF VIEW

Another challenging writing problem to which gifted students respond well deals with point of view. The egocentric nature of young children has been described by such psychologists as Piaget. To help them grow from this egocentricity to an awareness of the ideas, problems, feelings and reactions of others, we ask them to assume the role of another. Teachers often have students do this through discussion or role playing.

Another convenient way to do this is to have children recast a story told in third person into first person narrative. Folk tales work especially well for this purpose because their brevity makes it possible for youngsters to hold the plot in their minds as they write.

Much folk literature is told in third person—the impersonal, omniscient narrator recounts what happens. After sharing several tales in discussion with a group, we identify the narrator's qualities. These include being able to see (and report on) things happening to all characters, even if they occur at widely separated locations at the same time. This contrasts with the more limited ability of each of the characters to know only what happens to them or what is reported to them.

The writing task we set for boys and girls is to retell the story, switching from third to first person. In becoming a character and retelling the story from that point of view, student writers deal with some crucial problems:

One, personalizing the account to include a character's reaction—the feelings engendered by a plot event—is a valuable

challenge. In Heins' *Snow White*, for instance, the usual third person account specifies only that she awoke from the sleep induced by the poisoned apple. Children, when assuming the persona of Snow White, can describe how she would have felt upon awakening. Two, children are compelled to account for events which happened when the character whose identity they are assuming was not present. Again, to use the Snow White example, there is no direct way she can have known about the making of the poisoned apple. To rewrite the story from her point of view, the child must in some way explain what Snow White knows about the apple and *how* she knows it.

A teacher of gifted fifth grade students used *Snow White* to motivate first-person narration. In the following, Steve narrates as if he were the evil queen.

I, the wicked witch, always wanted to be queen. When the queen died and I became queen, I was extremely excited! I had a mirror that always told the truth. I asked it who was the most beautiful in the world. The mirror said I was and I knew it was speaking the truth. I cared about my beauty more than anything else.

One day I asked my mirror who was the most beautiful of them all, and to my astonishment, it said that I was the most beautiful here, but Snow White was 1,000 times more beautiful than I was. I was furious! I envied her! I wanted her dead! I called one of my hunters. I told him to take Snow White into the woods and kill her and bring me back her lungs and liver. That night I had them fried and I ate them.

Soon after, I stood in front of my mirror and asked who was the most beautiful of all. I was astounded! The mirror still said Snow White was more beautiful. I knew the hunter had deceived me. I vowed to kill Snow White.

I thought of an ingenious plan. I dressed up like an old woman. I went over the mountain to where Snow White was. I knocked on the door and said, "I am an old woman and I am selling laces. Let me come in and I'll lace you up properly." Snow White let me in. I tied the laces very tight. Snow White fell on the ground dead. I had gotten my revenge.

In a few days I asked the same question, "Who is the most beautiful?" I was terribly angry at the mirror's answer. I again

dressed up like an old woman. I made a poisonous comb. One brush of it and you would fall dead.

Once more I went over the hills to where Snow White was. She let me in. The instant the comb touched her hair, Snow White fell dead. I went back to the castle.

Again I asked the mirror who was the most beautiful, and it said, "Snow White." I was enraged with anger! I couldn't bear it. I made a poisonous apple. Half of it was poisonous, half was not. I went over the hill as an old woman. Snow White said she couldn't open the door for anyone. I showed her the apple. She immediately became hungry. I took a bite from the unpoisoned half and Snow White took a bite from the poisonous half. She fell dead instantly.

When I returned to my castle and asked my mirror who was the most beautiful, it finally said that I was the most beautiful. I was thrilled . . . just so excited!

Time passed and I received an invitation to a wedding. I was curious to see who the girl was. When I got there, I recognized Snow White. As I walked in, metal shoes were set on a coal fire. They were set in front of me and I was made to dance until I died. Oh! I was so angry!

In this next example, Becky retells the tale as if she were one of the dwarfs.

Let me tell you about Snow White and our big adventure. It all started when we seven dwarfs lived in the big woods, just as disorganized as seven little men could be.

One day a beautiful girl came to our house while we were at work. We found her asleep in one of the dwarf's beds. When she woke up, she told us that she was fleeing from the queen, her stepmother, who was terribly jealous of her because she was so beautiful. She also told us that her name was Snow White.

After looking around our disorganized cottage we decided that if she would keep the cottage neat and clean and cook for us, we would let her stay.

The next morning we went to work. When we got home we found Snow White lying strangled on the floor. We saw that there was a lace tied tightly around her waist. We quickly

cut the string. When she came to, she said that a little old lady came and was selling laces. Snow White said that the lady tied it and kept pulling tighter until she fell down. We told her that it must have been the queen, and that she wasn't to let anybody in.

The next day we went off to work. When we got home, we found Snow White on the floor again. We saw a comb, and it wasn't anybody's. We found out that it was poisonous. After we washed Snow White's hair, she came to and told us that she bought this comb and combed her hair, and then she fell down. Again we told her not to let anyone in. We all ate and then went to bed.

The next day when we came home from work we found Snow White on the ground. She looked dead. We tried everything, but she was dead.

We buried her in a glass coffin. It was on top of a hill. A prince rode by and saw Snow White in her coffin. While we were moving Snow White's coffin we must have jerked her. Some of the apple came up and out of her mouth. She was alive again!

The prince and Snow White got married. We were invited. Snow White's evil stepmother came to the wedding. Some men brought some red-hot shoes, and the evil stepmother had to dance until she died.

Ever since Snow White left us we have been seven slop-py disorganized, little dwarfs living in one messy cottage.

These are but two of many literature-based writing techniques. Several other of the techniques could be equally useful with gifted students. As one strand in a broad range composition program, such vicarious writing problems form a useful adjunct to personal narrative writing. By incorporating such ideas into writing experiences for gifted students, we provide additional writing options students may choose.

The three student samples included here are representative of the work done in the fourth and fifth grade gifted classrooms where we experimented with these techniques. While they are not conclusive evidence of the validity of vicarious motivations, they at least raise an important issue. Must all student writing be personal narratives, or is there some place in a writing curriculum for vicarious writing?

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