
May 1976

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Recommended Citation

Auger, John and Mason, Stevens T. (1976) "The Second "R", *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol10/iss2/6>

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THE SECOND "R"

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Students whose reading levels prevent them from fully understanding the ideas and concepts put forth in texts can glean a great deal of this information through listening to classroom lectures and discussions. However, their abilities to express and learn new concepts and ideas need channeling. To this end creative writing can play a major role.

Creative writing serves to affirm the beliefs, ideas, feelings, and concepts gained through classroom discussions and lectures. At the same time it frees those students who have reading difficulties from the frustration of materials and texts with which they are unable to deal. Creative writing can be-

come the backbone of a language-arts/social studies program, a forum for expression, understanding and learning.

Writing like any other skill requires practice, perseverance, and patience. The more time and effort spent in its pursuit the better the end product becomes. What daily exercise and training can do for an athlete may be applied to the student who goes through daily exercise and practice in writing. The mere fact that a daily writing exercise is performed does not guarantee success or perfection; however, it does help to develop and improve performance with the proper teacher guidance.

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expanding it. For example:

Sample expansion:

Child says, "Meat hot."

Teacher says, "Yes, the meat is hot."

Sample extension:

Child says, "Meat hot."

Teacher says, "Yes, it certainly is hot. Do you think you'd better wait till it is cool?"

Cazden found the extending language of the teacher to be more effective in developing the oral language abilities of children.

As teachers of young children, we need to be aware of these insights and devote conscious effort toward accepting the child's own language system. Then, building upon the strengths, we may hopefully pave the way for further success in language and reading.

Methodology and Motivation

The "feel" of the pen or pencil or paper, the ability to be fairly comfortable in that position, is a learned behavior rather than a natural reflex. If indeed this is the problem of some writers, it can be overcome through daily practice or what can be called quantity exercise.

The purpose of quantity exercise is to arrive at quality work. For some students, writing is practiced so little that quantity helps build their confidence and their stamina. Students who are proficient in writing already could forgo a good deal of the quantity writing and begin immediately on quality development. For those students who are not adept in writing however, quantity serves to help them get their ideas down on paper. Once this is done the task of arranging their thoughts, developing form, improving spelling, and writing mechanics in general can be attacked one at a time; but the primary task is to get something down in writing. Capture an idea, tie it to the paper, and then work on it. Don't let students be afraid to put something down just because they haven't yet learned writing mechanics. Writing form comes with writing practice.

Daily writing exercises do not necessarily have to be formal topical papers. They can take the form of disguised assignments such as: write a short note to someone in the room, draw an abstract picture and write down what it is, copy down the words listed on the blackboard, write down the names of everyone in the room. These quantity exercises can be anywhere from five to fifteen minutes in length and are designed to give the students daily writing experience. The object is to get the kids writing. As time goes on quality will replace quantity and daily exercises may take a more serious form and deal with a daily journal or class notes on lectures. Sheer boredom with meaningless exercises often motivate some students to request more chal-

lenging assignments, and it is the teacher's job to be aware of this shift in attitude as it occurs and to furnish the proper guidance at this point.

From the very outset of the year, the kids should understand what they will be doing. Explain the program to them and let them know that indeed they will be writing everyday, and that they will improve and become increasingly skilled and proficient. Just the fact that they know what will be going on and what can be expected of them helps to ease their minds and increase their cooperation.

Show your students that to you their work has value. Make brief comments in writing on their papers rather than check marks or an abstract grade, or worse, nothing at all. The "power of the pencil" is often underrated; students look and work for positive comments on paper even if it is as simple as: "Good Work", "You're getting better", "Keep it up", or "I like this". It does not have to be long to be appreciated.

Teachers can illustrate the quality of writing desired through the simple act of reading to their class a few of the stories that some of their students have written. This exercise provides instant feedback in that the youngsters can get an idea of what the teacher finds appropriate in terms of quality, content, and style. It is also a great ego-booster for those who are having their paper read, and it helps to motivate others to try and write well enough so that their papers will be read to the class too. A word of caution: If a student would rather not have his or her paper read in front of the class, this request should be respected. Not to do so might have a negative effect on that person for a variety of reasons.

Standard materials for writing should always be available to the students. If someone forgets paper or pencil he should be supplied rather than made an issue of. Yelling at someone for forgetting his supplies

might cause him to remember to bring them the next time, but it also might cause him to cease to care about writing. Losing a student is far more serious than losing a pencil.

Length of specific assignments shouldn't be an issue. If a student has said all he can about a particular subject, accept what he has said rather than reject what he hasn't said. Some kids like to have an idea of how much to write, though. Depending upon the assignment given to students, the length should be flexible enough to accommodate everyone.

Topics, Projects, and Ideas

This section deals with specific creative writing assignments. Most of the topics and ideas have built in motivators that will encourage even the most reluctant writers to strive for quality and improvement with every assignment. Some of the topics and projects may lend themselves to modification by the teacher depending upon the grade level being taught.

Several of these topics lend themselves more readily to large or small group projects, while others are more suitable for individual or independent undertaking; this again is where teacher discretion plays an important role. These topics are geared toward social studies classes:

- a. After reading a section from your social studies book, rather than answering the question at the back of the unit:
 1. draw four cartoons that capture and illustrate what the chapter was about.
 2. jot down about ten key words and ideas that help you remember what you just read. Using those words on graph paper, make up your own word maze and see if anyone can solve it.
 3. using the ten key words and ideas, make up a cross word puzzle. (This assignment is best done in small groups and often

takes up two class periods for it involves writing specific questions for each word used in the puzzle.)

4. summarize in twenty-five words or less what the chapter is about.
- b. If you lecture to your classes let them take notes and use them on tests. This gives them great motivation for taking notes and helps teach them to organize and summarize their thoughts.
3. Many social studies classes utilize the newspaper for teaching current events. Where this is the case:
 1. clip out major news headlines and pass them out at random and have the class write the story behind the headlines.
 2. write a letter to the editor concerning something you feel strongly about. If it gets printed you will receive an extra credit "A" for your effort.
 3. draw and illustrate your own editorial cartoon. Have it be about something that is currently in the news.
 4. if you worked for the newspaper, what part of the newspaper would you like to write? Demonstrate your ability in that area by writing an article for that part of the paper.
- d. Using a map of the country or state you are studying:
 1. write down the directions you would need to get from point "a" to point "b".
 2. copy down the name of the area you are studying, and behind each letter of the name, list each city, town, country or river, etc., that begins with that same letter.
- e. The study of history lends itself well to many creative writing encounters:
 1. write your own personal history by telling what you were doing

and how old you were when other historic events were occurring around the world.

2. write the history of your family tree.
3. write the true story of what really happened at (fill in any historic occurrence).
4. write about what you think would have been one of the worst times to live in.
5. interview the oldest person you can find and write down what they tell you life was like when they were your age.
6. write about a famous person with the same first or last name as you have.

These topics and projects are geared toward language-arts classes:

1. The day that the Water People took over the world.
2. If you were a teacher and in your class there was a student who behaved and acted just like you do, how would you go about trying to teach and understand that student?
3. The day I learned how to ride a bike.
4. The dumbest thing I ever did.
5. It's hell being a snake.
6. My most frightening experience.
7. My earliest memories are
8. If I could make a movie it would be about
9. List about five unrelated words on the board, i.e., WATER, DOG, ROCKET, CRUNCH, EYEBALL, and have students write a story using those words somewhere in the story.
10. A variation on the above topic is to have the students write a story on a specific topic like "submarines" using the five words listed.
11. Give the beginning or ending of a story and have the students fill in the rest, i.e., Across the room

a noise was heard. Was it , or , and they never did find out what happened to the magic stone.

12. I was an automobile owned by a teenager.
 13. The day my fingernails dropped off!
 14. The day I got my ears pierced.
 15. The flood in the Alka-Seltzer factory.
 16. What if birds had no wings.
 17. Your best friend is writing a letter to the "Readers Digest" about you. The title of his letter is "The most unforgettable person I have ever known", what will he write?
 18. What if there were no electricity?
 19. Cut out a picture from a magazine and write five words that describe the picture. (This is a good way to get into Haiku and Tanka poems).
 20. Write a story about yourself, but don't use the word "I" anywhere in the story.
 21. Write down as many new creative writing topics and ideas as you can think of. (This is a great way to gather fresh and new ideas for future papers).
 22. What do you want to remember when you grow up?
 23. If people had ears on top of their head
- f. Some creative writing topics and projects lend themselves well to large or small group work:
1. write a story in pencil and once you finish to back over it and erase every fifth or tenth word. Pass it to the person next to you and see what they put in the blanks.
 2. team up with someone and tell them a story. They will write it down for you, then when you finish it's your turn to write their story for them.

3. write and stage an original play. Try to make it last about fifteen minutes. (This requires a group of ten or more, and vague as it may sound, has never failed to be a success).
4. make up some funny "get well" cards or birthday cards. Draw and illustrate them on colorful construction paper that has been folded in half lengthwise.
- g. There are some creative writing exercises that can be used to help improve style and form and mechanics:
 1. write a paper about anything you choose, or get a topic from the teacher. Upon completion of your paper switch stories with someone and rewrite his paper while he rewrites yours. After you finish, compare the original with the re-written version.
 2. write three stories, one in the past tense, one in the present tense, and one in the future tense. Have all three stories be about the same thing.
 3. exchange and correct each others papers, return them and explain to each other what you corrected and why you did it.
 4. once a paper has been written, let it become a target for perfection. Have the author reword it and improve upon it for as long as he needs to. Furnish any assistance that is requested. The final product should be the perfect paper, free from any errors.

5. write a story using no punctuation or capitalization. Pass it to someone in the room and see if he can correct your paper.

Evaluation and Grading

Rather than grade each and every paper, the author has found that there are several alternatives to this:

1. check and comment on all papers, but only grade every fourth one.
2. have the students choose the papers they want to have graded and which they merely want credit for.
3. treat each paper completed as an extra credit project.
4. after three consecutive papers have been turned in, return them and have the students rework the one they feel they did the best on, and that paper will be graded.

Most school districts still require grading, and the majority of students like to know how they are doing. So, the need for grades is apparent, but they should reflect improvement based upon a particular individual's potential and should not serve as punishment for failing to reach perfection. Grading depends upon what the teacher is looking for, and what his or her beliefs concerning writing are. For students who don't enjoy writing and who are finally performing, perfection should certainly not be expected, and grades should be based on their individual potential, performance and effort, rather than on what the others are capable of doing.