

Dodging Past the Pen

What to do with Reluctant Writers
who are Gifted

Your Personal Teacher's Treasure



Treasure

Write Down...

...At least one thing that **you** treasure about teaching writing. Ideas could include:

- The ways **you** enjoy teaching writing best.
- Some approaches that really feel like **you**.
- Some writing activities through which **you** have got really good results.
- A snippet of two of something great a student wrote for **you**.

Value What You Have

- Value your own Teacher's Treasure. Add it on, blend it in, or take turns with different teaching approaches.
- I believe all good professional development, like all good teaching, seeks to value strengths the learner already has. Let's not throw any babies out with the bathwater.

Writer's Treasure

- The gifted child who is a reluctant writer has Writer's Troubles. He or she also has Writer's Treasure.
- Value ways in which your reluctant writer already shows what he or she knows. Add tailored written activities, blend writing in with other tasks, or take turns with written and non-written approaches to demonstrating knowledge.

The Reluctant Writer

- The only label you ever lose is pregnant, but many of these children will change.
- The person with “writer’s block”?
- A range of reasons for poor engagement in writing, and perhaps a range of additional labels to consider.
- A label is only useful if it leads to a useful strategy or solution.

What Do We See?

- When writing, may write well or poorly.
- May write freely on certain topics.
- May engage diligently in other tasks (or not).
- May really want to write.
- May write in other settings or genres.
- May be more frustrated than the teacher or the parents. Handle with care!

Why Can't I Just Say It?

- Many gifted children do not see the point of writing things down:
 - I can write already, I don't need to learn how.
 - I can't possibly write it all, but if you have two or three spare hours, I could tell you my ideas.
 - I lose pieces of paper, so why write on them?
 - When I started writing, nobody thought it was cool, so I have retired as a writer.

What About You?

- Share with someone sitting near you something that you wish teachers did not have to write down (or assess, or do).
- *If you are somewhat brave*, share an avoidance strategy you use.
- *If you are really brave*, admit what you don't write down that you really should!
- **Warning:** Gifted children will sometimes use adult-like avoidance strategies!

In the Literature

- Gifted children ... have exceptional memories and can verbally explain everything they have learned, so they don't understand the need to clearly explain what they know in written form to a teacher.

Brenda Rinard, 2008

http://nswagtc.org.au/images/stories/infocentre/rinard_reluctant_writer.pdf

A Purpose for Writing

- ... writing and thinking are interdependent. ... Writing is not, as many assume, simply a straight transcription of already worked out ideas. Our writing often surprises us. When writing, we may make unusual connections or uncover thoughts and ideas that were unconsciously buried in our brains ...
- Gifted children must be led ... to see the intrinsic value of writing, and not reduce writing to a scribal act.

Brenda Rinard, 2008

Implications for Practice

- How can you model writing as a more visible way of thinking to the young gifted writer?
- How else do we teach children that writing is more than “a scribal act”?
- Brainstorm in small groups. Share ideas.

Old Rules, New Twist

- Writing to children, writing with children, writing by children. (Established New Zealand teaching practice).
- Your modelling or writing, and written models that you discover, must show those “aha!” moments, and how to deal with complex ideas.
- Rearranging lists and brainstorm results can provoke “aha!” moments.

Writing as “Thought Processing”

- Model the way writing and thinking interact and draw attention to its usefulness:
 - “That reminds me...”
 - “I’ve just realised...”
 - “I’ve just thought of a better way to put that.”
 - “Now that I have written that down, I’m not sure if it is true... Does what you write help you to check your facts?”

A Hunch

- Among gifted children I have taught, I have noticed that some of my most reluctant writers are constant talkers.
- These children often have great things to say but labour or circumnavigate the point.
- I suspect that these children have not successfully used writing as a tool to reflect on their thinking, and that this adversely affects their talking style.

Purpose

Old Rules, New Twist 2

- Writing for an audience (established New Zealand teaching practice) is not a scribal act.
- The response of gifted children to audience opportunities may reflect asynchronous social skills and interests, Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities, or an innate talent for communication as a writer or a presenter.
- Clustering gifted children within classes is more likely to produce an audience who can respond with appreciation.

It Won't Be Any Good

Many gifted children feel daunted by the task of writing because they compare what they write with published work, and do not know how to write at that standard - they are paralysed by perfectionism.

- No, I don't want to write in that book. It doesn't look very nice to me. I want to make a hard book with a **very** shiny cover, and a **very** colourful picture, and that kind of writing there. (Gifted ex-writer, aged 3).

What About You?

- What is something you haven't written, or wouldn't write, because it might be too hard?
- What if you believed I expected this “too hard” task of you now?
- What if you expected this “too hard” task of yourself?

In the Literature

- Perfectionism was a positive attribute when it inspired efforts to be excellent. However, when their imagination outstripped even their precocious abilities, perfectionism often became a vehicle for self-punishment.

Jerald Grobman, 2006

http://www.hoagiesgifted.com/underachievement_in_exceptionally_gifted_adolescents.pdf

What Writers are Saying

- People have writer's block not because they can't write, but because they despair of writing eloquently.

Anna Quindlen

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9404E0DD1739F930A1575AC0A9649C8B63>

- I think writer's block is simply the dread that you are going to write something horrible.

Ray Blount, Jr.

http://www.quilldriverbooks.com/reports/banish_writers_block_forever.htm

For Perfectionists to Ponder

- We can't be as good as we'd want to, so the question then becomes, how do we cope with our own badness?

Nick Hornby

<http://www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/01/01-07hornby-speech.html>

Implications for Practice

- Use genres and topics that don't invite perfectionism and do invite a sense of fun.
- Probe the student's opinion of his or her own work, and help solve key problems troubling the student first.
- Be honest but supportive with feedback.
- Share the task at times.
- Provide models and resources.

Risks of Humour as a Motivator

- Humour is the single most powerful tool, in my own experience, for getting gifted boys to stop worrying and start writing.
- It can produce a writer who is only comfortable writing in a humorous style, so another motivational phase must follow.
- Emergent humour has its moments!
- Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities + Humour = Judgement Call (with classroom management implications).

Ready to Write?

- Developmentally, there is a lot of debate about young gifted children writing.
- Causes of gifted children's disengagement from writing may be varied, in my experience:
 - A start at five may be a very late start when set against the child's ability to form intentions for writing. Frustration and disengagement results from the mismatch of intentions and skills.
 - A start at two or three may create social tension that the child picks up on. This child may then disengage.

Ready to Write?

- A child who is pushed to write before they want to tell stories or organise information will see no purpose in writing, and may develop entrenched resistance.
- A child who has many gifts may seldom need to make an effort, and may find writing an effort.
- Posture, muscle tone and motor skills may be advanced, at age, or below. This impacts on writing.

A Balancing Act

- In my opinion, the early writing of gifted children, whether at school or earlier, should seek to balance four things:
 - Writer's intentions – enabling the child to communicate.
 - Writing skills – motor, perceptual, graphophonic, and the conventions of writing.
 - The ability to respond to challenge with sustained effort.
 - Finding joy in the written word.

Collaboration

- Think of something that you feel should be changed about the education system today.
- Choose something you feel particularly strongly about.
- Share your point of view with someone sitting near you.

So Much More to Say?

- Did you have more to say?
- How did you feel when I cut you off?
- Gifted children may be reluctant to write because they feel “cut off” from expressing themselves in full. For the young gifted child, assistance with expressing ideas is sometimes the only reasonable way to get all their ideas onto paper.
- A sense of completion is rewarding.

Collaborative Writing

- Scribing can enable or disable the writer.
- Take dictation or collaborate to organise?
- Chaining and reverse chaining approaches.
- Choose the scaffold you put in place during your turn with the pen – clarify intentions, word bank, layout, style.
- Transparent process to withdraw support.

Peer Collaboration

- Like ability may enable a “no passengers” rule.
- Diverse abilities are more common, even in a gifted group.
- Assistance in sharing the task cooperatively will be required.
- In my experience, gifted groupings think harder spontaneously. They write better as a result of teacher effort!

Reading as a Model

- Gifted children may read often but still not read to their potential. This limits their access to suitable models for their writing.
- They may limit their reading through preferences.
- We must limit their reading for their emotional safety.
- Some texts are appropriate in part.
- Texts for adults are often at their interest level if read collaboratively, but seldom at their interest level if read alone.
- Pictures are magnets.

Snippets of Eloquence

- Deborah Fraser has published several articles on using metaphor to enhance children's creativity as writers. She has used these snippets of creative writing intended for adults as effective models for children.

<http://www.aare.edu.au/00pap/fra00393.htm>

- Quotation searches on the internet can yield amazing snippets of literature that show such diverse things as how to agree, disagree, persuade, or express paradox.

Reader's Reflections

- Sometimes we can ask a writer to emulate a model, but at other times we can ask them to reflect on what was successful in the writer's approach.
- Guided reading can include guided criticism of content, style or organisation.
- Writers can reflect on the difference between their own work and the work of a published author, where it relates to an agreed writing goal.

Modelling Organisation

- Children with a great deal of information to communicate need a means of organising what they have to say.
- A blank graphic organiser can be a joyless thing, and it has more individual blanks than a blank page. Scary for some!
- An attention-grabbing model of well-organised writing is harder to find, but far more motivating to some students.

Reading Levels

- Gifted children tend to read at a range of levels, with many gifted preschoolers reading or listening to at least the picture captions of adult non-fiction books.
- Levelled books in schools can provide an input level (high – read this) and an output level (lower – write something a bit like this).
- If the child's set reader is not significantly more complex than his or her writing, it is not modelling the next step in recording complex ideas.

The Art of Attraction

- Luring the gifted writer into action can be tricky.
- Rosemary Cathcart's REACH model emphasizes choice, and I find this helpful for most of my students.

<http://www.reachgifted.org.nz/teachersmanual.htm>

- My most strongly writing-averse students like to be shown the task with the least writing, but still be given a choice. This builds trust, before expectations are raised.

Think Hard, Ease Into Print

- Early written tasks may need to be snapshots of a complex spoken whole.
- Tony Ryan's Thinker's Keys include higher level thinking tasks which require minimal writing, and can be adapted to most topics.

http://www.tonyryan.com.au/cms/pages/BM_Menu/Thinkers+Keys/Free+Thinkers+Keys+for+Kids/!/display.html

Match the Message to the Child

- Gifted children are drawn to novel ideas and perspectives, and to complex subject matter. They are often interested in social justice issues, and may be able to make links between diverse bodies of knowledge.
- Notice which characteristics of giftedness are most evident in the child you teach. Your greatest success in motivating writing is likely to come from thinking tasks that draw on these characteristics.

<http://austega.com/gifted/characteristics.htm>

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/characteristics.htm>

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/gifted/talented/parents/nurturing/pdf/understanding/3_characteristics.pdf

Each Child is Different

- Some children want to write at length, and extra time provision will encourage these children to write.
- Humour, horror and incongruity will motivate some children to write, but signal a suspension of behavioural boundaries for others.

A Different Angle

- A novel approach is needed where learning material is familiar.
- A balanced diet is something most children study again, and again, and again.
- In small groups suggest a novel writing task that will call on the writer to approach the balanced diet from an unusual perspective.

A Balanced Diet

- You have landed on an alien planet. Local creatures eat many different foods, and preliminary results indicate that 30 of these foodstuffs will not be toxic to humans. How will you decide the quantities of each that your crew should eat to ensure a balanced diet?

A Balanced Diet

- A scientist once told me that he believes weevils in flour and rice are essential sources of protein in some third world countries. The people eating this contaminated food are vegetarians. How would you boost their protein intake if the flour and rice supply were to become insect-free?

Know Your Student

- If you know what fascinates a child you can “sugar the pill” of written work, by incorporating it into the task.
- Learn how the student works:
 - Discussion or art as planning?
 - Work with teacher, others or alone?
 - Technology helps or hinders?
 - Preferred style of feedback.

Alternative Writing Technologies

- Computers are very helpful for the reluctant editor.
- Using a range of computer applications provides complexity and novelty that may be enticing or distracting.
- Typing takes time to learn. Voice to text still has limitations.
 - Training the software to the voice.
 - Indiscreet – all work is “on show”. (Dear John...).
- Computer overuse affects health and learning.

Computers and the Twice Exceptional Child

- Computers and other electronic text editors are highly valued as writing tools by many adults with dyslexia.
- Children who are twice exceptional tend to go through phases of valuing the technology, and phases of seeing it as an unwelcome marker of their differences.
- It's OK if I sometimes drive and sometimes walk – does a child have similar choices about using tools that enable them?

Tools not Telitales

- If you are dyslexic and you use a computer to write with it's "assistive technology" but if you're not dyslexic and you use a computer to write with it's not? Huh?

Richard Wanderman, 2003

http://ldresources.com/files/tools_and_dyslexia.pdf

Only Part of the Journey

- You would be amazed at how many people buy an expensive tool and think that the purchase alone is the solution to the problem. It is not. In fact, it can lead to more and different problems and sometimes does. The tool itself is a part of the solution; the regular use of the tool over time is another part of it; getting an assignment done with it is another part; and a changing attitude about learning and self is another part.

Richard Wanderman, 2003

Technology

Writer's Treasure

- The gifted child who is a reluctant writer, whether twice exceptional or not, brings his or her own writer's treasure to each attempt to write. Technology and teacher approaches must help display that treasure, not replace it with something else.
- Personally, I find it easier to help a reluctant writer than a willing bore.

Alternative Products of Learning

- Woodwork writing vs. fine furniture:
 - Which displays the most knowledge?
 - Which is the “real product” of the carpenter’s learning?
 - Which came first?
- Draw and write on the same topic:
 - What if the art is the more significant product?
 - What if the art is still needed to enable the writing? (Interdependent products).

Endless Possibilities

- Four categories of learning product – Visual, Oral, Kinaesthetic and Written.

Tracy Riley, 2000

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/gifted/reading/theory/plan-diff_e.php

- Expression Style Inventory includes such categories as commercial and service products.

Renzulli et al, date not found.

<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/sem/exprstyl.html>

Useful Chapter Online

- Materials and Methods for Teaching the Gifted, Karnes and Bean, 2nd Edition, 2005.
 - Chapter 6, Product Development for Gifted Students, Stephens and Karnes, p151.
 - Chart listing products on p 154.
 - Discusses evaluation, reflection.

<http://books.google.co.nz/books?id=f480PJC1iMoC>

Alternative Products of Learning

- What is writing and what is not?
 - Calligraphy?
 - HTML?
 - Lists?
 - Labelled diagrams?
 - Cartoon strips with speech bubbles?
 - Slide shows with captioned images?
 - One's personal shorthand or txt notation?

A Personal Message

- I was a reluctant writer at school.
- I wrote very capably when I did write.
- The stress of being unable to start on a written task is huge for children.
- Please let your students believe **it will get easier** if they keep persevering, because it does.

Please Reflect

- Can you add something new, and find something to keep, in your personal jewel box of Teacher's Treasure?
- Have you marked an "X" (dig here) on your mental map of the talents of a child you teach, that may help you uncover his or her Writer's Treasure?



Reflection

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