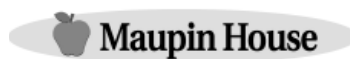


# Listening to Young Writers

Developing Writing Competency through  
Conversation, Engagement, and Assessment



**Listening to Young Writers: Developing Writing Competency  
through Conversation, Engagement, and Assessment**

By Melissa Hare Landa

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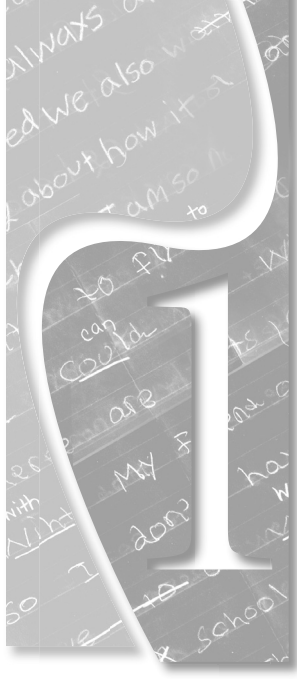
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# Creating a Writer-Friendly Classroom

**C**hildren come to school from every type of background and home situation, bringing with them a diverse range of experiences and abilities. We as teachers have the power to create a supportive classroom environment that is rich in oral language, one that accurately assesses the abilities of children, monitors their progress, and empowers all students with the academic tools and self-confidence they need to become competent writers

The successful classroom that supports young writers:

- Allows questions that lead young students to explore thoughts, perceptions, and feelings;
- Confirms for children that their experiences are significant and meaningful and that others want to hear what they have to say;
- Helps children understand that the issues in their lives are reflected in books, and, therefore, books are relevant to them;
- Supports the development of speaking skills and active-listening skills;
- Shows children that their ideas, feelings, and experiences expressed orally can be transposed to the written word;
- Teaches children how to think like writers;
- Provides the teacher an opportunity to learn about each student, including aspects of the students' home life and home culture; and
- Creates opportunities for the students to learn about, and from, each other.

## Writing Begins with Conversation

My approach to teaching writing to very young children presumes an inextricable connection between eliciting the motivating, creative aspects of writing and teaching the conventions of English.

By the time children enter kindergarten, some have already had years of practice with scribbling and improvised writing. Others respond eagerly to their first experiences with pencil and paper. How those first efforts are received by the teacher in large part determines how they will learn how to express themselves in writing.

The first step in writing for young children is speaking. They must process their thoughts aloud before they know what they are thinking, and then they become invested in their topics. Conversation is a helpful pre-writing activity for any writer, but it is by far the most effective pre-writing strategy for very young writers.

Without the opportunity to think aloud before they begin to write, children may not know *how* to begin to write about their topic even if it is meaningful for them. They might also create a list of ideas without understanding how to develop any of them.

Traditionally, teachers place a blank piece of paper in front of each student and tell them to choose a topic and write about it without allowing children to talk first about the topic. Some teachers may choose a prompt and ask children to add ideas, again without discussing it first. These teachers are then surprised when their students respond with stares or confused looks, or with one-sentence writing like, “I like my cat.”

Here’s how one first-year, first-grade teacher explained her experiences asking young children to choose a topic for writing. “I tell them to write about whatever they want,” she said. “If they choose computers, I tell them to write about what they like about computers. But they just sit there!”

Another teacher, a veteran second-grade teacher, described writer’s workshop in her classroom this way: “It’s like pulling teeth trying to get these kids to write,” she said. “I sit there and ask repeatedly, ‘And then what happened? And then what happened?’”

As these experiences with student writing demonstrate, young children do

not simply think and then write—they are still learning how to use words to formulate and articulate their thoughts. They are working to make letter-sound connections, to remember what each letter looks like, to spell correctly, to reproduce the letter physically, and to use correct punctuation.

To prevent frustrating writing experiences, do not send your students to their seats to stare at a blank piece of paper. Help them, through engaged conversation, to begin the task of writing with their words already spoken and, therefore, ready in their minds to be transposed into writing on the page before them.

When you give children the opportunity to articulate their ideas conversationally with an interested listener before beginning to write, they approach writing with eagerness. Moreover, as children develop thoughts through conversation, ideas for writing are within easy reach. The conversation gives them a mental map, which guides and motivates them as they practice the mechanical aspects of writing and learn specific craft skills.

The following list describes the process through which children move from thinking to speaking to writing. It suggests how thoughtful, open-ended questions encourage that process.

**Thoughts** (“I’m thinking about my cat.”)

**Verbal expression of thoughts** (“I have a cat.”)

**Teacher asking open-ended questions about ideas** (“I don’t have a cat! Will you tell me about what the best part of having a cat is?”)

**Response to teacher’s question** (“Feeding her.”)

**Elaboration on the child’s words** (“You feed your cat? What do you feed her? Do you also give her water to drink? It sounds like you take good care of her!”)

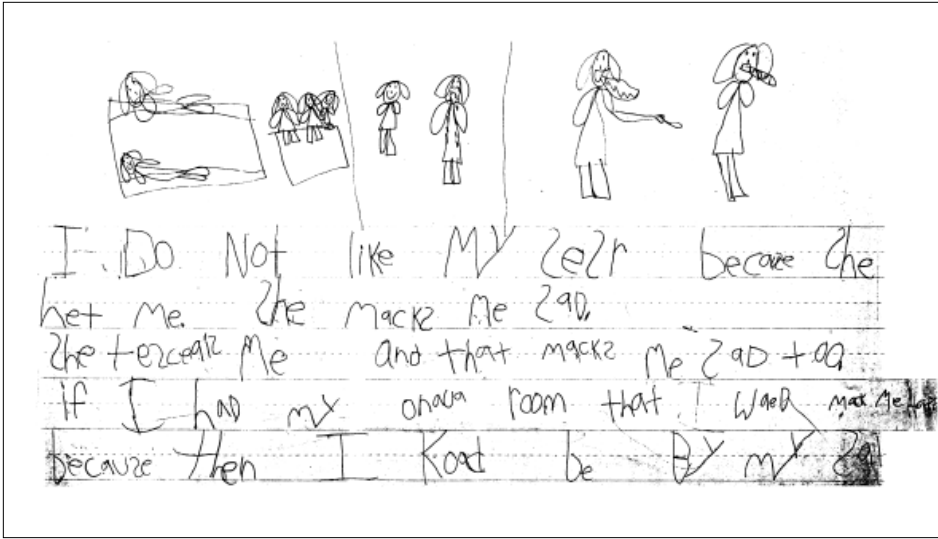
**Rehearsing her words to prepare for writing** (“Let’s figure out the words you are going to write about your cat. You told me that you feed your cat tuna and water. How about, ‘I feed my cat wet tuna food and I give it water.’?”)

**Writing the words down**

## **Conversations with Reluctant Talkers**

Almost every class includes children who eagerly offer their thoughts to the large group and those who wait to offer their ideas until most of the class has gone to their seats to begin writing. After my first invitation to “whoever is ready to write” to leave the meeting area to begin writing, I usually find that the remaining students are more willing to talk when fewer children are in

## I Do Not Like



When children write from experiences of their lives, the topics are authentic and meaningful.

the group. In fact, many teachers have told me that these moments were the first time they heard these particular children speak.

Other children choose not to speak but will reassure me that they know about what they are going to write. They are able to generate ideas as they listen. Whether they are shy, native speakers, or non-native speakers who simply are not confident enough with their English, this group of children often responds to the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts through drawing and writing.

One morning in a first-grade classroom, I approached a little girl who sat silently at her seat, and I asked her if she was feeling all right. She answered that she was tired because she stayed up late with her sister. Pleased that she was sharing something with me, I pursued the conversation, hoping to help her find a topic for writing.

“What’s it like having a sister?” I asked.

Without pausing, she blurted out, “Terrible!”

There was her topic! She wrote, “I do not like my sister because she hits me.

She makes me sad. She teases me and that makes me sad too. If I had my own room it would make me happy because then I could be by myself.”

## **Conversations with “Safe” Writers**

Some children will write the same sentence day after day. They are afraid to stray from writing words they know how to spell. In the process, they lose their sense of engagement with their writing and their enthusiasm.

As you help your students verbally explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, be attentive not only to what topics delight and please them but also to what troubles them. The opportunity to express difficult emotions conversationally can motivate children to write and help them to cope with hardship, loss, grief, disappointment, anxiety, fear, outrage, and any number of similarly difficult emotions. Sonia Nieto, in her 2002 book, *Language, Culture, and Teaching*, finds, “Teachers who allow children to articulate troubling issues find that their life experiences serve as valuable assets to their writing, rather than handicaps to learning.”

Here’s an example. A first-grade ELL student named Talia would write her signature, safe sentence, “I went to the park,” day after day. One day, however, she stopped writing, looked up at me, and said anxiously, “I saw a picture of a bad boy. He takes kids.”

I remembered a letter and a police sketch the school system sent to all families in the county, alerting them to a suspicious person in the area. I then asked her to tell me more about the picture. She proceeded to talk rapidly about the sketch and about her fears.

I explained to her that something important and powerful that we are thinking and feeling is usually a good topic to choose for our writing. Good writers, I told her, often choose topics about which they care or have strong feelings. I said that it didn’t make sense to write about one thing while she was thinking about something else. After our conversation, Talia turned the page of her writing notebook, abandoned her park theme, and, instead, wrote enthusiastically on a new page about how she felt when she saw the flyer with the picture of the “bad boy.”

When we encourage students to feel at ease sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, they begin to find their way as writers, expressing themselves first in conversation and, soon after, in writing.

## Conversations with English Language Learners

A class meeting that emphasizes conversation, as described in Chapter 4, offers an opportunity to monitor whether your ELL children are silent or listening and how well they are expressing themselves in their new language. Be sure to respond enthusiastically to any efforts at speaking.

Be careful not to shame these students because of difficulties they may have with spoken English. As you teach these children to write, also remember that they will become fluent in their new language in the same way your own children learned their first language: by hearing and by using it. As a teacher of children who are learning English, you should keep the following in mind:

- As ELL children learn English, they are simultaneously learning a new culture. The process takes time!
- We have to allow ELL children to speak more so that they have the opportunity to try out the words they are hearing.
- No matter what we are teaching and no matter how trivial it seems, we have to speak and listen to ELL children with respect and attention.

Experts of child development, as well as those of us who have children, are familiar with the “Why?” stage that two- and three-year-olds go through. Almost everything a child says at this stage begins with a demanding, “Why?” Such questions need responses that provide them with opportunities to learn new information and new vocabulary. For our second language learners, we need to recreate the “Why?” stage in the classroom.

**Talk aloud.** To help your ELL students build vocabulary in their new language, provide a running commentary in your classroom. Name objects. Describe processes. Give reasons and detailed explanations. Your ELL students may hear a lot of English spoken on the television at home, but TV and radio will not provide them (or their parents) with enough understandable language to allow them to learn much English.

**Speak simply.** Remember that children learning a second language need to hear simple sentences spoken slowly and repeatedly. Try to avoid colloquialisms, slang, and difficult figures of speech. Such expressions, which are common on TV, may confuse ELL children. As much as possible, show the meaning of your words and phrases with physical props, illustrations, gestures, and facial expressions.

**Encourage ELL students to talk.** When they are ready to speak in English, encourage them to participate in conversation during the class meeting. These children need opportunities to practice the English-language words they hear spoken around them. By participating conversationally in the class meeting, they can practice using English words to express the ideas, feelings, and experiences that are important to them and will, therefore, be their best topics for writing.

**Get to know them.** Also build up your background knowledge of these students and their culture. Make a point, especially, to learn about their immigration experiences, which are likely to be a vivid memory for them. Find out with whom they are living now that they are in the U.S.

**Get to know their cultures.** Try to be sensitive to the differences between the children's home cultures and American culture. For example, I once saw a father correct his daughter when she gave me a gift using her left hand. Later I learned that extending the left hand to another person is considered disrespectful in their culture. Similarly, I had a Korean student who would never look me in the eye. While avoiding eye contact with a

## The Earthquake

There was an earthquake in El Salvador. Hundreds  
of people died. All the people cried.  
Some people died and people were sad  
because they missed their families and  
their babies too. I want to go to  
El Salvador to see what's wrong.  
I will help all the peop in El Salvador  
and help them a lot. And I will  
help my family. I will bring them food and  
drink. I will bring them good things.

After participating in conversations, children will use these discussions as topics in their writing.