

Introduction

Introduction to the Second Edition

In conversations with teachers since the publication of the first edition of *Teaching the Story*, we have found that many states are testing on the narrative in the upper-elementary grades. In order to accommodate these students, the scope of the original book has been expanded. New activities are included that will enhance instruction in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms and can also be used by teachers with struggling older writers. For your convenience, these adaptations have been labeled within the book.

In general, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers need to make sure to allocate adequate time to demonstrate the concepts in this book. For example, plan to spend extra class time going from brainstorming an information bank for a character or setting to writing a descriptive paragraph. Modeling these skills is vital to ensuring that your students feel prepared to launch into the activity on their own.

You also might invite your third-grade teachers to use some of the activities in this book. Third graders can learn to brainstorm, compose descriptive paragraphs about characters and settings, “show, not tell,” and understand that “the red pencil is their best friend.” These instructional bridges will help facilitate the transition into writing the narrative in fourth or fifth grade.

A well-written narrative requires planning, an engaging beginning, a well-thought-out middle, and an ending that logically concludes the story. Written in chronological order, narratives should include powerful word choice (i.e., strong verbs, specific nouns, descriptive adjectives and adverbs), dialogue, supporting (sensory) details, and figurative language. In addition to being edited for these attributes, narratives should also exhibit proficient use of writing conventions such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation appropriate to the student’s grade

level. Although both real and imaginary prompts are used on standardized tests, learning the principles of composing and organizing an original short story will equip students for writing the personal narrative and vice versa. You will find a section on how to use these mini-lessons in **Writing the Personal Narrative** in the **Introduction** on page 13.

Along with new mini-lessons and activities, there is also a new folder on the Resource CD labeled “Student Stories.” Open it and you will find eighteen stories written by middle-school students to use as examples in your classroom. Although none are picture perfect, each represents a serious attempt at writing a fictional narrative.

Why Incorporate Technology into the Creative Writing Process?

There are several answers to this question. The first is simple: *This is where kids are now*. Our students are growing up in a rapidly changing world and a slowly changing school. Students today have to “power down” to come to school; at home, they are incredibly engaged online, able to communicate with just about *anybody*, and find and create just about *anything*. Sadly, when these worldly young people come to school, they are stuck with the same traditional tools: pencil and paper, handouts and word lists. Students are handed textbooks that, in today’s world, are out of date the day they leave the printing press! Incorporating progressive technology is crucial because it is this generation’s primary mode of communication and expression.

Utilizing technology also enlivens the entire writing process. Students in our schools are being drilled with scripted writing. They must include X number of transitions, X number of descriptive words, etc. High-stakes testing has squeezed a lot of passion and imagination out of what should be the most fun and imaginative part of their day. Creating and using these technology lessons has truly opened my eyes to this fact. Kids are so stuck in their ultra-structured rut that you almost have to *pry* their imaginations out of them. Technology invigorates and facilitates these bursting floodgates. Instead of moans, you will hear excited students who are ready to write something interesting that people might actually want to read! Once technology cracks open their creativity, your students’ stories will burst through in powerful ways.

Technology’s infusion into the creative writing process also allows for more differentiation in your classroom. The tools of this new generation are inherently personal and highly customizable; they allow students to take ownership of their learning experience. From wikis that can be accessed anywhere to malleable pictures and video, the students of today are able to make learning their own.

In addition to a more personalized experience, these lessons will also inspire the students that need inspiration most. Be prepared to witness your most reluctant writers springing forth into action! It's simply amazing to see reluctant writers blossom in front of your eyes simply because the tools they are using are exciting, motivating, and directly connected to their lives.

For these reasons and more, sixteen technology connections have been created to extend the mini-lessons in this book. It is important to note that these technology connections are meant to be completely *flexible* to your teaching environment: Pick and pull, muse and choose! Fit the connections wherever you'd like. Often, they can become great motivators, as one teacher remarked: "Doing the technology piece *before* the classroom lesson got my students much more prepared and excited about writing; the classroom piece turned out much better after having started with the computers!" You will also find instances where hardware may be replaced with little effect on lesson outcomes. If no SMART Board™ is available, adapt with an overhead projector. If no digital projector is available for a video clip, wheel in an A/V cart. There are also instances where software may be replaced based on what is available at your school. This flexibility is completely intentional: learning and technology are fluid and ever changing. Lesson concepts and outcomes are meant to carry through as the level of technology changes in your classroom.

These connections have referenced several different types of technologies, many of which you already are using in your classroom. On the Resource CD, you will find a "how-to" section detailing six new technologies: interactive whiteboards, Second Life®, podcasts, wikis, classroom quiz systems, and digital portfolios. Use this section as a reference guide to address any implementation issues and to enhance your students' experience with writing short fiction.

One final note: While these technology tools will not necessarily come together seamlessly, you will want to persevere through the challenges once you see the creativity they generate. So get busy building a progressive, enriching environment for the great writers of tomorrow!

Carol Baldwin, author

Steven Johnson, technology connections contributor

Why Teach Fiction Writing?

Maybe you don't feel like a writer yourself. Maybe you dismiss creative writing out of habit, thinking you have to focus on assigning "real" writing (like five-paragraph essays on the symbolism in *Romeo and Juliet*). Maybe you've hidden behind the fear that teaching creative writing is an insurmountable mountain better left for next year's teacher to climb.

But maybe you just need a step-by-step unit to take the mystery out of an enigmatic process.

Undeniably, the abilities inherent in writing expository and persuasive essays are important skills for students to master. Students in grades four through eight are laying the foundation for upper-level thinking and writing by composing essays which explain, instruct, and convince. Unfortunately, the emphasis on writing the five-paragraph essay often produces scripted results that lack original thought or language.

As educators, we want to challenge and encourage our students to think. One way to accomplish this is by challenging them with increasingly complex literature. A reciprocal way is to teach students how to write an original short story which also stretches imaginations in ways that TV and video games do not. Students who learn fiction-writing skills such as how to show, not tell, through vivid verbs, specific nouns, and figurative language can also use these skills when writing a persuasive essay. In the end, teaching your students to write fiction will benefit their expository writing as they add interest and detail to all their writing. By the way, they'll have fun, too.

Writing fiction helps young writers move beyond simply an adequate use of writing conventions; it provides an opportunity to practice the craft of writing. As Tim Keeton, a North Carolina writer, says, "By choosing the appropriate words and punctuation (the "nuts and bolts") the writer allows the reader to share and 'live' the experience that was previously only in the writer's head."

Your students will be doing more than just brainstorming story ideas. After analyzing the elements of successful stories, your students' hard work begins as they learn how to *translate* their story ideas into a written piece of work that is readable, entertaining, and perhaps even meaningful. Through many rounds of drafting and rewriting, they will discover how to *show* rather than *tell* a story.

This unit will also help your students prepare for standardized testing, including the new writing section of the SAT. As they move through the process of

translating brainstormed thoughts into cohesive writing, they will learn the importance of planning and writing in a logical, sequential manner.

In addition, when students critique their own and their peers' writing, they use critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate. All these skills are stressed in the National Language Arts Standards developed by the NCTE and IRA (particularly standards 1, 2, 4-6, and 11-12). You can see the full list of standards at <http://www.ncte.org/>.

All writers work to perfect their craft by constantly searching for the right word or sentence to convey their meaning. Don't be afraid to let your students know how much you are learning also. As you lead your students, I hope this creative process will not only work its excitement in your classroom but also in another writer-to-be—you.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into six blocks of mini-lessons: **Discussing the Basics**, **Creating a Character**, **Setting the Scene**, **Developing the Plot**, **Writing the First Draft**, and **Editing & Revising**. Each block is prefaced with information which provides you with a broad picture of your goals and what your students should achieve in that block of mini-lessons. Each mini-lesson includes instructive material for you to convey to your student as well as classroom activities and homework assignments.

The blocks and mini-lessons are organized in what I think is the most sequential, logical order, and you might decide to use this unit exactly as it is presented. But the mini-lessons are unnumbered so that you may pick and choose just the ones you want to use. The only lesson I recommend not eliminating is **A Look at the Whole Picture** (p. 26), which gives your students an overview of this unit and spells out your expectations for your students. There may be some lessons which you'll decide not to use. For example, if this is your students' first exposure to writing a short story, then some of the mini-lessons (such as **Dialogue** on page 82) might be more than you want to cover.

Blocks and mini-lessons within the blocks can be rearranged. For instance, you might decide to let your students brainstorm a plot before they work on developing a character. Or, you might want to provide a fun introduction to creating stories and begin the unit with the **Three Story Elements** mini-lesson (p. 28). No matter where you start, your students will begin to have ideas about

the other story elements. Encourage them to write these ideas down in their binders and return to them when the class begins to work on those lessons.

You will probably re-visit some of the mini-lessons throughout this unit of study. For example, you will refer to **The Red Pencil Is Your Best Friend** (p. 40) many times as your students write their descriptive paragraphs and rough drafts.

Your students will learn how to develop the three main story elements during the **Character, Setting, and Plot** blocks. Many students will decide to use the characters and settings they brainstorm in the lessons for their stories. Other students might discover that the character or setting they brainstormed doesn't work well with the plot they wanted to use and decide to create a different character or setting. Change happens. Train your students to think about their stories as fluid literary creations that will not be finished until "The End."

Included in the text are the reproducibles and transparency masters your students will need for writing a non-genre-specific story. These worksheets are printed in the book so you can easily reference them as you are working through the different instructional blocks. (The ones that are marked "Transparency Master/Reproducible" are the ones that I recommend discussing in class as well as handing out to all students as worksheets.) They are also included on the Resource CD which accompanies this book, saved in folders named after the chapter in which they appear.

The Resource CD also includes genre-specific versions of many of the reproducibles and transparency masters presented in the book. Use these if your students are writing genre-specific stories or as additional examples of the concepts you are teaching.

You'll also find student samples in the **Sample Stories** folder within the Chapter_1 folder on the Resource CD, including several complete stories. You may choose to either read one aloud or print and distribute several to your students. Encourage students to evaluate these stories using the criteria listed in the **Peer Checklist** on page 171. Used as an introductory activity, this will help students become acquainted with what a well-written short story includes.

In most cases, the files on the Resource CD are saved as Rich Text Format (.rtf) files, so they should be compatible with most word-processing programs. You can customize these to meet your students' needs and re-save the files to your computer for later use. Also, please note that these files are formatted as reproducible worksheets to hand to your students. You may wish to increase the size of the font before printing them to use as transparency masters so they'll be

easier to read when on the overhead. (For a complete list of all the reproducibles, see page 181)

Remember that the transparency masters and reproducibles are only tools to help your students get their imaginations started. They are not traditional “worksheets” that must be filled in line by line (although you should encourage your students to do so). When demonstrating the reproducibles on the overhead, emphasize how they guide a writer into useful, creative discoveries about their stories.

You will also find a teacher/parent letter on the Resource CD (in the Chapter_1 folder) that introduces the unit to your students’ parents and solicits their help. If you decide to have a party or writing contest at the end of the unit (see **After “The End”** on page 175), you can also use this letter to request help for these activities. Customize the letter and send it home several weeks prior to beginning this unit.

Instructional Themes

Your instruction will be framed by three themes. While working through the unit, your students might get tired of hearing you say, “How can you *show* that, not *tell* it?” “What are the key details that you want to include?” and “The red pencil is your best friend.” However, these three instructional themes are the heart of this unit, and more than likely your young writers will need to hear you repeat them many times as you learn and write together.

Story Showing vs. Story Telling

“Show, don’t tell” is a slogan that gets drilled into every writer’s mind. Don’t *tell me* about the student who doesn’t pay attention in school: *Show me* the glazed look in his baby blue eyes when his teacher calls on him, his slouched shoulders, and the *Sports Illustrated* hiding behind his literature book.

Almost all beginning writers (both adult and student) have a tendency to *tell* their stories rather than *show* them through dialogue, action, and the characters’ emotions and reactions. This type of narrative distances the writer from the action and leads to boring lists of events such as, “When John went to camp he went swimming, fishing, and hunting. He made new friends and then he came home. The End.” This type of writing summarizes the plot. It is *not* the story itself.

Throughout this book you will find many *show, don't tell* examples. Each one shows the difference between descriptive writing that captures a reader's attention and pulls him into a story, and bland, retelling writing. Asking your students to figure out why one type of writing is better than the other will sharpen their critical thinking and show them the importance of incorporating these skills into their own writing.

Show, don't tell is also true for you. You can't merely tell your students about good writing or the importance of revision, you must show them examples. Try out the exercises in this book. Read your results (both good and bad!) to your class. Let them see you develop and grow as a writer. By seeing you struggle to make your character's conflict strong yet simple, or watching you pick the most precise verb, they will realize that writing is a continual process—one in which all writers participate. The **How to Teach This** sections at the end of several mini-lessons are also available on the Resource CD (see the folder named after the chapter that the lesson appears in) so you can easily refer to the examples when teaching the concepts to your class.

Your students will also be models for one another. As they read their work out loud and the class comments on what makes one piece of writing shine and how another piece could be “jazzed up,” they are teaching each other how to become better writers.

Details Make a Difference

One of the main ways that an author shows a character or setting is in the details he chooses. Specific nouns and adjectives—even just a few words—create different types of stories. Consider the difference between stories that include a *soccer ball*, a *baseball*, a *tennis ball*, a *basketball*, or a *bowling ball*.

Each of these descriptive nouns immediately conjures up a different image in the reader's mind. Similarly, snow that is *dirty gray* is different from snow that is *ice cream white*, or snow that is *brittle* and *crunchy*. You will have many opportunities to emphasize this concept with your students. Choosing the right details will also help a story be internally consistent. A star quarterback on the junior varsity team who eats half a pizza at lunch and the other half after school probably doesn't take ballet lessons on Friday night and munch on alfalfa sprouts as a bedtime snack.

The Red Pencil Is a Writer’s Best Friend

The writing process is never stagnant. Writers constantly delete, change, edit, and rewrite. In fact, many professional writers have a hard time knowing when their work is “done”—the urge to find a better verb, adjective, or simile can prevent a writer from putting her manuscript in the mail. Once a manuscript is accepted for publication, a writer still faces thousands of hours of revision and rewriting. This book, for example, will have been revised dozens of times before it ever reached your hands—and that doesn’t include the thousands of changes on the computer which never reached the printed page!

On a smaller scale, this same writing and revising process holds true for your students. Unfortunately, they won’t see it exactly the same way.

Typically, students look forward to revising their stories just about as much as they look forward to doing fifty sit-ups or the mile run in PE. They want to finish an assignment, turn it in, and be done with it. They rebel at the thought of revision or correction—their work is perfect, how could it *possibly* be improved? An important part of this unit is showing your students that just like *real* writers, their stories will improve when they take them through several rounds of drafts and revisions. In other words, a red pencil is their best friend—not their dreaded enemy. Their changes and edits, their peers’ suggestions and feedback, and your corrections are *part of the entire writing process*—not something that is tacked on at the end before they get a grade.

Whenever you ask your students to find a more dynamic verb, specific noun, or explicit adjective, and when you encourage them to add imagery through similes and metaphors, you are entering into the adventure of cooperative classroom learning. This is guaranteed not to be boring (children tend to think more outside the box than adults—their responses will amaze you), and it also pulls students into the creative process. The greater the number of students who contribute to the finished product, the more everyone will feel as if the finished product (a descriptive paragraph, a story from a story prompt, or even just one sentence) is “theirs”—not just the teacher’s. As Maity Schrecengost points out in her book *Writing Whizardry*, this “ownership” of the writing piece is essential for students to accept responsibility for changing and revising it.

These important concepts are presented in the **Red Pencil** mini-lesson (p. 40) in the **Discussing the Basics** block but should be reinforced throughout this entire unit.

Teacher Goals

Before you begin, it is important for you to decide what goals you'd like your students to achieve. For example, if you want students to bring their stories to the best level they can, consider allotting additional time for more cycles of critique and revision.

On the other hand, if your goal is for your students to incorporate a brainstormed character into a believable setting, then these reduced expectations will determine not only what you deem to be acceptable work, but how much time you need to allot for students to successfully achieve this goal.

Setting appropriate goals for yourself and your students also will be extremely helpful in determining the parameters of your feedback and conferences. Selecting specific writing skills to focus on will keep you from feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of reading and commenting on a pile of stories. In the same vein, if you anticipate not having a great deal of time to read and make in-depth comments, keep the word limit to between 800 and 1000 words.

Since this unit potentially can be used in consecutive years by members of a language arts team, teachers can benefit from working together to set grade-appropriate goals in conjunction with the language arts goals already established for your school. For example, a student who is writing a short story for the first time will be just beginning to learn how to show rather than tell the story. On the other hand, a student who has already written one should be expected to know that the main character needs to resolve his problem himself and be more proficient at writing dialogue.

Although the process of writing a short story is the same for a fourth grader as it is for an eighth grader, a student's ability to write descriptively and cohesively and to include all of the elements outlined in this book will vary according to grade and skill level. I recommend using a comprehensive Target Skills list such as the "Bird's Eye View of Writing Development across the Grades" (http://www.maupinhouse.com/pdf/DWL_TargetSkills.pdf) from the CraftPlus® Daily Writing Lessons (Maupin House) to evaluate grade-appropriate skills. This will ensure that your expectations for your students are grade appropriate.

Grading, Correcting, and Story Requirements

Your feedback to your students on their descriptive paragraphs, plot sentences, and other written activities should focus on how well they have completed the assignment and on the content of their writing, not on spelling, grammar, and punctuation. A “no grades” policy at this stage promotes creativity and enables students to try out different ideas. Circulate through your classroom while students are completing their in-class assignments. Answer questions and provide assistance.

Deciding how much to have your students edit their “final” story is always a tough call. (“Final” is sometimes difficult for both the student and teacher to decide on since it may be hard to quit working on a story.) Obvious errors in grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling must be fixed. These are non-negotiable: to get a satisfactory grade these errors must be corrected. You’ll find **Guidelines for Grading Stories**, a suggested grading rubric, on page 174.

Errors in the story’s organization are sometimes more difficult to pinpoint, and may be difficult for your students to fix. For example, you may be able to see that the writer spent far too many words (or pages!) describing unnecessary background information without ever getting to the character’s main problem. Or the author may have left out important transitions which showed how a character moved from one event to another. Sometimes too many details stay in the author’s mind and never make it to the page so that the story just doesn’t make sense. Other times long blocks of description should be interspersed with dialogue. It is important that you point out these major structural observations and suggest appropriate changes.

Whenever possible, the red pencil belongs in your students’ hand and not yours. Don’t just hand them a marked-up draft: conference with them. Encourage them to take notes. Show them areas they need to consider condensing or reworking.

Remember that although you can see potential changes that might be beneficial to the story, the student must select which changes should be made. Your students’ ownership of their stories is vitally important to the writing process. Remember, it is the student’s story—not yours.

How to Use This Unit

If you have two weeks or if you have eight, this unit can be adapted to work within your school calendar. First, you can devote several weeks and encourage your students to focus on writing short stories. If you minimize other language arts assignments, your students will respond to this fun activity with enthusiasm.

Second, you could select some of the activities in the **Discussing the Basics** and **Editing and Revising** blocks and integrate them into your school year. For example, you could adapt and use **The Writing-Revising Cycle** (p. 43) or the **Peer Checklist** (p. 171) for other written assignments. In that way, these skills would become an intrinsic part of your students' writing repertoire before they begin this unit.

If you refer to this unit throughout the year, your students will start thinking about their stories ahead of time. For example, as you study the literary devices which authors use, you can remind your class that they can use these elements in their own stories.

Third, you could use this unit during your writing workshops. If you have already allotted at least three blocks of time for writing during the week, this unit is ideal for your classroom. The time to allot for each mini-lesson is indicated at the beginning of each lesson.

Your language arts team can decide which genres your school wants to use and when to teach them. You might consider teaching a non-genre-specific story in the fourth grade, sports stories in fifth to introduce the genre story, and then the remaining genres in successive grades. In keeping with the types of books which middle-school students seem to enjoy, sixth graders could write a mystery, seventh graders could write science fiction or fantasy, and eighth graders could write historical fiction. Mapping out a plan for your school enables the language arts team to work together and also fends off the “We did this last year!” complaint from your class—because, no, they didn't!

As you plan how to use this writing unit, consider working cooperatively with your science and/or social studies teachers. Any historical period will come alive with the additional research that historical fiction necessitates. Similarly, when your students write a science fiction story that requires them to use scientific facts or principles they have learned, their science knowledge and writing composition skills are both deepened.

Assigning different genres to different grades also creates a certain amount of “buzz” in your school. You’ll hear one student brag about the “awesome sports story” that he is going to write next year or the “unbelievably cool science fiction story” which his best friend wrote last year. The boy who insisted that there was absolutely no way he could write an historical story will surprise you with a vivid description of a Japanese samurai warrior. The girl who absolutely despises science fiction will create an incredible story about robots that transport people into the future. Your students will complain, argue, beg, whine, and nag you to death about switching genres. But in the end, not only will they be writing a wide variety of stories, they will be excited about it, too.

Writing the Personal Narrative

Although this book focuses on creating a fictional narrative, you can also use these mini-lessons to help students write a personal narrative. This activity is a great bridge into writing stories since students will practice the same planning, organization, sentence fluency, and descriptive-writing skills needed for creating fiction. In fact, your school might decide to use this book in the fourth grade to write the personal narrative and then in the grades that follow to write fictional narratives.

First, print and distribute copies from the Resource CD of **Getting to Know You** and **Character Info Bank** (Chapter_2 folder), **Setting Information Bank** (Chapter_3 folder), and **Build-a-Plot—Blank** (Chapter_4).

Choose a section from **Getting to Know You**. Upper elementary grades may begin with Sections B and C while middle-school students might prefer questions from Sections D, E, or F. You could select a few questions or ask students to answer the ones that intrigue them the most. Ask all students to fill out the **Character Info Bank** about themselves. As they fill out these scaffolds, they will generate ideas for their narratives that they should jot down. Using a pencil for ease of revision, they can fill in the **Build-a-Plot** to narrow down the problem that they decide to focus on. (You can also use the **Fold-a-Story** activity mentioned in the fourth- and fifth-grade adaptation section of **Discussing the Basics** on page 30.) The **Setting Information Bank** will help them remember sensory information that could be included in their narratives. After students have used these handouts and have written their rough drafts, discuss ways to hook readers (**Open Strong**, Chapter 3) and write good endings (“**The End**,” Chapter 5).

Overview of Blocks

DISCUSSING THE BASICS (CHAPTER 1)

This block of lessons introduces the students to the main instructional themes they will encounter during this unit of study. You will also communicate your goals and expectations for the unit.

CREATING A CHARACTER (CHAPTER 2)

By the time your students have completed this block of mini-lessons, they will be able to brainstorm a character and write a descriptive paragraph that *shows*, not *tells* that character to their reader. They will have practiced creating an information bank and learned how to include key details from that bank in their stories. They will practice building a believable character that is internally consistent. They will focus on creating one or two original characters for their stories that are not shallow stereotypes.

SETTING THE SCENE (CHAPTER 3)

In this block of mini-lessons, your students will go from imagining a setting to *showing* that setting to their readers. They will learn how to brainstorm, select relevant sensory details, and write a descriptive paragraph that creates a mood for their stories. They will focus on creating one or two settings for their stories.

DEVELOPING THE PLOT (CHAPTER 4)

During this block of mini-lessons, your students will define a simple plot for their short stories. By writing a plot sentence, your students will learn to focus on getting their characters (not God, magic, or their best friend) to resolve their own problems. The student writers will outline the events which the character experiences on the way to solving his problem. They will experience the satisfaction of the character reaching his goal or learning how to live with unmet goals or expectations.

WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT (CHAPTER 5)

Equipped with their characters and setting descriptive paragraphs, their plot sentence, and all the reproducibles which they have completed, your students will now be ready to begin their first draft. You will need to remind them that changes they make to any one of the three story elements will affect the other

elements—and that is part of the fluid process of writing a short story. They will also need to be reminded not to just dump their information banks or descriptive paragraphs into their stories. Some students may decide to throw out the settings and characters which they had previously brainstormed. This is acceptable, providing they have enough time to create new ones. You will spend less time teaching and more time providing support and direction in short mini-conferences.

EDITING AND REVISING (CHAPTER 6)

After the rough draft is completed, each student's story should be evaluated by himself, a peer, and you. The mini-lessons in this block are geared towards teaching your students to look for their own mistakes as well as to effectively critique one another's work. Ideally, you will be able to read each student's story at least once before they hand in their final draft. Guidelines for grading and strategies for revision are included in this section.