Derek Furr

# Struggling readers get hooked on writing

*A teacher-researcher describes an expository writing lesson, taught in the context of a modified writing workshop, that motivates his neediest students to compose meaningful essays.*

The teacher tapes up the flip chart pages filled with notes—organized in red, green, and black—that her grade 5 social studies class had taken together in preparation for their shared-writing report. The topic is the northeastern region of the United States. Perched on a stool at the overhead, ready to write, the teacher declares, "Now that we have our prewriting and planning ready, somebody help me start my draft. What should I say first? What's my opening sentence?" Silence reigns, with the exception of a few sniffles and shuffling feet. The teacher practices her wait time, then asks again for ideas about a first sentence for the report. There are still no takers.

I glance at two of my Title I students. Massie is practicing her cursive on the desktop; Jemale is busy chipping and flicking the lead of his mechanical pencil. (All student names are pseudonyms.) Patiently, the teacher smiles and adds, "Come on. I know that some of you have discussed this in your language arts block—you know, how you start a report. Isn't there something about getting the reader's attention?" Suddenly Massie drops her pencil, and her hand shoots up while Jemale blurts out, "A hook! You need a hook!" Now Massie volunteers an example, "Something like, you know, 'did you know that some northeastern states get three feet of snow in the winter?'" The teacher smiles and transcribes Massie's hook, as Jemale proceeds to tell why a report needs a hook and as other students begin to call out hooks that, in their opinions, are far catchier than Massie's.

Note that, in this mixed-ability classroom, Massie and Jemale both read at only second-grade level according to multiple assessment measures. But they lead the way in this particular lesson because, in their homogeneously grouped language arts block, they write daily. Massie and Jemale are 2 of 20 struggling readers whom I and a special education teacher teach in our morning grade 5 language arts block. Writing is especially taxing labor for these students, but it is becoming less so as I and my teaching partner modify writing workshop in ways that support the considerable needs of disabled readers. Alas, we have yet to find the magic formula that will bring our students to "grade-level" writing competency overnight. Nevertheless, in this article I outline a theory and practice of writing workshop for struggling readers that does, in our experience, help our weakest students gain confidence and competence as writers.

## A case for expository writing

Proponents of the workshop approach to writing instruction argue persuasively for the importance of personal writing and choice of topic, particularly for adolescent writers, regardless of ability (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1994; Kirby & Liner, 1988). Making it personal—whether the "it" is a literature response or a historical report—is essential to motivating


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thoughtful and energetic composition in which students find their unique, authorial voices. Workshop proponents have argued, however, that most writing for school lacks both voice and energy. In his essay "The Poison Fish," Macrorie (1985) coined the term "Engfish" to signify the vacuous, impersonal writing that most students learn to practice expertly in school, not least because most school teachers demand it. With assignments that begin "Write a five-paragraph paper..." and include such dictums as "Avoid first person," teachers have created a peculiar subgenre of writing, the school essay, in which personal interest and student choice rarely have a place. Engfish has a voice of its own, one that steals away the voice of the child-author.

On the other hand, genuine writing—the kind we read for entertainment and edification in the "better" magazines and books—appeals to us largely because it has voice. The voice is unique to its author and present because the author is personally invested in the work. We can get such writing from our students, workshop proponents argue, if we encourage them to write from their own experiences. Rather than requiring theme papers on "man versus nature" or encyclopedic reports on pollination, we should teach students to mine their own interests and experiences for topics they care about. Through frequent journal-writing and peer and teacher conferences, we teach them to discover their own "process" and the kind of writing that best expresses their inner voices. In the workshop, all students compose at their own pace, carrying through their process a piece of lasting value, both to them and (often) their classmates (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1983).

## Does any of this work for struggling readers?

Promoting self-pacing and independent learning, this constructivist approach to teaching writing is daunting to most teachers of reading-disabled students—those who may or may not have an identified "learning disability" but who read significantly below their current grade level. The most frequently asked question in my graduate classes on teaching writing is "Does any of this work with struggling readers?" It's a fair question. Because one of my principle charges as a middle school reading specialist has been to teach language arts to students reading three to four years below their current grade level, I understand these teachers' concern. It's born of their recognition that, to achieve the comfort and confidence necessary for independent learning, struggling readers often require much sturdier scaffolding for a complex task—such as writing—than their more able peers. For the disabled reader, the very act of generating language—retrieving vocabulary, articulating thoughts, recording these thoughts in a legible, coherent written discourse—can be prohibitively frustrating. Add to this the burdens of coming up with a topic, discovering their own process, and managing their portfolio, and disabled readers can quickly become behavior problems. Nevertheless, with a few significant modifications, writing workshop can prove rewarding to reading-disabled students and their teachers. So when my teachers ask their question, I answer "Yes," conditionally.

## I don't know what to write

This common response from students of all abilities is a veritable mantra of the reading-disabled writer faced with a writing prompt. It usually follows several minutes of sighs, hair pulling, paper rattling, lead breaking, and repeated trips to the bathroom, water fountain, and pencil sharpener. You, the patient teacher, kneel beside the student and do a think-aloud, encouraging prewriting, free writing—"any writing," you urge, then add reassuringly, "There's no right or wrong yet; just jot down everything you imagine from the prompt." The response you get is usually another delaying tactic.

Implicit in "I don't know what to write" are at least two important messages from the reading-disabled writer. The elusive "what"—the words that just won't come to the disabled writer's mind—is foremost an indication of verbal poverty. Students who read below grade level lag well behind their on-grade-level peers in vocabulary acquisition (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000). Having read fewer and less sophisticated texts than the average achiever, reading-disabled students simply have fewer words at their disposal. On the other hand, I would argue, they are often no less aware of the differences between the sound of "good" written language and that of their own writing and speech. Why else, after several minutes'

painstaking effort, does one girl angrily crumple her hard-won efforts and declare, "It sounds stupid!" Her work doesn't sound like the writing she's heard, and with its multiple spelling errors and grammatical snafus, neither does it look the part of formal composition. "I don't know what to write" really means "I don't have the language for this." It also means, significantly, "I don't have anything *meaningful* to say."

It is a maxim of writing workshop that all adolescent writers—indeed all writers of any age—have a story to tell. One task of the teacher is to help the student discover that story and write it meaningfully. Surely it is hard to deny that by grade 6 every child has had a memorable experience worth telling about—some, indeed, have had experiences they'd sooner forget. But does it follow that these students want to write about them or, moreover, that they want to delve into and articulate their meaning? According to one of my students, whose resistance to personal writing is typical, it does not. Dominique is a feisty student who struggles with reading and writing, but who loves rap, reciting Jack Prelutsky, and reading about reptiles and mollusks. We had begun writing personal narratives in workshop, and Dominique was painstakingly attempting to recount the story of an arson she had witnessed. Using frequent conferences and a language experience approach to elicit narratives, I had helped Dominique begin to articulate this powerful, indeed harrowing, tale. But as I became excited about the promise of her story, she became increasingly frustrated and despondent. Finally, she dropped her pencil and slumped over. "It's just something that happened!" she exclaimed. "Why do I have to think about that? Can I write a report on snails or snakes instead?"

Why would Dominique prefer to write about mollusks or reptiles rather than herself? In my writing workshops with struggling readers, I have found that students are much more engaged, prolific, and articulate when writing expository prose than when writing personal narrative. It stands to reason: They have acquired some level of expertise on the subjects from our guided reading experiences, and, moreover, they have acquired vocabulary and model syntax from their reading. Writing still requires substantial scaffolding, but I rarely hear "I don't know what to write" when our workshop is focused on composing expository prose.

During the sustained silent reading (SSR) segment of our language block, Dominique and many of the disabled readers gravitate toward information texts—books in such series as Eyewitness, Let's Read and Find Out, All Aboard Reading, and New True Books. Not only does the acquisition of "new" information from such texts appeal particularly to preadolescent students, but information texts in these series often mask their low readability. Students can read them, learn from them, and not be embarrassed in front of their more able peers. This interest would seem at first to contradict recent research on what adolescents prefer to read (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999), which revealed that magazines receive especially high marks while information texts generally receive low scores. For the struggling reader, however, magazine reading and low-readability information text reading are related. Both offer short, accessible text, which can be finished in one sitting, and both appeal directly to the interests of the child.

Taking a cue from my students' SSR preferences, I began using a variety of information texts in our guided reading block. It was a short step from there to writing expository prose in workshop, but ironically it wasn't one that I took automatically. Rather, it was reactions like Dominique's that helped me step outside the writing workshop box I had created, in which the autobiographical was paramount, and begin to see the possibilities for making writing a personally rewarding experience for my struggling students.

## What do I say first?

It is in writing information reports, not personal narrative, that I have been able to spark my struggling readers' interest in writing, allay some of their frustrations, and teach them about process. Our workshop on information report writing follows closely on our two weeks of guided reading in nonfiction texts. Every year, favorite model texts among my students prove to be *Gorillas* (Demuth, 1994), *Slinky, Scaly Snakes!* (Dussling, 1998), and *Bats: Creatures of the Night* (Milton, 1993). In pairs and small groups, we spend about one half hour per day for two weeks reading and discussing these books. We collect important vocabulary using Robb's

(1999) "predict and clarify" strategy, and we practice the words by writing "meaningful sentences" (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996). To facilitate explicit comprehension and encourage deeper thinking as well, we work on asking and writing thoughtful questions as we read—a strategy endorsed by comprehension research (Pressley, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). When possible, I extend students' knowledge of the subjects with read-alouds and by filling our book baskets with related materials. In short, by the end of our two weeks of reading, students are steeped in language and information to use in their writing.

Our first report is largely "shared writing," similar to that described by Tompkins (2000): I model and take dictation as the class helps me plan and compose most of our essay. As in all good writing, the planning stage is crucial, and I usually allocate at least two half-hour periods to it. We begin with a six-box web on an overhead; at this point I haven't given students a copy because I want them to focus on the process as I model it, not on taking notes of their own. After writing the topic in the middle box, I suggest that we need a category of information for each box. Because we're writing about animals, I speculate that one category should be "general characteristics," and I write this on the web. Having seen a model for making categories, students now begin, usually without prompting, to offer others. I jot down several, regardless of quality, for then we work together to decide which suggestions work best as "categories" and which are really specific information within one of the categories.

Next we brainstorm information for a category of the students' choice. In a class of struggling readers, what follows is as powerful as it is heartwarming. Nearly all of the students' hands shoot up, each child eager to contribute knowledge to our class web. Students recall detailed information, often details that I can't remember. They get into fruitful disputes over the facts—disputes that provide opportunities for us to return to the text for arbitration. I guide brainstorming for the first two boxes and then distribute photocopies of the web to everyone. Each student is to complete the rest of the boxes while I circulate (see Figure).

Once the webs are complete, we're ready to begin drafting. But even with their wealth of prewriting information, students will call out "How do I begin?" I've wrestled with answering this, because I so wish to avoid teaching the dreaded "thesis" or "topic sentence." Both reek of Engfish, and yet the need to provide students—especially disabled readers—with a way to begin remains. Following a lead from Murray's (1999) discussion of hooks in journalism, I teach my students a formula for beginning the essay. I ask them to think of the most unusual or stimulating fact they know about their topic and then turn it into a question. I model by asking "Did you know that there are bats as large as geese and as small as bumblebees?" Given a few minutes to practice coming up with a question of their own, students again wave frantically when offered the opportunity to share. We call these questions the hook because they're baited with tasty information intended to lure a reader into the paper.

After the hook, I model a simple, general statement, something like "Read on to learn more about these fascinating creatures." Students quickly offer variations: "Did you know that bats are not really blind? Read to learn the truth about bats!" (Quiana); "Did you know that gorillas can talk, sort of? If you want to know how, read my paper!" (Elton). Soon we have cleared the "How do I begin?" hurdle and avoided the slough of despond altogether.

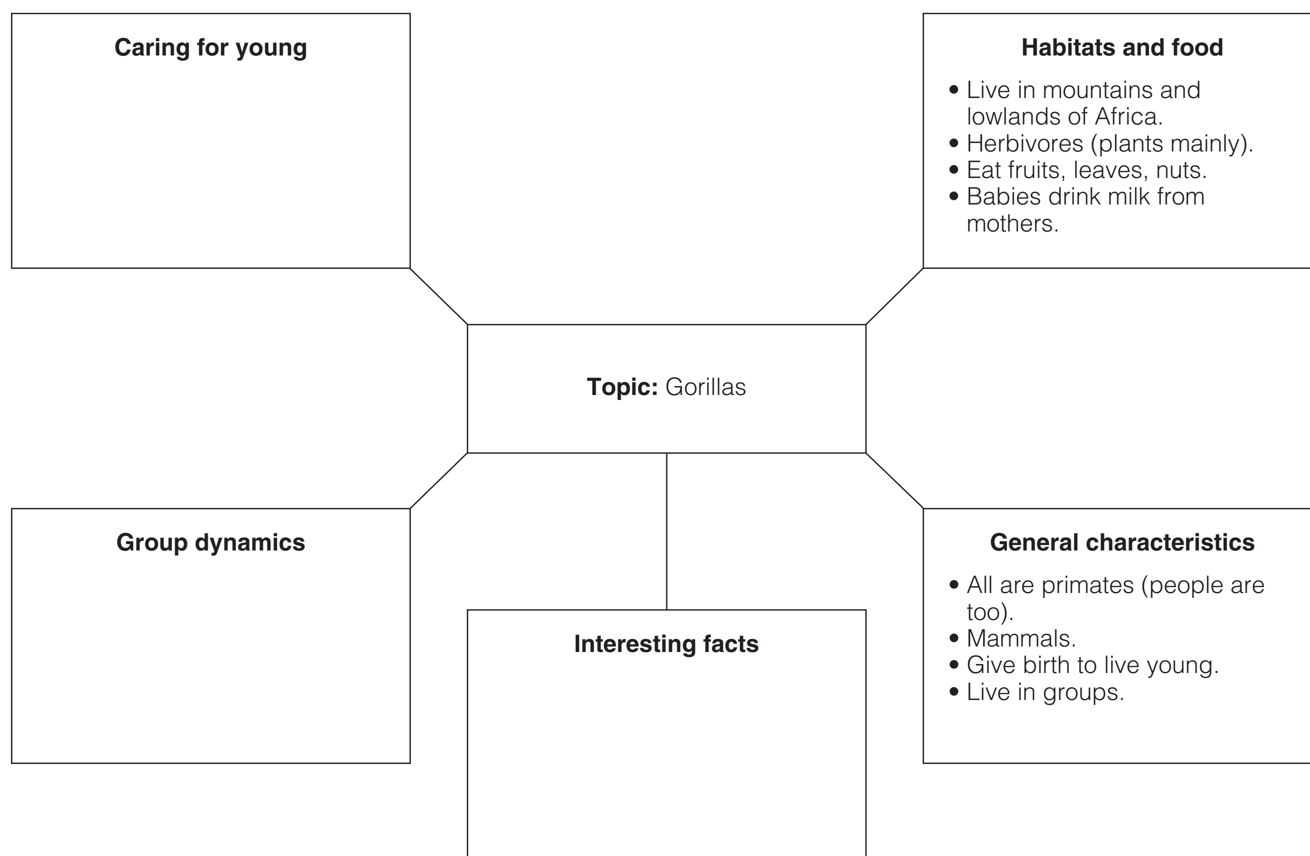
The hook and general statement are, I must admit, varieties of Engfish—formulaic and contrived. Nevertheless, they serve an important purpose: They give reading-disabled students a discourse pattern with which to begin. As the year progresses, many students will deviate from the pattern in interesting, creative ways. I encourage this deviation from the norm. After all, I'm not interested in their writing to a script. Rather, I'm attempting to provide a script that they can build upon and then, when they're ready, discard.

## Can we keep on writing?

After we have gathered information, organized it, and written our hook, we compose part of the draft together. We begin by organizing our information. Looking back at our completed web, I suggest that each box may constitute a paragraph—where, therefore, should I begin? Here is an opportunity for a minilesson on how information texts—newspaper articles, scientific

Web for gorillas report

Teacher and students decide on categories of information then brainstorm information for two categories before students continue on their own.




reports, and the like—nearly always move from the most general to the most specific. So, on the web for our bats paper we assign number 1 to the "general characteristics" box, number 2 to "habitats," and so forth.

Now that we have a clear direction, I model how I construct sentences for my first paragraph on "general characteristics" by combining like ideas and expanding on them, based on my knowledge. Consistently, after I've written one or two sentences of our shared draft, students begin to offer up the rest. I compose the first paragraph of the paper with their input. For our most recent shared report on gorillas, we used the web in the Figure to write the following paragraph together:

> What do gorillas have in common? All gorillas are mammals that belong to a special group called primates. People are also primates. Gorillas can be divided into two groups, based on where they live. Lowland gorillas live in the lowlands and have short hair. Mountain gorillas live up high and have long hair. No matter where they live, gorillas don't eat meat. All gorillas are herbivores.

Using our first paragraph for a model, the students usually compose the second, while I transcribe. Next, if most of the class seem to be catching on, they'll begin to ask "Can we keep on writing, on our own?" Of course my answer is a resounding "Yes!" Not only do I want to fan the flames of their enthusiasm, but I am also confident that they will be able to produce quality

work. Even for those who continue to struggle with generating text, there are several layers of support now available. First, there are the class web and model paragraphs. Second, there is a teacher, circulating and conducting conferences—a critical component, not only for keeping students on track but also for suggesting revisions. We also "publish" student writing often along the way. This may simply consist of devoting five minutes of workshop time to an open sharing session, in which students can volunteer to read segments of a work in progress just to be heard. Students get ideas from hearing others read, which brings me to perhaps the most important mode of support constructed by our workshop: There is a community of writers in which sharing ideas has been endorsed.

Through the workshop, students invariably pair up as they write, comparing phrases or asking for help with getting a paragraph started. In a classroom of struggling readers, where animosities born of frustration with school and (often) home frequently interfere with the development of positive group dynamics, it is especially rewarding to witness this teamwork. When I see a pair or small group of students sharing ideas or supporting one another, I often draw attention to it. I ask the group to explain to the class how they solved a compositional problem together, and I encourage others to do the same. Publicizing examples of cooperative learning as they happen is as important in creating a productive writing workshop as the frequent "publishing" of student writing.

From this point, students work at various paces to complete a draft of the "bats" essay by our deadline. Before editing, we go on to compose a second information report based on their reading. Again, I offer guidance but pull the supports away earlier at each step—perhaps modeling only the first box of the web, reminding students of the hook, or getting them started on a paragraph. With the procedures clearly defined and daily reminders on the order of Atwell's (1998) "status of class," these struggling readers are able to work independently with confidence and success.

## Look how much I wrote!

Quantity, of course, is not necessarily a measure of quality. But to struggling readers, from whom (too often) very little writing is expected, completing a draft of over 200 words is monumental. I capitalize on their pride by asking them to choose their favorite report. We talk about how to choose, and the students help me come up with criteria. Here's our list from the fall.

1. Which sounds most like me?
2. Which has exciting information?
3. Which is organized best?
4. Which has the coolest hook?
5. Which animal do I like best?

The students call out more, but we narrow the list to make it functional. Needless to say, most students base their decision largely on the fifth criterion. But it is often the case that their best writing follows from the topic that most interests them. Even when writing information reports, student interest and choice are basic to motivation and high-quality work.

After they've made their choices, I ask students to take their piece through one more step: personal and peer editing. They use a procedure called CAPS, an acronym for Capitals, Agreement, Punctuation, and Spelling. For the students I've taught, these four areas usually represent their fundamental weaknesses in grammar and mechanics. I devised CAPS after realizing that despite daily practice in editing sentences, using methods similar to daily oral language (Vail & Papenfuss, 1990) followed by application to their own writing (Weaver, 1996), my struggling readers still regularly missed common mechanical errors when editing their own work. What they lacked was not necessarily an understanding of the error. They did not lack adequate practice either. As research in learning disabilities would suggest, they needed a systematic procedure to follow each time they edited (Westby & Clauser, 1999).

The procedure for CAPS is simple to model. On the class draft we've composed on chart paper I write the acronym vertically with a blank by each letter. With the students' help, I then scan the paper four times, once for each kind of error. I admit to the students that the method seems repetitive, but I emphasize the importance of focusing on one problem at a time and suggest that all good writers reread their drafts many times before publication. Once students learn CAPS, we use it in daily oral language practice, and in writing workshop it serves as part of our peer-editing rubric.

Finally, their reports revised and edited, students illustrate them and hang them in the hall—it's "publication" time, and the length and quality of their reports make the students proud of their writing in a way that few have experienced.

## Is it Engfish?

Our information report unit leavens the writing workshop with a whole-group, direct instruction model for teaching composition. The product—both the pedagogical model and the actual reports—may not be to the tastes of passionate advocates of the writing workshop approach. But how we teach writing must, in the final analysis, be influenced by whom we teach. This method helps struggling readers see themselves as writers, and rightfully so, for they have used a complex process to compose original writing on a meaningful topic. That end, it seems to me, justifies the means.

But is the product good writing or "schooled" writing...Engfish? Perhaps it is good schooled writing, with a personal touch. You be the judge. Here are samples from two of my fifth graders, Albert and Kristen. On the basis of multiple measures—Qualitative Reading Inventory–3 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2000), the Ganske Developmental Spelling Analysis (Ganske, 2000), teacher observations from fourth and fifth grade, and a writing prompt scored according to the Virginia Standards of Learning rubric—both students read and write at a second-grade level.

> Did you know that mother gorillas only have one baby at a time? Please read on! I have some good things to say. Thank you!
>
> All gorillas are mammals. They belong to a group called primates. Gorillas do not eat meat. They eat only plants. They are herbivores. Lowland gorillas live on low land and have red [sic] hair. Mountain gorillas live on mountains and have long hair. (Kirsten, grade 5, "Gorillas," paragraphs 1–2)

> Baby bats are born alive. When babies come out of their mothers, the baby falls and the mother flies down fast to catch it. The mother knows the babies [sic] voice. The mother flies across to wash baby. (Albert, grade 5, "Bats," paragraph 3)

Struggling readers can become confident, capable writers if writing workshop provides them with procedures to address the questions "How do I begin?" and "What do I do next?" In my own experiences teaching struggling and high-achieving students alike, writing workshop becomes frustrating when students begin to feel that they've been left to their own devices with insufficient "expert" guidance. It's true that an important goal of writing workshop is to help students discover their own voices and become independent writers (with the caveat that all writers rely on others for support). But too often we begin with the independence—choose your own genre, topic, planning style—rather than supporting students as they work toward independence. I've learned that my students become better independent writers after we've developed a few foundational models for how to plan, draft, revise, and edit a piece. The models for an information report, such as the one on gorillas, won't fit every type of writing. Students soon discover this, and teachers must be ready for it. But once students learn one set of answers to "How do I begin?" and "What do I do next?" they have a place from which to start as they address the different demands of new types of writing.

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## I know someone who loves to read

Gail A. Bauman

I know someone who loves to read
And loves to share her reading with me.

We read Mother Goose tales written in rhyme.
We travel with Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*.

We laugh at the poems of Shel Silverstein.
That Jimmy Jet is such a scream.

We read the narrative poems of Dr. Seuss,
Where you can let your imagination run loose.

We read about castles and faraway places.
We dream about dragons and wide open spaces.

We read about Harry Potter in wizards' school.
We think Amelia Bedelia is really cool.

We read about Ramona and Madeline.
We always have such a wonderful time.

Reading together can be lots of fun.
So go grab a book and read with someone.

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