Motivating Readers, Inspiring Teachers

Making Writing Exciting
Tips for Student Success
by David L. Harrison & Lauren Edmondson
As the old saw goes, “Not all readers are writers, but all writers are readers.” Writing involves the process of bringing something new to what is already known. The amalgamation of new and prior knowledge is the process of learning. Students benefit most when writing is presented to them in ways that stimulate and engage them actively in literacy learning. One of the most effective methods we’ve found is to provide students with writing “tips” based on how real writers think and work. By breaking down the complex world of writing into bite-sized components (tips), students focus on one element at a time. This makes students feel more connected to the overall process and approach it with greater confidence in their own work.

Making connections is a writer’s stock in trade. The usual synonyms are creativity and imagination. As a writer, I (David) believe that our imaginations are most often the products of the connections we make: from the known to the unknown, from the unknown to the known, from one known to another.

I wrote a picture book about a pair of raccoons who need a roomy, quiet home for their twins when they’re born. Mama and Papa eventually settle into a nice attic. They soon discover, through a series of irritating noises from below (baby crying, dog yapping, people grumbling) that they have the worst kind of problem: people in their basement. Naturally, they leave, and the story has a happy ending.

The genesis of this story is connected to incidents in my life. My wife and I had a problem: raccoons in our attic. They cost us sleep, a disrupted routine and, eventually, a new roof. The roofers found baby raccoons nestled in the insulation. I put myself in the raccoons’ position and told their story. The connections here are clear, but most stories spring from real situations. Writers know how this works, but students may not. That’s why writing tips can be so helpful.

One of our favorite tips falls under the category of Getting Started (Harrison & Edmondson, 2012). There are lots of ways to find an idea and to start writing about it, but one of the most useful in the classroom is something we call Association, which is another term for Connections. We’ll present an example of how Association works and go through a week of lesson plans after we hear from Laurie. She’s going to provide some of the research-based background about the importance of writing.

Overview
We all know those students who have trouble getting started with writing. Writing is a difficult task for some students. Emily, age 10, says, “The hardest part about writing is finding good things to write about.” I think that is true. Sometimes getting started in writing is half the battle! As teachers, we can help students figure out how to get started in writing with just a few simple strategies. It is important for students to know that there is always something worth writing about. Sometimes we just have to get them to stop and think about the writing process.

We know that in order to improve as a writer, students need to write every day. Students need to be self-sufficient in thinking through the writing process and developing stamina as writers. We also need to make sure students write for a variety of purposes and are able to adjust and adapt to new writing topics and genres. The Common Core State Standards have allowed us to push ourselves as readers and writers and to explore ideas and topics that we might not have worked with before. It is an exciting time to be a writer!

Why Study Writing?
Think back to when you learned to write. What were some of the tools you used? What was the focus? You might have used lined paper to practice manuscript
skills and become better writers. The panel also found that teachers must receive training on how to teach and assess writing in the classroom.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) have raised the expectation level of writing instruction in the classroom. In third grade, students are expected to write opinion pieces, informational texts, and narratives. Third graders are also expected to be able to provide text-based support of their writing in detail. Teachers need explicit instruction on how to teach the variety of genres and to use authentic texts with students to illustrate the examples.

Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau (2007) advocated for using a combination of explicit writing instruction and authentic texts in the classroom to teach expository writing. At the state and national levels, third graders are assessed on reading and writing about a variety of informational texts. Purcell-Gates and colleagues worked with teachers on the process of helping students evaluate the text and formulate written responses to those texts. They concluded that students who used authentic texts in the classroom along with explicit writing instruction were better able to understand expository text and write responses based on those texts. They also found that explicit instruction in writing on its own was not enough. The use of authentic texts was critical to student success.

What Does the Research Say?
Learning to write is a developmental process. In order for students to be proficient in writing, they must understand language and the relationship between reading and writing. In 2011, the International Reading Association in conjunction with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development convened a panel of experts to look into the reading–writing connection and the impact of that connection on instructional strategies in the classroom. The panel found that when sufficient time is set aside for writing instruction every day, students are able to improve their writing skills and become better writers. The panel also found that teachers must receive training on how to teach and assess writing in the classroom.

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What Common Core Standards Correlate With This Subject?
There are 10 Common Core Standards of writing in Grade 3. The standards in relation to text types and purposes are as follows:

W.3.1. Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.
• Introduce the topic or text they are writing about, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure that lists reasons.
• Provide reasons that support the opinion.
• Use linking words and phrases (e.g., because, therefore, since, for example) to connect opinion and reasons.
• Provide a concluding statement or section.
W.3.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
simply writing about the details of the event tends to lead to dry informational text with no pizzazz. Using the tip of finding the story in the event allows writers to use the senses and creates a more powerful connection for readers.

The first writing tip is about finding ideas by association. The concept is that any word can lead to many writing ideas. This corresponds with CCSS W.3.2, which is to write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. This tip helps students to organize ideas and information into a well-developed text. One of the most difficult things about getting students to write in the classroom is literally getting started. This technique helps students brainstorm ideas and gives structure to the story from the beginning. Plus, the structure of the strategy could also lead to other writing ideas that can be kept in a notebook and used later in the classroom the next time students think there is nothing to write about.

The second tip is about finding the story in nonfiction or expository text. This writing tip goes with standard W.3.3., which is to write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. David does a great job of talking about how he wrote about real events in history by thinking about the story involved in the event, such as what an earthquake feels like and sounds like when it is happening. He used those descriptive details to tell a story about an actual event. The feelings draw readers in and create interest in the event, which makes the story more interesting for everyone. Authentic writing experiences allow readers to connect to the material. One of the challenges of writing informational text is that

simply writing about the details of the event tends to lead to dry informational text with no pizzazz.
We’ll start by putting one word on the board. How about *ice*? Under *ice*, we’ll make a list of words and phrases that you associate with ice. We’ll move quickly.

**Ice**
- Cubes
- Cold
- Water
- Something to drink
- Ice cream
- Freezing
- Frozen pond
- Ice skating
- Glass of ice
- Polar bear

Some will go shopping, some will have funny things to say about hunting for lost remotes, some will write about their pets, and so on. This technique is a good way to jump into any genre of writing. It works equally well for poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. It’s also a nice exercise to send home for family sharing. Once you get started making lists by association, the main problem is knowing how to stop!

**Classroom Examples**

Students in a third-grade summer school classroom worked with their teacher to come up with writing ideas using the Association strategy. The teacher said that the students loved the ideas by association chart because it was like a domino effect of ideas or a chain reaction that they could keep writing about. The students loved writing about their own ideas.

In Figure 1, Student A starts off thinking about cats and dogs. Then, the ideas take a turn to amusement parks and danger! There are so many ideas for writing on this page alone. The great thing is that Student A can keep this in a folder and come back to it later when he needs an idea for writing.

In Figure 2, Student B starts with new clothes. That led her to thinking about parties, cakes, and birthdays. I know there are at least a few stories there!

**Figure 1. Student A Association Sample**

**Figure 2. Student B Association Sample**

This quick exercise gives you a list of 20 topics, but for good measure we like to brainstorm a third column. Again, choose something to put at the top and go! How about *hunter*?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ice</th>
<th>Polar bear</th>
<th>Hunter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cubes</td>
<td>Big white bear</td>
<td>Tiger in the jungle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>Lives where it’s cold</td>
<td>Dragonfly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Seals</td>
<td>Spider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something to drink</td>
<td>Eskimos</td>
<td>Deer season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream</td>
<td>Hunter</td>
<td>Looking for remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freezing</td>
<td>Endangered</td>
<td>Looking for bargains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen pond</td>
<td>Glaciers</td>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice skating</td>
<td>Bearskin rug</td>
<td>Shark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass of ice</td>
<td>Bear cubs</td>
<td>Hunting my socks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar bear</td>
<td>Hungry</td>
<td>My cat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you’re looking for core subjects and Common Core State Standards–related subjects scattered across these lists of words and phrases, you’ll find plenty. Not only that, but you’ve created a wonderful variety of choices for your students to write about.
important topics. So the next time a student in your classroom tells you that he or she doesn’t know what to write about, you can remind the student that just taking a few minutes to think it through will open a world of writing possibilities. The tools are at our fingertips. All we need to do is get started!

**Tip #2: Finding the Story in Nonfiction Writing**

When we talk about our favorite stories, we usually think about books of fiction. But nonfiction books can have stories too. A good story makes a nonfiction book more interesting. When we prepare to write about a nonfiction subject, we need to study it. How can we explain it to our readers if we don’t know what we’re talking about? That means reading and taking notes. It means deciding what is important enough to put in and what is unimportant enough to leave out. It means making an outline to help us say what we want to say in the best order. It may mean setting a word budget so we’ll know when we need to be finished.

But after all those preparations, we’re not ready to start writing. We need to ask ourselves if we have a story to tell. If we can’t capture the reader’s attention in the first page, the first paragraph, the first sentence, we risk losing the reader altogether.

When I (David) was reading and taking notes for a book called *EARTHQUAKES: Earth’s Mightiest Moments*, I kept looking for something to help me leap out to a fast start. There are so many things I wanted to say, but unless I could find a great beginning, my book would read like *blah-blah-blah*. I looked until I found one. Here is how the book begins:

> In 1811, at two in the morning, just nine days before Christmas, settlers in New Madrid, Missouri, were startled awake.

> Their furniture was bouncing, pots and pans flying.

> Cabins shook.

> Chimneys tumbled.

> Roofs fell in.

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By opening the book about earthquakes by describing a real one—the worst that had ever hit the United States at the time—I caught readers’ attention on the first page. The book goes on to describe what...
causes earthquakes and ends by describing how far we’ve come but still how little we know about these destructive forces of nature. But it is the beginning that invites readers to keep turning pages.

Unlike Tip #1 (Getting Started by Association), Tip #2 addresses a general approach to writing nonfiction. We tell students that we need to know what we’re looking for so we’ll know when we find it. This tip encourages students to read, think, and apply what they learn to what they will write.

**Classroom Examples**

In the Common Core State Standards for Grade 3, students are expected to write informational/explanatory texts in a clearly organized manner with supporting details. What better way to organize a topic than by telling the story? Every student understands telling a story with a good beginning, middle, and end. And what better way to connect a reader to a piece of writing?

There are many sources of informational text. Think about your favorite informational text that you read most often. Personally, I (Lauren) read informational text online and in newspapers and magazines. What aspect of informational text helps the reader to form a connection? For me, it is about making a connection to the text. If I am reading an article in the newspaper, I am going to look for something there that I care deeply about or that I would like to know more about. Recently, our local newspaper ran a series of articles about the homeless population in our city. There were photos of children who live in desperate situations and the stories of the families and how they ended up where they are now. The series of articles inspired many people in our community to see what could be done to support the children in the stories as well as in the greater community. This was a compelling example of a story about a real situation that can be told in a way to inspire people to take action and improve the lives of others.

In classrooms, the same type of compelling writing can take place. We encourage students to do the following, using the graphic organizer found in Figure 5 to organize thoughts and make notes:

1. Read as much as you can about your topic.
2. Write good notes and keep track of sources.
3. Decide what facts you want to share. Look for the story the facts can tell.
4. Frame your story on the basis of voice. What voice makes sense to best tell the story?

For this writing tip, the teacher worked with fourth-grade students who were studying weather-related events such as tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes. The teacher asked students to research some recent weather stories and write about their findings. Students were able to find many facts and stories online about people who had survived those traumatic experiences as well as videos of the actual events. Those artifacts helped the students tell the stories of the actual events from first-person accounts.

Student A researched Hurricane Sandy, using online resources in researching the topic (see Figure 6). The story is simple but captured the devastation that occurred in one life that fateful

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**Figure 5. Graphic Organizer Example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research sources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
day (see Figure 7). Student B wrote about the Joplin tornado from a few years ago. Student B took more thorough notes (see Figure 8) and wrote a longer story (see Figure 9). Thinking of nonfiction writing in the form of a story helps writers frame what happened in a clear and concise way.

**Conclusion**

Writing can be challenging for some students. It is a long, labor-intensive process that can be difficult. Teachers must provide students with the right tips to help with increasing demands of more rigorous writing in the classroom. Implementing the tip to get started with writing by employing association is a wonderful technique that students enjoy using and can lead to a much easier beginning to the process. Finding the story in nonfiction writing helps students frame the idea into a complete story with the connection of actual thoughts and feelings. Writers have a better connection with readers and the process flows more smoothly. Teachers can use these tips to support students in the classroom and to help improve the writing process.
Figure 9. Student B Nonfiction Writing Sample

![Student B Nonfiction Writing Sample](image-url)

**Joplin Tornado**

My name is Emily Smith. My husband, three children and I were out at dinner when the tornado sirens went off. When we heard the sirens we left the restaurant and went home. Once we got home we went in our basement. We had a bed and extra supplies down there just in case of something like this.

My husband put the children to bed while I got the radio out.

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We had no idea what was going to happen. On the radio they said that it was going to be a level 5 tornado. My husband, Brandon, forgot something up stairs so he had to be fast. When he got back he said it was very dark. My friend Lucy Jones called me and said she saw the tornado and that it was going fast coming out of the sky.

After a while Brandon and I realized that this was a serious tornado. We heard a lot of noise and one loud crack woke up our youngest child Lily (6) and second youngest, Madison (7). They woke up. They ran out and told Brandon and I to get back to bed.

Brandon and I finally went to sleep. We heard a knocking at the door and I got up and answered it. It was a fireman. He asked me if everyone was alright and I told him yes, I asked him what...


References


David L. Harrison is the poet laureate of Drury University. He has published more than 75 books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for young readers and has been anthologized in more than a hundred others. His work has been translated into 12 languages and presented on television and radio and via podcasts and video streams. His professional works include Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight, with Bernice Cullinan (Scholastic); Using the Power of Poetry to Teach Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, and More, with Kathy Holderith (Scholastic); “Yes, Poetry Can,” the poetry chapter for Children’s Literature in the Reading Program (3rd ed., IRA); and Partner Poems for Building Fluency: 40 Engaging Poems for Two Voices With Motivating Activities That Help Students Improve Their Fluency and Comprehension, with Timothy V. Rasinski and Gay Fawcett (Scholastic). Let’s Write This Week With David Harrison (Phoenix Learning Resources) is a 20-episode video program that brings writing tips into the elementary classroom and offers graduate credit for teachers. He holds degrees from Drury and Emory universities and honorary doctorates of letters from Missouri State and Drury universities. David Harrison Elementary School is named in his honor. David can be contacted at davidlharrison1@att.net.

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