

# How Can I Improve My Students' Writing By Increasing Their Volume of Reading?

Julie McIntyre

## Biography



Julie McIntyre is fairly new to the teaching profession. She began her career in a Grade 8 class, and, for the past two years, she has taught Grade 2. Making the jump to Grade 2 was a new challenge, but has been a rewarding experience for Julie. She has an extensive background in music and theatre, both of which contribute to her daily classroom activities. This is Julie's first Action Research Project.

## Abstract

Last year, Deb Opersko, our Primary Consultant, approached me and asked if I would be interested in participating in an Action Research Project. I had little prior knowledge of Action Research, but decided to give it a try,

in the hope that it would benefit my students, and, ultimately, my teaching in the classroom. The area of research was determined to be Writing in the Classroom. I have loved writing for as long as I can remember, and feel encouraged when I see students grow and excel in this area.

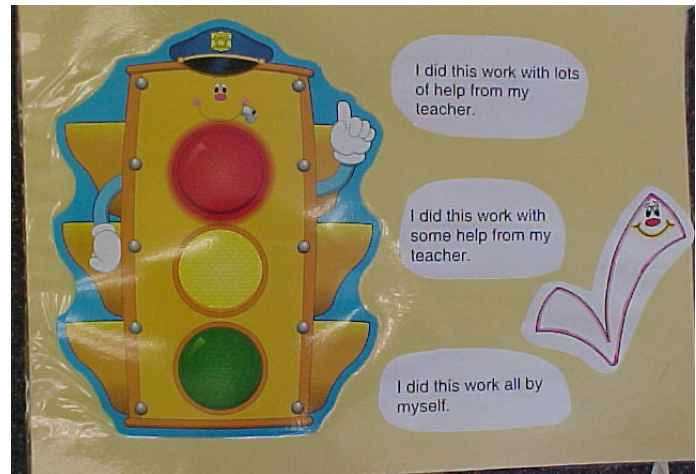
During my first year of teaching Grade 2, it became quite apparent to me that, as my students' reading improved, their writing also improved. Additionally, I began to see improvements in punctuation and grammar. This led me to my Research question and my desire to prove that, indeed, writing improves with increasing reading: How Can I Improve My Students Writing By Increasing Their Volume of Reading?

To ensure that I provided the most conducive classroom possible for learning, I spent time arranging my bookshelf according to reading levels and genres. I placed a number of visuals around the room, including my word wall, letters of the alphabet, a process for writing poster, punctuation and grammar reminders, and added to these throughout the year. The Ginn levelled books were placed within the children's reach so that they could read them

during free time or during silent reading periods. I used these almost daily for our guided reading sessions. For each writing session I posted a chart in front of the children for words that we had brainstormed together or for ideas that we had formed as a group so that they could refer to them while writing.

My expectations for writing are high. From the very first day of school in September, I expect my kids to write a minimum of 2-3 sentences in their journals. For some, this poses a real challenge, but, once they have accomplished this feat and are happy with what they have written, the expectations can only be heightened. For me, a child's creativity is of great importance, but, so too are the





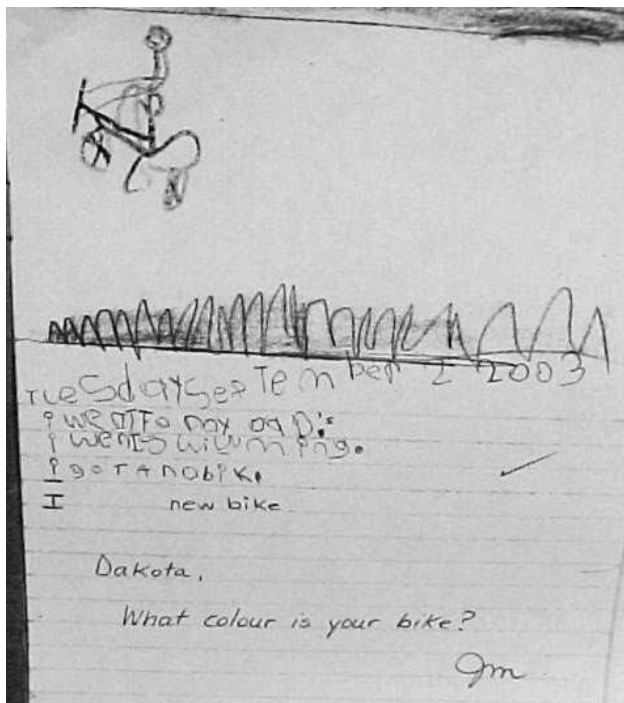
basic structures of writing. My students are well aware that all mistakes must be corrected. Capitals, periods and other forms of punctuation must be present in all writing and, if they aren't, the student is expected to correct his or her work. I firmly believe that if students make recurring errors, without being held accountable for them, it will be increasingly difficult to prevent the mistakes over time.

### Wild Things Project

Deb Opersko, Primary Consultant, visited my class during the second term to complete a writing lesson with my class. She read them the familiar story "The Wild Things," by Maurice Sendak, and had each child fashion his/her own "Wild Thing" from construction paper. The children were enthused to have created such unique creatures, and, because of this, were eager to write about them. The second day, Deb modelled an example of a rough draft, and specified exactly how many sentences the students were required to have for each descriptor of the "Wild Thing." After several days of proofreading and editing, the students were ready for their good copies. We emphasized neatness and accuracy of spelling and grammar. The children did a wonderful job, and we were very proud of their work.

I was so lucky to have Deb join us for those few days. As a newer teacher, it was to my benefit to have an experienced teacher impart new ideas to me, and I felt even more eager to carry on with new writing activities. In my journal, I noted that, "it is so nice to have an experienced teacher come in and teach a writing activity with my students. The interest the students are taking in the project and the ideas I have gained are invaluable. I hope I can have Deb come back again this year" (Dec. 10/03).

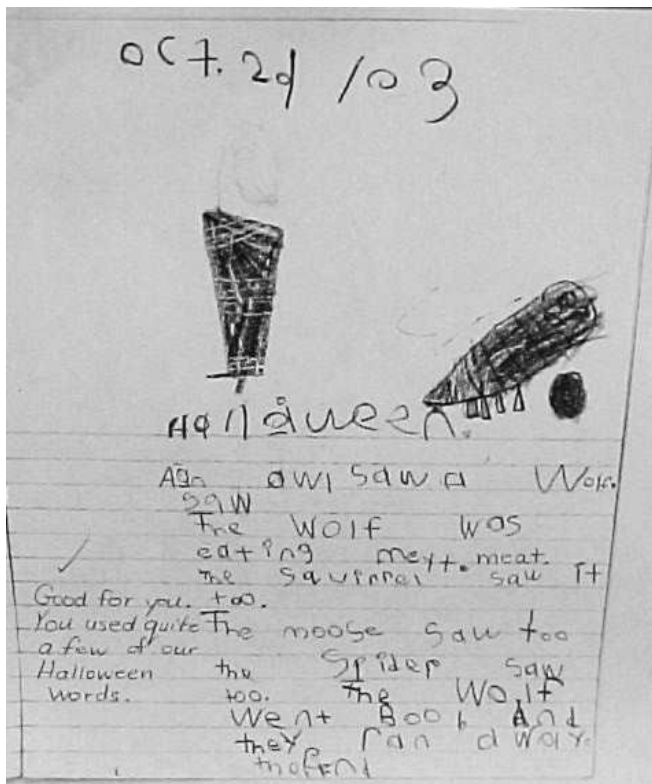
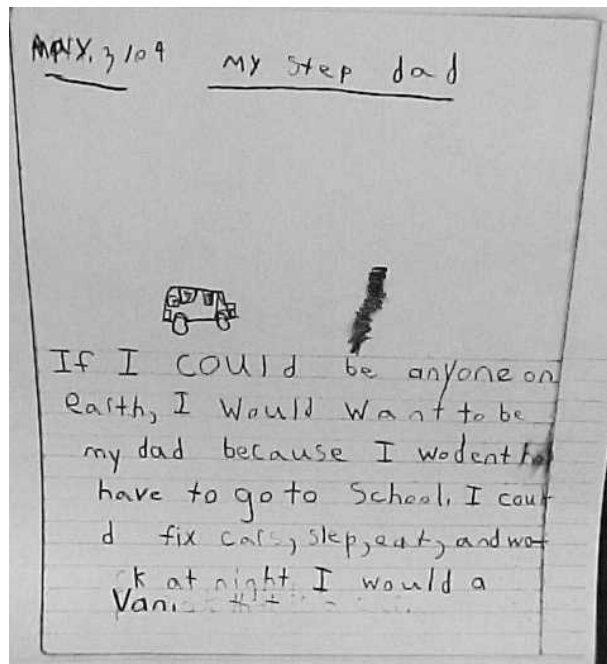
Throughout the early part of the year, my students needed constant reminders to attend to the basic structures of writing. Letter reversals, absent punctuation, and spacing issues were constant battles I had to face. To conquer the challenges posed by letter reversals, I put a chart on each child's desk with the alphabet and numbers from 1-10. They were asked to refer to it on a regular basis. Immediately, I began to see improvements in this area. To improve upon absent punctuation and spacing, I handed the work back each time until it was corrected. Often, it would take 3-4 revisions, but the kids soon understood the seriousness of my expectations. During the second term I noticed improvements the children were making in their reading. They began to use more expression while reading orally, used pauses at the ends of sentences, and read with more ease. At the same time, I noted an improvement in the same areas of writing where originally I had expressed a concern. I began to realize that the more often students are exposed to proper writing techniques (through reading and modelling), the more often we will see improve-



ments in their work. Teachers emphasize the importance of modelling good writing for our students, and what better way to model than to read books with stories or facts that the children are interested in?

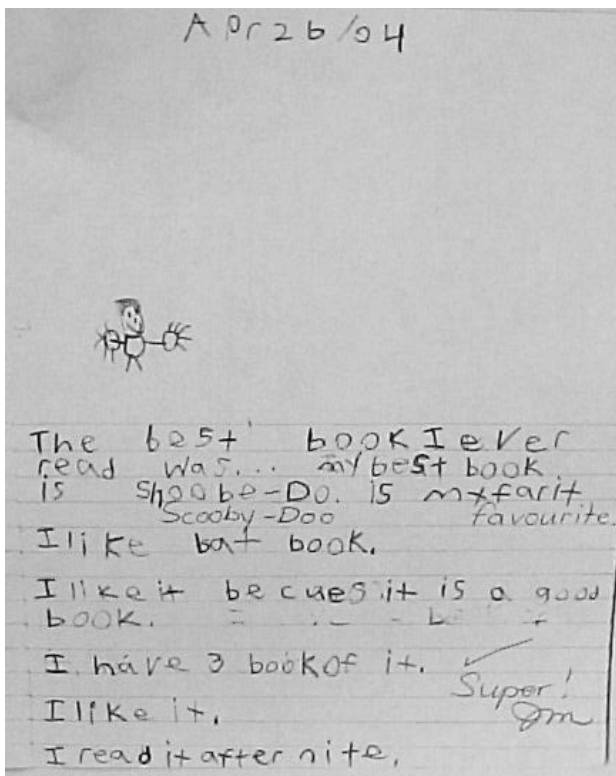
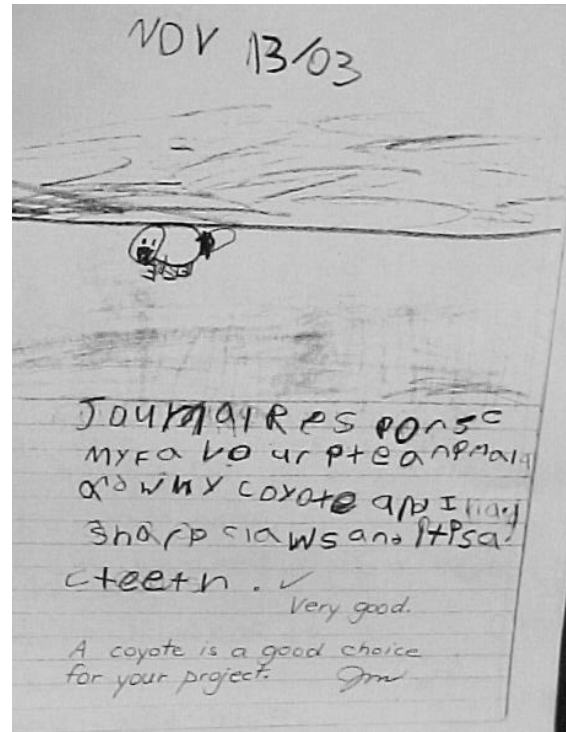
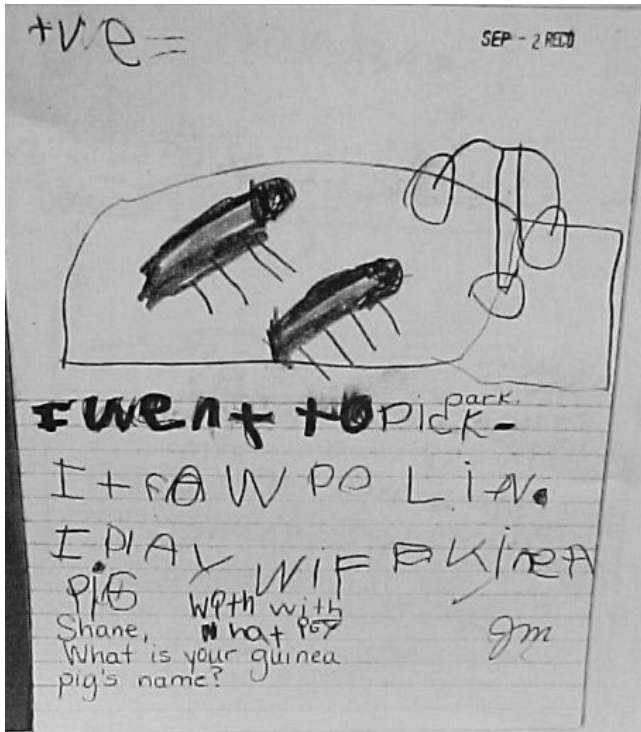
On that note, I was well aware that boys and girls generally have gender-oriented preferences in reading materials. Obviously, this is not a universal truth, but, in the case of my class, the boys preferred factual reading materials, while the girls preferred fictional stories. To capitalize on these respective interests, I read an equitable number of both types of books to the class, and often followed up with journal entries that gave students a choice to write about the story or factual evidence from the story. As was my prediction, each gender continued to write about his/her specific

interests, but were expected to write in both genres throughout the year. We wrote adventure stories, hypothetical stories (If dogs ruled the world.....), our favour-



ite animals stories, we made lists, wrote directions for how to build something or get somewhere, wrote about our favourite books and one of the last assignments was to write about how they think their writing has or has not improved. Very insightful!!

Four of my students had difficulties in getting started, and, as a result, we would brainstorm ideas together. Orally, they were successful in expressing their thoughts, but we had to get them down on paper. After reading some literature on student writing (Interactive Writing,

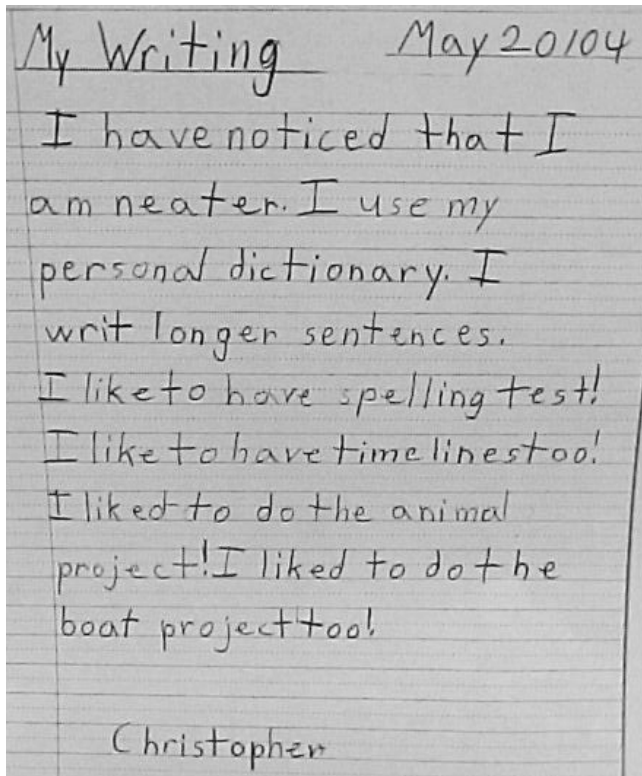


Chapter 12) and speaking with other primary teachers, I began to encourage the four students to draw pictures of their ideas prior to writing. Drawing pictures first piqued the children's interest, and, soon after, I saw their ideas develop. My biggest goals for these four children were the absence of letter reversals and the presence of finger spaces. In addition, we celebrated the fact that they could construct small, three-or-four-word sentences from the single words they were able to complete at the beginning of the year. Just as I began to see significant progress with one of my girls, she moved, and I felt frustrated that I could no longer see her progress and be proud of the accomplishments she was making. She had improved from writing a word or two under a picture in September, to completing four-to-five-word sentences. This was a real accomplishment for her, and I hope she is striving to do the same at her new school.

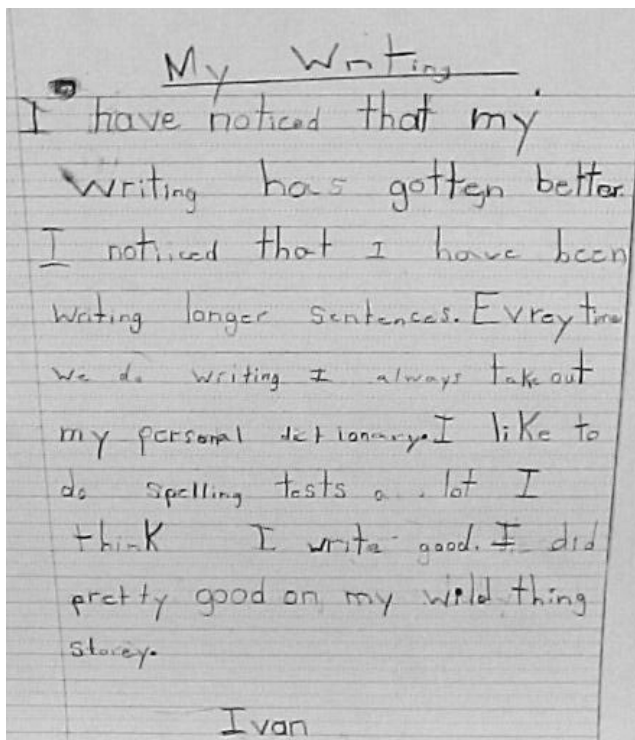
Last year, Deb told me that she never started a writing activity with her primary students until their personal dictionaries were out on their desks. If the student needed to know how to spell a word, he/she had to find the beginning letter on his/her own before asking. This strategy has been a

benefit to both myself and my students. We waste less time, and the students take more ownership over their learning. I have several picture dictionaries in my class that the students use if they require a visual aid in finding a word.

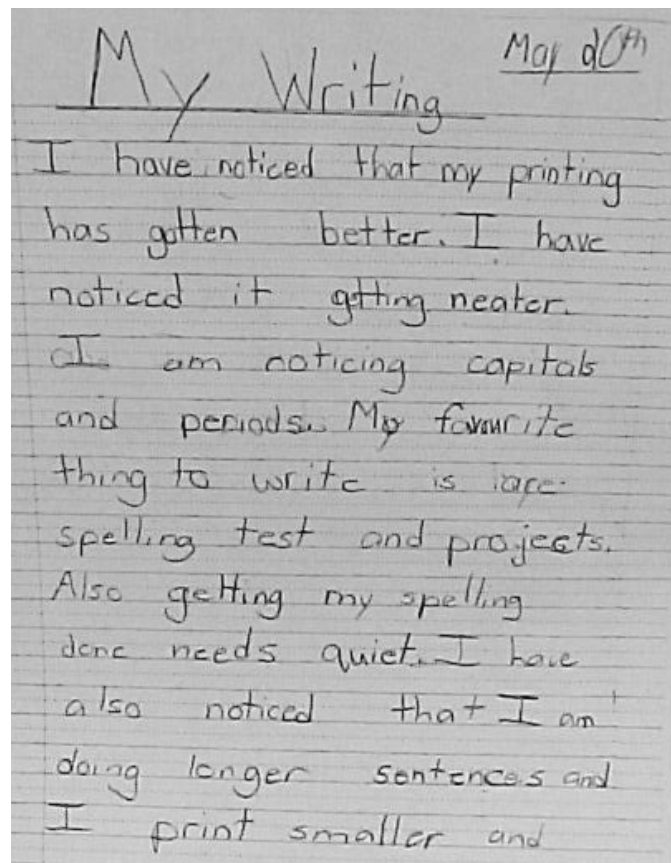




“what an opportunity to have a class from a larger, urban area as our pen pals! At first my class was unsure as to the gender of some student’s names and this has aided them in their exposure to other cultures and hopefully

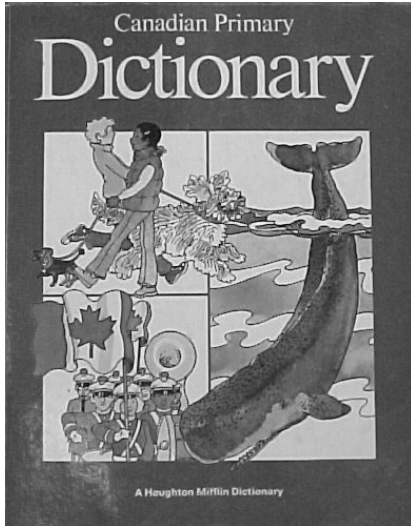


My sister teaches Grade 2 as well, for the Peel District School Board in Mississauga, and we have been enjoying sharing success stories and challenges for the past two years. We have also shared resources whenever possible. My sister had connected with another teacher to initiate Pen Pals between their two classes, and had achieved great success with her students, ranging from a greater interest in writing to more accuracy and detail in the written letters. Her teaching partner was also looking for a class partner, and my sister suggested mine. In my journal I mentioned,



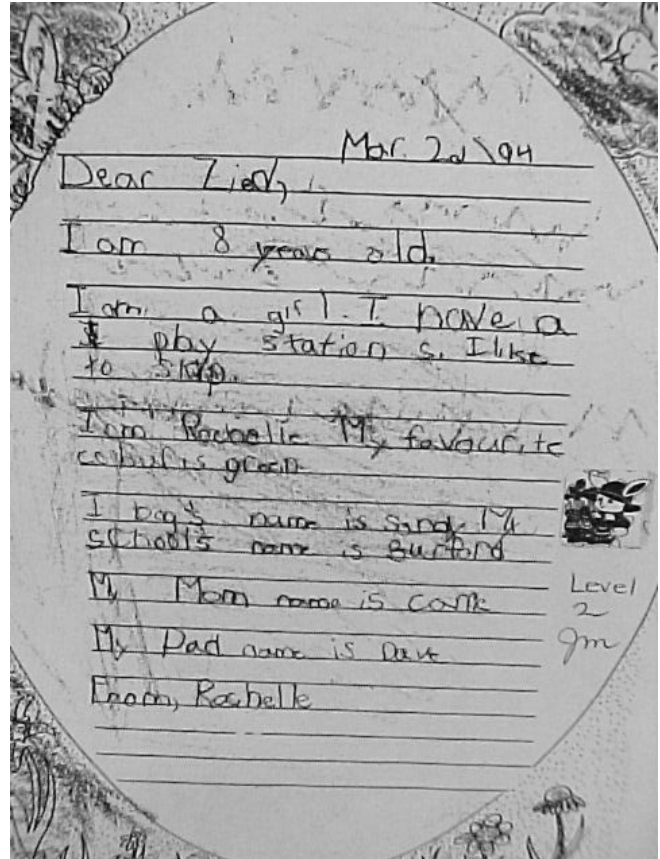
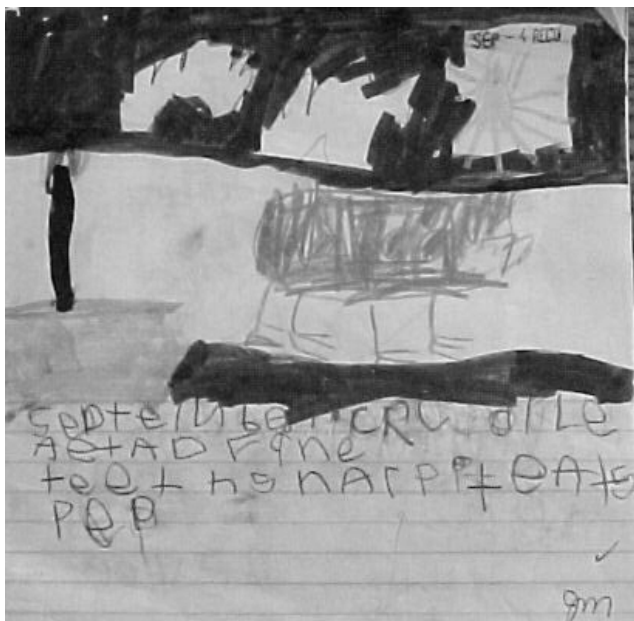
will be something they will remember for the rest of their lives” (Journal, March 10/04).

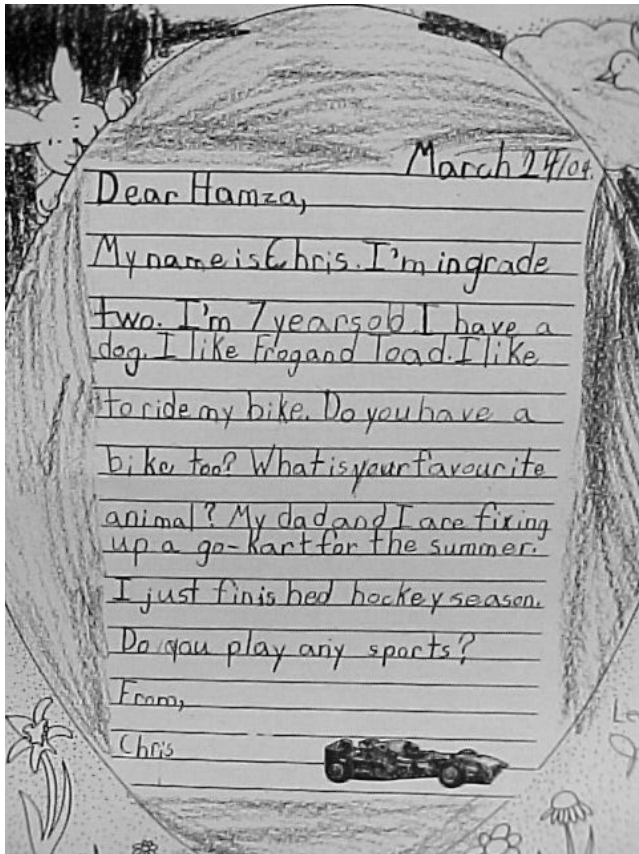
In February, we started sending letters back and forth to each other. Together, my class brainstormed ideas for what we might like to ask our pen pals or share with our pen pals. Each time we sent a letter, we had a brainstorming session and then began writing our rough drafts. I also knew that it was important to model a letter with the students prior to having them write their own letters. I mod-



elled writing a letter to my sister, and the students thought it was hysterical that Miss McIntyre was writing a letter to Miss McIntyre! We had quite a good laugh that day. With successive letters, my students needed fewer and fewer reminders for how to set up a letter, with “Dear,” and “Your Friend,”. They wanted to do the best job possible because they wanted to impress their new friends. I had the students do peer editing with at least two other classmates, and then I reviewed each letter before the good copies were begun. The final drafts were far beyond what I could have imagined, and I was extremely proud of my kids. One of my girls was excited to include a quarter with her letter, and I thought that was very original (while she just figured it was “neat”). Both classes want to meet each other and we will do our best to arrange a meeting for the students.

I have spoken with our Grade 3 teachers, Glenna Nicholson and Ruth Storey, about the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) provincial testing and what we should expect from our students (Conversations, Jan..16, Feb 23/04). I have been trying to provide a program that will prepare my students for the testing next year. Both teachers said that one of the biggest challenges for most kids is responding to questions or stories they read with sufficient detail. In several cases, the students are excellent readers, but lack the ability to comprehend the material and retell the events of the story. We have done several comprehension activities this year, including reading paragraphs about a main idea and then choosing from four multiple-choice answers. The first couple we tried as a group were painful, to be quite honest. I thought, “How can you not see the answer? It is right in front of you!” I wrote in my journal, “How did I learn to find the main idea in a piece of written work? It seems to me we were told in school to circle or underline key words that are repeated. I also remember using a process of elimination. Put an X on the answer that is the least correct and go from there. I’ll have to try this and





model some examples for them” (Journal, March 10/04). With this frustration as the impetus, I went back and showed the children how to circle key words from the paragraph or story they had read. They soon realized that a main-idea paragraph will frequently make recurring references to the topic and, with this realization, I began to see more successful answers. We are now getting into lengthier stories and the children are feeling a real sense of accomplishment when they are able to pick out the main idea, problem, setting and main events on their own. The frustration was worth it! My journal indicated the same enthusiasm, “It has been only two weeks and my students are finally having greater success in identifying the main idea in our readings. I’ll continue to reinforce the need to circle key words so that it becomes ingrained in their minds for future work” (Journal, March 25/04).

I have used the Tree House series to teach a few lessons about organizing ideas for writing. One lesson - writing directions - was particularly useful to the students. The students were asked to write directions for how to get somewhere or for how to build something. I began to model directions for how to get from the local church to our school;

the children were then required to describe the return trip orally. As I expected, they left out several details, so we had to back-track and think each step through very carefully. Drawing a picture helped the students who learn best visually. I then asked the class to write their own versions of the trip, and they were expected to use the following words: first, next, then, now, and finally. Most students remembered, but some needed reminders. Now, when the class is asked to make a list or write directions, I seldom have to remind them to use these important words. Evidence of this was made very clear to the class when we were writing about how to build a house. Keegan reminded everyone to use first, next, then, etc. without any prompts from me (April 6/04). Each time we write, I have the kids offer suggestions for what we must remember in our writing and each time they refer to all of the techniques I reviewed with them this year.

Toward the end of May I sent a survey home for my parents to read and participate in for my area of study. The results are included in the appendix, but I found the comments to be the most useful:

*“Haley has always excelled well. I am proud of her in all areas.”*

*“Merissa loves to read! She also enjoys creative writing and storytelling. These qualities have been enhanced by her classroom activities and encouragement by her teacher.”*

*“Keegan has shown an increased level of confidence in reading. He still needs to be convinced to proofread his work and often fails to find his errors. While he is very creative verbally, he often loses it when he puts pencil to paper. I’m sure this will come as he becomes more proficient with the mechanics of writing (printing).”*

*“We are pleased with Chloe’s progress in reading and writing. She is reading well with a good flow (not too much stopping). She still needs a lot of reminders when writing. Capitals and punctuation are often forgotten.”*

*"I have seen big improvements in my son's work. He is still having a lot of difficulties but has made a huge jump since the beginning of the year."*

Through reflective practice and the completion of my action research, I have learned what has worked best for this group of students and what might need refinement another year. Each year will bring a new group of students, with varying abilities and interests, and what worked this year might not in the following year. What I do know is that the reading and writing abilities have improved from the beginning of the year. Based on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) levels (Pearson), all of my students have improved, whether it be significantly, or only a little. As the reading levels improved, so too did their writing - technically and creatively. I saw several words used directly from the Ginn Series and all of my students now say they enjoy reading and writing much more than they did at the beginning of the year (Discussion, May 27/04). Either way, I know that providing children with varied and numerous sources of literature, and modelling clearly written text, demonstrating the proper use of language conventions, is proof enough that children do, indeed, learn from the reinforcement of well-written work. For the rest of my career, I will continue to work with other teachers in analyzing students' work, to learn from, and expand upon, my own instructional strategies.

## References

- Bainbridge, Joyce & Grace Malicky. (2000). Constructing Meaning: Balancing Elementary Language Arts, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Scarborough: Nelson Thomson Learning.
- Cunningham, P.M. & Hall, D. (1994). Making Words. Torrance, CA: Routledge.
- Graves, Donald H. (2003). Writing: Teachers & Children At Work. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- McCarrier, Andrea, Gay Su Pinnell & Irene C. Fountas. (2000). Interactive Writing: How Language & Literacy Come Together, K-2. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.





## Appendix 1 ~ Parent Survey

Question 1: Has your child's writing improved in the following areas: (Circle yes or no)

The results follow:

Punctuation:	16/16YES
Spelling:	16/16YES
Writing:	16/16YES
Creativity:	14/16YES
Letter Reversals:	15/16YES
Clearly Expressing Thoughts:	14/16YES
Spacing Between Words:	14/16YES

Question 2: Is your child more comfortable writing than he/she was at the beginning of the year?

16/16YES

Question 3: Is your child reading better than he/she was at the beginning of the year?

16/16YES

Question 4: Is your child reading more effectively than he/she was at the beginning of the year?

16/16YES

Question 5: Is your child reading more willingly than he/she was at the beginning of the year?

14/16YES

Question 6: Please comment on any additional aspects of your child's reading or writing.