

# Launching Family Message Journals

## Overview



This lesson introduces Family Message Journals, a teacher-tested tool for encouraging family involvement and supporting writing to reflect and learn. The teacher introduces journals by demonstrating the process of writing a letter. Children are then led into composing through guided and finally independent writing of messages that will bring home for family (or others) to read and write a reply. Messages focus on classroom and activities in which children have participated at school. A letter to families is included so that they understand what they are expected to do with the children's daily journal messages and why.

## From Theory to Practice

Wollman-Bonilla, Julie. (2000). *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing Through Family Involvement*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Writing is a powerful tool for reflecting on and taking stock of learning.
- Young writers need frequent opportunities to express themselves in writing, trying to match sounds to letters and to communicate clearly and legibly.
- Children need to write for real purposes and audiences if they are to learn that writing is personally meaningful and a powerful communication tool.
- Families are an authentic audience for journal messages about school activities. Children's writing must be clear enough to communicate what happened to those who were not there. Family Message Journals help young writers develop awareness of readers' needs.
- Children naturally enjoy communicating with others and learn about correct spelling, style, spelling, and other mechanics by writing to be understood and get feedback on whether they were successful.
- Family Message Journals engage families in modeling writing and create a community inclusive of the classroom and the home.
- Family involvement has a positive effect on children's school achievement.

## Student Objectives

**Words**

- Composing Cinquain Poems with Basic Parts of Speech
- Composing Cinquain Poems: A Quick-Writing Activity
- Using a Word Journal to Create a Personal Dictionary

**Students will**

- begin to use writing for daily communication with families as a tool for on school activities.
- become more aware of readers' needs for clarity and legibility and how to meet these needs.

**Instructional Plan****Resources**

1. A booklet or notebook to be used as a journal. Lined paper with an unlined area at the top (for illustrations) works well in the beginning.
2. Copies of the [family letter](#).
3. Back-up people to reply if a child's family members don't. (The letter and the pressure from children make this a rare occurrence, but there are always two families who cannot reply regularly. In this case, a student teacher, a school, a special subject teacher, the principal, or librarian are good options.)

**Preparation**

1. Choose the activity, book, or experience about which children will write two messages. This could be a book read aloud, a science inquiry, a social studies lesson, a school assembly, the experience of the first day at school, making friends, or any other topic drawing on school experiences.
2. Choose a topic for the demonstration message that you'll compose for students.
3. Prepare and photocopy the Family Letter. Have it translated into families' languages as necessary.

**Instruction and Activities**

1. Tell students "In our classroom you will be writing letters to your family about things you do in school. I'm going to write one first to show you what I mean. I'll think aloud: "What should I write about? Hmmm, what did we do in school today? Oh, I know, I'll write about the science activity we just did before when we compared different kinds of apples. I'll start by putting the date in the right corner and on the left side I'll write 'Dear family.'" (demonstrate on chart paper or chalkboard as you speak). "Now, that's how a letter looks with a date and greeting" (point at each again).
2. "What are some of the things I could write about the apple activity?" Invite children to brainstorm ideas and discuss whether and why the suggestions are important to tell families.
3. Once a number of ideas have been suggested, begin composing: "Okay I'll begin with 'Today we did a science activity with apples. We observed different kinds of apples and cut them all in half.'" Stop and point out where you started the body of the letter, under the greeting. Continue composing using some of the children's suggestions. Discuss what needs to go in the letter to make it clear. For example, "I can't just say, 'Each had them inside'" because someone reading your letter at home won't know what they had inside. why I wrote 'Each was a different color and weight but they all had small, slippery, black seeds inside.'" As you compose think aloud about content decisions and model how to listen for the sounds in a word and invent a word.
4. Once the message is complete tell students they will begin their own messages in their own Family Message Journals. (This could be done in a second session where they tell what activity or experience they will write about. Something learned, read or discussed or experienced that day works well—anything can be the subject of a message. For example, they might write a response to a book read

5. Once children open their journals and are ready to write, ask them how begin their message. "Will you write 'Dear Family' or 'Dear Mom' or 'Dear Grandma' or 'Dear [older sister's name]?' Who at home might read your message?" Ask children to write their date and greeting and then ask "What you write next?" After a few ideas are shared ask children to begin the Circulate to help as needed. Notice things children have done and share example, "Oh, Pat wrote 'We read a book called \_\_\_\_.' That's good because whoever reads Pat's message will know what it is about."
6. As they write, remind children to listen for the sounds they want to write spell it as best they can. "This is your letter with your spelling." Because you can read the messages to their families at home or tell them what they are about, it is okay if the spellings are not clear to families. Children write from this that they need to work at spelling but they will still be able to read their messages and get response. (For children whose home language is not English: They may write in English and tell their families what it says, or they may write their home language if that seems most appropriate. Families may reply in the home language if that is most comfortable and children can understand it.)
7. As children announce they are finished, ask if there's anything they can make the message clearer to family members or to provide helpful details. Suggest an example or two of such detail from your demonstration messages. Example: "See how I wrote 'The school looked huge and there were hundreds of people wandering around. I didn't know how I would find my teacher but suddenly she found me!'" Encourage children to add at least one thing to their messages. Finally, invite children to illustrate their messages. Illustrating is a way to more writing as the year goes on, but in the beginning many ideas are communicated through drawing and drawing may spark ideas for additional written message.
8. Provide children with the Family Letter to place in their journals. Remind them that this is their homework: "Show the Family Letter and message to someone in your family who can read it, have that person write a response, and bring the journal back to school the next day."
9. The following day begin with a reminder of where to place the date and greeting and where to begin the message. Then have children brainstorm ideas for their message topic you've chosen and begin writing independently. Continue to circulate to provide support, share suggestions, and recognize what children are doing that others might want to try (e.g. varying greetings or paying close attention to printing neatly so it's legible). Such support may be needed the first week or two. After that children should be able to generate ideas for their messages independently, though brainstorming ideas to share may continue to be appropriate.

### Web Resources

#### Invented Spelling and Spelling Development

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed272922.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed272922.html)

A brief overview for teachers and families on invented spelling and writing development.

#### Invented Spelling

[http://www.naturalchild.com/guest/margaret\\_phinney2.html](http://www.naturalchild.com/guest/margaret_phinney2.html)

A teacher explains invented spelling and emergent writing and includes suggestions for families to encourage children's writing and appreciate their spellings.

### Student Assessment/Reflections

1. Observe as students compose: What are they struggling with? What is easier? Are they using suggestions from you and other students? Are they talking about writing messages and sharing family replies?

2. Review student journals regularly looking for knowledge of
    - o appropriate content for a message (e.g., enough detail and explanation)
    - o text-level conventions (e.g., letter format, style appropriate to text)
    - o sentence-level conventions (e.g., punctuation, grammar)
    - o word-level conventions (e.g., spelling)
    - o topic studied or activity experienced
  3. Keep anecdotal notes about your observations and review of journals. Use a photocopy of a sample journal entry every two to four weeks to use for comparison and evidence of growth or need for instructional support.
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## **NCTE/IRA Standards**

4 - Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5 - Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use digital writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

11 - Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).