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Return to Horrorland

Hank Benjamin

Many of my students rate writing just behind washing dishes and cleaning their rooms. They have memorized a personal list of “can’ts, don’ts, and won’ts” they repeat when confronted with the dreaded essay. “I can’t spell. I don’t have anything to write about. I don’t like to write. You can’t read my writing. It won’t be any good.”

I personally believe there are only two basic strategies for helping Negative Attitude Writers, commonly known as NAWs. You can teach them to write small or get them to write big. Small writers start with a simple sentence and gradually work up to a paragraph and maybe even a short story. Big-writer teachers ask for the “impossible”—a major story or maybe even an entire book. My NAWs have been writing small all of their academic lives, and all it has gotten them is personalized NAWs lists.

Big writing calls for a big start, similar to that of a drag racer. I get my little NAWs revving their engines so that when I finally yell, “go,” they fly right past their “can’t do” lists without thinking about what is happening. The author that every fifth-grader knows best gave me the idea.

R. L. Stine has a simple formula for success; he writes books that children want to read. His books start fast, bounce from one suspense-filled event to the next, and end with a twist. They have minimal character, setting, and plot development, and much of what happens is illogical and

violates the laws of nature. It doesn’t matter; kids eat up his *Goosebumps*’ books.

I start the school year by giving each child a copy of Stine’s *One Day At Horrorland* and reading it orally with them. It is about three children (one logical, one brave but foolish, and one cowardly) who visit an amusement park run by monsters. The children survive the rides and other activities through a combination of courage and dumb luck. It is a perfect read-aloud book, providing the teacher doesn’t mind cheering and other reactions between the chapters. I add to its natural appeal by adding sentences of my own like, “Clay knew that he could be in big trouble if he didn’t find a restroom in the next thirty seconds.” I also offer to excuse students during the scary parts if they are worried about nightmares. Reading the book is great fun and takes about four hours.

When the book is finished I ask the class if they would like Mr. Stine to write another Horrorland book. If so, could they suggest additional rides and events that he could include in the story? The chalkboard is soon full of interesting and gross possibilities. The little dragster motors are starting to warm up.

The conversation then turns to what it is that makes the *Goosebumps* books so interesting and what tricks Mr. Stine uses to keep us in suspense. Our lists generally include things like foreshadowing, misinterpreting what is seen, unbelieving

adults, descriptive words, interruptions in the story, runaway imaginations, dreams, things people are naturally afraid of, and real danger. The motors are getting louder.

The ideas on our chalkboard are so good that it seems only logical that we write the book for Mr. Stine. The children are told to find one or two writing partners and think about what they could put in their chapter. We will then connect all of the chapters ending up with a book. The children may use anything already suggested or come up with something totally new. But they must all follow a few simple rules:

- The characters in our book are to retain the same basic personalities they have in *One Day at Horrorland*.
- We are to try and imitate R. L. Stine's descriptive sentences so our book will be scary also.
- The adventures we create must take place in an amusement park that is run by monsters.
- Our adventures should be different from the ones in the book—and not too gross.
- And no killing off any of the heroes.

The motors have gotten so loud that I am forced to shout last-minute instructions. I yell, "go," and the children scramble to find partners. A few ask to do it alone, which is OK for now. The room quiets as the writing starts. I circulate to answer questions and jot down each group's ideas. I try to make sure that we don't get too many chapters on the same ride or activity. The NAWs roar off the starting line, right past their list of objections without realizing what they are doing.

The children stopped writing when I announced it was time for recess. Shane asked if he

could stay in and continue writing. I indicated that it was his choice. Suddenly he got a shocked look on his face and said, "What am I doing? I hate writing!" He shrugged and continued on, absorbed in his masterpiece.

We may or may not get enough material to publish a class book. Some of the children will write wonderful chapters that are as good as those of Mr. Stine. Some of the children will write chapters that violate our writing rules and can't be used in the book. And some of the children will give up before their chapters are finished. It doesn't matter where we end, only what we learned along the way. This is a foundational writing activity. I use it to introduce the four cornerstones on which I build our writing program:

- Writing is an enjoyable activity.
- Reading and writing are connected.
- Every writer needs a writing team.
- Creativity and communication are our goals. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are only tools to help us.

Reading Stine's book to the class stimulates student imagination, makes it easy to find the structure of the story, and provides a concrete model for students' own writing. Moreover, this is real writing for a real purpose that students value.

About the Author

Hank Benjamin, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, has taught fifth grade in Eaton Rapids for twenty-two years.