Start with a Story

I always start with a story. In the residency work I do, I have a new first day of school almost every month. Stories are how I bond with kids—the stories I tell and read and write, the stories we write and then read together, the stories students tell and write. From “You won’t believe what happened” to “Let me tell you about the time . . . ,” stories are how we relate to one another in the world and form the necessary bonds that build trust. Family stories and traditions, everyday happenings—stories about our lives—are easy “hooks” for children to grab on to.

I want all students to be successful writers from day 1, and they are. Even students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with little knowledge of how written language works, can and do acquire that knowledge in school, especially when they have rich opportunities to hear and respond to stories.

Use Stories as a Springboard for Teaching and Learning

As kids listen to stories and sometimes dramatize them or draw them, they get ideas of their own—original ones or adaptations. Let students know stories happen everywhere—at home, in school, on the playground, on the bus, in the imagination. Stories get us going in our writing. One student, on meeting her teacher years later as an adult, told her, “What I remember most about our year together were the stories you told.”

Through stories, we can teach and develop:

- Language and vocabulary.
- Listening and communication skills.
- Imaginative thinking.
- Comprehension.
- An appreciation for literacy.
- An awareness of story structure.
- An awareness of how to sequence ideas.
- An understanding of life and other cultures.
- An awareness of authors and illustrators and how they work.

Acting out stories in dramatizations and Readers Theatre, at all grade levels, improves children’s reading and writing and positively impacts their fluency, their ability to sequence and shape ideas, their understanding of how stories work, and their awareness of audience, to name just a few benefits. For English language learners of all ages, telling stories of their lives helps them develop their oral language facility, a necessity for writing and thinking clearly.
We also need to allow kids to experiment and play around with the pop culture stories in movies, video games, and sports. Many boys experience their greatest writing enjoyment and literacy growth when they can create their own pop culture stories, even though these stories appear to their teachers to be repetitive and sometimes gruesome.

Most of all, stories are fun, and fun is sadly missing from our classrooms these days. My four-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Katie, has already heard thousands of hours of stories and easily makes up her own. She adores stories of all kinds and will even sit still through rather lengthy chapter books like *Charlotte’s Web* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which contain few pictures. Even though she doesn’t understand every word, she gets what the story is about and savors the language.

**Ensure That All Your Students Hear Stories**

Guard the time you have with your students. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers, especially, need to be strong advocates for keeping all students in the room during story time. Do your best to ensure that your students who most need to hear stories and rich language are not leaving the room for special classes when you are reading aloud and introducing shared language experiences. Hearing and talking about stories and creating our own are a great way to get kids’ oral language going.

Oral language development and literacy skills are closely linked. Poor readers are less experienced as storytellers. Poor writers have good ideas but have difficulty with organization and structure. Stories are an entryway into reading and writing. Phonics and “the skills” only make sense once a student connects those skills with reading and writing real stories.

- **Take stories apart with students and notice what makes them “good.” Chart what the author did.**
- **Validate students’ lives through regular journal writing in which students can tell the stories that matter to them.**
- **Take an objective look at your students’ journals. Are they full of rich, detailed stories and topics they care about, or are they dutifully completing boring entries? One way to combat boring entries is by encouraging students to stick with the same story or topic for days or even weeks.**
- **Have an adult scribe (it doesn’t always have to be you) take dictation for students who aren’t ready to write (or aren’t ready to write as much as they say) and then dramatize these students’ stories. Talk about characters, setting, problem, etc. as the stories are being acted out.**
- **Publish class-authored and kid-authored stories regularly, and feature them in your classroom and school libraries.**

**Choose Your Topics Carefully**

When I write in front of students and bonding with them is a major goal, I pick a story topic that:

- Is easy for students to relate to.
- Is appropriate to share with students.
- Is important to me.
- Lets students know more about me.
- Allows me to take some risks.
My topics are personal and commonplace and relate to everyday happenings: getting new glasses, having a hard time moving to a new place, taking care of my disabled father. Often, my stories are about things that happened when I was the students’ age (see my “secrets” story on page 73 and my thinking/writing process in Teaching in Action: Lesson Essentials).

I always tell the story first before I write it. Saying the story out loud engages the students, lets me clarify my thinking, and reinforces the importance of conversation before writing. It also models the conversation—outer (with others) and inner (with yourself)—that I want students to have with their own writing.

Then, when I write, I make sure to include the details that fascinate. (Often I observe teachers tell a lively story and then just write down the bare-bones facts.) I pull out all the stops—recreating conversations, slowing down the writing with carefully chosen descriptive words, letting students in on my thinking and what I’m feeling. I try to emulate award-winning author Kate DiCamillo: “I put my heart on the page when I tell the story.”

It is important to take a risk and share something personal about yourself that you are comfortable sharing. Our students will not easily share their life experiences in a meaningful, personal way until we share ours. If we write dry, boring stories when we model, we will get dry, boring stories from our students. If you have never written in front of your students before, take the plunge: they will appreciate your risk taking, and you will have a much clearer idea of what you are actually asking them to do.

**Keep Your Students’ Attention**

I adjust the story I tell and the amount I write to the age and capacity of my students. I only write as much as I expect my students to write. It makes no sense to take the time to model a full page of writing when most of the students are able to write just a few sentences. Likewise, if the goal is for older students to write and publish one excellent paragraph, model writing just one cohesive, interesting paragraph. (I write on a lined chart or projected transparency.)

Watch the clock. I always look at the time when I start. It’s so easy to go on too long. I aim for ten or fifteen minutes, maximum. Otherwise, I lose students’ attention, and I also lose precious time for students to write.

Focus on the content. You can’t do everything at once. Avoid explaining why you’re putting a capital letter here and a period there. And don’t ask students, *What do I need here?* or *Why do you think I . . . ?* This is your time to demonstrate, show possibilities, and get students excited about writing. Show your thinking out loud, and then just write. Write the words as you say them so students match your voice with the text.

With very young students, stretch out the sounds of the words as you write them. I tend not to ask students to help me spell words, because it slows the writing down too much, and my main purpose is showing good storytelling (although I will say, “everyone, spell-ing”—or whatever word or letter grouping we’ve been working on).
Identify some topics that are easy for teachers and students to write about and that can help us bond with one another:
- Start of school.
- Special memory (summer, friendship, family, trip).
- Best friend.
- Family (parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives).
- Sports.
- Pets.
- Favorite movie, book, food, thing, place.
- Being an expert.

Pick a topic that resonates for you and that will let your students get to know you more. For example, if you write about being an expert, pick something like being a good friend or taking super-good care of your pet. What's important is that your modeling be everything you want your students' writing to be.

Write in Front of Your Students

The only preparation I do before writing is to think about what my topic will be and narrow that topic. Usually, I’ll jot down three or four ideas on a sticky note. Here’s my quick planning for writing about moving.

After listing my subtopics, I think out loud, talking briefly about each one. Then I choose the one I most want to write about now and put a check mark next to it. (See page 63 for an example of a student circling her writing topic.)

I continue to make all my decisions in front of the students, beginning by saying something like this: Kids, I’m going to be thinking out loud before I write and as I write my story. I’m doing that so that when you write you’ll know what kind of thinking writers do. Then I compose on a projected transparency or large (usually lined) chart.

Expand Personal Writing

Older students are often tired out from years of writing personal narratives. Besides journals, kids can write: brief memoirs from one period of their lives, photo-autobiographies, a moment from the timeline of their lives, favorite memories, snapshots (see Chapter 8), hero moments (see pages 323–329), friendly letters, cards, poems.
Choose writing assignments (being sure to give lots of choice within an unobtrusive structure) that build classroom community and enjoyment and can become class publications. Some examples are:

- What we worry about.
- Our favorite places.
- A day we’ll never forget.
- What we’re experts at (what we’re great at).
- The best thing we ever did.
- All about us.
- What we like (or dislike).
- Heart poems.
- Our pets.
- Secrets of second graders (kindergartners, whatever).