

Newsletter

SPRING 2008

FOCUS ON WRITING

In the seven years since implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, writing instruction has often been reduced to formula-driven methods designed to produce passing scores on state assessments. George Hillocks, Jr., a noted researcher, studied writing instruction in five states and reported his findings in *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning* (2002). It isn't enough to teach form and genres, Hillocks maintains—thinking is at the heart of writing, and students benefit greatly from teachers who model their own writing processes and demonstrate the thinking behind their writerly decisions.

In an [article](#) about his research, Hillocks writes, “In the programs I examined in 30 school systems, six in each of five states, teachers indicated that they spent classroom time almost exclusively on teaching students the formal characteristics of the three or four types of writing [e.g., narrative, expository, and persuasive] they believed would be necessary for success in the state writing exams.” Hillocks goes on to say that whatever the type of writing, the five-paragraph essay was the form that teachers “drill[ed] . . . incessantly,” to the detriment of their students’ development as writers and thinkers.

LEARN MORE about Hillocks’ work in Carl Nagin’s thorough [review](#) of *The Testing Trap*. For a view of one state’s efforts to reduce reliance on the five-paragraph essay formula, see [“Kicking ‘FCAT’ essay habit”](#) in the *St. Petersburg Times*.

NEW SCHOLASTIC RESOURCES FOR TEACHING WRITING

If drilling students on forms isn't effective in developing competent, confident writers, then how do you teach writing? Barry Lane, who has taught writing at all levels and worked as an artist-in-residence at hundreds of schools across the United States, has posed and answered this question in his own inimitable, engaging style in a new book titled [But How Do You Teach Writing? A Simple Guide for All Teachers](#). With humor and wisdom, Barry addresses the needs of both beginning and experienced teachers of writing at all grade levels and across all subject areas.

For those who work with younger writers, Ruth Culham and Raymond Coutu offer their considerable expertise in a new Scholastic book, [*Using Picture Books to Teach Writing With the Traits: K-2: An Annotated Bibliography of More Than 150 Mentor Texts With Teacher-Tested Lessons*](#). The authors have organized by trait more than 150 annotations of new and classic books that will delight young students—and inspire powerful writing. Peppered throughout are 18 step-by-step, trait-focused lessons based on specific books. **[Book Image]**

Ruth Culham also has new trait-based K-2 lessons on DVD in [*Inside the Writing Traits Classroom*](#), which also includes a spiral-bound guide. See master teachers use traits at every stage to support students as they draft, revise, edit, and publish their work. Literacy coach Debbie Stewart of Topeka, Kansas, says “Watching these teachers and kids in action in the next best thing to having Ruth Culham come to your classroom.”

In [*Teaching Young Writers to Elaborate: Mini-Lessons and Strategies That Help Students Find Topics and Learn to Tell More*](#), veteran teacher and writing consultant Megan Sloan shows you how to help children in grades 1-3 develop their writing by adding definitions, asking questions, using visualizations, and lots more, with the help of mentor texts. The strategies and lessons can be used for teaching nonfiction and fiction during shared, guided, and independent writing. The author includes record-keeping forms that make it easy to document students’ growth.

COMING SOON FROM SCHOLASTIC

Look for these books at the International Reading Association’s annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia:

- *Guiding K-3 Writers to Independence: The New Essentials* by Patricia L. Scharer and Gay Su Pinnell—This breakthrough book introduces the concept of *community writing*, which focuses on the relationship between group writing—such as shared and interactive writing—and children’s own independent writing development. Community writing invites rich talk about the writing process and integrates other key elements associated with children’s growth as writers.
- *Teaching Writing in Kindergarten: A Structured Approach to Daily Writing That Helps Every Child Become a Capable, Confident Writer* by Randee Bergen—A master teacher shares her yearlong plan for daily writing, providing complete lesson plans and tips for motivating all learners, managing writing time, and assessing children’s work effectively and efficiently.
- *Mastering the Mechanics: Ready-to-Use Lessons for Modeled, Guided, and Independent Editing* by Linda Hoyt and Teresa Therriault—Three separate books for grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 each weave explicit instruction in grammar, punctuation, and spelling into your curriculum in short, manageable sessions. Includes Skills Continuum and suggested Yearly Planning Calendar.

- *Grammar Study: Helping Students Get What Grammar Is and How It Works* by Janet Angelillo—The author uses an inquiry approach to help students understand the purpose and power of grammar to transform their writing. Her approach goes beyond teaching isolated rules and shows writers how grammar frames our thoughts and words in ways that make sense to others.
- *Visual Tools for Differentiating Reading and Writing Instruction: Strategies to Help Students Make Abstract Ideas Concrete and Accessible* by Roger Essley with Linda Rief and Amy Levy Rocci offers a rich array of supports such as storyboards that serve as a bridge to text and help text-challenged students make giant strides in writing.

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR TEACHING WRITING

The [National Writing Project](#), whose mission is to improve writing and learning in the nation’s schools through teachers teaching teachers, offers a variety of resources and links to NWP sites where summer institutes and workshops are offered.

The Alliance for Excellence in Education report to the Carnegie Commission, “[Writing Next](#),” identifies research-supported instructional practices for students in grades 4-12.

NEW AUTHOR FOCUS: Barry Lane

Barry first experienced the power of his own writing in fourth grade, when his teacher, Miss Carolyn Foley, “put a picture on the wall and told us to use our imaginations to write a story. That’s when I realized you could think about your stories at night when you were not sitting at your desk. Most kids would write a paragraph or two but I would write for days, long stories that Miss Foley encouraged me to turn into books. Sometimes she would read my books to the whole class. I had a small cult following in the back of the room.”

Despite Barry’s “cult following” of fellow fourth graders, he didn’t plan to become a teacher of writing until his last semester of graduate school at the University of New Hampshire, where he was influenced by Don Murray and Don Graves. During his last semester at UNH, he taught two classes of freshman composition using Murray’s *Write to Learn*, a text that modeled writing from a writer’s point of view.

After graduate school Barry moved to Vermont, where he continued to publish essays and short stories and wrote his first book on writing, *Discovering the Writer Within*, with his friend and colleague, Bruce Ballenger. Over the course of his career, Barry has taught writing across the spectrum, from kindergartners through prison inmates.

When we asked Barry what advice he would give teachers who are struggling with students’ reluctance to revisit and revise their writing, he offered this insight: “When a student says, ‘It’s done,’ it is. Our job as teachers is to help students to see the possibility in the text, to prolong the moments before they think it’s done.” In his new Scholastic

book, *But How Do You Teach Writing?*, Barry shows teachers how concepts of craft like leads, endings, and meaningful elaboration can give students a real handle on revision.

Challenged to provide an extended metaphor for his new book, Barry said “It’s like eating a good home-cooked meal. It’s as comforting and nonthreatening to new teachers as whipped potatoes; as healthy for school curriculum and children’s learning as string beans; and as practical for the day-to-day classroom and protein-rich as meatloaf; and to top it off, it’s got a lot of pie-and-ice-cream good humor mixed in throughout for the joy of learning.”

Barry also made sage observations about state writing assessments that have resulted in students being trained to produce formulaic five-paragraph essays. “Formulaic writing is not only bad writing, it’s also bad teaching. Writing is a tool for thinking, so when we create robot writers we, in turn, create robot thinkers. This is the tragedy of the high-stakes testing epidemic. On the bright side, real, voice-rich writing scores higher on most high stakes tests,” says Barry, who has interviewed test scorers and collected considerable evidence. As a result of his study of writing tests, he has developed a workshop he calls “How to Succeed at Writing Tests While Having a Good Time.” Barry believes “that students should be taught to play with the prompt, like it’s a new toy or a partner to dance with.” He also shared the following “dance steps”:

1. Step away from the prompt.
2. Find your truth.
3. Find or create a structure.
4. Dance: elaborate.

Send questions and comments to Barry at barry@discoverwriting.com.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Many of our Scholastic Professional Authors will be speaking at the upcoming IRA Convention, May 4-8, 2008, in Atlanta. At www.scholastic.com/professional visit the home page to download a PDF file of author sessions and signings at IRA. A [downloadable schedule of all upcoming author appearances](#) is also available.

QUICK QUIZ

1. Which two of the following are strong research-supported strategies for improving the quality of writing?

- a. decontextualized grammar instruction b. prewriting c. sentence-combining d. weekly spelling tests

True/False:

2. Writing instruction should begin only after children learn to read.

3. Young children should have opportunities to choose their own topics, audiences, and purposes for writing.
4. Teachers who model and demonstrate through their own writing are more effective.

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. b and c [Source: *Writing Next*]
2. False—the synergistic relationship between learning to read and learning to write makes it crucial to teach writing in kindergarten. [Source for all T/F items: [NWP's *Because Writing Matters*](#)]
3. True—even the youngest learners engage more deeply when they have meaningful choices.
4. True—Think-alouds provide strategies that young writers can apply in their own writing.

NATIONAL POETRY MONTH

If your state testing has concluded, celebrate by writing and reading poetry. If you're still gearing up for end-of-year exams, set a day aside for creating, reading, and performing irresistible poems.

- If the weather in your corner of the world is suitably spring-like, consider a poetry field trip . . . within your own schoolyard or on a walking tour of the neighborhood.

Preparation for Poetry Field Trip

If your students already have writers' notebooks, have them label a fresh page "Sensory Images" and divide it into five columns: Sound, Taste, Smell, Touch, and Sight. Lead a warm-up lesson that invites writers to contribute classroom images in each category, using the freshest, most vivid language. Share images the students create and discuss which ones are the most memorable—and why. Continue collecting images on your poetry field trip and then craft them into poems when you're back in the classroom. Lorraine Ferra's *A Crow Doesn't Need a Shadow: A Guide to Writing Poetry From Nature* (1994) is a treasure trove of ideas for poetry field trips.

- Organize a [poetry tournament](#) modeled after the NCAA basketball national championship games. Middle school teachers on an NCTE email list have provided many models and options for organizing the competition. At the [NCAA Web site](#) you can download a 2008 printable blank bracket in both PDF and Excel.
- Write poems with colored chalk on the sidewalks around your school. If you're old enough to know what Burma Shave signs are, create similar effects in your schoolyard, with short, punchy poems composed by groups of students. Or involve your whole school by wrapping the building in butcher paper and passing out

markers. Inviting the media will inspire stellar efforts. Dave Morice's *The Adventures of Dr. Alphabet: 104 Unusual Ways to Write Poetry in the Classroom and the Community* (2007) has 101 other inspirations to offer.

- For year-round enjoyment—and instruction—[Poems for Teaching in the Content Areas: 75 Powerful Poems to Enhance Your History, Geography, Science, and Math Lessons](#) by J. Patrick Lewis, with teaching ideas by Laura Robb, is a great resource. Here's a sample: **[Book Image]**

Chromosome Poem

By J. Patrick Lewis

Each chromosome is home
To many genes
(The body's biological machines)
That tell you if your eyes
Are brown or blue,
Determine sizes
Of your hat, your shoe.

And tell you if your hair
Will wave or frizz.
The chromosomes sort out
The Hers from His
By making you
A Mr. or Ms.

- “I grew up in a family full of talk—my parents were natural storytellers, and at a young age I learned the wonder, the merriment, and the power of words,” says Helen H. Moore, author of *A Poem a Day*. “Our house rocked with riddles, puns, quotations, jokes, blessings, imprecations, and rhymes. In order to get any attention at all, my brother and sister and I learned we had to have something to say and a special voice to say it.” In her giant collection of poems, Moore seeks to delight primary students each day from September to summertime as they build language skills and become aware of the world around them. She includes book links and an activity to make the poem as meaningful as possible, from sharing to snowfall, honeybees, hiccups, and magnet mystery!