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By: Steve Graham, Charles A. MacArthur, Jill Fitzgerald

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Writing Instruction for Young Children

Methods Targeting the Multiple Demands That Writers Face

DAVID COKER

When teachers examine the writing of a young child, they frequently focus on a single quality, such as organization, attention to genre conventions, handwriting, degree of elaboration, or spelling. A child learning to write does not have the luxury of being selective. The writing process requires that children integrate many different kinds of information from many sources.

Imagine the task for a first grader who has been asked to write about one thing she learned during a class field trip to the science museum. To make sense of the assignment, she should be aware that writing serves as a tool for communicating ideas. Even in the highly regulated context of a classroom assignment, she needs to appreciate how people use writing to share information, and she must recognize that her teacher expects her to describe the experience well enough so that someone who did not join the class would understand.

The child sorts through her memory of the event, which could include everything from the demonstration of static electricity given by the guide to the argument she had with a friend on the bus to the miraculous water faucets in the bathroom that turn on when you put your hands in

the sink. From the collection of memories of the field trip, she must decide which events are relevant to the task and which ones are not. To make the decision, she might be thinking about the expectations of her reader, who is probably her teacher, who created the assignment. She also needs to choose how to frame her writing. Will she follow the generic conventions of fairytales and begin with the line "once upon a time"? Perhaps she will select the style of a newspaper and adopt a more dispassionate perspective. The decision will draw on her knowledge about how writers package and present their text.

Once she has decided how to organize the piece, she must select the right words to represent her memories. The ideas are then connected to each other and planned at the sentence level. In order to write the words, she draws on her spelling knowledge. If she has difficulty spelling any of the words, which is highly likely, she might use a common spelling strategy such as segmenting the word into its individual sounds. When the sounds are isolated, she relies on her knowledge of the alphabetic principle to select the right letter or letters to represent each sound.

Even if she has quick access to a word's spelling, she needs to be able to write the letters. If her recall of the letter shapes or the motor plans for forming letters do not operate swiftly, she may labor just inscribing the words on the page. If her handwriting demands close attention, she runs the risk of forgetting her plans for words and sentence structure. As she writes, she must follow the conventions that dictate that she print in a row from right to left and use spaces to separate words. During the entire process, she also works to maintain her attention on the writing task and to try to ignore her best friend who has just slipped her a drawing on the way to the pencil sharpener.

The previous description was intended to demonstrate that writing is an immensely complex language task. The challenges that children face as they develop into writers are substantial; however, thoughtful, responsive writing instruction can support young students and speed their growth as writers.

This chapter focuses on the writing development of children from preschool through the early elementary school years. In the first part of the chapter, I describe some of the major challenges that children face as they learn to write. These challenges include:

- Understanding how we use writing to communicate
- Unlocking the conventions or concepts of print
- Discovering that the alphabet is used to represent speech sounds
- Developing knowledge of the world and of text genres
- Writing or typing well enough to express ideas fluently

I also present instructional approaches designed to address each of these challenges. The instructional methods were selected because they are appropriate for preschool and early elementary classrooms, and they have been demonstrated to be effective. At the end of the chapter, I describe a writing lesson taught by Mrs. Nelson in her kindergarten classroom. In the context of a single lesson, Mrs. Nelson demonstrates how teachers can provide engaging instruction that addresses many of the writing challenges that students face.

There are two principle goals for this chapter. First, I hope that readers will come to appreciate the substantial challenges involved in young children's writing, particularly the confluence of skills and knowledge necessary to write well. I also hope that the instructional examples provide teachers with an understanding of some effective teaching methods to help young students develop into skillful writers. The description of the writing challenges students face as well as the instructional suggestions reflect the theoretical position that writing development is complex and can be attributed to the interplay of cognitive, social, cultural and instructional forces (Coker, 2006).

CHALLENGE 1: UNDERSTANDING HOW WE USE WRITING TO COMMUNICATE

One essential lesson for young students is that writing is a way to share ideas and communicate. This fundamental insight about writing must be learned through experience with writing and print (Tolchinsky, 2001). Very young children learn that oral language is a symbolic system used for communication. A crucial difference between speaking and writing is that young children have considerably more experience with oral forms than they do with written forms.

By the time children enter preschool or kindergarten, they understand an enormous amount about how we use oral language to communicate. Even though nearly every preschooler knows that spoken words can serve a range of communicative functions, there are stark differences in children's language skills based on their experiences at home. One startling example of this was provided by Hart and Risley (1995), who have shown that children have vastly different early language experiences and that those experiences at home are closely related to the development of vocabulary knowledge.

Similarly, children's exposure to the uses and practices of writing and reading varies widely (Purcell-Gates, 1996). The amount and nature of exposure children have to writing and text-related practices

may be related to how well they understand the way writing functions (Purcell-Gates, 1996). In one study of low-SES (socioeconomic status) students, Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) found that children entering first grade differed in how well they understood the uses and communicative nature of print. The differences in print understanding were related to the students' success in literacy instruction. Children who see the adults in their lives using writing in a variety of ways to express their ideas and to communicate may come to appreciate the utility of writing faster and better.

Children need to be introduced to the various ways in which we use writing to communicate in society and to gain practice using writing as a form of communication. As Wong and Berninger (2004) noted, an important instructional goal for developing writers is to learn that writing is similar to speaking because both offer ways to communicate with others. Children benefit from opportunities to see how adults use writing and to practice those forms.

In the classroom, teachers can create opportunities for students to observe and participate in authentic literacy activities through the use of thematic play areas. For example, by setting up a classroom post office where students can mail notes to each other and to others outside the classroom, teachers can create opportunities for students to use writing in a meaningful way. Other literacy-rich play areas might include a restaurant with menus and notebooks for servers to record patrons' orders. In a study of preschool literacy environments, Morrow (1990) created a veterinarian's office with a waiting room supplied with magazines and books. Students could take the roles of doctors and nurses to record the condition of the imaginary animals who were treated. In this study, teachers modeled the writing and reading behaviors commonly found in the setting, and over time children incorporated the literacy behaviors into their play.

Another effective way to increase students' participation and exposure to writing activities is to supply classrooms with a range of writing materials. Morrow (1990) found that simply adding books, book-making materials, and various types of paper and pens resulted in children engaging in more writing behaviors in their classroom play. In another study, students in first-grade classrooms with access to writing materials were found to write longer descriptions in first through third grades (Coker, 2006).

The understanding that writing serves a communicative function is essential for young students to grasp. Teachers who create opportunities in their classrooms for students to write may be enhancing students' awareness of the instrumental use that writing plays in society.

CHALLENGE 2: UNLOCKING THE CONVENTIONS OF PRINT

Experienced writers take their understanding of the rules of print for granted. As I drafted this chapter, I did not have to remind myself that English is written in a horizontal line, that one writes along that line from left to right, and that words are bounded by spaces; however, children are not born knowing these conventions of print. Very early in the developmental process, children benefit from specific activities designed to expose them to print and to familiarize them with the rules of text. By interacting with text, children can learn the conventions of print. In this way, reading experience can benefit children's writing knowledge. One effective approach for young children who are learning about print is to fill classrooms with books and to engage students in interactive book reading.

One crucial practice for classroom teachers is making sure that children are surrounded by many different kinds of books. Neuman (1999) demonstrated that flooding child care centers with books and training providers to engage in literacy activities can support children's engagement with print. The children who received the intervention developed their understanding of the concepts of print faster than the children who did not. Teachers also must engage in literacy activities to encourage students to interact with print.

One particularly effective practice is interactive book reading. During an interactive, or shared, book-reading lesson, the adult acts as a guide for the child. In one-on-one situations, the child and adult look at the text together, and the adult engages in a number of practices to draw attention to the content of the book and to the way that print operates. The book-reading practices involve drawing the child's attention to salient features of the text, including the print. As adults read, pointing with a finger helps illustrate the directionality of print and the way words are represented as isolated units. Good book-reading sessions involve discussion about how the illustrations contribute to the text's meaning and draw attention to new vocabulary or unusual syntax. Parent-child book reading has been identified as a powerful contributor to a range of skills, including emergent literacy skills such as name writing, letter identification, and sound blending and language skills such as vocabulary knowledge (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995).

Although book reading has been associated with a wide variety of literacy-related skills, not all book-reading practices are linked to student gains. Bus (2001) points out that the best book-reading practices involve drawing students into the text by making connections between the story and the children's experiences and interests.

One successful classroom adaptation of book-reading practices is

dialogic reading (Whitehurst, Crone, Schultz, Velting, & Fischel, 1999). The dialogic reading intervention aims to engage students in the reading process by having them assume the role of the storyteller. Teachers using dialogic reading follow the child's storytelling efforts closely and prompt the child with questions. For very young children, questions that teachers pose relate directly to the story, such as asking them to describe what a character is doing or to identify something in an illustration. For preschoolers, the questions are designed to be more complex, to encourage students to think about the overall story. The more challenging questions encourage children to make connections between the text and their lives. For example, a teacher might ask if a child has ever experienced something that happened in the book. Dialogic reading has been found to have a positive impact on language skills such as vocabulary as well as a range of emergent literacy skills. In particular, the intervention was related to positive effects in children's knowledge of several print conventions including identification of the print, directionality of print, and the mechanics of writing (Whitehurst et al., 1999).

Another way that teachers modify the book-reading practice for the classroom is through the use of big books. These oversized books are typically propped on an easel or stand where all students can see them. During the session, the teacher models the reading practice by pointing to highlight the features of print such as directionality, spaces between words, and the relationship between words and the story. Big books have also been found to be effective when students can follow along in their own copies of the text. When teachers model reading behaviors with a big book as students follow along in their own copies, students have the opportunity to handle the book and track print themselves.

Modeling the writing process with young students also provides teachers with the opportunity to highlight important print conventions. As teachers compose on a large flip chart or chalkboard, children observe how writers do things like separate words with spaces and write from left to right. Wong and Berninger (2004) recommend daily teacher modeling of writing to underscore the relationship between sounds and letter patterns, to demonstrate how writing is used for communicative purposes, and to practice spelling. By engaging students in print and modeling writing behaviors, teachers can facilitate students' understanding of the conventions of written language.

CHALLENGE 3: DISCOVERING THAT THE ALPHABET IS USED TO REPRESENT SPEECH SOUNDS

An important insight that children make as their understanding of the writing system expands is that print represents the sounds of language.

In their work with Argentinean preschoolers, Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979) found that children frequently believed the length of a word was related to the size of the object it named. For example, they interviewed children who reported that the word for *bear* must be bigger than the word for *duck* because a bear is so much larger than a duck. As children's experience with print grows and they begin to understand that letters represent the sounds in words, they gradually abandon theories that do not successfully account for the way print operates.

In English, knowing the names of letters may provide children with an important source of knowledge about the relationship between oral language and the alphabet. Since many 4- and 5-year-olds can recite the alphabet and can match letters with their names, Treiman, Tincoff, and Richmond-Welty (1996) examined whether children use their letter knowledge in their spelling attempts. The relevance of letter names to children's spelling was assessed in a study that compared the spellings of words that begin with the same letter. Students spelled a series of word pairs. One word in each pair began with the sound that matched the letter name, and the other member of each pair began with a sound that did not match the letter name. For the letter *b* the words *beaver* and *bone* were contrasted. *Beaver* begins with a sound that matches the name of the letter, but *bone* does not. Words that began with sounds matching the letter were spelled more accurately. The results suggested that letter-name knowledge may offer children insight into the way the alphabet works. There are a variety of effective methods that teachers can use to enhance young children's letter knowledge.

Frequently, children learn their first letters through their own names. For many young children, their name is the earliest word they recognize, primarily because it is familiar and meaningful (Bloodgood, 1999; Clay, 1975). The importance of names to children often results in their learning to write their names before other words and learning the letters in their names before other letters. As children practice writing and spelling their names, they gain experience matching letters to sounds. Having a stable relationship between the graphic and phonological form of a name provides children with key insight into how writing works.

Writing instruction can capitalize on children's interest in their names by providing opportunities for children to print their names. Once children can write and spell their names fairly well, teachers can make connections between the initial sounds in the name and other words. For example, a teacher might ask 3-year-old Tobias how to spell *table*. If he were unsure, she could make the connection to his name explicit and encourage him to compare the initial sounds of *table* and *Tobias*. Knowing that his name begins with a *t*, he may listen to *table* and realize that it begins with the same sound.

Drawing on children's interest in and knowledge about their names offers one instructional approach to the challenge of linking sounds to letters, which is known as the alphabetic principle. Many children learn some letters through the spontaneous analysis of their own names supported by their parents or teachers, but explicit instruction is also important to ensure that young children know all the letters in the alphabet.

In many preschool classes, teachers engage in a wide range of activities to teach children the alphabet, such as the alphabet song. Teachers also post the letters in the classroom and refer to them at meaningful moments. During book reading, teachers may draw students' attention to specific letters that are prominent in the text.

Another successful way to teach children the alphabet is through the use of mnemonic clues. Ehri and Roberts (2006) reviewed several approaches and concluded that pairing an illustrated mnemonic with letter sounds was effective. The technique involves having a character for each letter, such as Polly Parrot for the letter *p*. When the letter is taught, children are shown an illustration that integrates the shape of the letter with the character. This pairing is designed to boost children's memory of the letters and the sounds connected to the letters. Although teachers can create their own characters for each letter, there are commercial programs on the market that utilize this approach (Ehri & Roberts, 2006).

Another effective approach to learning the relationships between sounds and letters involves drawing students' attention to individual sounds in words (phonemes) and practicing writing letters (Berninger et al., 1998). One goal of this intervention is to teach students that sound-to-letter relationships often involve more than one letter. Berninger and her colleagues (2002) have pointed out that when children receive phonics instruction in the context of learning to read, the lessons often target the relationship between single letters and sounds. Little attention is usually devoted to the role played by multiletter spelling units. When children attempt to spell words by applying phonics knowledge in the reverse direction, they tend to look for single letters to represent single sounds. For students operating with this assumption, spelling words with vowel teams or digraphs can be frustrating. In order to avoid this confusion, Wong and Berninger (2004) recommend explicit instruction on the relationship between phonemes and functional spelling units. As children learn how these functional spelling units represent sounds in words, their spelling skill has been shown to improve (Berninger et al., 1998). In addition, phonics instruction is recommended that proceeds from the phoneme to the grapheme so that it is directly transferable to the spelling process.

The explicit instructional programs described above use a coordinated, systematic plan to introduce students to the alphabetic principle.

Students also benefit from the opportunity to practice with the spelling system as they write on their own (Tolchinsky, 2001). Students' attempts at conventional spelling have been called *invented spelling*. Practice with invented spelling has been shown to promote spelling development because it allows children to test and refine their theories of how the writing system represents sounds (Tolchinsky, 2001).

Encouraging invented spelling can play an important role in fostering spelling knowledge. In fact, the linguist Charles Read, who first wrote about the importance of children's invented spelling, encouraged teachers and parents to foster a positive attitude toward invented spelling and writing in general (Read, 1986). In addition to remaining open to children's experiments with spelling, teachers also can use students' writing to gauge their level of spelling knowledge and to tailor instruction to fit their needs. Before teachers can do either of these things successfully, they must understand the underlying logic behind invented spellings.

As Read (1986) has pointed out, "children's beginning spelling is essentially phonetic" (p. 1). When children know enough about the writing system to map letters onto sounds, they frequently make spelling mistakes based on the sounds of words. This can be seen when kindergartner Michelle spells *wrecking* as RIKING. The silent *w* is absent and the short *e* is spelled with an *i*. Since the vowel sound in *wrecking* sounds more like *i* than it does *e*, Michelle's error is understandable.

Teachers will profit from an understanding that unconventional spelling patterns often reflect students' burgeoning knowledge of the alphabetic principle. One example of this is Michelle using an *i* to spell the short-*e* sound in *wrecking*. Once teachers can analyze spelling mistakes, they can design instruction that addresses the particular point of confusion. Spelling development for many students follows a sequence that begins with initial consonant sounds and moves through vowel sounds, consonant and vowel letter combinations, and spelling patterns based on word derivations (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2003). Spelling instruction, such as word study, that is sensitive to students' developmental level and provides opportunities for students to work with orthographic patterns has been found to be effective (Bear et al., 2003; see Schlagal, Chapter 9, this volume, for a discussion of spelling).

CHALLENGE 4: WRITING OR TYPING WELL ENOUGH TO EXPRESS IDEAS FLUENTLY

In many kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, handwriting instruction is nonexistent. Based on their experiences as students, many

teachers believe that the sole function of handwriting lessons is to improve the appearance of printing or cursive. Furthermore, with personal computers widely available, very few important documents are handwritten any more. In some schools, primary-grade children receive instruction in keyboarding; however, these lessons are not widely offered.

Despite the assumption that handwriting does not affect writing quality, research on handwriting and composition quality suggests it may be very important. In one study of handwriting, Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, and Whitaker (1997) examined the impact of handwriting on both the quality and the production of text. For students in the primary grades, handwriting measures were related to both the quality and the compositional fluency of their writing. As children write, they must manage several tasks at once. During the composition process, a number of things need to be considered, including the topic, the structure of the piece, and the words to be selected as well as other concerns such as spelling. If handwriting is difficult and requires considerable effort, the child may not have enough resources to develop the ideas well, write in complete sentences, or determine the correct spelling of words. Children whose handwriting is fluid and automatic are able to transfer their ideas onto paper without experiencing an information bottleneck. From this perspective, handwriting is a low-level process that must be accomplished quickly and efficiently so that higher-level tasks can receive attention.

Based on their research, Berninger and Richards (2002) made several recommendations for successful handwriting instruction. First, teachers should adopt explicit methods and limit lessons and practice to brief periods of only 5–10 minutes. They also recommended that opportunities to write connected text follow handwriting instruction. Opportunities to write after handwriting instruction are designed to help children transfer their handwriting to the authentic writing task. The sequence of instruction should begin with attention to the formation of the letters. Once letters can be produced with reasonable accuracy, instruction should target automatic production of letters (see Schalagal, Chapter 9, this volume, for a discussion of spelling).

Berninger's (1998) instructional method begins with attention to manuscript letters. The intervention combines attention to the physical formation of the letters with the higher-order task of writing. Although cursive letters were traditionally taught sometime around third grade, Berninger and Richards (2002) suggest that instruction in keyboarding skills may be of greater value and should begin by first grade. (It is not clear whether keyboarding instruction should be initiated *before* first grade.)

CHALLENGE 5: DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD AND OF TEXT GENRES

In order for writing to be a meaningful activity for children, they must have something to say. Children come to school with personal experiences that can vary widely, from participating at a county fair to watching cartoons and talk shows on television to attending a ballet production. As teachers search for writing lessons that tap this vast range of experiences, they learn that few activities are equally engaging for all students. One solution to the problem of uneven background knowledge is the personal story. One reason many teachers focus on the personal narrative (sometimes called the *bed-to-bed story*) is that all children have relevant background knowledge. Teachers know that most children can write about some event or sequence of events in their lives, even if it is just the morning classroom routine. While the personal narrative offers many opportunities to practice a wide range of important writing skills, students also need practice with other kinds of writing.

Given opportunities and exposure to print and texts, children will explore their ideas and produce a broad range of texts spontaneously (Bissex, 1980). When children come to school without having experienced a wide range of ideas or kinds of writing, teachers can enhance their background knowledge by exposing them to different ideas and texts. Even students like Bissex's son Paul, whose home offered many opportunities to engage with print, depend on teachers to broaden their understanding of the world and the world of text.

A time-honored method of introducing children to the ideas and language used in books is reading aloud. As discussed earlier, read-alouds can be instrumental in highlighting the conventions of print, although typically children are more attracted to the stories than to the instructional possibilities. The primary draw of hearing books is the delight experienced through a new and possibly unimagined world. As children delight in the text, they may experience contexts, learn new words, and expand their understanding of the world.

Although children's fiction has been the mainstay of preschool and elementary school classrooms, children also need to hear other kinds of books. By choosing text that addresses topics related to classroom lessons, teachers can develop students' background knowledge in ways that will support their engagement in lessons as well as their ability to write about specific topics.

Children's genre knowledge can benefit from exposure to a wide variety of books. Early understandings of the conventions of stories and various informational texts draw heavily on oral language experiences. As early as kindergarten, children demonstrate an awareness that texts

differ depending on their purpose (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006). For most students in kindergarten or the early primary grades, genre knowledge is nascent. In order to apply genre conventions to their own writing, students need more exposure to the varieties of texts that will be important later in their lives. Although the research on the impact of genre instruction is thin, there is support for surrounding students with a variety of different types of books. One study found a positive relationship between the range of text genres in the first-grade classroom library and students' writing growth through third grade (Coker, 2006).

Providing students with ready exposure to all types of print is important for their developing genre knowledge. Principals and teachers should work to stock classroom libraries with books of all types. It is important to integrate all these types of books into the curriculum. Teachers who discuss the classroom books in their lessons may find that students are more motivated to explore new kinds of books.

The practice of reading a variety of books to children has been shown to support their acquisition of genre knowledge (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006). As genre knowledge grows, so does children's ability to apply that knowledge to their own writing.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF INSTRUCTION

When writing instruction is most productive, it addresses a range of skills and practices relevant for good writing. Of course, not all lessons can target every important aspect of writing, but in many lessons teachers can address more than one facet of it. The following lesson from Mrs. Nelson's kindergarten classroom illustrates how instruction can provide direction and practice in many of the important challenges that young writers face.

In her kindergarten classroom, Mrs. Nelson devotes 45 minutes to writing workshop nearly every day. Often the writing lessons and activities build on topics from other parts of the curriculum. Mrs. Nelson planned this lesson around the class's science unit that focused on endangered animals. She leveraged the students' interest in the material to engage her kindergarteners in multiple aspects of writing.

Mrs. Nelson began the lesson by calling the children to the carpet. When they were seated and quiet, she began the lesson.

MRS. NELSON: Today I want you to do something good writers do. Sometimes good writers use lots of detail, but sometimes it's done to make a quick point. Who's seen lots of advertisements for McDonald's, or Coke? How many of you have seen them with a million words?

(Many students raise their hands.)

MRS. NELSON: I haven't seen one. Could you read a Junie B. Jones book on a sign as you're going down the road?

STUDENT: Too quick.

MRS. NELSON: So you need something quick [for an advertisement]. You see "Drink Coke." The author's not saying it's a sweet brown liquid, it bubbles, and all those details. They want you to know "Drink Coke." How many of you have seen the commercials for milk with famous people? They say, "Got Milk?" What did the author want you to know?

STUDENTS: [Multiple responses.]

MRS. NELSON: All they needed to say was "Do you have milk?" Today, you're going to have some fun making a simple sign that's going to get to the point about saving the Earth. Think about what bothers you with the Earth. Who wants to give me an example of what bothers them?

STUDENT: [En]dangered animals.

MRS. NELSON: Give me an example.

STUDENT: Stop making animals endangered.

MRS. NELSON: Others?

STUDENT: Let animals cross the street?

MRS. NELSON: How about "Leave trees alone"? I'll give you a big piece of posterboard. First, write your message, and not in teeny-weeny letters. When you're going down the road and you see a sign (*writes in small letters on board*), is that going to catch your attention?

STUDENTS: No.

MRS. NELSON: You're going to write it to grab the attention of the kids in the hall. Watch this (*writes something very small*). Can you read that? Anyone having trouble reading that?

STUDENTS: [Various responses.]

MRS. NELSON: You're going to put big words on your poster, like is. (*Writes "Save animals" very large on the board.*)

STUDENT: As big as a school?

MRS. NELSON: Well, if it's as big as a school, it won't fit on the posterboard. Usually someone doing a commercial also uses an illustration to grab your eyes, or sometimes a fancy border. I want you to make a sign that makes kids stop and think. Today, you're going to

work on the floor because the poster is big. I want to see lots of detail in your drawing (not your writing), colors, and I want to see you make your point. I'm going to take the really good ones and hang them all over the school. If you're wearing red, get a coffee can and pick a spot. [Mrs. Nelson uses metal coffee cans to store pencils, pens, markers, and other writing materials for students.]

In the course of her brief lesson, Mrs. Nelson was able to highlight multiple characteristics of the writing system that are important to young writers. Her lesson referenced the communicative function of written language, the conventional arrangement of print, the relationship between speech sounds and written words, and the importance of background knowledge as well as genre knowledge. Even though she spent relatively little time on each point, her lesson was designed to draw students' attention to these challenges.

At the beginning of her discussion, Mrs. Nelson reminded students of their experience with the form of writing that was the focus of the lesson—signs. She knew the students were familiar with advertising signs, so she led a discussion about the communicative function of signs. A unique feature of signs is that they are designed to communicate a single idea. As she explained to the class, "Sometimes good writers use a lot of detail, but sometimes it's done to make a quick point."

The discussion of signs also underscored the understanding that people write to communicate. Mrs. Nelson made this point particularly salient by referencing a written form that children have experienced outside of the classroom. For the students who have read and thought about roadside signs, Mrs. Nelson may be subtly signaling that writing has an important communicative function in their lives outside of school just as it does in school.

After a discussion of the conventions of signs, she encouraged students to create their own signs. The activity was designed to allow students to express their views about the importance of protecting the environment. From their science unit, the children understood that the natural world was threatened by humans, and they were making signs that would function like billboards. Messages such as "Save the animals" or "Stop wrecking habitats" were designed to change people's behavior. Mrs. Nelson explained that she would post the signs around the school so that other students could read them. One implicit message in this lesson was that students could use written signs as a way to express their ideas. Furthermore, the ideas that students expressed would be displayed, just like signs are along the road. Not only will the kindergartners share their ideas through the signs, but they may also be able to

change people's behavior. In this lesson, students experienced writing as a tool to share ideas and potentially influence behavior.

During her mini-lesson, Mrs. Nelson discussed the conventions of signs and modeled how to make one. After explaining that signs need to be brief so they can be read quickly, she also added that the letters should be big. She then wrote her message on the board in big letters, modeling for students the process of forming the letters and arranging the words. In this example, Mrs. Nelson did not discuss how she wrote from left to right and left spaces between words; she might have done so if she thought it would benefit the students. Instead she modeled the way to write words on a sign, giving students an opportunity to see how a writer composes text.

After her mini-lesson on signs, Mrs. Nelson walked around the room monitoring the children's progress and having brief conferences with them. When she asked Michelle what she was planning to write, the following exchange occurred:

MICHELLE: Stop wrecking.

MRS. NELSON: That's a good one. Maybe you can start right here.
(Points to a spot on the paper for Michelle to begin writing. Michelle writes Stop and then pauses.)

MRS. NELSON: What vowel is it?

MICHELLE: a?

MRS. NELSON: Wr-e-cking (Stretches the word out for Michelle). Stop wr-e-cking, wr-e-cking. (Says the word several more times, stretching out the vowel sound.)

MICHELLE: (Writes riking.) Stop wrecking habitats.

MRS. NELSON: Habitats, that's even better.

In this exchange, Mrs. Nelson helped Michelle with a difficult vowel sound by stretching the word out. After Michelle produced a word that reflected the sounds in *wrecking*, Mrs. Nelson complimented her and moved on. The goal of the lesson had been met even though Michelle still has a lot to learn about conventional spelling.

In Mrs. Nelson's writing lesson, students composed signs based on their study of endangered animals. During that unit, Mrs. Nelson had used a wide range of books that provided scientific information about animals, their habitats, and the wider ecological system. By including nonfiction books in her unit, Mrs. Nelson helped enrich students' background knowledge about endangered animals and the reasons for their

declining numbers. It seems unlikely that children would acquire this kind of scientific information without access to nonfiction books.

The lesson on writing signs about endangered animals also made many of the characteristics of the sign genre explicit. At the beginning of the discussion, Mrs. Nelson asked the class how many students had "seen a sign with a million words." She used the question and the students' responses to describe one of the defining features of signs: their brevity. An example she introduced was the "Got Milk?" campaign because the message is distilled into only two words. Mrs. Nelson's point was that good writers understand the structure of signs, and, as a result, the message must be expressed as succinctly as possible.

Another benefit of the sign-writing activity is the development of students' understanding about the kinds of information that writers need. First, writers need to have knowledge about the topic (in this case, endangered animals). Through their science lessons and read-alouds, the students had learned about the topics surrounding this issue. Now as sign writers they could draw on that knowledge. For their signs to be persuasive, students also were taught that they need to know how signs work. This understanding of the features of the sign genre coupled with background knowledge about the issues made it possible for them to write something that could change people's ideas about saving the Earth.

CONCLUSION

For young children to develop into accomplished writers, they must learn to manage the substantial challenges of writing. By supporting their acquisition of writing processes and knowledge, teachers can guide students to deepen their understanding of writing. Many of the instructional methods described in this chapter detail ways to expose children to specific aspects of the writing system or process. Some of the recommendations made in this chapter have the potential to enhance more than one area of students' writing knowledge. For example, the use of book-reading interventions can enhance background knowledge, conventions of print, and the understanding that writing is a communicative act.

It is also important to note that by themselves these approaches will only have a limited effect on children's writing development. Children also need to write on a daily basis. As Tolchinsky (2001) asserted, "it is by being exposed to writing and by using writing that children will learn to master it" (p. 95). The tasks of writing about a field trip to the science museum or of creating a sign about endangered animals have real value for young children. These challenges offer opportunities for children to

experiment with the writing system and to generate and refine their notions of how writing works.

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