

LETTERS TO SUSAN: AN INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING INVENTION STRATEGIES TO FOURTH GRADERS

MARJORIE BURGESS

I

Dear Susan,

October 13, 1986

I can sympathize with your feelings at this point. To be assigned the fourth grade this year when your only experience is in kindergarten is quite a jolt. As for that emotionally disturbed student who will be in your class until he can be transferred to an institution in Indianapolis, I really have no advice except to take one day at a time.

You asked, "How does a teacher help a child turn a blank page on his desk into a written composition?" I need time to think this over. I'll be writing you more than one letter to really cover your question because I have strong feelings about teaching writing which may seem new and a little threatening since they aren't based on traditional approaches.

I came to these feelings because when I was teaching, it seemed particularly cold to me to hand students a blank page and insist they write on an assigned topic. I like to use what I call a warm-up exercise, even if the exercise is as simple as reading poems with my class for twenty minutes. Then I ask them to set down any thoughts in their heads at 10:20 a.m. One day I got this from Emily:

“I like to read because it is interesting. I like to put a lot of action into it. I like making words sound like what the word means. I like reading about seasons and famous people. I like reading funny books and magazines. I think that I will be a famous author when I grow up. I want to write funny stories for little kids. I want to make them laugh. That’s why I like to read.”

I think it is more natural to have a warm up exercise that motivates children to write, gives them information, and promotes ideas before pens touch paper, but I had to search to find people who felt like me. I found others who agreed that the old emphasis on thesis and outline does not help a child think through a writing task. We shouldn’t spend all our effort teaching a child to write a model composition and get bogged down with mechanics.

We have tended to start in the middle of the writing process and ignore the beginning. A child is most helped by finding a starting point well before he finds an outline because writing is a process. As the child invents, drafts, and revises his writing, he follows more of a figure eight pattern than a straight line.

Another thing that has always bothered me is that in the past, writing has not been related to the child’s world. We all know what Piaget says about development: a child learns in the limited world of self experience. Why haven’t we tied into Piaget’s theory and allowed children to write about their feelings rather than frustrate them by demanding the highly analytical skills of the book report? Where is our humanity? Let children write expressively; here, they are really capable. You would think expository writing was a sacred cow in most schools. To our credit, elementary teachers have done a better job than the later year teachers in allowing expressive writing, but the attitude is still that writing that shows our feelings, emotions, and experiences has less value. That is rather silly, too. After all we have *Walden Pond*, the Declaration of Independence, and even the Bible to prove expressive writing reaches the same heights of excellence as exposition.

What is really needed (I think!) is a revival of Aristotle. Right now you’re asking, “What is she talking about?” I’m talking about an old idea, historically: the idea that language is a social phenomenon to serve our needs. I believe if children first learn to express themselves, they grow in understanding their surroundings. At a later time, they develop to the point that they analyze their world. As their awareness grows, they see that there are other worlds than their own. They must reconcile all these different understandings.

As language serves the need to reconcile, writing is the means to communicate not only their own understandings, but the understandings of others to them. Writing is communication in its broadest sense. Whether you view the process of child development as the old acorn into the oak story or as ripples on a stream, I think the process of writing helps produce enlightened human beings. Without numerous experiences with writing, I really think a part of a child's development is slowed. Considering my thoughts, you won't be surprised if I feel we have got to quit narrowing writing down to fit some small time slot in teaching Language Arts. Seriously considered, writing as a whole is an actual reflection of the thinking process.

I think I could help you most by sharing with you some starting points for children's writing. Some ideas are my own. I have drawn heavily on the work of James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, but I have too much to tell you and too much work to do tonight to finish my thoughts on teaching writing. I promise a very long letter next week!

Yours,
Margie

II

Dear Susan,

October 20, 1986

It is so nice to have the kind of captive audience that I have in this letter. I can reminisce, backtrack, and go on as long as I want. There is no way to turn me off. You have to read every word to get to the point. You better pour yourself a cup of coffee before you read further because I have plenty to say about starting points in teaching children to write.

First off, take a good look at your classroom. You will need the right equipment to inspire your fourth graders. Children at this age learn through the direct experience of their surroundings. It only follows that your room should be filled with objects that can be involved with self experience. An art corner is a good idea with prints and copies of paintings by the Masters as well as by your little masters. Do not forget records and a record player as well as books and a bookcase. A wicker basket will do to hold props and old clothes for role playing. I hope you are lucky enough to have a large old desk and typewriter. The desk can store your perception games, too. Use color; exploit it everywhere on walls and bulletin boards.

Nothing brings a room more to life. You will also need all that hands on experience stuff like clay, paper, paints, and tactile objects on your shelves. To keep the room from becoming static, move desks into groupings, circles, semi-circles, and rows throughout the day and week.

I always try to remember that I am the coach when children write. I play the day by ear, just like the old *carpe diem* idea. I seize the day by taking a moment when the children are enthused about an idea and turn from that idea into an activity that leads to writing.

That moment is most likely to come when I use strategies that inspire children to communicate their emotions and experiences. At this age, they are only comfortable with concrete subjects. They are just learning to work. If I let them express what they know, though it is limited to narratives, descriptions, simple stories, and self expressive writing, I will not have to deal with their frustration at being asked to perform tasks beyond their development.

Before I start the activities, I propose a writing contract. Since the children are still at an egocentric stage, they often do not know a polite way to criticize others' work. In the contract, I can limit what are acceptable comments. Remarks like "You're stupid!" are changed to "I have a different idea." I establish a rule about laughter: no one may laugh at another's work unless it is intended to be funny. I include the children's ideas of what should be in the contract. I write the rules on cardboard and have everyone, including me, sign the contract. I post the contract in the room to refer to when anyone forgets to criticize politely.

There are several activities you can try for starting points toward a written composition. In brainstorming, you write all the words on the board that the children free associate with a subject. The writing takes shape and purpose from your children's free association of ideas, not from your pre-conceived topic, thesis, or outline.

When the class read a story about China, I used brain storming to develop the idea of what life is like in China. Typical to the egocentricity of this age, David could only represent China in terms of its differences from his American experiences, but the brainstorming session gave him the concrete details to develop his paper as follows:

"Do you know anything that is Chinese that is different from what we have? I do! For instance, they eat with chopsticks instead of silverware. They have a different language than ours. They read from right to left and down.

Most Chinese are poor farmers; American farmers make pretty good money. China has at least four times as many people than we do. Yet they are one of the poorest countries in the world. They have to do all their farming by hand; we use machines. They have to shop to get hot water for tea; we don't.

I guess in all of this you can say that China has different ways of doing things than ours."

Another starting point is to pose a problem, ask the class to orally think through the sides of an issue, and give a possible solution. The problems come from actual situations. Children write directions to their homes or directions for making their favorite craft. You can use problems solving to create an experiment. You can use it in arithmetic to figure lunch refunds. Facts are generated orally by you, but the children write the problem.

I like role playing as a starting point because you get some interesting responses when children are asked to create a situation that can be acted out by three to five players. Use your props and clothing in the room here. Children generally create situations that call for ethical judgments, such as, "You saw your best friend cheating." You can have them give written responses to cover the alternatives in a situation and, at times, the solutions.

In another approach, you can appeal to the children's experiences. They can be asked to describe what they feel when listening to music or viewing a painting. They can taste a fortune cookie and write about the fortune and flavor, maybe even contrast it with other cookies. They can draw a monster or an invention, and then write about the picture. The results can be made into a class book which is a way for children to share motives and emotions other than through discussion only.

Once I asked my children to write about what the world would be like if they suddenly found themselves ten inches tall. The strategy appeals to a child's experience because he identifies with what it is like to be physically small in a large world. He understands feelings of helplessness and powerlessness since he often views adults as giants. This identification is present in this excerpt from Nils' paper:

"Out on the playground girls thought I was a doll they threw me everywhere. They squeezed me and then threw me into a dog pen of a German Sheperd. That German Sheperd almost bit off my leg I'm lucky I got out of there.

At lunch I had a hard time when I picked up my milk it went all over me. When I got home my mother was sweeping and she

swept me into the trashcan. I finally got out of the trashcan. My mother said,

“What happened too you.” I had to wear my sister’s Barbie doll clothe’s.

When I want to feed my dog he tore off my finger. He thought I was the Alpo.”

I know I’ve given you much to mull over here. I was going to give you some starting points that are directly involved with writing, but I’ll save that for my next letter. My letters are becoming epistles of a new writing theory, but I feel invention strategies are so important to writing that I’m asking you to bear with me until next week.

Yours,
Margie

III

Dear Susan,

October 27, 1986

I have more starting points this time, but their difference is that they all involve writing. I am so glad you are interested in these ideas and open to the possibilities of teaching invention strategies. You may not want to develop all these activities into written compositions. They may be just as useful as thinking exercises.

When you use guided free writing, you allow a few minutes each day for children to write without evaluating their work. Let them react in writing to a school movie, the first snowfall, a surprise fire drill, or a fight at recess. You will want to give topics to your children daily until they ask to write what they want.

Journals and diaries are totally private or turned in to be read by you as you wish. Since this age child likes appeals to his emotions, the journal and diary are best used for self-expression. When a child has a problem outside your realm to solve, perhaps the journal will help you as it did me. A little girl came to me with fears of staying by herself from 3:00 p.m. until her mother was home at 5:00 p.m. I encouraged this child to write out her fears, hoping that writing would give her release from the tension she was experiencing.

Once, a child surprised me by using the diary form in a paper that described the first Thanksgiving. I wish I could take credit for the following clever strategy, but the idea was all Thom’s as he wrote:

“My name is Cromseit and I am reading the famous diary of . . . , uh, let me see, oh, skip it. Anyway, here it is.

Dear Diary,

July 25, 1623

Today is a very happy day, we are getting ready for the very first Thanksgiving. Half of our people have died through this harsh winter that has past.

Dear Diary,

July 29, 1623

Here it is, the day before Thanksgiving. All the food is ready and Samoset, Sqanto, and Chief Massasoit are a great help.

Dear Diary,

July 30, 1623

Today, it is here, the very first Thanksgiving. We are having turkey, venison, duck, fish, seccotash, corn, meal, and journey cake.

(Cronseit:) Well there it is the famous diary of . . . who Knows."

In memory writing, you can ask children to write what they remember. They can write about the school carnival or class trip which, with snapshots, makes a class scrapbook.

An unfinished sentence or an unfinished story is a popular starting point with my children. Write an unfinished sentence which they must complete and develop into a simple story. Another strategy is to draw illustrations for a story first, then write a story that describes the picture. The results also make a class book.

When I use an unfinished story, I orally tell "The Lady and Tiger," and then ask which door was opened. I really liked Kyle's answer; the simplicity of the narrative and ending fit the tone of the original story:

"As the slave walked to the two door he opened the door on the left. Out came the tiger! The tiger lepped on the slave. The slave saw some human bones and used them for weapons. He killed the tiger but he was badly wounded. He looked at the princess one tear fell from his eye. Then he died."

In elementary grades, I have plenty of opportunity to use reading assignments as invention strategies. Since I read to my children daily, I have even more options than just my texts. C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* really captures Nils' attention. Though he used details from the story, I really thought Nils was making an attempt to capture Lewis' style rather than just repeating facts in this excerpt: "I was in Narnia when I saw centaurs eating snakes and lizards. Centaurs are humans that have horse legs.

Once I was in Narnia and there was a centaur would do anything.

He was a wizard his name was Charlie the Wizard. Charlie was really neat he liked to make people snakes.

Charlie was different from all the centaurs he was more human than any others.”

Compositions can not only develop from readings in literature but also in other subjects. For example, my social studies book described the process of cutting down a tree and then the tree's being made into a product. The class read Hans Christen Andersen's "The Fir Tree" at the same time as the social studies assignment. Then they wrote a paper personifying a redwood tree from the time it was cut down until it became a product.

One form of heuristics, or the use of questions to prompt writing, makes a more demanding starting point. You would want to limit this technique to three to five questions. Used to generate factual material, heuristics work in creative writing.

The use of questions prompts writing by giving children a sense of direction. I use this form of heuristics to give children directions when I ask them to write a fairy tale. The children test ideas for stories according to these questions: 1) Will your story begin with "Once upon a time?" 2) Will your story show animals or objects acting like people? When the centaurs in Chris' story needed firewood, he answered this question in the sentence, "The tree felt pain when the centaurs felled through his marrow." 3) Will your story talk about magical powers? Aaron's answer to this question was "a waterfall colored by the sun. They touched the waterfall and came to another world. When they looked at each other one looked like a gnome and the other looked like a wizard." 4) Will your story have make believe creatures? Clista answered all the above questions in one sentence: "Once upon a time a witch turned a cat so that he could talk and he could do special things." 5) Will your story end happily ever after? I had to laugh when I read Alyssa's version of utopia, "The children always behaved their mother and father, they never ran away or hurt one another. They lived happily ever after."

Peer group work is the last starting point I would like to describe to you. Group your children to generate ideas as units rather than as individuals. The previously mentioned inventive strategies all can be done in peer groups, but I especially like to use peer groups in writing workshops. You divide your class into groups of four in the workshop. Each group is to create a magazine composed of a joke or cartoon, an illustration, a creative story or a non-fiction piece, and a poem generated by the group. The group is also responsible for a title page and cover illustration.

Why do invention strategies work so well? They are all starting points that appeal to the emotions and experiences of your fourth graders. Remember you are acting as a coach in teaching your children to write. The structure of the game must fit the structure of your students.

Yours,
Margie

IV

Dear Susan,

November 3, 1986

I guess I haven't quite convinced you. I'm happy to see you agree about the value of teaching invention strategies, but you're still unsure of why the structure of writing must fit the structure of the student. To me, it's crucial to understand the structure of your students.

Did I ever tell you Sister Leona's story about her first teaching job? She was teaching seventh grade and about to give a final test when the priest knocked on her door. He was an elderly man who loved to make dandelion wine, so much so that he took the seventh grade girls from class every year to help him pick the dandelions to make the wine. When he came for the girls, Sister sputtered that they were about to take their final tests. He said, "Oh well, you know what they know, don't you?" Then he just took off with the girls.

You really should know your students well, so well that test results are rarely a surprise. You should also coordinate teaching activities with the cognitive level of your students; it only makes sense to do so.

Review Piaget first—the fourth grader is at a stage he calls concrete operations. Simply put, that means he is centered in himself and his surroundings, which are bound to be a limited world. He can think through classes and relations, but he is still tightly bound to concrete subjects. He learns best by memorization of the concrete.

I always liked Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* because the fourth grader described there is a child learning to balance industry and inferiority. As he learns to work, school becomes the field to develop his abilities in tools and skills. Your child is ready to handle writing tasks because he has a basic understanding of goals and limits. Though he is ready to work, he is still fragile when it comes to handling disappointments. It's dangerous for your age child to feel a sense of inferiority because he may feel he is inadequate

and think he is mediocre. This supports fitting the structure of writing to the structure of the student since his sense of industry is frustrated when he is asked to perform tasks beyond his development. Your strategies should be limited to subjects children know from their surroundings. Self-expressive writing, narratives, descriptions, stories, and concrete subject matters work best in fourth grade.

Look into the work of James Moffett and James Britton if you still are not convinced. Moffett's stages of coding or language skills show the need for sequence in writing that corresponds to the child's language development. A fourth grader puts his experience into thought, his thought into speech, and finally, his speech into print. A child needs starting points to be able to transfer his ideas to paper. What we expect him to write about must mesh with his development or we are back to Erikson's frustration.

Britton also feels that children have a limited understanding of the world since they learn through self-experience. You can guess what follows: expressive writing is the most appropriate form for this age. They will develop the constraints of poetic writing later.

I hope I have convinced you of the importance of fitting the curriculum to the student. Really, there is a sound theory behind all this. You would not be obstinate enough to ask what the sound theory is, would you?

Yours,
Margie

V

Dear Susan,

November 10, 1986

I can always count on your obstinacy. All right, I will explain the sound theory behind my strong feelings about how writing should be taught. But this is my last letter! You will have to tackle Moffett, Britton, and Janice Lauer on your own.

I have to agree with you. When you are knee deep in "we was" and "alot," theory seems remote. You want to get right down to correcting spelling errors. But at the heart of writing problems is often the choice of theory from which methods spring. Read that sentence twice. I know you want nice steps in a straight line, but there are a couple of things to remember. Writing experts analyze other's experiences with writing and then make reasoned conclusions. Why wander a woods haphazardly when others have blazed a trail? Study-

ing theory is like following the trail blazers rather than getting lost.

We want effective writers, but we need certain guided limits to the groundwork. Janice Lauer has criteria to test the effectiveness of heuristic procedures that with a little tailoring provide a groundwork for fourth grade invention strategies.

Lauer's first criterion is that the invention strategy works best when based on a basic inquiry procedure. The inquiry comes from the child's immediate environment or is developed through self-experience and limited to concrete subjects. I have an example. A paper on the differences between life in the United States and China could begin with fortune cookies. Ask your children to taste the fortune cookies (self-experience and concrete) and then ask how they are different from American cookies (immediate environment). Once your children have experienced a concrete difference between China and the United States, like the tasting of the fortune cookie, have a brain storming session to find more differences.

The invention strategy should be a closed system as opposed to an open system is Lauer's second criterion. For example, ask your children to develop a paper from a fixed number of questions or categories. In the example of the paper on China and the United States, ask children to tell about three to five differences.

A third Lauer criterion is that the invention strategy should resemble fundamental psychological operations. Your children experience life through touching and tasting, emotional reactions, and visual pictures as well as through words. It is your responsibility to include hands on experiences in invention strategies. Invention strategies that allow children to work out present skills are successful because they appeal to a child's sense of industry.

Are you out of the woods, yet? Well, Susan, now you know all I know about helping a child turn a blank page on his desk into a written composition. I should thank you also for inspiring me to verbalize what were only strong feelings into clear, concrete reflections set down on paper. After all, isn't that the purpose of writing?

Yours,
Margie

Marjorie Burgess teaches fourth grade at St. Bernard School in Wabash, Indiana and is pursuing a Masters degree in English at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne.

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