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# Jacob's Writing: Sources, Subjects, Forms, Features



ESSAY BY DAVID SUDOL

## Abstract:

*This essay describes and discusses the sources, subjects, forms, and features of a seven-year-old's writing. It offers parents and teachers suggestions for promoting literacy.*

Some years ago, when my son, Jacob, was a seven-year-old first grader, I collected all his writing from January through April: his computer and classroom journals and his miscellaneous at-home scribbles. Initially, I wasn't sure what to do with it. I considered discussing his spelling, which was inventive to say the least, but Glenda Bissex (1980) had already covered that topic. I toyed with studying his writing development — his growth as a writer — but, realistically, four months was much too short a time. (Bissex studied her son Paul for six years.) After looking through his "oeuvre," however, I realized that I was most interested in the sources of his writing: What occasioned his composing? Whence his subjects? Similarly, I was fascinated by the various forms he wrote in and, more specifically, their distinctive text features.

## Sources and Subjects

Donald Graves (1983) claims most six- and seven-year-olds have little difficulty finding sources or subjects: "They are convinced they know about almost any topic" (p. 22). I couldn't agree more. In fact, I'm tempted to say the sources of Jacob's writing were infinite. That may seem like a glib response, but it's not altogether inaccurate.

Two obvious ones were television (a

perpetual electronic wellspring) and toys. At the time his favorite show was *Captain Power*, a high-tech Buck Rogers, which he watched every Sunday morning. Shortly after seeing his first episode, he wrote a *Captain Power* story in his classroom journal. In fact, like the TV show, Jacob's story continued from week to week; and *Captain Power* (along with his arch rival, *Lord Dred*) was the journal's sole focus for the entire semester, nearly a hundred pages worth. Like many seven-year-olds, Jacob loved dinosaurs. To play with dinosaur models, however, was perforce to make up terrifying tales and violent adventures. Whereas previously he acted out these dramas by himself or with his friend Derek, he now wrote "the fite" on the computer. He also featured his *Battle Beasts* (plastic animal warriors) in "the fite in akshin."

A richer source of writing was reading, both in school and at home. Right after winter vacation, Jacob's teacher, Mrs. Morris, read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) to the class. (Incidentally, he thought this was the greatest book ever written; second best was the sequel *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, 1972, which he read by himself.) During his "Wonka" period he produced a batch of writings, all with a chocolate theme. His basal reader also provided subjects. For instance, after reading folk tales and poems, he decided to write a "foke" tale and the poem "my coat."

At home he read Mike Thaler's (1987) *Hink Pink Monsters*, which inspired him to write riddles — including a number of



## the fite in akshin

One day four baddle beasts wer on a trail. Ther wer three baddle beasts on the trail the baddle beasts wer the duck and the owl and last of all the ponny. Then the beafer jummped on the trail they begen to fite.

The duck ran on the back of the beafer but the beafer theru him in the air and whn he got on the gond he ran and shuted him and the owl made him faw down. And the ponny got him to go crasy.

And they won!

Check for understadeen

1. Whut did the ponny do?
2. How did wader win?
3. Whut wer the good gies names?

The asers, sh.

1. Make the beafer go crasy.
2. Bi making the beafer faw down and bi making him go crasy.

4. Whut did the baddle beasts do?
5. Whut did the beafer do?

3. Duck and owl and ponny.
4. Fite
5. Faw down and go crasy

“candy riddles” (no doubt influenced by Willy Wonka). Upon completing Kin Platt’s (1977) *Big Max in the Mystery of the Missing Moose*, he wrote his own “Big Max” mystery. Early in April he decided to read the Sunday paper (mainly the toy ads and comics); that afternoon he produced the first edition of *Jacob’s News*. Also in April he read Louis Sachar’s (1978) *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* and the following week wrote a sequel, *Sideway School 2*.

Other school activities stimulated writing, too. A unit on letter writing prompted a letter to Mrs. Morris, filled with ideas for what to do on her summer vacation. Cooking applesauce (no doubt mixed with reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 1964) inspired a recipe for a candy bar. A class discussion of favorite foods produced a recipe for homemade pizza (which he gave to Mrs. Morris and badgered her about for days until she told him that she had made his pizza, and it was indeed delicious). A social studies lesson on map skills produced a map of his school cam-

pus, and weekly spelling lists and math worksheets generated a “Willy Wonka” spelling list (which he insisted Mrs. Morris give to the class) and the “math sections” of his Captain Power story.



Two rather curious sources were a miscue and a model. First, when Jacob saw the writing my wife’s fifth graders had posted on the bulletin board, he immediately assumed she had conducted a writing contest. That evening he decided we should have a family writing contest, so he wrote his entry, “The Rocket avdiner.” After listening to Mr. Bailey, the Chapter 1 reading teacher, talk about how he used to make up rhymes (mnemonic devices) to learn multiplication facts, Jacob had to write his own.

At home, family activities frequently stimulated writing. For instance, after visiting a Mexican restaurant, Jacob wrote a menu for “Jacob’s Caffay.” (By the way, I’m not sure whether or not the trip to the restaurant is the sole source of this writing. After I ordered a peanut butter sandwich, he expected me to pay





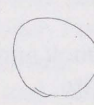

Jacob's  
Caffay



Breakfast  
pancakes... \$1.79  
toast... 5¢  
fresh toast... \$1.55  
eggs... \$1.66






Speckles  
the 10th   
\$1.70  
the 20   
\$1.80  
"Very good!"

Luch  
peanut presle  
\$1.09  
peanut  
90¢  
jeley good  
80¢  
peanut jeley  
70¢

Speckles  
the 19...   
\$1.00  
the 29   
50¢  
"Very good!"

Dinner  
PIZZA... 20¢  
  


Speckle  
  
10  
for  
50¢  
  
50¢

Drinks  
  
  
  
  
  
all  
10¢

him — it turned out he needed money to buy a new Lego set. I suspect, therefore, the motivation for his menu was greed, not Mexican food. In the same way, one Sunday he wanted doughnuts for breakfast, but he knew better than to pester his folks; so he made a box clearly labeled "Donken Donuts," hoping we would take the hint.) Further, a long hike in the desert was the source of his book *The Draggen*. An outing to a minor league baseball game inspired the baseball story he inserted in his mother's birthday card. Finally, getting into trouble for refusing to make his bed and clean his bathroom resulted in a long list of contrition — all the daily chores he promised to do religiously.

Two conventional sources of writing were special occasions and social obligations. For example, Jacob wrote a thank-you letter to Santa, who had mailed him a personal letter; he drew his mother a "Wonka" birthday card, which included a story in lieu of the traditional greeting; and he wrote a thank-you story

for our friend Carl, who had given him a collection of coloring books and assorted cereal-box goodies. Somewhat unconventional sources were music and games. To clarify, after watching the Grammy Awards and learning how to play solitaire, Jacob made up "song cards," which combined song titles with playing cards. (He put his favorite song on an ace.)

Curiously, the one source absent is adults. Mrs. Morris never assigned journal topics; my wife and I suggested only one topic — friends — and that was when Jacob couldn't think of anything on his own and asked our advice. Interestingly, some of his shortest pieces were written in response to our suggestion.

Clearly, I wasn't joking when I said the sources of Jacob's writing were infinite. He truly did write about anything and everything. Further, unlike more experienced writers, he rarely pondered purpose. On the contrary, his writing was a reflex — stimulus-response: to



see, hear, touch, taste, and smell was to write. Put simply, his writing was pure self-expression, even when he wrote to an audience. In Donald Graves' (1983) terms, he wrote "for the sake of writing" (p. 153). Like Glenda Bissex's (1980) son Paul, he was interested in accomplishing writing, in the written object itself, and in sharing the product (p. 101). What impressed me most is that he viewed writing as fun — a form of play — the sources and subjects of which were as varied and rich as his environment and imagination.

### Forms and Features

Reviewing the hefty stack of Jacob's writings, I was amazed by the many genres. He wrote (not necessarily in this order) letters, signs, recipes, a game (his song cards), a menu, labels (a Wonka candy bar wrapper and a "Donken Donuts" box), a Wonka Golden ticket (including prize-winning information), lists (Wonka spelling words, daily chores, and hit songs), maps of his school campus and of North and South America, a newspaper (including weather, sports, comics, and music), a season-long baseball schedule, a box score, a movie timetable, a greeting card, riddles, math worksheets, songs (both lyrics and musical notes), comprehension questions, descriptions of friends, rhymes (as mnemonic devices), various forms of fictional narratives (two books, one table of contents, a continuing story, lots of short stories, and a "foke" tale), and a poem.

Surprisingly, Jacob did not write in the one form Denny Taylor (1983) found most common in her study of family literacy: notes (pp. 32-34). I'm not sure why he never wrote us notes, but it probably has something to do with his being an only child. After all, he doesn't have to compete with brothers and sisters for our attention, so why write a note when he can talk to us in person?

Although I was amazed by the forms of Jacob's writing, I was fascinated by their distinctive text features because they revealed how closely he paid attention to form, how much specific information he assimilated and comprehended. For example, Jacob loved to write stories, but there were significant differences between the ones he composed on the computer and those he wrote with pencil and paper.

His computer stories were never illustrated, possibly because he didn't have a graphics program to use along with the word processor, possibly because he didn't see any need to illustrate a type-written story (his mother and father never illustrated their writing). Moreover, he used fairly conventional paragraphing and line length. In many ways, these stories looked like those in his basal reader and trade books. In fact, he sometimes attached "Check for understadeen" questions, just like those in his reader. (He even answered them.) Curiously, he changed font size for some stories, switching from 18 to 12 point print. Although he claimed these size shifts were a matter of personal preference, I suspect they had something to do with the length of his writing—shorter pieces were usually in 18 point, longer ones in 12 point. Also, his new basal reader had smaller print, as did his most recent trade books.

In contrast, his pencil-and-paper stories were always illustrated, either with pencil or crayon drawings. Inexplicably, he sometimes used conventional paragraphing (indenting the first line, keeping a set left-hand margin and consistent line length); other times he wrote "creative" paragraphs. His Captain Power story, for example, contained many paragraphs that began with a full-length first line, then funneled down with an ever-expanding left-hand margin until the last line was little more than a word or two on the right side of the page.



When I asked him why he wrote such paragraphs, he replied, "I like to. It's my style." Further, these stories never included comprehension questions (or answers). At most he concluded with "The End."

One feature common to both computer and pencil-and-paper stories was combined forms. His horse racing story, "The Maze," for instance, had a song in the middle. The continuing Captain Power story incorporated math problems, comics, musical notes, and song lyrics. I suspect Jacob combined forms because he'd seen it done in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). (Roald Dahl frequently inserts a didactic poem in the middle or at the end of a chapter.) I also believe he was experimenting, playing around with forms. It's likely as well, since his composing was so spontaneous, that he simply wrote whatever was currently on his mind. If he was working in his classroom journal right after a math lesson, then why not put some math problems into the Captain Power story? When I asked him why he combined forms, he said, "Because I want to . . . so I can make it longer."

Some global features common to both kinds of stories were titles, chapter markers, and headings. (An aside: When Jacob was typing his book *The Draggan*, he decided it had to have a table of contents. So, using *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972) as his model, he typed not only the titles of every chapter but their page numbers as well. When I asked him how he knew ahead of time how long each chapter would be, he stared at me incredulous and said, "That's how long I'll make them." Evidently he understood the concept of "Table of Contents" but not the cause-and-effect relationship between chapter length and page number.)

Common local story features were (1) quotation marks to indicate dialogue (although he didn't use new paragraphs

to indicate a change of speaker); (2) dialogue tags (both subject-verb and verb-subject); (3) compound intensifiers ("we ate a very, very, very big brekfist") and exaggerated exclamations ("Nooo! Nooo!") to heighten effect; (4) indiscriminate hyphens to break words at the end of lines (or wherever he felt like it); (5) ellipses (usually a string of dots) "to make the reader guess what's coming up next"; and (6) random commas and periods to mark a pause, the end of a sentence, or — more often — the completion of related actions and thoughts.

Of course his biased father found Jacob's other forms of writing as fascinating as his fictional narratives, but I won't comment on each piece; rather I'll focus briefly on two forms that contained the most significant features. First, *Jacob's News* demonstrated his knowledge of the different sections of a newspaper and the unique styles of each. For example, he wrote his weather report in short, telegraphed sentences ("Today higt in the 80s. Tomarow in the higt 80s."), similar to the weather summary that appears above the local temperatures in the morning paper. By contrast, he wrote his sports story in longer, more complete sentences; and not surprisingly it contained an editorial bias ("It was a sad day on Saterdag becuas the wildcats lost in the finle four." His headline read "Boo hoo 88-78.")

Second, the "Jacob's Caffay" menu revealed his understanding both of form and function. The cover was boldly marked in fancy script, immediately capturing the diner's attention. The contents, organized by meal ("Brekfist," "Luch," and "Dinner"), were clearly labeled and easy to read. Most appealing, though, were the daily specials, which included eye-catching illustrations, tempting prices, and testimonials ("Very good!"). Although Jacob claims he wants to be an architect when he grows up, I think he may have a future in



journalism or advertising.

Overall, I'd say Jacob was working hard on the forms of writing: genres and text features. Not only did he model what he read — Nancie Atwell (1987) would call it "borrowing" (pp. 227-228) — but he also invented his own meaning systems, for example, the string of dots to make the reader anticipate action. In essence, he was grappling with what Ken Goodman (1986) calls "centrifugal and centripetal forces" (pp. 21-22). Ultimately, I hope he achieves not stasis, which is stagnation, but a dynamic tension wherein he continues to invent and experiment, but also communicates meaningfully.

### Becoming a Writer

By May, Jacob was a writer. Every day he wrote at school in his classroom journal and at home on the computer or with pencil and paper. Writing was as natural and easy for him as watching television and playing with dinosaur models. However, it was not always so. At the beginning of the school year, he would not write. When my wife asked him in August, just out of curiosity, to take Mary Ellen Giacobbe's spelling assessment (qtd. in Graves, 1983, p. 185), he refused to do it. He didn't know how to spell those words; he was afraid he'd spell them wrong.

So how did he come so far in nine short months? First, we promoted writing — in any form — as an enjoyable activity. To get him over the "correctness hump" we encouraged inventive spelling; regardless of how unconventional his writing looked, we gave it unqualified praise. That was Jacob's big breakthrough. Because the writing pleased us, it pleased him; because it pleased him, he wrote more and more. Further, we never pushed revision. Of course, he corrected as he wrote and occasionally when he re-read, but whenever we asked questions about meaning

or suggested revisions he'd grow sullen and resistant. Consequently, we backed off. Jacob was happy with whatever he wrote, and we were happy he was writing: for the time being, fluency was enough. Moreover, to demonstrate the importance of written language we wrote a lot ourselves, both for work and pleasure. Finally, we exposed him to an enormous amount of print. Our home is filled with books, we read every day, we read to him each night. In short, Jacob witnessed the value of reading and writing in our lives, and somehow — whether by our model, his teacher's instruction, or his own natural desire to make meaning — he came to see the value of reading and writing in his own life as well.

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