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ON TALKING TO AUTHORS: NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Ruth Nathan

A core aspect of process writing is the teacher-child conference. It is here that teachers have the opportunity to help children grow as writers. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to outline a few basic writing problems that I have found repeatedly in children's drafts, and to share conversations I have had while conducting teacher-child conferences. My intention, each time, was to help a youngster see a pervasive trouble spot in his or her writing.

For those of us who teach young children, approaching a conference is no easy task: we understand that personally-selected topics are highly meaningful to their owners. On the other hand, I have found that children want teachers to help them think about their writing. Pragmatically, their papers are published for others to read, and children want their classmates to view their work favorably. More importantly, however, I believe children enjoy these writing conferences because they receive their teacher's **undivided** attention. When we think about how little time there is in school for us to talk individually to our students, it is no wonder they seem to relish conferences.

Though a topic of this paper is writing problems, I would like to remind you of what Kenneth Koch (1970) said in **Wishes, Lies and Dreams**: "I was useful in the classroom for getting the children in a good mood to write and then for keeping them going. And they were useful to each other in creating a humming and buzzing creative ambience." It becomes much easier to help children grow as writers if a good mood is floating about. Respect, understanding, and a tendency not to be a "know it all" promotes the trust which is necessary if we want children to hear our suggestions.

WRITING PROBLEMS

Too Much Detail

One writing problem that I encounter often is **too much detail**. Usually this problem occurs when a child is telling about a treasured trip. Ricky, a third grader, wrote the excerpt below about Florida:

I went on a trip to Florida. It was better than last year because I had more money this year. On the first night there was fun because I got to see my dad. We just sat around and talked that night. The next morning my Aunt found a 20 dollar bill in my shoe. I figured it was my dad. My Aunt was with us and she was the one who found it! Except it was in my shoe so I got to keep it. That morning I jumped out of bed and went upstairs to get my bathing suit on. As soon as I ate breakfast I ran out the door and then I went flying down the stairs skipping one or two and jumping down the last three. ... When we got up to the condominium I siad, I'm hungry. Are you? My grandma siad yer, my grandpa siad so am I so did my aunt. So my grandma made some sandwiches, they were good, we ate them right up. After we ate we watched tv...

Overall, Ricky's piece had a lot to say and was good in parts. For example the section about his father was thought provoking, and his use of language was often good (e.g., "I went flying down the stairs..."). However, Ricky had a lot of "dead wood" in his piece (too much information), and I wanted him to begin to recognize this general writing problem, a problem we all have with first drafts. I asked Ricky, "Do you think that you may have too much information anywhere in this piece?" We

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talked about what this meant, and about how too much information can get in the way of meaning.

Ricky re-read his piece to me. I asked him to stop when he came to a section that he thought he could remove without changing the meaning of his piece. He found the section about eating lunch and watching T.V. himself.

Not enough information

In Ricky's Florida piece, there was a section about Disney World's Tomorrow Land that needed work: there was not enough information.

[Tomorrowland] has all the fututre-istick rides. It has things like Moom Mountain. It was scary.

Ricky had many lines like, "It was scary." Lines like this, such as "It was neat" or "It was fun" appear a lot in children's prose. This type of sentence leaves the reader up in the air. Why was it neat? or scary? or fun? Recognizing lines that "tell" rather than "show" is an important writing skill. We help children become aware of them when we are aware of them and when we help young writers explore what their lines mean. "Can you explain why you wrote 'It was scary'?" I asked. Ricky explored his senses by charting what he saw, felt, and heard. Then he wrote:

A monorail takes you to Tomorrowland. That has all of the fututreistick rides. It has things like Moon Mountain. Witch is like a big mountain that is holowed out. Except it has a roller coaster inside. You get in a rocket thats really a rollercoaster. It takes you throught a big tunnel that has big long blue lights. I was scared. All you could hear was screaming. All you could see was little lites that look like planets. You had to hold on to cold metal. It seems like your flying through the solar system.

Ricky connected with his audience by developing and revising his original "telling line."

Jennifer had a similar "telling" line in her piece about her first day at school.

When I got my yellow heart saying what class I was going to be in, I immediately went to this little book and looked for room 9. ... The first day of school came. My teacher was so nice. On that day I had a nice time. By 11:15 I didn't want to go home.

When I first read Jennifer's draft, I got the feeling that her line "On that day I had a nice time," could have been elaborated. What did she mean? I asked her and she gave me a full, beautiful response orally. Later she wrote:

On that day I had a nice time. We got to pick our own desks, and I sat next to Stacey. I was happy because Stacey was my best friend. We went outside and played a special game. That was fun. New pencils, new books, new crayons, they were fun to use.

Incredible, isn't it?

Le Ann also had an underdeveloped draft. She had gone to the hospital and recounted her visit there:

I was in the hospital for five days, and I almost had brain damage. They had to treat me. I was in emergency for two whole hours. After the five days were over, I got to go home".

(Note: I think she meant to use an exclamation mark rather than quotation marks.)

I wanted to know more about Le Ann's experience. Donald Graves (1983) and Donald Murray often talk about a reader's hunger for information. Well, I was hungry, so I asked Le Ann to elaborate. First she did this orally. Then she sketched some ideas on a tidbit of paper (she wrote single words and attached other words to these). The next day, using her scratch sheet, she wrote:

It was scary in the hospital and lonely. the trays the needlwa and tools! The doctors scared me the most and nurses. The sound of surens while I was restis. The doctrs

, standing over me in emergency. There was no one to talk to. And no friends around I had to stay in.

Lack of organization

Quite often a child's piece has a clear topic, but it is unorganized. This is a third writing problem. Here, an excerpt from a piece by Marc, is just such an example:

They (there are) different kinds of fishes in the Lake I known. One fish is the trout. He is the most fast fish in the Lake. The bluegill lays its eggs down at the bottom of the Lake. Like the sword fish is the dagger fish in the poscik ocean. And like the srke (shark) is eat's people! and like the dofn eat's food like other smell (small) fishes in the dofn eat gold fish. and the randow trow eat's dady cat fishes and the cat fish stay at the dome (bottom) of the Lake.

It is obvious that this section is about two things: fish information, in general, and specific information about what fish eat. The day I read this piece I asked Marc two related questions. First I asked him what this section was about. Then I asked him if he knew how he could organize it a little better (i.e., I explained my confusion). Marc said his paper was about what fish eat. I asked him to circle the sentences that dealt with just that issue, so he did. Once his sentences were isolated, Marc and I talked about the rest of his piece informally.

In actuality, Marc was learning about forming paragraphs during our conference. What seemed so special to me at the time was that he was learning about this in context, his own. It's very exciting to see language workbook exercises transfer into real needs.

Chris, like Marc, was also having trouble organizing his thoughts, but in his draft the problem was a little different. Chris had written a piece that was essentially a list of all the rides he had gone on during a trip to Cedar Point, an amusement park near his home. I believed at the time that Chris was able to think on a higher level, that he could go beyond a

list, so I asked him if he could group the rides in any interesting way. He answered quickly and blurted out, "Oh, yeah, some rides were scary and others were just fun." We talked about giving his piece this focus. He wrote:

First Draft:

When I went to Cedar Point I went on the Demon Drop. It takes you up 131 feet and this wheel moves you over and you go down 60 miles per hour.

The second ride was the White Water Landing and I went on it and got all wet.

The third ride was the swings. They probably go five miles per hour.

Second Draft:

At Cedar Point the sounds are amazing. They're amazing because the roller coasters sound like something banging down the stairs. It is also good because people are screaming and music is playing.

Some rides are scary and some rides are fun. The Demon Drop is scary because it takes you up 131 feet and lets you go. You think it's never going to end. But when it does end everybody gets off and gets back in line. The Blue Streak is fun because it is fast. It seems like you are in a car going 50 miles per hour.

Unclear drafts

Sometimes drafts seem unclear, another writing problem: You don't feel sure about what an author is trying to do. If a youngster seems unable to tell you the purpose or theme of a piece, a strategy that I have found helpful is to ask the writer to underline the part that tells what the draft is about. In the following story it seemed that Tony, a fifth grader, was trying to prove that Santa was real. But, I wasn't sure. So I asked him to underline the part in the following draft that best explained what the characters were trying to do:

I'm a reporter from the Special Christmas issue which only comes once a year which you may or may not know. This story is about many kids who

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think department store Santa clauses for real, but still others think there is no santa clause. I'm here to prove both theories wrong, and ours right. We believe that there is only one santa and he is real. Therefore we must ask kids what they think and we will try and prove them wrong. Hello little girl what is your name? "My name is Mellisa Lee" and what do you think of Santa? I think he's a fake, and I cant talk to strangers so BLLLt." Well we got Mellisas approval, lets see what this boy says. ... "What do you think of Santa?" "I think his spirit is in the north pole, but is also fake. But the good spirit is also in store Santas." "Augh, this kid .." (The author concludes, after one child's testimony, that the other theories are wrong and his is right.)

Tony underlined, "I am here to prove both theories wrong, and ours right." I could see I had correctly understood his purpose, so I went on. The problem I was having, I finally told him, was with his concept of "proof." In my opinion, one child's agreeing with him was no reason to declare himself the winner. I mentioned this, and Tony countered with, "It's just a story." But, then he went back to work on it. Later he met with his usual group, and I overheard them talking earnestly about my question.

Aside from sharing this anecdote to illustrate an unclear draft, another important thing to catch is that Tony and I were truly talking to one another, and we were doing so in an atmosphere of mutual respect. He didn't view me as his primary source of negative feedback, and I didn't view him as a youngster that needed a teacher. Tony was a writer, and I was one of his readers.

I have shared, in this past section, a few pervasive writing problems: too much information, not enough information, lack of organization, and unclear text. There are others, to be sure. For example, some pieces seem flat; you hardly know that a human being is on the other side of the pencil. Other pieces have a good beginning, but go nowhere. Though I haven't covered very many of the problems

I've come across, I hope you have identified a few issues relevant to your situation, and that you have gotten the feel for what a teacher-child conference might be like. There **is** a time to teach, and the writing conference is a good place to do it. (Much better than putting the child on the spot in front of the class.) Here you are working on a one-to-one basis and the author can have your **undivided** attention. This allows you to interact easily: to talk and learn together.

WHEN TO KEEP QUIET, AND WHY

Every once in a while, when I read a piece that seems extraordinarily delicate, I get the feeling that I shouldn't say too much. The piece below, by Angela, is just such an example. Angela's grandfather died, and it was clear that she was using her writing time to think about his death and all the feelings that surrounded it. Here is an excerpt:

My grandpa is wonderful.
Last Christmas my grandpa got sick. He had pneumonia. He got so sick that he had to go to the hospital. My grandpa was losing his hair. Finally, he was so sick he had to be in the emergency room. He had to stay in the hospital for about four weeks, and even longer.
My grandpa was losing his memory. He was so, so tired of the hospital, and wanted to go home. So, they let him go home.
Finally it was his birthday and he got a lot of things.
Then it was my brother's birthday. And, the next day after my brother's birthday my grandpa died. ...
I will always remember Grandpa. And the scary thing about it is when my dad was shaking him. My dad's sister told him just to leave him, that we cannot help him, he is too sick. And then he died. ...
My grandpa was 55 or 56 when he died. And he liked to watch TV too. And he worked at a church. ...
My grandma had him creamated. Now he is silver box in my grandma's night stand in her bedroom. ...
Every night, before I go to bed, I talk to him about all the times we've

been together. He used to take me to his church.

But one thing about this story-my grandpa wanted his way. He wanted to be home, and he was.

Some lines in this piece are misplaced; they could be moved for better or for worse, but the teacher must always ask (if not out loud, at least privately) why a writer might be saying what is being said. To deal with misplaced sentences in a piece like this would be preposterous. In this case, I would have destroyed Angela's trust in me as a conference partner, and I probably would have crushed her desire to use writing as an outlet. There is a time to deal with misplaced sentences, and a time to listen.

There are other occasions when I say very little. When a child who has hardly written a word all year comes to me with a full paragraph, I usually leave well enough alone and praise what I see. Though on the next day I may ask for more information, I keep a low profile on day one.

Sometimes shrugged shoulders cause me to remain quiet. If I have asked a question like, "What is your piece about?" and get a humph and "I don't know," I assume that the youngster has had a change of heart about the draft. I may press a little, but chances are I'll back off and wait until a more compelling piece shows up.

Delicate pieces, drafts produced by great expenditures of energy, and uncertain authors (who seem deliberately uncertain) all cause me to rethink my stance as a listener. Sometimes conference partners just have to wait until the time is right to help one another move on.

IN CONCLUSION

Learning how to be a good conference partner takes time and effort. The best

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advice I can leave you with is be patient, with yourself and with your children. I am reminded of these words written by Carl Rogers (1961) from **On Becoming a Person**. In his introduction he tries to take us inside, to tell us some of the things he has learned from the thousands of hours he has spent working with individuals in personal distress. He says:

The next learning I want to state may be difficult to communicate. It is this. **The more I am open to the realities in me and in the other person, the less do I find myself wishing to rush in to 'fix things.'** As I try and listen to myself and the experiencing going on in me, and the more I try to extend that same listening attitude to another person, the more respect I feel for the complex process of life. So I become less and less inclined to hurry and fix things, to set goals, to mold people, to manipulate and push them in the way that I would like them to go. I am much more content simply to be myself and to let another person be himself (22).

The need to rush in and "fix things up" is an urge best left at home, for educators as well as psychologists. On the other hand, I do not believe we should be intimidated by the naivete which endears us to children's writing. Questions which attempt to help readers understand authors' messages seem appropriate in any school setting, be it elementary or secondary. The trick during a writing conference is to know when your question may be far beyond your student's ken. That is why teaching is truly an art, and why helping children solve their writing problems is difficult. But, like artists, we should expect to have to practice.

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