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Meghan K. Block  
Central Michigan University, [block1m@cmich.edu](mailto:block1m@cmich.edu)

Stephanie L. Strachan  
Western Washington University, [strachs@wwu.edu](mailto:strachs@wwu.edu)

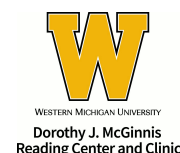
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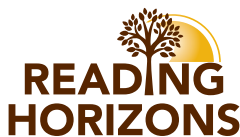
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## The Impact of External Audience on Second Graders' Writing Quality

Meghan K. Block, *Central Michigan University*

Stephanie L. Strachan, *Western Washington University*

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### Abstract

The overarching purpose of writing is to communicate. As such, the intended audience is a critical consideration for writers. However, elementary school writing instruction commonly neglects the role of the audience. Typically, children are asked to compose a piece of text without a specific audience in mind that is usually evaluated by the teacher. Previous studies have found a relationship between audience specification and higher quality writing among older children. This article presents a study that examined the impact of audience specification on young children's writing. Using a within-subjects design, the study compared writing quality when second-grade students wrote for internal versus external audiences and found that children are more likely to produce higher quality

**Keywords:** elementary writing instruction, audience awareness, external audience, informative/explanatory text, literacy instruction

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Writing, at its essence, is a social process with a communicative purpose (McCutchen, 2006). We write to convey ideas, questions, and experiences. When experienced writers compose text, they write with a particular audience and purpose in mind. Their understanding of the expectations of the readers with whom they are communicating informs the form, content, and language of their writing (Alamargot, Caprossi, Chesnet, & Ros, 2011).

Recent writing standards and frameworks encourage elementary classroom teachers to attend not only to a particular audience in their writing, but specifically to audiences beyond the classroom, such as children or adults in other classrooms, schools, or communities (Graham et al., 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). The What Works Clearinghouse guide *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, for example, recommends that teachers "design writing activities that naturally lend themselves to different audiences. Otherwise, students view writing in school as writing

only for their teacher” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 21). Similarly, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) state that “a key purpose of writing is to communicate clearly to an external, sometimes unfamiliar audience” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 18). For the purposes of this article, we refer to an audience beyond the classroom as an *external audience*, distinct from an *internal audience* such as the classroom teacher or classmates.

Attention to audience, whether internal or external, tends to be entirely overlooked in school writing (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Duke, 2000). If audience is addressed at all, writing instruction in schools tends to be for an internal audience, most often the classroom teacher (Billman, 2008; Duke, 2000; Strachan, 2016). This is concerning given that effective writers choose their words, genre, and voice according to the audience and purpose of their text (Berkenkotter, 1981). If children do not have opportunities to write with audience in mind, we posit that they are missing the essence of writing itself: to communicate.

Research suggests that providing students with an external writing audience tends to lead to higher quality writing in older students (e.g., Cohen & Riel, 1989; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979). We hypothesize the same holds true for children in the early elementary grades; however, to date, we have had little empirical evidence to support this claim. The purpose of this study was to begin to examine the dearth of knowledge about the extent to which writing for an external audience impacts the quality of writing and revision in early elementary students, specifically second-grade students, as compared to writing for an internal audience.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in sociocultural views of writing as inherently dialogic and communicative in nature. Unlike cognitive views that explain writing as a series of mental processes including planning, organizing, and working memory (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987), taking a sociocultural lens leads us to view writing as a social experience occurring between the writer and the perceived audience (McCutchen, 2006). According to the theory of dialogism, people use oral and written language at a particular time in response to how others have reacted to the language in the past and in anticipation of how others might react to the language in the future (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). In this view, written language requires problem solving and negotiation of word choice and organization in relation to one’s perceived audience and anticipation of how readers might respond (Brandt, 1990). In theory, as writers work to compose, we would expect them to draw on their knowledge of and interactions with the intended audience in order to communicate their message in a way that ideally appeals to their audience and their communicative purpose (Freedman & Medway, 1994). In this way, a sociocultural view of writing helps explain why we might expect that providing children with a clearly defined audience would be supportive of the their overall writing quality given that the writers might be better attuned to the potential audience’s response and react accordingly in their word choice, organization, use of details, and other developmentally appropriate aspects of quality writing.

Writers purposefully select their language in response to how others respond, yet observational studies of writing instruction in the early elementary grades suggest that much of the writing children do is for an unspecified audience (Billman, 2008; Duke, 2000). We expect writers to have higher quality writing when they are choosing language to communicate to a specified audience, but how can they experience the communicative and dialogic nature of writing if they do not have their audience in mind when writing? Within sociocultural traditions, we also expect people to learn most effectively when they are given opportunities to engage in authentic communities of practice (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick,

1996). Learners begin to take on the behaviors, language, and values of their community through what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation. In this perspective, novice writers become more expert within a writing community, then, not just by learning a series of increasingly complex schemata and thinking processes but by becoming active members, taking on common practices and values—and, critically, being seen by an audience of other members as knowledgeable participants and, eventually, as experts (Magnifico, 2010, p. 174).

The authenticity of writing audiences within this community of practice is critical. If young writers understand that their written attempts will be shared with others who authentically desire to read and learn from this work, then we would expect the overall writing quality to be higher given that the writers will better attend to word choice, organization, details, and illustrations. Indeed, many scholars argue that authenticity of literacy activities is critical when learning oral and written discourse (e.g., Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; New London Group, 1996). Situating ourselves within this perspective, we would expect that specifying a clear audience and asking students to write for a specific purpose would be more motivating and lead to higher quality work than were students asked to write as they typically do during writing instruction: for an unspecified audience or perhaps for their teacher, an individual to whom they typically write for the sake of learning how to write, not for the purposes of communicating ideas. We therefore designed a study to compare writing for a local librarian to the typical writing done for the classroom teacher.

### **External and Internal Audience Specification on Writing Quality**

Little research exists on the implications of providing students with an external audience, especially for children in the early elementary grades. With older students, some limited evidence suggests that providing an external audience tends to be related to higher writing quality. In a study of 44 seventh-grade students in Jerusalem, Cohen and Riel (1989) asked students to write two compositions: one to their teachers, a familiar internal audience, and the other to international peers, an unfamiliar external audience. Students wrote on the same topic for each essay and experiences were counterbalanced, yet student compositions written for the external audience were rated as higher quality in all dimensions examined, including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Cohen & Riel, 1989). The authors hypothesized that providing a contextualized writing environment with a clear external audience led to higher quality writing from the middle school-aged students in this study because the student writers knew the intended audience would actually be reading their work, thereby increasing attention to detail and motivation as compared with the typical school setting that minimizes the social aspect of writing.

In another study of older students, this time with middle and high schoolers, researchers addressed two audiences: one internal and the other external (Crowhurst & Piche, 1979). The researchers asked students to compose persuasive essays, one for their teacher and one for their best friend. The researchers found students used more effective argumentative language when addressing their best friend, an external audience, as compared to addressing their teacher. Again, the researchers hypothesized that providing a specific external audience required students to consider the needs of their audience as they composed their text, whereas writing for the teacher—a common occurrence often void of a true communicative purpose but rather situated solely as instruction—did not entail this

consideration. One complication of this study, however, involves the differences in ages and familiarity between the two audiences. It is quite possible that writing for peer audiences, whether internal or external, is more motivating and leads to higher quality writing than writing for a teacher. As such, it is difficult to decipher whether the age difference or the distinction between internal and external audience influenced the findings of this study.

In the only study with elementary students that we identified, Purcell-Gates et al. (2007) analyzed the influence of authentic reading and writing of science informational and procedural texts on second- and third-grade students' writing quality, both overall and in terms of particular features. The researchers conceptualized authentic writing in two ways: the degree of authenticity of texts (is the text used beyond school walls?) and the degree of authenticity of purpose (is this a real reason why people write?). Although audience was not the primary focus of this study, classrooms in which students had more opportunities to write and read beyond-school kinds of texts for specific, beyond-school purposes, including opportunities to write for an external audience, grew in their abilities to write both informational and procedural texts at faster rates than those in classrooms with fewer such opportunities. Yet, because this study did not isolate the effects of providing external audiences and subsequent writing growth, we cannot know for certain whether differences in writing quality were due to inclusion of an external audience or other factors, such as authenticity of genre.

These three studies, only one of which occurred with elementary students, suggest a relationship between audiences other than the teacher and higher quality writing among students. In each case, students produced higher quality writing when provided with an external audience. However, the only study involving younger writers did not isolate the effects of audience from other study variables.

### **External and Internal Audience Specification on Revision Quality**

As early elementary students improve their writing quality, many studies indicate that they consider the needs of their audience more in their revision than in their initial drafts (e.g., Frank, 1992; Midgette, Haria, & MacArthur, 2008; Roen & Wiley, 1988). Some argue this is because students devote much of their attention and cognition to the topic during their initial draft (Flower & Hayes, 1980) and are better able to consider their audience during revision once their initial ideas about the topic have been drafted. For example, in Frank's (1992) examination of 30 fifth-grade students' writing and revision of newspaper advertisements to specific, external audiences, the students demonstrated that they were more likely to use writing strategies to appeal to different audiences' needs as they revised their persuasive texts as compared to when they first drafted them. Students were not directly taught to use strategies to appeal to different audiences, yet Frank noted that students revised their drafts to include different voice, text length, adjectives, address, and selling tactics depending on the audience for whom they were writing. Frank's study suggests that older students are able to use strategies for addressing audience in their writing. Furthermore, those strategies are often more pronounced when students revise rather than when they draft. We hypothesize the same might be true for younger students; however, empirical evidence is needed to determine whether this is the case.

## **External Audience and Implied Purpose**

The Common Core State Standards clarify that students should be able to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 18). Writers can write for multiple purposes, including persuading, informing, or critiquing, just as they might write to different audiences such as a local elected official or classmate. In any study examining the effects of audience awareness on writing, we argue it is essential to parse the effects of writing purpose from audience specification. For example, in any of the aforementioned studies, it is possible that providing students with an external audience implied that students were writing to someone for a specific reason more so than if they were provided with an internal audience of their teacher whom they write to or for daily. Might telling children they are writing an informational book about gardening for a neighbor imply that the neighbor needs to learn that information for an authentic purpose, such as beginning their own garden? Compare this to a scenario in which a teacher asks children to write an informational book during class. Is that same authentic purpose implied, or is it more likely that the children assume the writing activity is for some method of grading purpose or for the purpose of simply learning how to write better, scenarios without a clear communicative purpose? If the latter, then it is possible that merely identifying an external audience implies some communicative purpose, an authentic reason to write or revise, more so than any scenario in which writers compose for their teacher.

For these reasons, this study attempted to parse the effects of external and internal audience specification from identifying a specific purpose for writing on early elementary students’ writing quality and revisions. If young writers who were given a clear purpose for their writing wrote higher quality pieces regardless of internal or external audience specification, then we might assume that it is the explicit specification of an authentic purpose for writing, not audience, that influences writing quality.

## **Research Questions**

1. How does the quality of second-grade students’ writing compare when writing for an internal audience versus writing for an external audience?
2. What interactions, if any, does specifying a communicative purpose have on second graders’ writing quality for both external and internal audiences?

## **Methods**

### **Design of the Study**

This study employed a within-subjects design. The within-subjects design has been instrumental in designing evidence-based instructional practices in education because it is an experimental design that identifies causal relationships between independent and dependent variables (Horner et al., 2005). A within-subjects design allowed us to use repeated measures in order to examine each student’s writing performance in all four writing conditions.

In this study, the first researcher met with students in nine small groups of four to five students for a total of eight sessions per group. The researcher provided no instruction on the writing process during this study. Instead, over the course of these sessions, she asked students to write and revise texts on varying topics under four conditions: (1) external

audience with a specified writing purpose, (2) external audience without a specified writing purpose, (3) internal audience with a specified writing purpose, and (4) internal audience without a specified writing purpose.

Given the limitations of studies discussed in the literature review that compared audiences of differing ages and familiarity, we were careful to select an unfamiliar adult for the external audience in order to mirror the age of the internal audience, the classroom teacher, and reduce the influence of audience familiarity on writing quality. In this study, a local librarian who the children did not already know served as the external audience. We chose the librarian as the external audience for this study because she was not involved with the school and was someone who children would recognize as being authentically interested in receiving informative/explanatory texts.

All writing conditions and writing topics were counterbalanced to ensure that students' writing did not improve simply as a result of repeated writing opportunities or background knowledge of a particular writing topic. Specifically, topics were randomized for each group of children in a particular writing session, and then each condition was randomly assigned a topic, ensuring each topic was written about in each condition.

Topic familiarity is important to children's successful writing achievement (e.g., Tedick, 1990). To determine the writing topics, the first researcher browsed several standardized tests for second-grade students to identify topics covered in either the reading or writing portion of the tests and selected topics she believed to be familiar to children of this age based on several years of teaching experience in the primary grades and also based on a pilot of the topics. The final topics were birds (Duke, 2008), fruits (Duke, Martineau, Frank, Rowe, & Bennett-Armistead, 2012), flowers, and insects (Duke et al., 2012). All topics could be addressed with different kinds or ranges of background knowledge. Indeed, all of the children demonstrated some knowledge of each topic.

## **Participants**

Participants were students at a K–5 elementary school in a midwestern U.S. school district. Their school is the only elementary school in the district and is located in a small village. The district draws students from the village and the surrounding rural township. Sixty percent of the students receive free or reduced-priced lunch and the student population is predominantly white, a profile seen in many elementary schools in the state. We specifically selected second-grade classrooms because previous studies did not examine the effect of audience on the quality of early elementary writers. Furthermore, we selected second-grade classrooms over kindergarten or first-grade classrooms because self-evaluation of writing and subsequent revision are not recommended until second grade (Graham et al., 2012). As such, we believed it was likely that second graders would both compose the texts and subsequently make some types of revisions in their writing.

Of the 84 second-grade students to whom consent letters were given, 47 returned signed letters among the three classes. Teachers reported that this pool of children was representative of their classes; there were no obvious differences between children whose parents provided consent and those who did not.

In order to ensure that all of the 47 participating children had a baseline level of writing fluency, a writing fluency assessment was given and analyzed. The fluency test required students to think about the topic of school for 1 minute, and then they had 3 minutes to write. The target number of words for a second grader to write in the 3 minutes was 20 (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007). Based on these criteria, all of the children were eligible to participate in this study.



Due to time and personnel limitations of this study, 40 children were randomly selected to participate from the 47 consenting students: 17 boys and 23 girls.

## **Data Collection**

**Initial drafting sessions.** The first researcher led all writing sessions. During the initial session, children were asked to produce a piece of text in response to a prompt. Regardless of condition, children were read a prompt and given booklets with lines for writing and blank space for illustrations to complete their writing. Before writing, the researcher introduced the audience for whom children would compose their texts and gave children some information. Then, children watched a video of the audience for whom they would be writing the text. For example, when children were asked to write a book about birds for a local public librarian, they viewed a video of the librarian requesting the book. Likewise, when asked to write about birds for an internal audience, children viewed a video of their teacher requesting the piece of writing. Regardless of condition, while students wrote, a photo of the audience (either the librarian or the classroom teacher) was on the table to serve as a reminder with whom they were communicating.

Given the potential that the external audience specification might imply a clearer communicative purpose, we had children write for both the librarian and the classroom teacher for specified and unspecified purposes. For example, this was a prompt for a specified communicative purpose: “My name is [Name]. I am a librarian at the public library. I want to read examples of second graders’ writing so I can get ideas for when I order books for my library. I will look for books similar to the ones you write.” In contrast, this was a prompt for an unspecified purpose: “My name is [Name]. I am a librarian at the public library. I want second graders to write books about birds.” In these two cases, one clearly specified the purpose for the written communication, whereas the other did not.

Once children watched the video, the researcher passed out the writing booklets and pencils and told children, “It’s OK to draw pictures, but make sure to write words, too. If you want to write a word that you don’t know how to spell, just do the best you can to write it.” When children asked how to spell a word, the researcher told them to do the best they could. Children had 20 minutes to write their texts.

At the culmination of each writing session, children were asked to read their work. Because students were using invented or estimated spelling in their work, they were asked to read their written work aloud to ensure the score reflected the text the children specifically wrote. The researcher transcribed children’s text onto another sheet of paper as they read aloud. Sometimes, children explained an illustration as they read their text, so the researcher noted those descriptions as well.

During each writing session, children met in the back of the classroom at a large table designated for group work. To avoid having them look at others’ papers, children were given folders to surround their writing space. Each child produced four texts for a total of 160 texts overall. All writings were collected after each writing session and remained with the researcher.

**Revision sessions.** Because the literature suggests that writers are often able to attend to audience more strongly during revision than during initial drafting (Frank, 1992; Midgette et al., 2008; Roen & Wiley, 1988), children were given an opportunity to revise their first draft. These revision opportunities always took place 2 days after the initial drafting session. Prior to the revision sessions, all initial drafts were copied in order to compare them against the revised pieces.



When the first researcher returned for the revision session, she told students, “I read through your books about [topic] for [name of librarian or teacher]. They are almost ready to give to her. Today, I want you to read through your book and make sure it is just the way you want it for [audience] to read. We’re going to watch the video of her again, and then we will write.” The children reviewed the video of the respective audience and received their booklets and pencils. Again, children were instructed to try their best when they asked how to spell words. Children were given 15 minutes to revise. Additionally, in order to gain further insight into the nature of students’ revisions and their thinking behind the revisions they included, each child was asked to talk about their revisions after reading their response. The researcher took notes on children’s reporting of the revisions that they made and kept record of those notes. All data were collected in accordance with the standards of the human subject review board at our institution.

### **Data Analysis**

Researcher-created rubrics were used to analyze children’s writing as well as counts of revisions and linguistic features. The rubrics were used to assign a holistic score (see Appendix A) and a score for seven primary traits related to quality informative/explanatory texts (see Appendix B). The researcher counted the total number of children’s revisions and the number of mechanically oriented and content-oriented revisions. Finally, the number of particular linguistic features were counted in each text. Each of these analyses is described separately following a paragraph on data preparation. For student work samples, see Appendix C.

Prior to scoring and counting, all transcriptions of the writings were typed. The typed versions were scored except for instances in which the original text (such as viewing the illustration) was important to scoring. To assist with scoring, the first researcher trained a colleague to code all texts using the rubrics. The colleague is a former elementary language arts teacher who was seeking a doctoral degree with a focus on literacy. The colleague (referred to as the assistant researcher in the remainder of this article) did not know the specific research questions and therefore did not know the hypothesis of the study. This was done intentionally to prevent any potential scoring bias. The assistant researcher coded all the samples according to the rubrics described below. Additionally, the first researcher scored a randomly selected subset for the purpose of estimating inter-rater reliability. Blind to condition, the first researcher did the counting for the revisions and the linguistic features. This seemed appropriate because the counts were straightforward and objective.

**Rubric scoring.** Because we wanted to examine overall writing quality, scoring was carried out using children’s final drafts (after revisions). To score each piece, the scorer first analyzed the piece of writing and assigned it a holistic score based on the rubric. We created the holistic rubric based on the rubric used by Purcell-Gates et al. (2007). It is a 3-point rubric and assesses the overall effectiveness of the writing as an informative/explanatory text. In addition, anchor papers were included to use in the scoring. Blind to condition, anchor papers were identified after children participated in the study; this way, the papers used were ones that were written specifically for these tasks (rather than for another, unrelated study) to use in the holistic scoring. Anchor papers were selected prior to establishing inter-rater reliability and were excluded from the pool of papers used to estimate inter-rater reliability.

In addition to the holistic score, writing quality was evaluated with a primary trait analysis. This researcher-created rubric was used to evaluate features of quality in informative/explanatory texts. In order to determine the areas of analysis, the CCSS for informative/explanatory writing for second grade was used, and indicators of quality were gleaned from the description. Additionally, the first researcher obtained several informational text writing samples of children written in the first half of second grade. From these texts, traits of quality informative/explanatory text writing that might be expected from second-grade children at the beginning of the academic year were identified. These markers of quality informative/explanatory text and the CCSS used in this rubric are as follows: text remains focused on topic, text includes accurate information, text includes details about the topic, text includes explanations or examples to support the reader's understanding, illustrations complement the text on the page, text includes language used in informative/explanatory texts, and text includes navigational features such as labels, headings, and table of contents.

It was essential to score children's attention to audience in their writing. However, in order to do this the assistant researcher needed to know which audience the child was writing to. To prevent this from potentially biasing other scoring, the assistant researcher consulted information regarding for whom the child was writing a particular text only after all primary trait and revisions analysis had been conducted. At that time, the assistant researcher had knowledge of the audience but was still blind to participant and purpose. The assistant researcher then determined for which audience the piece was written and then scored the piece for the degree to which the child appeared to attend to that audience specified. In this study, attention to audience was typically demonstrated through dedications to the particular audience (e.g., "To [librarian's name]), illustrations that included a portrait of the audience (often labeled as such or indicated as the child read their text for transcription), questions to the audience member (e.g., "Do you know that spiders are not actually insects?"), and providing biographical information about the author at the beginning or end of their texts addressed to the particular audience.

**Inter-rater reliability.** To identify anchor papers and to train the assistant researcher to use the rubrics, 25% of the collected data was used. Throughout the training, the assistant researcher also scored the samples; the researchers compared scores and resolved any differences. After the training, they scored another 25% of writings to examine inter-rater reliability and computing a Cohen's Kappa, established an inter-rater reliability of .92. Once that was established, the assistant researcher scored the remaining samples.

**Revision counts.** After assigning a holistic score and seven primary trait scores to determine writing quality, the nature of the revisions was examined by comparing the copies of students' original writing to the revised pieces. Again, analyses were conducted blind to condition. To assess revision, the number of revisions made between the initial draft and the final draft were counted. Then, to determine the different types of revisions that children made, the number of mechanical revisions and the number of content-oriented revisions were each counted separately. Mechanical revisions included revisions pertaining to spelling, punctuation, insertion of omitted words, and sentence structure. As students revised, they often erased words to improve handwriting; these revisions were also scored as mechanical revisions. Content-oriented revisions included revisions that primarily addressed the content or meaning of the text. Typically, these revisions included adding more details in words or pictures and revising statements to reflect more accurate information.

**Linguistic feature counts.** In addition to the researcher-created rubrics, all texts were scored using an external, count-based measure. Duke and Kays (1998) identify important linguistic features of informative/explanatory texts. Two language patterns common to these types of texts are timeless verb constructions and generic noun constructions. An example of a timeless verb construction from a child in this study was “Flowers grow in soil.” The child also used generic noun constructions in the words flowers and soil. Because these are important language features of informative/explanatory texts, a count of generic nouns and timeless verbs was conducted for each piece of writing, and then a ratio of each to the total number of nouns or verbs that the child used was computed.

## Results

### Statistical Analysis

To conduct the analysis, multilevel logistic regression (both binary logistic regression and ordinal logistic regression) was used. Logistic regression for the holistic scores and primary traits was used because those scores included ordinal variables. Multilevel logistic regression does not assume independence, so it was appropriate to use in this case because the same children participated in each of the four conditions. For the variables that were counts, such as the number of total revisions, mechanical revisions, and the number of content-oriented revisions, a Poisson regression was used because the data were not normally distributed. The assumptions of these Poisson regressions were that the data were dichotomous, nominal, ordered, and with a Poisson distribution (determined by examination of histograms).

Using the child as the grouping variable and the intercept and gender as level 2 variables, several multilevel statistical models were set up using a random intercept for all models. The random intercept accounted for the fact that this was a within-subjects design and that all children were starting at different points. From there, impacts of the various conditions were determined. Because students met in the same writing groups for each session, researchers also checked for and confirmed that there were no grouping effects.

### Rubric Measures

For the holistic scores and the primary trait scores of details, language, illustration, navigation, and addressing the audience, multilevel ordinal regression was used because those variables had more than two categories represented. For the primary traits of focus and accuracy, a multilevel binary logistic regression was used due to the fact that the dataset for those variables did not include the full range of possible scores, including instead only two scores per variable. For the primary trait of accuracy, scores spanned from 0 to 2. However, only six scores of 0 were included in the data. The statistical software reported error scores with so few zeros; at the advice of the statistical consultant, the scores of 0 were combined with the scores of 1. As a result, the accuracy scores represented only two categories of rubric scores and were analyzed similar to focus scores using the binary logistic regression.

**Holistic scores.** The ordinal regression model for holistic scores with audience, purpose, gender, and the interaction of audience and purpose as predictors was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, 152) = 9.176, p < .001$ . The impact of audience was statistically significant. When it was an external audience, the estimated odds of a child achieving a higher holistic score were 22.695 times greater. The impact of purpose and the interaction of audience and purpose were not statistically significant. The predictors of gender and classroom were also not significant.

**Primary trait scores.** The binary regression model for focus scores with audience, purpose, gender, classroom, and the interaction of audience and purpose as predictors was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, 153) = 6.433, p < .001$ . Similar to the holistic scores, the impact of audience was statistically significant for focus scores. When it was an external audience, the estimated odds of a child achieving a higher score for focus were 9.526 times greater. The relationship of purpose, gender, classroom, and the interaction of audience and purpose to the focus scores was not statistically significant.

Similar to the findings of focus scores, accuracy scores with audience, purpose, gender, classroom, and the interaction of audience and purpose as predictors were statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, 153) = 9.347, p < .001$ . The impact of audience was statistically significant. When it was an external audience, the estimated odds of a child achieving a higher holistic score were 37.470 times greater. The impact of purpose and the interaction of audience and purpose were not statistically significant.

The remainder of the primary traits all had scores ranging from 0 to 2. Therefore, a multilevel ordinal logistical regression model was used to analyze the results. From the statistical tests, researchers determined similar results for the traits of details, illustrations complementing texts, language of informative/explanatory texts, and evidence of addressing audience. For each of these traits, the model using audience, purpose, gender, classroom, and the interaction between audience and purpose as predictors proved to be significant. In each case, the audience variable was significant; the presence of an external audience increased the likelihood of a higher score on the rubric.

For the remaining trait, navigational features, an ordinal logistic regression was run. Similar to the previously discussed traits, the model for scores addressing children's use of navigational features in their writing was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, 152) = 2.753, p = .014$ . The interaction of audience and purpose was also significant. This meant that when given an external audience, the odds that a child used navigational features increased by 33.506 but only when children were not given a specified purpose.

## Linguistic Feature Counts

In addition to the researcher-created rubric, the children's writing was analyzed using linguistic feature counts, including ratio of the generic nouns to total number of nouns used, ratio of the timeless verbs to total number of verbs used, and total word count. These were all count measures, and after checking their distribution using histograms, it was determined that all data were skewed toward zero and followed the typical pattern of a Poisson regression; therefore, these measures were all analyzed using the Poisson regression.

**Generic noun constructions.** The model for generic noun constructions was statistically significant at the .05 level,  $F(6, 153) = 42.550, p = .000$ . The only predictor that was statistically significant was audience. When writing for an external audience, the

proportion of generic nouns to the total number of nouns children used in their writing increased by .49; in other words, children increased their use of generic nouns by 49%.

**Timeless verb constructions.** The model for timeless verbs was also significant at the .05 level,  $F(6, 153) = 21.838$ ,  $p = .000$ . Writing for an external audience was significant, but so was the interaction between audience and purpose. The statistically significant interaction effect means that the impact of the external audience was different depending on whether children were writing for a specified or unspecified purpose. When there was an unspecified purpose and the target was an external audience, the increment in the number of timeless verbs children used was 2.83 times more. When children wrote for an external audience and a specified purpose, the increment increase was 5.25 times more. In addition, other control variables, including gender and classroom, influenced the number of timeless verbs children used. Specifically, boys were more likely to use timeless verb constructions, and children in Classroom 3 were more likely to use timeless verb construction.

**Word count.** The model for word count also was significant at the .05 level,  $F(6, 153) = 20.854$ ,  $p = .000$ . Audience was significant but, as was the case with timeless verbs, the effects differed based on the purpose. When writing for an internal audience, there were not statistically significant differences in the total number of words that children wrote based on the purpose. However, when writing for an external audience, when the purpose was unspecified, there was an incremental increase of 16% in the word count. When children were given a specified purpose, there was an incremental increase of 35% in the total number of words children produced.

## Revision Counts

For the three revision measures, histograms showed data were skewed toward zero, and these measures were counts so a Poisson regression that included audience, purpose, gender, classroom, and the interaction of purpose and audience as predictors was used. As indicated, this model was not statistically significant,  $F(6, 153) = 0.997$ ,  $p = .429$ . None of the predictors impacted the total number of revisions. However, as reported in detail in the following subsection, models for mechanically oriented revisions and content-oriented revisions were also run. The sum of these two types of revisions was equal to the total number of revisions. Both types of revisions showed purpose as being significant.

**Mechanically oriented revisions and content-oriented revisions.** The corrected model for mechanically oriented revisions was not statistically significant at the .05 level,  $F(6, 153) = 1.999$ ,  $p = .069$ , but purpose was significant. The corrected model may have a p-value slightly higher than .05 as a result of including all the other variables such as audience, classroom, and gender in the model that were not significant. As mentioned, purpose was significant at the .05 level. When writing for a specified purpose, children increased the number of mechanical revisions by 58%; in other words, they made 1.581 times more mechanically oriented revisions when writing for a specified purpose as opposed to an unspecified purpose.

The model of the results for the number of content-oriented revisions children made was borderline for being statistically significant at the .05 level,  $F(6, 153) = 2.167$ ,  $p = .050$ ; however, as with the mechanical revisions, this p-value might also be due to the number of variables included in the model that were not statistically significant. When looking at the predictors, the model did show that purpose was statistically significant, indicating that when children wrote for an unspecified purpose, they made 48% fewer content-oriented revisions.

**Audience-oriented revisions.** This study also measured audience-oriented revisions. However, there were no instances of revisions that clearly and specifically addressed the audience, so there was a floor effect for that measure.

In sum, this study found that when writing for an external audience, children had greater odds of higher holistic scores as well as the primary traits of focus, accuracy, details, illustrations complementing the text, language features of informational texts, addressing audience, and navigational features. There was also an interaction effect with navigational features. Purpose had a statistically significant effect on children's revisions. When children were given a specified purpose, they made more revisions in their writing.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the effects of providing second-grade students with both an external audience (librarian) and an internal audience (the classroom teacher) for both specified and unspecified purposes when asking them to compose and revise an informative/explanatory text.

**Audience.** A key finding of this study is that early elementary students produced higher quality informative/explanatory writing when they were provided with an external audience regardless of whether a particular communicative purpose was specified. The children's holistic scores were, on average, significantly higher when writing for the external audience—the local librarian—than when writing for the internal audience—the classroom teacher. Similarly, children received higher scores related to particular traits of writing when composing for an external audience. Specifically, the writing was more focused, children included well-developed details, and the information they provided was more accurate. Children were more likely to use the appropriate language of informational texts, and illustrations complemented texts more often when writing for an external audience than when writing for their classroom teacher. In other words, children's texts were more effective textually and visually when writing for the librarian. Based on our views that writing is inherently dialogic in nature, this finding did not surprise us given we would expect children to be more effective communicators when they believed the communication to be authentic and purposeful.

For navigational skills, audience also had a statistically significant positive impact, yet there was an interaction effect between audience and purpose, meaning that audience had a significant positive impact only when children did not have a specified purpose for their writing. We hypothesize that this may be because children assumed a communicative purpose when writing for the librarian regardless of whether they were told a particular purpose, yet did not assume an authentic communicative purpose even when they were told of one when writing for their teacher, a person for whom they typically write for the sake of learning to write instead of communicating an idea or engaging in dialogue.

In summary, all primary traits were positively impacted by the presence of an external audience. Audience was also statistically significant in the number of words children produced, the number of generic nouns present in their texts, and the number of timeless verb constructions children used.

**Revision.** Interestingly, there were no statistically significant differences in the number of revisions children made based on the type of audience to whom they wrote. Although we did not expect this result, it likely stems from the fact that children did not typically make a large number of revisions during revision sessions in this study. The mean number of total revisions was just 3.27. Chanquoy (2001) purports that beginning



writers do not naturally revise their work and the revisions they do make often are not of substance. Furthermore, the younger the children, the less likely they are to revise (Chanquoy, 2001). Second-grade students were selected for this study in part because of their greater likelihood to revise than kindergarten or first-grade students, yet it is known that elementary-grade children in general typically struggle with revising their writing (Hayes, 1996, 2004). Boscolo and Ascorti (2004) concur that revision is difficult for children in the early elementary years, yet found that children were much more likely to revise when working in partnership with another person (either a classmate or teacher) and when given opportunities to answer questions and talk about their writing. The small number of revisions observed in this study may have been due to the design in that second-grade students had to be self-directed in their revision and were not given an opportunity to confer with peers or a teacher. It may also be possible that working with slightly older students would have produced different results.

Despite research suggesting that older students often addressed audience more in revision than in their initial drafts (Frank, 1992; Midgette et al., 2008; Roen & Wiley, 1988), this study found floor effects for audience-oriented revisions. In fact, there were no such revisions. There are a few possible explanations for this finding. One is that with so few revisions of any kind, audience-oriented revisions were unlikely. Another explanation is related to genre. Many of the existing studies of revision with older children used persuasive texts (e.g., Crowhurst & Piche, 1979; Frank, 1992; Midgette et al., 2008; Roen & Wiley, 1988). Arguably, because the purpose of a persuasive text is to sway the opinion of the target audience, audience may play a more central role in a persuasive text than in an informative/explanatory text. A final explanation for this floor effect could be that early elementary students are less attentive to audience than older students; however, given the effects of audience on overall writing quality, this is unlikely.

## Purpose

Although audience had a significant positive impact on overall writing quality, providing a specific communicative purpose did not result in differences in overall writing quality. We contend this may be due to the fact that children might have assumed a purpose when writing for a librarian but not when writing to the classroom teacher. In both external audience conditions, upon learning they would be writing for a librarian, children immediately talked about the various people who might read their texts despite the fact that only in one condition did the librarian give children a specific purpose for their writing, and even then the purpose given was never for others to read their books.

**Revision.** As noted earlier, children in this study made few revisions, only 3.27 on average. Given this small number, it is not surprising that purpose did not have a statistically significant impact on total number of revisions. However, purpose did have a statistically significant impact on mechanically oriented and content-oriented revisions. Upon analyzing the revision data further, we found that when children were given a clearly defined communicative purpose, they were more likely than not to make mechanical revisions. In fact, children made 58% more mechanical revisions when writing for a specified purpose. During the designated revision time, children were quick to add periods to their sentences, correct capitalization, and make handwriting more legible. On the whole, they were very concerned with making sure their work was legible and punctuated correctly. When they described the nature of their revisions, children often commented about the importance of punctuation in producing good writing. For example,

one child commented, “I have to put in the periods to have good writing.” Although it is likely that children inferred a purpose when writing for an external audience, here we find that clarifying for children a specific rationale for their written communication may have influenced their willingness or ability to make mechanical revisions in order to ensure that the librarian (or others) would be able to read their writing.

A related finding from this study was that the children made 48% fewer content-oriented revisions when writing without a specified purpose than when they were given a specific communicative purpose regardless of audience assignment. As indicated previously, content-oriented revisions included revising text to aid meaning as well as revising illustrations to help provide more meaning to the text. Although children tended to make fewer content-oriented than mechanical revisions (e.g., Chanquoy 2001; McCutchen, Francis, & Kerr, 1997), it is encouraging that they would make more of this type of revision when asked to write for a specified purpose. It is unclear why specifying a purpose would impact revision quality yet not the overall writing quality. One hypothesis is that although children assumed a purpose when writing for an external audience, the additional specification and clarification of why they were writing was enough to prompt quality revisions beyond what is typical for this age group. Clearly, the relationship between purpose for written communication and revision with early elementary students warrants further research.

### **Instructional Implications**

The findings from this study suggest the need to rethink the type of writing children do in school. Currently, the most common audience for whom children write is the classroom teacher (Duke, 2000) or an unspecified audience (Strachan, 2016). Furthermore, these same scholars have observed that children from low-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds have fewer opportunities to write for external audiences than their higher SES peers. This study found that children from low-SES backgrounds writing for an external audience produced higher quality writing than when writing to their teacher. Given that writing is at its very essence a form of communication, we argue that early elementary students would benefit from writing to external audiences more regularly in school. At the very least, schools situated in low-SES communities should offer children at least as many opportunities to write for an external audience as are offered to their higher SES peers. Some examples of external audiences for whom children might write an informative/explanatory text include younger children, community members, or patrons at a particular venue.

This study also suggests the importance of specifying a clear purpose for written communication, specifically as it affects revision. Based on personal experience, it seems that children are not often provided with a specified purpose for their writing, and other scholars have observed the same (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012). Given that revision is difficult for younger students (e.g., Chanquoy, 2001; Hayes, 1996, 2004) and this study’s findings that purpose significantly impacted revision, it could be that providing a specified purpose for written communication might lead early elementary students to more deeply engage in the revision process.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Although observing a positive and significant relationship between an external audience and higher quality writing of informative/explanatory texts among early elementary students is important, these results also suggest the need for further research.

This study found that audience affected quality but not revision and purpose affected revision but not quality when writing informative/explanatory texts. This study is worth replicating with different genres, grade levels, and contexts to determine whether this same pattern is upheld and to explore possible reasons for why this might be.

Another important area of research is instructional strategies that support teachers in incorporating writing to external audiences for clearly defined purposes into early elementary students' writing experiences in school. As an example, future studies might address a myriad of ways in which children are introduced to external audiences. This study used video recordings of the external audience. Would inviting the audience member into the classroom impact writing quality differently? Furthermore, given what we know about the dialogic nature of writing, would consistent communication with the audience lead to improved writing over time?

Finally, more research needs to be done to better understand the revision process. Research has shown that early elementary students typically do not engage in significant revision and are much less likely to do so when asked to do it independently (Chanquoy, 2001; Hayes, 1996, 2004). However, this study found that specifying a purpose for writing had an effect on the number of content revisions and the number of mechanical revisions children made. Future research might replicate this study with more students or might address whether this holds true with younger children and in different genres. Interviews with students during the revision process would also provide additional insight into young writers' thinking as they revise. Because most of the revisions were mechanical, future research could also address what it might take to support students instructionally to revise their writing for content.

An important direction for new research is to look at long-term effects of providing children with an external audience and a specified purpose. In this study, the presence of an external audience led to children producing higher quality writing on that occasion. New research will need to address whether having children write for external audiences regularly over time helps them become stronger writers or improves writing growth.

## Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. For one, the first author led all writing sessions. Although the classroom teachers and the librarian were video recorded and students watched the videos, the researcher was delivering the instructions for the writing. It is possible that some children perceived the researcher as a target audience for the writing and were generally more motivated to write given the novelty of the situation. However, whatever impact this limitation may have had, it was not enough to eliminate the differences in writing quality between the internal and external audience.

Another limitation is related to the within-subjects design. Although this design has many advantages related to control, it may have been the case that children put forth less effort when writing for their teacher in this study than they might otherwise have put forth if, in the counterbalancing, they had previously had an opportunity to write for the librarian, a comparatively more novel audience.

Finally, in this study, when children watched the video of the librarian, they often made comments about an inferred purpose for their writing communication (e.g., "So many kids are going to read my book, so I have to do my best"). This was despite the fact that the librarian never indicated that other patrons would read the books, and in one condition,

the librarian did not indicate a specific purpose for the books. Still, children commonly assumed that writing for a librarian meant that their books would be read by a large number of library patrons. This may be a general challenge of this type of research—that it is difficult to separate external audience and purpose as early elementary students may infer purpose given the particular audience.

## Conclusion

This study was an initial study looking at the impact of audience and purpose specification on the quality of early elementary students' writing of informative/explanatory texts. Previous studies found a relationship between external audience and higher quality writing for older children (e.g., Cohen & Riel, 1989); this study found a similar relationship among early elementary students in their composition of informative/explanatory texts. This finding is significant in that it suggests the need to make a shift from predominantly asking students to write for their teacher to providing opportunities for them to engage in written communication for external audiences. The CCSS have given renewed attention to writing and call for students to have opportunities to write for external audiences. This study provided empirical evidence to support this shift in our primary-grade classrooms, at least in second grade.

The intent of schooling is to provide students with the skills and experiences they need to be successful in the world outside of school. Writers in the real world (the world outside of school) write for a variety of purposes and audiences, many of them unfamiliar. Providing students with opportunities to write and revise for specific purposes to external audiences invites them into a larger writing community of practice in which they can begin to take on the skills and values of more experienced writers.

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### About the Authors

Meghan K. Block is an associate professor of elementary literacy in the Teacher Education and Professional Development Department and serves as the director of the Language Arts Council at Central Michigan University. Prior to her work at CMU, she spent time as a K–2 classroom teacher.

A former K–2 educator, Stephanie L. Strachan teaches preservice elementary educators at Western Washington University, where she serves as the director of the Language, Literacy, and Cultural Studies Program. Prior to coming to WWU, she spent time as an elementary curriculum specialist at the Lawrence Hall of Science where she co-designed kindergarten inquiry-based units that integrate science, language, and literacy.

**Appendix A**  
**Holistic Rubric**


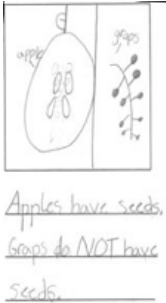
Score	Description
0	No written text
1	Text is of low quality for an informative/explanatory text.
Anchor Paper for 1	17-3 I love butterflies. My favorite butterfly is a Monarch. On a Monarch butterfly's wing, they are orange and black, but their wings are really fragile. Once I saw a Monarch butterfly come toward my car and it hit the windshield. And its wing broke. I was sad, but I hate spiders. They creep me out! But, I think my favorite insect is a butterfly.
2	Text is of average quality for an informative/explanatory text.
Anchor Paper for 2	Insects are interesting. Some can fly. Some can't. Butterflies can fly. Ants can't fly. They are red and they crawl. Insects have 6 legs. Spiders have 8 legs so they are not insects. (No illustrations or navigational features)
3	Text is of high quality for an informative/explanatory text.
Anchor Paper for 3	34-1 Birds I am going to tell you about little and big birds. When birds hatch, they cannot fly because they are wet. When they are dry, they try to fly. Birds eat worms, spiders, and insects. When the baby birds are born, their mom hunts for their food. When they get older, they hunt for their own food and have babies. That's how it works. Birds are good fliers. (Included detailed illustrations with captions and labels)

Appendix B

Primary Trait Rubric: Writing Quality

	0	1	2
Text remains focused on topic	No written text	Topic is present, but text often deviates from the topic.	Text is focused on the topic throughout the pieces.
Anchor Paper for Focus		<p>Insects</p> <p>p. 1: Butterflies are my favorite. I love butterflies are the favorite fact!</p> <p>p. 2: I love spiders and rabbits too.</p> <p>p. 3: Ants are insects too.</p> <p>The end.</p>	<p>All About Bugs</p> <p>p. 1: Ladybugs can bite. Only the red ones can. Did you know that?</p> <p>p. 2: A bee can sting you. It hurts badly.</p> <p>p. 3: A horsefly can hurt you too.</p> <p>p. 4: A tick can go in your hair and bite you.</p> <p>p. 5: C.2: Flies are kind of like a horsefly, but they are not. Flies also eat a lot of trash.</p> <p>Accurate information is present and well developed.</p>
Text includes accurate information.		Accurate information is present, but not all information is accurate	
Anchor Paper for Accuracy		<p>Birds</p> <p>p. 1: Birds can fly high and eat worms.</p> <p>p. 2: Birds are smarter than people.</p> <p>p. 3: Birds can fly south in the summer to stay warm.</p> <p>p. 4: Birds have small baby birds.</p> <p>p. 5: Birds are reptiles.</p> <p>p. 6: Birds are cool too. They eat seeds and feed babies.</p> <p>p. 7: Birds are like dinosaur birds, but dinosaur birds are bigger.</p> <p>p. 8: Birds are small. Some birds are very small.</p>	<p>Insects</p> <p>p. 1: All insects have six legs.</p> <p>p. 2: One big insect is a praying mantis. They can kill, but only enough to kill other small insects.</p> <p>p. 3: Spiders are not insects. They have eight legs instead of six.</p> <p>p. 4: Bees are insects that sting. Their sting can hurt a person.</p>

	0	1	2
		p. 9: Birds can fly fast and hop fast too.	
Text includes details about the topic	No details are present.	Text includes details, but details are not developed using explanations or examples.	Text includes many details, and they are well developed using explanations and examples.
Anchor Paper for Details		Insects p. 1: Insects are all colors.  p. 2: Bugs are insects.  p. 3: Flies are insects.  p. 4: Butterflies are insects.  p. 5: Caterpillars are insects.  p. 6: Insects are gross. They hibernate in winter.	Fruit: A Reference Book  Front Matter: Written in [Name of Town and State]  p. 1: Watermelon are tasty, but you can't eat the peel. They also have black seeds that you should not eat.  p. 2: Oranges have rinds (ri-nds) which are the peel you can't eat on an orange.  p. 3: Grapes are tasty and you can even eat their skin. They can be green or purple.  p. 4: Butternut squash is sometimes considered (cun-siderd) a fruit because it has lots of seeds inside.  p. 5: Grapefruit is a sour fruit. Sometimes the inside is pink. They are juicy.  p. 6: Kiwi are brown with hair. The inside is green with black seeds.  p. 7: Pears are about 5 inches tall. They are green fruits. They grow on trees.
Illustrations complement text on the page	No illustration is included and/or no text is included.	Illustrations and text are present.	Illustrations complement details and are well developed.

0		1	2
Anchor Paper for Illustrations		<p>p. 9: Birds can fly fast and hop fast too.</p> 	
Text includes language typically used in informational texts (e.g., timeless verbs, generic nouns, specialized vocabulary)		No evidence of language of informative/explanatory texts is present.	Language of informative/explanatory texts is present at times.
Anchor Paper for Language of Informational Texts		<p>Birds</p> <p>p. 1: Birds are fun to me. Birds are interesting.</p> <p>p. 2: Birds eat seeds and worms. They make nests.</p> <p>p. 3: The bald eagle is a sign of the USA. He flies high. He likes the U.S.A.</p> <p>p. 4: Some birds are small. This bird is eating a worm.</p> <p>p. 5: I like birds.</p>	<p>Birds</p> <p>p. 1: Birds fly. They live up in trees in nests.</p> <p>p. 2: Birds catch worms and they can fly high.</p> <p>p. 3: Ducks are birds, but they don't eat worms.</p> <p>p. 4: Chickens are noisy birds.</p> <p>p. 5: Birds eat worms and they are awesome.</p>
Text includes navigational features typically found in informational texts (e.g., table of contents, glossary, index, headings)		Text includes no navigational features.	Text includes well developed navigational features.
Anchor Paper for Navigational Features		<p>Cover</p> <p>Fruit</p> <p>P. 1: (Picture talk bubble) Yummy (Attempted a table of contents but is incomplete) Do you know that fruit is good for you? Apples are green, red, and yellow too.</p> <p>(footer)</p>	<p>Front Matter:</p> <p>In this book people learn about the parts of a flower.</p> <p>Back Front Matter:</p> <p>(Diagram of a flower)</p> <p>The Parts of a Flower are...</p> <p>Roots</p>

	0	1	2
		<p>p. 2: Bananas are yellow. They turn brown when they are old. (footer)</p> <p>p. 3: Apples have seeds. Grapes do not have seeds. (footer)</p> <p>p. 4: Limes are yellow and green. Grapes are purple and green. (footer)</p>	<p>Stem Petals Leaves</p> <p>Contents</p> <p>1 Tulips 1</p> <p>2 Roses 3</p> <p>3 Sunflowers 5</p> <p>4 Roots 7</p> <p>5 perennials 9</p> <p>6 Leaves 11</p> <p>7 Stems 12</p> <p>p. 1: Chapter 1: Tulips Tulips are very pretty, but prickly (pri-kole).</p> <p>p. 2: Tulips are red and green but the roots are brown.</p> <p>p. 3: Chapter 2: Roses Roses have prickly things called thorns.</p> <p>p. 4: The leaves of dead roses are down and the tops are flat.</p>
Text shows evidence of attention to specific audience.	No evidence is present.	Attention to specific audience is present.	Attention to audience is present and well developed.
Anchor Paper for Attention to Audience		Child included drawings of the librarian in the illustrations of the text. No other references to audience were made.	In front matter: To: Miss Linda My name is [student's name]. I am in second grade. I am writing this book for your library.  At the end: I hope you liked this book about birds, Miss Linda




Appendix C  
Student Work Samples

External Audience, Specified Purpose

the Parts  
of a flower is...

roots  
stem  
Petals  
and  
Leafs

contents  
1 Tulips 1  
2 roses 3  
3 Sunflowers 5  
4 roots 7  
5 petals 9  
6 Leafs 11  
7 stems 12



A hand-drawn diagram of a flower. The flower has a circular head with many small petals. A long, straight stem extends from the head down to the ground. Two leaves are shown on the stem, one on each side. The roots are drawn at the base of the stem, extending into the ground. Labels with arrows point to each part: 'petal' points to one of the flower's petals, 'Leafs' points to one of the leaves, 'stem' points to the central stalk, and 'roots' points to the base of the flower.

chapter 1 Tulips



Tulips are very  
pretty but  
prickly  
(Pri-kole)

A hand-drawn diagram of a tulip flower. The flower is shown in profile, with a single large petal and a long, straight stem. The stem is labeled 'tulip'. The flower is growing out of a rectangular box that is divided into two sections. The top section is labeled 'Dirt' and the bottom section is labeled 'water'. The flower's stem passes through the 'Dirt' section and ends in the 'water' section.

in this book  
People Learn  
about the parts  
of a flower