

Donald Graves – A Fresh Look at Writing

Heinemann, 1994

I – Making a fresh start

1. Consider Your Roots

2. Learn from the Children

Some tips & exercises on getting to know the ch. In your class. In particular: asking Q's about their perceptions of their own work in progress; how they interpret the classroom; their own lives & interests outside sch.

DG uses 3 column sheet for recording, with headings: Name – Experiences/interests – Confirmation, which he recommends filling in over three weeks.

3. Why Would Anyone want to Write?

Two Views

- Standards – pressure – H/W, spelling, grammar
- Meaning comes before convention + mechanics

- DG suggests a series of actions to practice writing:

- 3.1. Begin to read the world
- 3.3 write a short, 10 min piece
- 3.5 write about a photo

- Principle: Write rapidly, changing nothing. Allow your thoughts to come & Qs enter your head. Do not try to write well.

- 3.6 Work to find out what the ch think writing is for... Q. *'Why do you write?'* You are trying to find out: ch's overall understanding of the function of writing & their understanding of the role of the audience

4. Day One: Help Ch to write + Keep Writing

Key Idea: *'Writing us a studio subject. I invite ch to do something I am already doing...'*

1. First entry point into writing is conversation
2. The ch help the teacher to compose a piece of writing that comes from conversation
3. Drawing often helps ch to think
4. Making a list, giving commands or directions, making signs is closer to their thinking & communication needs
5. The idea is to help ch find out what writing & print can do for them now

- Example - Action 4.7: *Conduct a series of writing conferences in which ch teach you about what they know*

You come to each student with these notions:

- *What the topic is about*
- *Where the topic came from*
- *What they will write next*

DG – *'I concentrate on flow for the student and learning for me.'*

- Example - Action 4.8: *Conduct a writing share session*

Procedure:

- Ch say something first about their piece
- Others listen carefully & then say what they remember
- Then the ch reads his/her piece
- Ch choose ch to say what they remember

'Ch need to be able to listen carefully – receiving the text'

For this Action, gather the children in a circle or on the floor in one section of the room. The share session comes at the end of the writing time. For your first share session you may wish to select certain children to share what they have written thus far, or ask for two or three volunteers. This is how I introduce the session:

Don: Two people will be sharing their writing this morning.

Danny will share first, but before he reads his piece he'll tell us the one thing it is about. Then it will be our job to listen very carefully, because when he finishes we'll tell him what we remember from it.

Dan [reading]: Last Saturday me and my Dad went to the science museum in Boston. I remember the owl especially because of the way he turned his head. It was like he could turn it all the way around. When the man held him he told us about his sharp claws. They were long.

Then there was Tyrannosaurus Rex. If you lived when he did he would be able to eat you with one bite.

He was very tall-about fifty feet high.

We had pizza for lunch. We got home about seven o'clock.

Don: All right, Danny, you are in charge. You call on the children whose hands are raised. They will tell you what they remember. You'll need to listen carefully too in case we forget some things that are in your piece.

Child: I remember the Tyrannosaurus Rex. How big he was.

Child: You had pizza.

Child: The owl had long, sharp claws.

Child: Tyrannosaurus Rex was fifty feet high.

Child: You went to the science museum.

Don: All right, Danny, what did we forget?

Dan: The owl can turn his head almost completely around. And we got home about seven o'clock.

5. Understand ch when they Write

Key Practice – Interview ch when they are engaged in the writing process. Discover how the ch is orientated to the piece – try to get a sense of the past, present & future dimensions.

We will move in more closely in order to learn from children while they are actually writing. I stress *actually writing* because that is when children's memory and understanding of what they are doing are much more vivid. This is especially true of children in the primary grades. My first objective is to discover how the child is oriented to the piece. This means that I try to get a sense of its past, present, and future dimensions:

- *Topic origin (past)*: I'm curious about what triggered the topic. Possibly another child suggested it or something about it was quite important to the child.
- *Topic focus and depth of information (present)*: I'm curious about how focused the child is on the topic (Can he state in one simple sentence what the piece is about?). In addition, I'm curious about her knowledge of the details connected with the topic.
- *Topic direction and final disposition (future)*: Does the child know what she will next write? Finally, is there a notion of a specific audience or what will happen to the piece when she has completed it? Specifically, is there someone she has in mind for a reader (another child, a teacher, a parent, or the entire class)?

Jennifer

Here is an interview with a fourth grade girl in the process of writing:

- Don:** Excuse me, Jennifer, can you tell me what your piece is about?
- Jennifer:** Oh, it's about my new baby sister.
- Don:** I see. And where are you in the piece right now?
- Jennifer:** I've been working on this for two days. I'll probably finish it tomorrow. I need to write the part about how she's screaming bloody murder right now. Maybe I'll be done about then.
- Don:** Screaming bloody murder? Gosh, what happened to make her scream?
- Jennifer:** Oh, she's got this thing called colic. She's in a lot of pain. I don't like to hold her when she's like that. She gets real stiff.
- Don:** So, you have to take care of her sometimes?
- Jennifer:** Yeah, and sometimes I can't do it very well cuz she screams so much. Then my mother comes over and takes her. I wish the baby wouldn't do that.
- Don:** How did you happen to choose this topic to write about, Jennifer? Tell me about when you first decided to write this.
- Jennifer:** Let's see, it was Monday night and my mom was real tired from work and she wanted to take a nap, so she asked me to keep an eye on her, but just after she was fed and my mom put her head down she just started yelling. It's an awful sound. She isn't doing it on purpose, Mom says, she really has pains in her stomach. So, I knew on Tuesday morning I'd write about it. Maybe I'd feel better if I did.
- Don:** Sounds as though you didn't mind taking care of her, but when she screams it really bothers you. So that's how you decided to write this, to see if writing it would maybe make you feel better. Is it?
- Jennifer:** Sort of, I guess.
- Don:** If you finish this piece tomorrow, Jennifer, what will you do with it? Who will read it?
- Jennifer:** Oh, I don't know. Maybe my mom.

Beginnings

1. Choosing a topic – DG: *'Gradually I have come to trust my writing.'*

Flannery O'Connor: *'Every morning between 9 & 12 I go to my room and sit before a piece of paper. Many times I just sit for three hours with no ideas coming to me. But I know one thing: If an idea does come between 9 & 12, I am there ready for it.'*

2. Composing patterns –

- Select
- Write
- Read
- Write
- Re-read

- Re-write

3. Voice – Finding a voice, voice is the driving force

'This is not a mechanical process, each person uses it differently.'

6. Expect more of your writers

Construct with the student a shared vision of what they know and what and how they will carry out their vision.

Key Idea: DG recommends a series of interviews to examine and evaluate pupil's writing. He uses an interview sheet

It is important to have a sense of what they already know as well as what they want to learn next... - share the interview sheet with the ch. & give them a copy...

Key Idea – Nudging

If ch get stuck in one gear, writing the same topic, or drawing continually...

Use nudge paper, sufficient to accommodate 5-10 mins of writing...

DG – *'Sometimes ch have to be saved from themselves. Sometimes a little prodding is needed. But if I find myself giving one directive after another, I know something is wrong with my own teaching.'*

Sometimes when I direct the child to do something it means I've overruled her judgment about what the situation requires. Before I do, I want to be sure I have as much information as possible. Here is an example of that process:

Don: Tell me about your piece, Jason. What's it about?

Jason: It's about these robots that are taking over the earth.

Don: I see. Where are you in the piece and what will you be working on next?

Jason: I just got started and this part here that's coming. See this picture up here? This robot here is made of a special metal that you can't destroy and he's coming here to take things apart. See the army here with their laser beams can't do nothing about this robot here.

Don: This sounds familiar to me, Jason. You've written on these robots before. Take out your last four pieces from your folder and let's take a look.

Jason: Yeah, these are all on robots. I like robots; they're indestructible.

Don: Put these all out here on your desk, Jason. How have these changed from the first to the last, the one you are working on right now? I'm curious to know how you sense you are getting better at writing these.

Jason: Well, I know my drawings are getting better. And more exciting things are happening. The kids like these.

Don: I have another question for you, Jason. Who is controlling the robots? Tell me about the people here.

Jason: There's an evil one from the robot's planet.

Don: Tell me about him then.

Jason: He's just evil. He wants to take over the universe.

Don: Why?

Key Ideas

1. Demonstrate from your own work – state how you are trying to improve
2. Use books students are reading to point out good writing
3. Use nudges that are appropriate
4. Offer focused mini-lessons to improve students writing

II – Essentials for child responsibility

7. Conditions for effective writing

1. Time – 4 days out of 5, 35 – 40 mins from Yr.1
2. Choice - ch need to learn how to choose their own topics. When ch choose their own topics we can expect more from them
3. Response – Your responses can help ch. Respond during writing... Other ch's responses: 10 min short conferences, sharing ch's writing at the end of sessions. *"In this class we experiment & learn."*
4. Demonstration – DG: *'YOU the teacher are the most important factor in creating a learning environment.'*
 - a. Writing is a craft is needs to be demonstrated – the classroom is a studio.
 - b. The ch need to see you writing and struggling from choosing a topic to final draft.
'Every mark on the page is an act of meaning.' 'I demonstrate a mood of discovery & experimentation.'
5. Expectation – 'What are we working at in order to get better?'
6. Room structure – A high degree of structure. Everything must be predictable...

- **Have students write each day.** If students miss a day or don't know when they will write again, they are losing a sense of structure and predictability.
- **Establish a basic structure** for the student to follow at writing time, such as, "First, get your folders containing all your writing, write, then share writing."
- **Set up procedures for solving problems.** Basic procedures have been posted telling students what to do when they don't have the right supplies, are stuck for a topic, need to confer with another student, need help proofreading their writing.
- **Circulate among the students.** The teacher contributes to structure by moving through the class conferring with students, so that students feel the teacher's listening presence.
- **Negotiate class management problems with students.** When issues such as noise or how to work with others arise, the teacher discusses new ways to solve these problems with the students.

7. Evaluation – Ch need to learn how to evaluate their own work:

- "This is what my piece is about." (Only one thing)
- "This is where I am in the draft."
- "This is what I will write next, or this is where I need help."

Key Idea: From the beginning of the sch year ch keep collections of their writing in folders or portfolio's

8. Organising the Classroom – DG: '*Responsibility is the key to classroom organisation. Ch need to have a clear sense of what is expected of them during writing time.*'

Some children will misinterpret your listening as a shift in authority. They will believe that when they control the topic, you have also handed over all responsibility to them. A few children are frightened by this; many others push to find out just how much authority you have delegated to them.

I'll make a list of some of these new choices and show what I mean by the limits that go with them:

Choice of topic: "I expect you to decide what you will write about. This means that you will need to be thinking about your topic *before you* come to class. Remember how to come up with topics from my demonstrations."

Children living by their own choices: "Sometimes you will find that your choice wasn't a good one. After working with it for a while, you may want to change. You can do that."

Continuous writing: "When you finish writing about your topic, when you have looked the piece over and decided that you've done as much with it as it merits, then you can start on a new topic without delay."

Delegated responsibility: "Since this is your topic, I expect you to know as much about it as you can; if you need more information, you will get it. This means you may need to speak with someone; if so, you may quietly leave your seat, discuss your problem or idea with one person for a few minutes, then go back to your seat."

Children waiting turns for attention: "When I am working with someone else, I am not to be disturbed. If you run into a problem, try to solve it with the help of at least two other people before seeing me, and then you must wait until I have finished with the student I am talking to at the moment."

Room mobility: "If you need paper, materials, or supplies, you may get up and get them. You do this by going directly to what you need and then returning promptly to your seat."

Other limits: Each class has its own particular need for guidelines. When I sense that some of the guidelines are not working, or that additional limits are needed, I'll call the (-lass together. First I state the problem: "I notice that some of you are not starting to write again after you finish a piece." Then I open the discussion very broadly. "Before we get into a discussion of the problem, let's talk about how you feel or what you do when you finally finish a piece. What did you want to do when you finished?" Quite possibly some children may need to shift to reading a book, doing math, or trying something else; still others may need to start a new piece right away. The children know I am listening carefully to their experiences in order to discover the best way to handle the transition after they have completed a piece.

I approach the rhythm of writing time systematically. Each writing period follows a similar rough sequence:

- I say, "Quietly get your writing folders and/or portfolios." Sometimes I have three students pass them out.
- I move quickly to the four children who seem to find it most difficult to start. The blank page is menacing to them, or they don't know how to connect today to yesterday; yesterday hardly exists. My job is to bring back yesterday and help them teach me a little about what they are writing. I might ask them what they will write next (generally) or even what the next line will be (specifically).
- Option: I may write first myself, for five minutes, and tell the children a little about my topic.
- I conduct further conferences with six to eight children, remembering that the purpose of the conference is to help the child speak first and to orient her to where she is in her piece and what she will write next.
- I offer a short mini-lesson of about ten minutes on a selected skill (see Chapter 12 for more details).
- We all share our writing-about five to ten minutes maximum. Be sure to bring your own writing to the share session at least one day in ten.

9. Help ch. To share their writing – Author's Chair:

- Attentive listeners
- What do you remember?
- Comments to connect information
- Questions – "*Good Qs come from thinking about the text*"

Once you decide that learning stories, trying new experiments in writing, and taking on self-assigned challenges are important, what children share in this type of session is virtually limitless, since the underlying question is the same: "What's new in our learning?" (Don't forget to include your own journey as a writer in the share session.) Here are some examples (Graves/ Sunstein **1992, 89**):

- *Did anyone create a new character in their fiction today?* This question deliberately focuses on character formation, the heart of writing good fiction. If someone answers this question positively, the other children may want to ask some follow-up questions:
 - What is the character's name? How did you choose the character?
 - What is going to happen to him/her? How come?
 - How old is he/ she?
 - What does he/she look like? Read that part.
 - Read the part where he/she talks.
- Children ask these questions because you have helped them develop fictional characters in a workshop setting (Graves, **1989**). You also demonstrate with your own questions how to develop the writer's characters.
- *Did anyone try a new form of punctuation today?* Children should keep track of when they use new forms of punctuation. They can keep track of their first use of the punctuation form on a sheet that records their use of conventions along with the title and page of the piece in which it was used. This helps them keep their own reference book on punctuation. It also helps them notice how professional writers use punctuation. That way, when children share their reading, they can also point out which new conventions they've noticed the author use. (See Figure 9.1.)

- *Did anyone try an experiment-that is, something new for you- It may not have worked, but you tried it.* This is a general kind of question to open up the discussion about anything new the children have tried. There is no way to anticipate all the different kinds of new things that might come up.
- *Did anyone try a different form of writing today-a poem, a piece of fiction, or a personal narrative?* I'd suggest the same when children share books. If they try a different kind of book it ought to be shared with the class.
- *Did anyone use some words today that they liked? Maybe it was just the right kind of verb.* You might also say, "Let's read some of your new verbs aloud." This kind of question can lead to a mini-lesson on the importance of precise word use.
- *Did anyone struggle with spelling a tough word? Did anyone experiment with something that didn't work today? Maybe it was an experiment that didn't quite turn out the way you'd hoped.* This is a good time for children to be interviewed about their experiments-what didn't work, what they learned, and how they might change the experiment to make it work the next time.

The characteristics of the lifelong writer, I look for the following elements in the children I will call lifelong writers:

- *Initiates writing:* The child chooses to write in order to recount, then understand experience. The child has a sense of "topic" and seeks to tell the story his way.
- *His sense of the power of writing:* The child recognizes what writing can do. She knows that her text can affect what other people will do.
- *His sense of history and of the future:* The child senses where he has been and sees the past as basically healthy and foundational to the future. "See, I used to write this way and on these things, but now I'm going to do this and I'll get better at it."
- *Has a sense of audience:* "I know the kids will like this" or "I wonder if he'll get this."
- *Initiates writing at home and to affect others.* When children write at home, on their own and to affect others, they demonstrate the best of the "lifelong" characteristics.
- *Senses the appropriateness Of writing in a variety of genres:* If I have shown children some of the uses of writing in their lives well as in science, math, and social studies, then I know they will be able to put writing to use. Now I look for signs that they do this on their own.

10. Evaluating own classroom –

- Keeping records, folders/portfolios
- Strategic use of time
- Record keeping problems

11. Experiment with portfolios –

Without question, teachers today are very busy, far busier than when I first began teaching. So much has been added to school curricula during a day already punctuated by constant interruptions. It seems that every time you turn around, there's a new evaluation scheme.

- **Shift responsibility to students.** Teach students how to read their own work, keep records, and maintain their portfolios in order.
- **Stop doing all the record keeping.** Move from "corrector" to guide, showing students how to handle the responsibilities you have given them. Not every piece a student writes is reviewed.
- **Shift grading responsibilities.** The student not only evaluates a piece but puts a grade on it and justifies the grade. Thus, whenever you look at a piece, you already know how the student regards it.
- **Push for more uninterrupted time for reading and writing.** Teachers who have access to students for only short periods tend to take more responsibility for students' work. It is more difficult to delegate when the student is out the door again so quickly. When students are immersed because time permits it, they use time more efficiently and we can expect more of them.
- If portfolios are used for evaluative purposes then **other forms of evaluation have to recede into the background**, especially those that are in conflict with portfolios. Something has to go.

III – Teaching the Fundamentals

12. Learning Conventions –

Frank Smith: *"Every act of putting marks on a page is an act of convention."*

Key Ideas:

1. Point out the conventions as the ch are already using them
2. Once they understand what they do: GD: *"I want the ch to aspire to add more to their repertoire."*

Key Action:

- Short, small group or whole class
- About one convention at a time
- Mini-lessons are compulsory for some, voluntary for others
- Ch can help conduct mini-lessons

13. Help ch read their own work

A series of actions which can help teach ch to read their own work.

14. Help ch to revise their own work

ACTION 14.2:

Interview children to see if they have a sense of their options.

Choose three or four different children to interview. You will want to find out how different children manifest their sense that they have options. Here are some examples at various points in the writing process:

- Is just beginning: "I see you have just started a new piece, Derek. Tell me what will happen next." I listen carefully. "Well, I think it's going to be about my hike, but I may write more about my friend." With very young children the answers are usually direct and simple. "It's about my hike. We're going to get lost."
- Is in the middle of composing: "I see that you are well along in this piece, Derek. What's going to happen next?" "I don't really know. I'm stuck."
- Is faced with a problem: "What do you do when you are stuck? Tell me some things you can do to get out of this fix." "I could talk to a friend, or I could do some more drawing."
- Has completed the piece: "Now that you have finished, what do you plan on doing with it?" "I'd like to read it during share time. And I want to show it to my mother."

Chat with a child about his piece. "What's this about? Tell me some more about it."

- Listen carefully for something the child mentions that may not be in the piece.
- Respond by saying, "Did I get this right, that you said this?" If it seems right, say, "Just the way you said it, it seemed important to you."
- Say, "You don't have to write this but would you show me where this would go in your piece? Read it over and put your finger on the place."
- Follow up on adding information. If the child indicates an appropriate location, ask, "How did you know to put this here?" Then ask, "How would you go about putting this in without having to copy the whole piece over?"
- Ask, "Do you think you are ready to put this material in?"
- Would you be able to do it on your own?" If the child wishes to put it in but doesn't know how, show her how to write it on a separate piece of paper, star (*) it, and insert it later on.

When Revision Is Difficult

There are many reasons why revision is difficult for some children. It depends on the circumstances and the child involved. Here are some signs to watch for:

- *Lack of knowledge about the subject:* If children are uninformed about their topic and unable to discuss content, they need to remedy the situation by finding out about their topic before they can consider revision.
- *Lack of understanding about the uniqueness of writing:* Writing is intended to transcend the writer in space and time. Unless children realize they may refer to this piece at another place and time, or understand that they will not be present when another person reads it, revision will not make much sense. Young children often believe they will be available to supply the extra information their readers may need. If your students have this problem, set up projects that involve writing letters or sending a written piece to another class. (See Graves **1991**, Chapter 4.)
- *Lack of audience sense:* "Why do I have to do anything with this? I know what it means." In this instance the writer doesn't necessarily care if the audience understands; she is merely writing for herself. Or the situation could be one in which the author is sure readers will understand what he means. It takes a great deal of practice before the writer can shift her point of view and play the part of reader of her own text. This is one reason why teachers have children share their own writing with a variety of audiences and act as audience for others. The teacher deliberately has children shift back and forth between the two roles of writer and reader.
- *Motor problems:* Some children, particularly boys, do not wish to rework a piece because the task is long and tedious. If this is a problem, I try to reduce the amount of writing that needs to be inserted. Using the computer is a great help to children with this problem. I find, however, that when children are genuinely interested in what they are writing (and write daily) problems in fine motor control are greatly reduced.
- *Lack of time to write:* When days pass (even only two or three) between one writing session and another, children lose interest in a piece. Picking up the lost trail of an old idea can be a frustrating experience.
- *Writes too much:* How easy it is for children to lose control of a piece when it gets too long. This is particularly true in fiction writing. Some children, particularly girls, get caught up in a plot, lose sight of their characters, and simply don't know what to do to help themselves. They wish to abandon the piece and start another. Workshops on character early in the process can help them gain control of their writing.
- *Is unfamiliar with the genre:* When children are not used to writing reports, poetry, or fiction, they do not know how to reread their work and revision is difficult for them. Workshops on these specific genres can begin to remedy this problem.