

# Teaching Print Awareness Through Kindergarten Journal Writing

BY SUSAN J. MENZMER

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**T**raditionally, kindergarten students have not been formally taught to read or write. Instead, they have learned “reading readiness skills.” These may include “auditory memory, rhyming, letter recognition, visual matching, listening skills, sound-letter correspondence, initial consonant sounds, and visual and auditory discrimination.”<sup>1</sup> This approach separates the processes of reading and writing, with writing being taught only after the child can read and spell.<sup>2</sup>

Writing instruction, in later grades, usually consisted of formal activities such as copying sentences and forming perfect letters. Expressing thoughts and ideas was rarely emphasized.<sup>3</sup>

## **Writing Is Natural**

Now, however, educators have begun to see writing as a natural process. “The seeds of writing development are present from infancy. They can be observed early in children’s actions, their gestures, speech, play, and eventually, drawing—all of which are forms of symbolic representation.”<sup>4</sup> Research has shown that, given the chance and the supplies, young children will “write” even though they have not mastered the reading process.<sup>5</sup>

*[A]dults . . . have turned writing into an exercise on dotted-line paper, into a matter of rules, lessons, and cautious behavior. Children view writing quite differently. For them, it is exploration with marker and pen. Long before they come to school, youngsters leave their mark on foggy car windows and wet beaches. We, as adults, may not believe in writing for kindergarten children—but the children believe in it.*<sup>6</sup>

Children learn to speak by using sounds they know. Adults do not divide the oral language up into segments and drill a child on these before letting him speak a whole word. Likewise, a child learns how to read and to write by using the written language in the best way that he can, for real purposes. And teachers and other adults must look past the “mistakes” to see what the child wants to say.<sup>7</sup>

## **Print Awareness Begins Early**

By the time children come to school, they already have a vast awareness of print and the ways it is used to commu-

## *Educators have begun to see writing as a natural process.*

nicate. They want to write. They have already been writing for some time—on newspapers, walls, or anyplace they can reach with a crayon or marker.

Even a child as young as one or two will produce “scribble” marks. At age three one can find wavy lines, small circles, or vertical lines—similar to adult writing that the child has observed. In the next few years, children notice more details about adult writing, such as individual letters. They know that the different shapes have different meanings.<sup>8</sup> *Between three and five years of age children . . . move from imitation to creation. They produce a mixture of real letters, mock letters, and innovative symbols. They write messages which they expect adults to be able to read.*<sup>9</sup>

Learning to write gives children a joy of accomplishment, as well as a way to understand themselves.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, writing is a survival skill in a cul-

ture filled with words.<sup>11</sup> Children who can write words independently usually have a higher chance of success in elementary school. High school students who cannot write clearly may not receive credit for information they know. And when applying for a job, applicants often favorably influence employers by giving articulate answers on an application form.

### **Encouraging Your Students to Write**

To expand your classroom writing program, you will need to consider several factors. First is the daily routine. Arrange your classroom schedule to include writing for practical purposes. To take attendance, have students sign in on a sheet as they arrive. To participate in upcoming events, they can put their names on a sign-up sheet. Schedule free time daily when students can interact with print at various learning centers.<sup>12</sup>

Next, consider the physical environment. Offer a wide range of reading and writing materials at different locations in the classroom. At a writing center provide different forms of paper, a variety of writing utensils, and blank books. Leave pads of paper and pencils in the play house for making grocery lists. A tele-

phone book, magazines, cookbooks, and newspapers can be in the play house, too. Post charts listing classroom rules, as well as directions for using each learning center. Other suggestions include monthly birthday lists and labels for classroom items. Typewriters, computers, and a mailbox will contribute to a print-rich environment.<sup>13</sup>

### **Journal Writing in Kindergarten**

Classroom writing in kindergarten consists of five main forms: (1) logs, (2) diaries, (3) creative writing, (4) expository writing, and (5) journals.<sup>14</sup> Each of these is written for different reasons, created in varying ways, and is read by a specific type of audience. Daily journals are a good place to start, as they require only a small amount of planning, and no further publishing is needed.<sup>15</sup> A journal may be as simple as five 8 1/2” x 11” unlined blank pages stapled between two construction paper covers. At the beginning of each week, give the students a new journal.

At the kindergarten level, journal “writing” may include a lot of pictures drawn by students. These pictures may be accompanied by scribbles, random letters, numbers, invented or conven-

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tional spelling—depending upon the child’s skill development.

Children may also “write” in journals and later dictate what they have written to an adult.<sup>16</sup> Seek a balance between encouraging the child and making “the resultant entry too much the teacher’s, too little the child’s.”<sup>17</sup> Keep in confidence any personal items the children write about in their journals or dictate to you.

### **Establishing a Writing Routine**

The following procedures to establish a writing routine were adapted from an article on “Getting Started With Writing” by Bobbi Fisher.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Day One**

1. Tell the children that every day they will be drawing pictures and writing about something that interests them.
2. Ask them to do four things on their paper: (a) draw a picture; (b) write something; (c) write their name on their paper; (d) stamp the date.
3. Make a chart showing writing steps (a) through (d) above.
4. If the children say that they can’t write, tell them to do some scribble

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writing or write some letters or words that they know.

5. Have the children place their writing in a sharing basket. Collect it and save a sample for each child.

#### **Day Two**

1. Demonstrate the four steps of writing. Choose something that happened to you. Draw a picture, write about the happening, write your name, and stamp the date.
2. Demonstrate different kinds of

kindergarten writing, such as scribbles, letter-like symbols, random letters, labels, and words and sentences.

3. Have the students follow the steps outlined in item number one.
4. Encourage the children to take this piece of writing home.

#### **Day Three**

1. Review the four steps of writing.
2. Describe the types of kindergarten writing and have children demonstrate each type on the chalkboard.
3. Show the children how to file their work. Prepare in advance a file box with a manila folder and hanging file for each student. Write the child’s name on both. Explain that the hanging file stays in the box, so that it will be easy to find. The children can take their manila folder out to insert papers or look at their work.
4. Have each child file the work written that day.

#### **Day Four**

1. Give a mini-lesson on “ear spelling” or “invented spelling.” Draw a picture of a topic suggested by the students. Discuss the message and meaning of what they want to say. Next, have them help you label, write words, and finally write a sentence. As the class listens, say the words slowly, then again together. Ask them what sounds they hear and what letters represent those sounds.
2. Have children choose whether to file the day’s writing, put it in the sharing basket, or take it home.

#### **Day Five**

Make a chart of topics the students can choose to write about. Students can help by using their “ear spelling” while you fill in the other letters so that the list is written conventionally.

#### **Day Six and Beyond**

Now that procedures are established, have students begin writing in their journals every day, while you take individual dictation once a week. Respond in written form to the students’ writing at least twice a week. Schedule sharing time every day, and give each student the opportunity to share at least once a week. Add new writing topics to the topic chart each week.

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Find a time in your school day when students will appreciate some quiet time to write in their journals. After recess may be a good time, or when they arrive in the morning. They can walk to the file box as they come in, find their current journal, and go to a special spot in the classroom for journal writing. Some may like to write in the play house, reading loft, or even in a corner on the carpeted floor. Pencils, crayons, and markers should be set out for them. If they finish their writing early, they can file their journal and go to a designated spot to read quietly while the other students finish their writing. Start with five minutes each day for journal writing. Over time, increase to 15 to 20 minutes daily. During the first five minutes you should write as well, providing a model for your students.

### **Making the Writing Conference Work**

Once a week meet briefly with each student to talk about his or her writing. The conference may take place while other students are writing, during recess, lunch, or other free moments throughout the week. Schedule a few conferences each day. You won't feel as pressured if you know you have to meet with only four or five students on any particular day. Having a regularly scheduled day for their conference also helps students look forward to their special time with you.

At the conference, ask the children to tell you about their picture, and "read" to you what they wrote. Ask questions that show your interest and stimulate them to think. For example, you might say: "I like your picture of a bunny. Where is she going? What does she have in her bag?" At the bottom of the page write what the child tells you about the picture. Use the exact words the child uses—no editing! This helps the children see that what they say can be written down and read back later exactly as they said it.

Each day provide a time when students pick one page from the current week's journal to share with the rest of the class. Encourage the other class members to make positive comments, such as "I like the way you drew your tree." They can also ask questions about the story.

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*A child learns how to  
read and to write by  
using the written lan-  
guage in the best way  
that he can, for real  
purposes.*

### **Help Children Learn the Skills They Need**

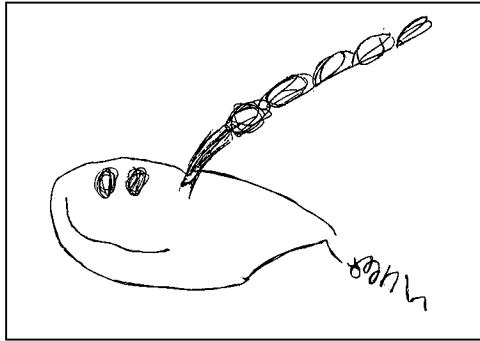
Encourage your students to spell words using their "ear spelling." When they ask how to spell a word, ask if they can hear what letter it starts with. If they can tell you, write it down. Next, ask them what letter the word ends with, and help them fill in the rest of the letters. This will help them to develop an "I can" attitude about spelling. The most important thing is to get them writing. Conven-

tional spelling will come with time and practice.

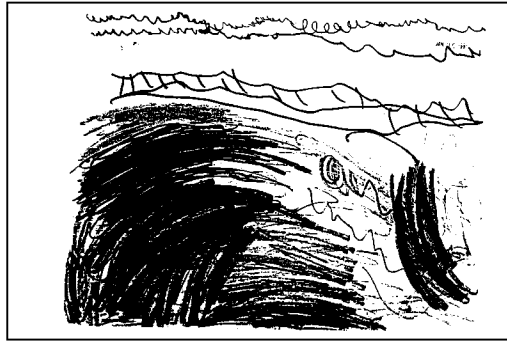
### **Understanding How Children Develop as Writers**

A typical kindergarten or first-grade classroom has students from a wide range of writing levels (see chart on the Developmental Stages of Children's Writing). Remember that all students can meet with success as they progress to the higher writing stages. Don't try to bring all students up to the same writing level. If this happens naturally, great! But chances are, by the end of the year there will still be a wide range of writing levels in your classroom. Children learn and grow at different rates. One child may move from Stage 4 (labeling and listing) to Stage 5 (invented spellings) in one week. Another child may take a month or more.

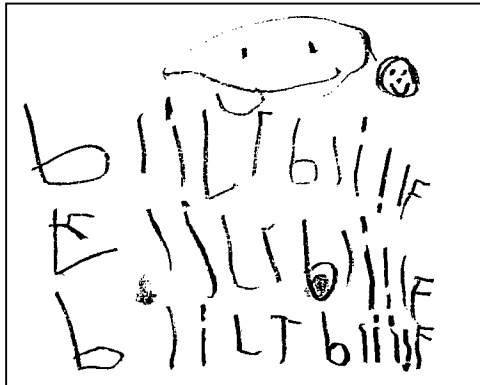
Talk to your students about the different writing stages. Encourage tolerance of other students who may write in different ways. Remind them that they couldn't always spell some of the words they can spell now, but they learned—



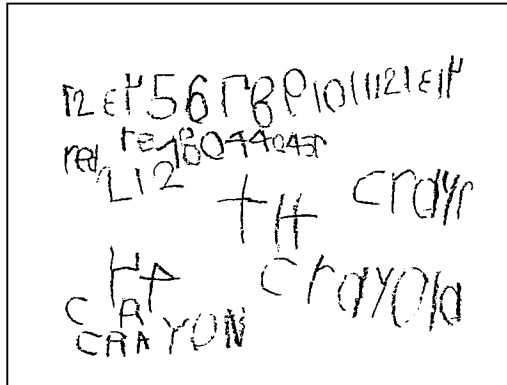
Stage 1 - Nonwriting



Stage 2 - Scribbling



Stage 3 - Random Lettering



Stage 4 - Labeling and listing

just as their classmates will learn.

### Document Children's Writing Development

It's exciting for both parent and teacher to see a child learn and grow. Documenting this process can be done easily in a classroom writing program. Collect a writing sample from each child on the first day of school, or on the day you begin your writing program. Date the sample, and put it in a folder with the child's name written on it. Using the developmental writing chart on page 9, evaluate the child's writing stage. This will provide a basis for comparison. Compare each child against himself or herself, rather than against other students. Once a week, choose and file a writing sample from each child. Be sure to write the date on each one. By the time report cards are due, you will have a nice selection of writing that represents the growth of each child. These can be used in parent-teacher conferences to show the child's progress.

The developmental writing stages of children's writing identified by Marjorie L. Hipple are just one way you can evaluate children's writing. Others

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could certainly be used as well. The evaluation form should, however, be consistent with whole-language principles. Kenneth S. Goodman has identified five common characteristics of effective whole-language evaluation methods:

1. They are holistic and do not fragment language.
2. They treat both teachers and learners with respect.
3. They are consistent with the best scholarship on language, learning, teaching, and curriculum.
4. They are innovative, creative, and dynamic.

5. They are open-ended.<sup>19</sup>

### Publicizing Your Writing Program

Gaining parental and administrative support for your writing program can be relatively simple. The key word is *communication*. If your school already has a Back-to-School night, arrange to meet with the parents of your students for 15 to 20 minutes. Or you might ask for permission to schedule your own program for the parents of your students. Call several parents and ask them to bring refreshments. Be sure to invite your principal to attend. (If this is not possible, tell him or her what was said and how things went.)

Explain your writing program to the parents. Pass out copies of the developmental writing stages of children's writing so par-

ents understand the writing processes their children will be going through, as well as the things you will be looking for.

Begin a monthly classroom newsletter. Have students draw pictures and write stories to go in the newsletter. Make sure that every student occasionally has something published in the newsletter. Include a column with writing ideas parents can do at home with their children.

Finally, keep in mind that a picture is worth a thousand words! So borrow or rent a video camera and record each child as he or she talks about a favorite piece of writing during classroom sharing time. Do this several times during the year. Show the video to your students, their parents, your school board, and other teachers.

It's important to schedule a variety of activities that help children develop their skills. But above all, make sure you and your students have fun as you explore the world of print together. ✍

*Susan J. Menzmer teaches Reading Comprehension for foreign students at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.*

## Developmental Stages of Children's Writing<sup>20</sup>

1. *Nonwriting*: Draws stories with no accompanying text.

2. *Scribbling*: Attempts to emulate the line, shape, and direction of traditional writing.

3. *Random lettering*: Prints random letters.

4. *Labeling and listing*: Reproduces numerals, proper names, or other words either from memory or from print sources. These may appear singly or be repeated in lists without narrative content.

5. *Invented spellings*: Demonstrates beginning phonemic segmentation skills by writing words with some consonant sounds spelled out. More advanced forms of invented spellings include some vowels. Words may appear singly, such as when labeling a picture drawn, or together in a sentence or story.

6. *Transitional spelling*: Mixes conventional and invented spellings. Words appear more often in sentence or story form, rather than primarily as a one-word label.

7. *Conventional spelling*: Produces mature conventions of spelling and writing. Words are written in sentence or story form.

## Writing in the Classroom

### 1. Establish a Writing Routine

- Organize the classroom for writing.
- Surround the children with literature.
- Help the children choose topics.
- Write with the children.

### 2. Make the Writing Conference Work

- Help the children speak first.
- Ask questions that show interest and teach.

### 3. Help Children Learn the Skills They Need

- Use "ear-spelling" to communicate.

### 4. Understand How Children Develop as Writers

- See the different developmental writing stages represented.
- Watch the writers grow and develop.
- Explain the development to the students.

### 5. Document Children's Writing Development

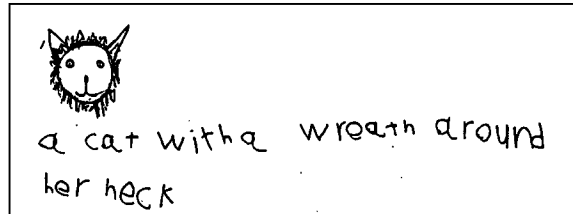
- Collect writing samples.
- Record each child's development.
- Send home classroom newsletters.
- Videotape each child.
- Share the child's development with administrators and parents.



Stage 5 - Invented spellings



Stage 6 - Transitional spelling



Stage 7 - Conventional spelling

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