

## The Journey of a Primary School Writer by Jo-An Vargo

I enjoy a special gift three times a year - reading your child's assessments. It not only provides an in-depth perspective of each child's progress in all areas of development, it also allows me to look at our ever evolving goals throughout the curriculum.

I thought it might be helpful to summarize the goals we have for our student writers this month. Therefore, I'm going to quote heavily from Columbia University's Teachers College publications, Launching the Writing Workshop. Their rubrics for K-2 and 3-5 assessment contain invaluable information for our teachers as they design their instructional units and specific mini-lessons.

We want our K-2 students to approach writing eagerly and with confidence. Planning your story in advance is an important skill. We work diligently to help children generate ideas and use a drawing/sketch to hold the story in memory and also allow each student to rehearse the words he plans to write or tell.

Developing independence during the writing lesson is a gradual process. We help our students learn how to move independently from the whole group mini-lesson to their writing place, select the appropriate paper and writing implement, and settle into writing work. Our goal is that children will be able to initiate and work independently for at least 15 - 20 minutes.

Perseverance is such an important skill in school. We help each child to work diligently for increasingly longer stretches of time. When one piece of writing is finished, another is begun without needing a teacher's assistance. As writers mature, they add details to their original story, letting it "grow".

Our students recognize that writing is an important form of communication. They pay attention to and share the details of their lives through many avenues - drawing, writing words, and oral commentary. Writing evolves from trying to "list" words or events to fill a page to capturing the moments of their lives and the depth of their knowledge.

We want students to work productively every day. Teachers College encourages us to set high expectations for our writers. They suggest that a child in K-2 should work toward producing a large stack of around 30 pages by the end of a unit. Most of these pages will contain either fairly detailed drawing and/or a more sketchy drawing plus sentences of print. The stack of work will show a child's engagement, activity, and persistence.

It's important to note that we do not expect perfect spelling (applied knowledge of phonics) at this stage of development. The child knows that he must write words the best that he can. We ask him to "stretch the word" by saying each word slowly, listening for the sounds, and record the sounds he hears. He will begin to develop other strategies throughout these grades: relying on known words, visual knowledge and our word walls of high frequency words, and familiar phonic "hunks and chunks". The point is to do your best to write and spell. That's our definition of quality work - not perfection.

Therefore, as children progress from kindergarten through second grade, they may move through any or all of the following stages:

- make writing-like marks that show a growing knowledge of the concepts of print (left to right, top to bottom, and alphabet letters)

- label items in the drawing, mostly using initial sounds and then approximating the other sounds in the word
- progress to labelling items with more than initial sounds and move to writing a sentence under each picture
- write a sentence under the picture and learn how to leave spaces between words, thereby making his writing easier to read
- develop sufficient knowledge of conventional spelling that the writing is easily read and the child is monitoring for phonetic and high frequency word accuracy.

We want our students to move easily and independently through the writing process. They should be able to generate/brainstorm ideas for many pieces they are interested in writing. They should be able to plan their story in advance, telling “across their fingers” to an adult or student partner. These writers put their initial ideas down in draft form and understand that the piece is not complete at this stage. We help our writers reread for clarity of meaning and accuracy and then make revisions and edits. They may need to add on or change the order of parts of the piece. They will definitely examine the piece for writing mechanics capitals at the beginning of sentences, ending punctuation, and spelling.

Then it’s time to “publish”. We work to have each child understand what it means to write well. We often ask the child to tell us “What makes this piece better than the others you’ve written during this unit?” “Why did you choose this particular one?” “If you were going to improve this, what might you do?” Publishing your piece and having a writing celebration with your classmates is a very exciting part of the Writers Workshop!

I just returned from a 5th grade writing celebration in Patrice Cardiel’s last class on Friday, October 28th. Her students just completed a unit on memoir and were eager to receive feedback from classmates and past and future teachers/administrators. The evolution of our writers’ development continues on through the Middle School, and the increasingly sophisticated level of skills was evident in the body of work I just read. The goals for the grade 3-5 curriculum continue our journey. These 5th grade students really narrowed in on a particular episode and developed compelling leads that drew the reader into the story. You could read each memoir “as a movie”; clearly, they were reliving the event through their words.

Lucy Calkins, the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, makes the following point when speaking to teachers and administrators. “Using the process approach of Writing Workshop allows children of all ages to work as authors do, focusing on only some aspects of writing at a time. Teaching writing, like writing itself, like living itself, is a continual process of drafting and revising, and then writing, teaching, living again.” What a wonderful gift this is for our young students to begin learning at an early age!