

Wanted: Student Writers

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Writing. It is one of the four language arts along with reading, listening, and speaking. Children absorb much about language even before they step foot into a pre-school or kindergarten classroom, and they learn about the alphabetic system in informal ways. Print is ubiquitous in their environment: street signs, billboards, bumper stickers, and more. When children tag along on shopping trips, environmental print bombards them. A small child can readily pick out her familiar yellow box of Cheerios compared to Shredded Wheat, Raisin Bran, or the numerous other cereal selections. Is it any wonder, then, that children are inquisitive about how letters work? For them, mastering those squiggly marks gives them entree to a wonderful realm that, seemingly, belongs only to grown-ups.

Young children demand from their parents: *Show me how to write my name.* Little ones badger: *How do I write 'love' or 'happy birthday'?* Their avid interest in reproducing the symbol system grows as does their willingness to take risks. One word leads to another and another until they miraculously transition from representing single words to expressing complete thoughts. With time, preschoolers write notes to parents or friends; they draw pictures and compose captions; and they mimic adult behaviors—perhaps writing their version of a weekly shopping list. A few years pass. Enter formal schooling. Alarmingly, for some, this first fascination for writing begins to fade. How can this be? Even while primary-grade teachers forcefully pursue a noble mission of inspiring and helping young wordsmiths, classroom tasks, though designed to empower self-expression, may actually interfere with it. In school, children learn that sometimes writing is collected and assessed. Really? What a novel experience! Fearing failure, budding writers may proceed with caution. As a result, their responses may

become less genuine, less spontaneous. Marjorie Frank (1995) suggests ways to intervene. She argues that inviting students to write short pieces can do wonders for burgeoning Mark Twains.

How so? Students, especially those who are tentative or less-than-confident, might well feel that a short task is one they might actually finish. Of course, “short” may be defined differently depending on the situation, but the idea persists across grade bands and content areas. Especially in the case of handwritten work, young students will find it easier to tackle a shorter piece than several paragraphs or pages.

Examples of short text vary: captions for an illustration, an explanatory sentence to accompany a graph, or a paragraph-long character description. Fables represent the ideal literary form to study, savor, and mimic. Besides being brief, their abbreviated structure requires the writer to address essential story grammar—characterization, setting, and simple plot structure—but simply, sans complexity. Aesop’s fabulous fables date back to the fifth century B.C. Because these are short—often a single paragraph or two—student writers who emulate such models needn’t be burdened with lengthy character development and intricate plot structure. In contrast, merely identifying one or two characters suffices, and plot structure is stripped to its most basic form. When presenting a lesson on fable writing, the following sequence might work.

- Introduce Aesop’s Fables. Read and discuss a minimum of three.
- Invite students to identify primary fable elements (short tales, element of humor, narrative structure, dialogue, animal characters who talk and act like humans, lesson—or moral—to be learned)
- Brainstorm life lessons, or morals. Familiar ones include:
 - A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.

- A man is known by the company he keeps.
 - A villain may disguise himself, but he will not deceive the wise.
 - Acquaintance softens prejudices.
 - An act of kindness is a good investment.
 - Avoid a remedy that is worse than the disease.
 - Be sure that there are others worse off than yourself.
 - Beauty is only skin-deep.
 - Better a certain enemy than a doubtful friend.
 - Beware of flatterers.
 - Beware of hypocrites.
 - Birds of a feather flock together.
 - Clothes do not make the man.
 - Do not count your chickens before they are hatched.
 - Every man for himself....
 - Evil wishes, like chickens, come home to roost.
- Compose a class (group) fable after selecting animal characters, defining a lesson to be learned, and then targeting a way in which to make this lesson come to life.
- Read aloud the class composition and make improvements as needed. Model how to ask questions as part of the revision process.

After the “we-do-it” portion, another example to probe—the teacher’s modeled example—follows with a helpful checklist of essential assignment criteria. Students can step into the role of evaluator and learn to critically review—in this case—their teacher’s creation. Lastly, with teacher guidance, students can brainstorm possible titles for the tale (such as for the zebra-cheetah example below). Importantly, students experience how the process unfolds; they learn that writing (a fable) is not the result of a one-time effort; rather, the pieces are completed separately and result in final product.

Teacher’s Modeled Example

A vain zebra was in the habit of admiring herself. “My stripes make me the most unique animal for miles around,” she thought. Frequently, she stopped to look and see if others were

noticing her. One day, she found herself apart from the herd, for her friends had all moved ahead. As she was scanning the horizon, a cheetah stalked her from behind; it had picked up her scent and was hungry for a tasty meal.

“Oh dear,” she muttered, “Where is everyone? Now who will admire me?”

Overhearing her, the clever cat introduced itself.

“Why don’t you come to a beauty pageant I’m hosting this evening?”

“Really? Me? Why, I would love to—where is it?”

“It is nearby,” replied the cheetah, “in a place called Predator Alley.”

With a gasp, Zebra responded, “Predator Alley! I was told never to go there.”

“It’s okay,” soothed the cheetah. “There’ll be plenty of your friends there. I promise.”

So Zebra went to Predator Alley. Unfortunately, instead of a beauty pageant and friends, she found a pack of hungry cheetahs. Too late she realized, **don’t believe everything you’re told.**

Fable: Criteria checklist

YES	NO	CRITERIA
___	___	1. My fable has animal characters with human characteristics.
___	___	2. My fable has tells a complete, satisfactory tale that is short—about a page.
___	___	3. My fable has a beginning, middle, and end.

- ___ ___ 4. I use dialogue; I correctly format with appropriate punctuation and indenting.
- ___ ___ 5. I use strong verbs; linking verbs (is, are, am, was) are used minimally.
- ___ ___ 6. I have proofread my fable **out loud**, listening for ideas that are organized.
- ___ ___ 7. I have proofread my fable **out loud** a second time, looking at sentence lengths. I have short simple sentences and longer ones.
- ___ ___ 8. I have proofread my fable **out loud** a third time, listening for repetitive words, and made necessary changes.
- ___ ___ 9. All words in my fable are spelled correctly.
- ___ ___ 10. This assignment represents my best work.

Fables serve as an invitation to writers of all abilities to explore short assignments.

Experimenting with form, playing with character development, and determining how to craft the tale is an exhilarating part of authorship. William Butler Yeats observed that, "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." So it is with classroom teachers. They ignite passions for learning which are manifested in myriad forms. And those who teach, mentor, and assist student writers may one day have the satisfaction of knowing their efforts have inspired the next Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, or Mark Twain. What begins with a cereal box may end with a best seller or an everlasting classic— when sage and patient instructors keep alive a child's first fascination with those squiggly, black marks.

References

Frank, M. (1995). *If you wanna teach kids how to write, you've gotta have this book*.

Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications.

About the author: Ann Ellsworth teaches writing to K-12 students and to teacher candidates. This fable assignment has been used with fourth graders, sixth graders, and pre-service teachers in a writing methods class--with enthusiastic approval from all participants.