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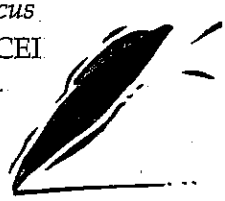

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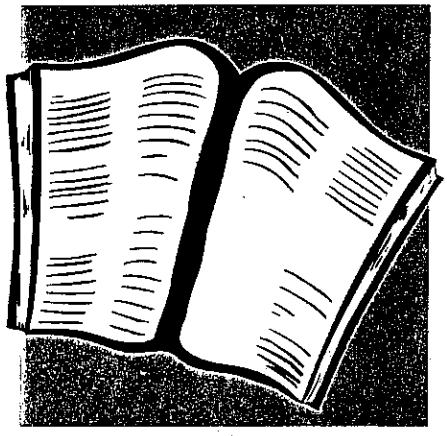
Creating an Author's Notebook

Ending Writing Welfare As We Know It

Sherron Killingsworth Roberts,
Visiting Assistant Professor,
University of Central Florida

How often do teachers hear this heartfelt cry "... but Teacher, I don't know what to write about!"? Donald Graves (1976, 1983) coined the phrase "writing welfare" to describe the way that some teachers attempt to help children become better writers. In the midst of the creative writing push of the '70s and early '80s, when many teachers fed their students catchy sentence starters or clever scenarios, Graves argued that teachers should avoid force-feeding topics to children. In his mind, this "writing welfare" could arrest students' development in finding their own voices. On the other hand, some teachers tell students right away that they will have to be in charge of their own writing topics. In this case, students not only complain,



"I don't know what to write about," but they also use this initial roadblock as an excuse not to write at all.

Donald Murray advises writers who are stymied to "start by writing about something you know. . . . You can't write about nothing," (Murray, in Graves, 1983, p. 12). Another great author, Lucy Calkins (1991), suggests building a notebook of ideas, not only as a tool for writing, but also as a tool for living. Jean Little (1987, pp. 92-93) notes that by compiling these ideas drawn from your own life experiences, it is possible to see the cumulative effect and realize that "your thoughts, your noticings, your fleet of orange slices matter."

When we start to bring our students into alignment with authors' circles (as outlined by Harste, Woodard, & Burke, 1984), not only are students modeling themselves after real-life authors, but now they see the recursive process of brainstorming ideas, and of writing and rewriting and turning and twisting ideas inside and out.

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The Author's Notebook

This article outlines the concept of an author's notebook (or idea bank); it is borrowed from many prolific writers for use in the elementary classroom. Writers of all ages could benefit. In order to end "writing welfare" as we know it and give credence and power to the voice of children, I suggest that teachers allow students to create these author's notebooks. To begin this way of creating and thinking like a real author, I show my students examples of various author's notebooks. I have one example that is kept in an old recipe file with index cards. I have another from a student that was collected in a layer book, with each layer representing a section. And I tell them about yet another example that was made using a HyperStudio stack, with links to each section.

Whatever format this compilation of ideas takes, the author's notebook should contain some of the following sections: character names, interesting places, problems to solve, quotations, overheard conversations, and any other headings one might find helpful.

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Elementary students can follow in the footsteps of prolific authors by compiling ideas that will help them overcome the intimidation of facing a blank page or blank computer screen. After helping children in grades 3 to 8 in workshop settings to create their own author's notebooks, my suggestion would be to have a mini-lesson concerning the importance of each of the following headings and then to offer resources to students in a learning station format.

• **Character Names Section**

In my classes, we discuss the importance of giving characters names that suit the characteristics of that person or that highlight some character trait that we want the reader to be sure to find. I discuss the intrigue and implications of a character named Harlan Granger in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), as well as the character of Salamanca Tree Hiddle in *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994). Those who have not read about these characters will still be able to venture a guess as to what sort of role they might play, what sort of people they are, and why the author would choose these intriguing names for their characters. After providing that rationale and motivation, the students have the opportunity to take their index cards, eMates, or layer books to a learning station that has resources to help them begin compiling a list of interesting names to use in their upcoming writing. The resources I have found most useful for allowing students to gather character names are various baby name books and old phone books. In fact, my own author's notebook contains a character name that I still would like to develop into a satirical piece called "The Reverend Pat Answers."

• **Interesting Places Section**

Sometimes, before students start to collect ideas for interesting places, it helps to have a mini-lesson on choosing between an integral setting versus a more universal setting. To inspire students to think of unusual places, I have sources in a related learning station such as travel magazines, maps (*Family Fun* magazine always has a section on traveling for children), related Internet sites, and a book called *Books on the Move* (Knorr & Espeland, 1997), which describes both interesting places for families as well as related children's books. Generally, students will record various interesting places that they can work into future writing. Students always are encouraged to add their own experiences and ideas to the mix. As I search for a new idea in a book or magazine, I often am drawn to a memory of a place that I had forgotten: houses and rooms and towns I have left behind. Children should be encouraged to document any and all ideas in their author's notebooks for later use.

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• **Problems To Solve Section**

"Problems to solve" is such an important heading for authors that over the years I have found several ways to help students find their own ideas for this section. In many cases, I find that a week-long unit on the importance of incorporating conflict into writing will help. I generally start with identifying the conflict in well-known fairy or folktales or in popular picture books. Having made clear to my

students the need for conflict or a problem, I provide several very different ways for them to collect problems, including the following:

Comic strips. One fun way to collect problems is to provide comic strips for students to read. I have found that elementary students lose momentum when given whole pages of the comics or "funnies"; therefore, I cut them into individual comic strips in order to maintain the students' focus. Often, students will select several comics that present an interesting problem to solve, and they will simply glue or paste these comics onto their index cards or in their layer books. Sometimes students elaborate upon and extend the simple text of the selected comic, but many times I have been reminded of a similar problem in my own life about which I will later choose to write.

Want ads. Another great vehicle for generating ideas about problems to solve are the want ads. Students find this an interesting and motivating medium. I cut out many different want ads. The lost and found ads, in particular, will yield the most interesting problems. Students are instructed to read the lost and found ads, and then brainstorm possible scenarios that created the need for the advertisement. I remember reading an advertisement in our local newspaper that announced a sum of cash being found near our university. My students and I not only imagined the personality of the person who would place such an ad, but also brainstormed the unscrupulous folks who might try to answer the ad although they were not the rightful owners. We even had story ideas generated that described the possible scams that might come out of this scenario.

Writing prompts. In the creative writing movement of the '70s and '80s, many teachers gave students independent task cards that had a creative, sometimes wacky or "far-out," idea as a story starter. For example, a card might ask students to imagine and write about what it would be like to be transformed into the teacher. Even though these "writing prompts" are the very thing that started the whole "writing welfare" controversy, I have found that allowing students to sort through reams of old creative writing prompts can be very effective. In my mind, one of the most stimulating parts of being an author often is coming up with the "idea," whereas the actual writing process can be tedious or laborious. Invariably, students who sift through these crazy ideas (such as being a flea spying on a dog) generate—and own—a new writing idea!

• Quotations Section

In order to inspire students to use quotations or proverbs in their writing, or to influence their prewriting thoughts, I read portions of Madeline L'Engle's (1962) *A Wrinkle in Time*. Another great book that uses quotations is *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994). Remind students that even so-called clichés, such as "Never judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins," can be absolutely memorable and effective in their writing. During the mini-lession, we discuss how these quotations emphasize the related themes of each book. I love showing students examples of how a good quote can link ideas, drive ideas, and drive home the book's central themes. Then, I make available in a learning station many different sources, such as the Internet sites of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* [http://www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/bartlett/] and the *Quotation Board* [use AOL keyword: TBR, which stands for The Book Report]; the *Scholastic Treasury of Quotations for Children* (Betz, 1998); *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (Browns, 1961); and the series of books by Roger and McWilliams (1990, 1991, 1992), which have an abundance of stimulating and clever quotations on almost every page.

• Overheard Conversations Section

I have not decided what it is in my own personality that loves to eavesdrop on people, but, for better or worse, this "hobby" can produce a rich set of ideas for the budding writer. In my own author's notebook, I have documented for future reference many different scenarios—some funny or clever, and some poignant or intriguing. About eight years ago I overheard my college roommate asking her toddler son how many pieces of candy he wanted. Without blinking an eyelash, he emphatically told her "too many"!

On a recent occasion, I overheard a mother who, while introducing her son, mentioned his ADD diagnosis, as well as his subsequent retention in 1st grade. The son's smile faded as his mother introduced his siblings with much more evident

pride. I have these memorable conversations noted in my Overheard Conversations Section, and I know that I will incorporate them into my writing. Being totally observant and taking in their surroundings will allow students to breathe life into stale characters or indifferent situations. In a related station, students can bring in transcripts of overheard conversation upon which you can build a mini-lesson, as well as a subsequent small-group brainstorming and remembering session.

Conclusion

Perhaps all this information about creating an author's notebook or idea bank will inspire you or your students to find other headings or avenues for conquering "writing welfare." Some teachers find it useful to have sections that include mini-lessons attended, or to include sections listing spelling demons or transitional phrases. The idea is to make this author's notebook work for you. As teachers, we know we should end the practice of providing writing assignments that are artificial and disconnected from students' lives. Forcing students to write without providing support through an author's notebook or idea bank, however, seems equally unreasonable. Calkins notes that

> throughout the field of teaching writing, one educator after another has begun to advocate that students jot down things they notice and wonder about, their memories and ideas, their favorite words and responses to reading into a container of some sort. Donald Murray speaks of that container as a day book, Donald Graves as a journal, Betsy Byars as a bureau drawer, and my colleagues and I as a writer's notebook. . . . (Calkins, 1994, p. 24).

Supporting our students as they shape these "containers" will serve as an important means for ending "writing welfare."

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