

BUT HOW DO YOU TEACH WRITING?

A Simple Guide for All Teachers

BARRY LANE

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DEDICATION

For



Carolyn Foley



Donald Murray



Zunade Dharsey

Great teachers, like great stories, live forever.

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Editor: Lois Bridges

Cover designer: Brian LaRossa; Cover illustration: Dave Arkle

Interior designer: Sarah Morrow

Copy editor: Chris Morris

Photos: From the personal photo collection of Barry Lane, unless otherwise indicated.

ISBN-13: 978-0-545-02118-0

ISBN-10: 0-545-02118-9

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Printed in the U.S.A.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 23 13 12 11 10 09 08

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YOU'RE A WRITER, TEACH WRITING

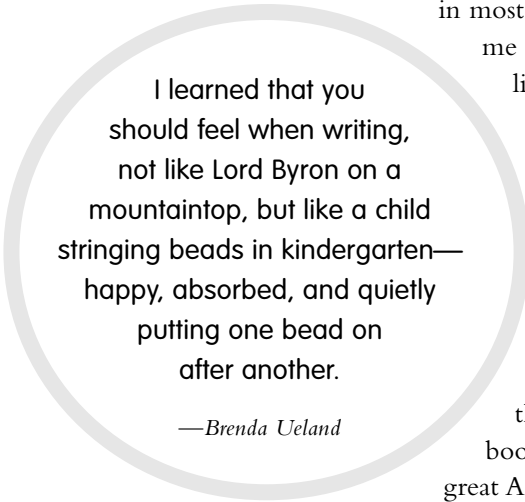
Reclaiming the Spark of Your Own Literacy

On the next page is a piece of writing I did in third grade. It is a book report, written the day before Open House Night. I can almost hear my teacher crying, “Quick, it’s Open House Night. Read a book!” It was jammed into an folder labeled “Open House” and stored in the attic of the garage at my mother’s house, next to a stack of bald tires that should have been taken to the dump. The box was taped up with masking tape and said “school stuff” on it.

Though the handwriting is better than you will find in most classrooms today, there is very little of me in this piece of writing. I write a few

lines about what the book is about and then I end with the classic line, “Read the book and find out what happens. Book Report by Barry Lane.” I am not entirely sure I even read the book.

That was third grade. In tenth grade it wasn’t any better; in fact, it got worse. Teachers just gave up and gave us lists of questions to answer. On the next page is the beginning of my book report on the autobiography of that great American writer, Joe Namath.



I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountaintop, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten—happy, absorbed, and quietly putting one bead on after another.

—Brenda Ueland

The Simpletons -
by Richard and Eva Witt

The book was about
the people of Wichita and
how they lived. They were
When merchants came
to the town of Wichita they
would say, "You've got bats
in the factory."
They would climb the
lunch counter and look for bats.
They got it a three word
term bats. They wanted to get
some light onto it. They tried
all kinds of funny ways.
Find the bats and find
out what happens.

Book Report by Beverly

The Simpletons book report

BOOK REPORT

I read the book *Joe Namath*
The Namath

WRITTEN BY SANDY BROWN

1. The primary topic of this book deals with the life
of Joe Namath and how he obtained his very
publicized image.

2. The author actually has two purposes in writing the book.
One is to inform and the other to entertain. The author
is trying to inform the reader how Joe really
lives and at the same time is entertaining the reader with
stories about the antics of other teammates and himself.

Harry Lane
Period 7
Section 1

200 pages

Book report on Joe Namath book

Notice how stilted the writing is. This was not the quirky kid I was. I use words straight out of travelogue writing—words like *antics*. But notice what my teachers cared about. Look at the grade. I got a B- and the comment: “It’s nice to read typewritten work.” Those were the two qualities my teachers cared about when I was in school—grammar and neatness. Those are important qualities of writing, no doubt. I am not saying students should write sloppily or they should write ungrammatically, but you don’t hear Oprah gushing, “We chose this book because of the neat margins.” Or “This is a fine novel, with not one misspelled word.” Readers care about other things: vivid, pertinent detail, honesty, voice, humor, organization, idea development, guts, passion . . . you name it. As readers, we want real stories, essays, and reports, not the “schoolified” writing assignments my seventh-grade teacher Mrs. Kent wanted us to complete.

The one creative assignment we did each week was to put all the spelling words into a paragraph. This would often lead to compelling sentences like, “He abated her so she abashed him.” One day my teacher Mrs. Kent made me stay after school and tear my weekly spelling list into little pieces. I had written a parody of the assistant principal’s latest speech, but, in my defense, I did manage to work in all the spelling words. In her mind, the reason she made me tear it

up was simple: “He might get the wrong idea about the kinds of assignments I am giving.”

You see, the concept that students could give themselves an assignment didn’t exist. In this book, we are going to learn how to create a class that gives itself assignments. And if you don’t teach this way already, you will delight in the joy your students’ initiative will bring to your teaching.

Mr. Francis Gray, my eighth-grade teacher, was one of those who delighted in student initiative. Mr. Gray wore gray suits and had gray hair, but nothing else about him was gray. He cared about his subject and he cared about us. He believed in creativity and had us do something he called “the creative project.” I’m almost sure he wrote it just like that in his plan book for months. I had written a lot of humor in school, but I would get either a C- or a “See me” for a grade, so I stopped showing it to teachers. I took a chance in Mr. Gray’s class and added this poem to my creative project.

‘Twas the night before school starts and all through the hut
Not a creature was smoking, not even one butt.
The school clothes were hung
By the chimney on a chair,
With hopes that by morning they would disappear.
My brother in his tee shirt
And, I, in mine, too
Were just getting ready
To enter the blue
When all of the sudden
There came such a roaring.
I knew at that second,
This life wouldn't be boring.
I ran to the window
As fast as a sprinter
And looked at my seat
And found 17 splinters
And what to my wandering eyes should I see then
But a 12 tire, 525 horsepower garbage truck with 5 miniature garbage men.

They said not a word
But went straight to our cans
They hoisted them up with their tired grubby hands

The head driver of the crew yelled at his men
On Harry, on Benny, on Simon and Den.

And I heard them cry out as they rode past a bus
You blankety-blanks stay in school or else you will end up like us.

At the bottom of the page, Mr. Gray wrote, “Excellent parody of *The Night Before Christmas*.” I didn’t even know what a parody was, but I was in eighth grade and I had a subscription to *Mad* magazine. Mr. Gray gave credence to forms of writing that were not just school writing. In Chapter 7, we will explore alternative forms of writing and how they can revive report writing in any subject.

Mr. Gray told me I had a talent with words and I should pursue it. He implored me to enter the spring poetry contest. You had to write a poem about the word *if*. Here is my poem.

if

If is a word
that’s become very trite.

It’s been used through the ages
With no end in sight.

It’s been used by peoples
Small and vast,
but mostly by those who live in the past.

An “iffer” believes the world needed no change
He just keeps on singing, “Home on the range”
Although people call him hopeless and strange
He keeps “iffing” and “iffing” the world hadn’t changed.

And so the “iffer” ends his stay.
Sad and disappointed he goes on his way.
His life has been one big myth,
All because of the little word *if*.

I won the contest and the certificate was presented to me by none other than my seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Kent (the same one who made me tear up the spelling quiz). No sweeter literary victory was ever won. I can still hear her slightly shaky voice as she nervously handed me the certificate: “And here is a man of many surprises,” she said.

They put me in an honors English class, and it took me only a half semester to prove myself unworthy. I wrote haikus like,

Hard boiled egg yolk
Why couldn't you be a chicken?
Who aborted you?

Television set
I stare at you constantly
It's nothing personal.

Soon I was back in the vocational English class. And by the time I left high school this is what I looked like. Have you ever seen a sadder, more irony-deficient face than this one?



Me, in high school

Here's what I looked like 25 years later.



Me, 25 years later

It's taken me years as a writer to get back to where I was in Miss Foley's fourth-grade class. If you want your students to be writers, you need to share your writing with them as I have shared with you. But before you do that, you have to reclaim the spark of your own literacy for yourself. Here's a good place to start.

TRY THIS!

RECLAIMING THE SPARK

1. Get a blank piece of paper.
2. Draw a line down the middle. On one side write "School"; on the other, "Life."
3. List all the writing assignments or work from school that you can remember on the left. Examples might include reports, essays, stories, poems, etc.
4. Brainstorm a list of all the writing assignments from life on the right. Examples might include notes, birthday cards, letters to loved ones, e-mails, cartoons, illustrated stories, etc.
5. Share examples with others to help trigger more ideas. Let your list grow long.

If you are working with a group or study circle, take time to share your memories. This will trigger more assignments to add to the list. If you have a mother or father who saved things, go to their attic and see if you can find old examples of your writing, from school and life.

Debriefing

Is there a pattern to the writing you remember? Was most of the interesting writing done in the home or at school? What assignments stuck with you all these years? Which assignments faded away?

A WRITER TEACHES WRITING

The best advice I've ever heard about teaching writing came from the great Donald M. Murray, who died in December 2006 at the age of 82. Murray, who turned in his last column to *The Boston Globe* three days before his death, always said that we write to find out what we don't know we know.



Donald Murray

Murray won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1956, and he divided his time between teaching at the University of New Hampshire and freelance writing. His many books on writing and his generous spirit inspired a whole generation of writing teachers.

This is what Murray often said when anyone asked him how to teach writing. “You’re a writer. Teach writing.”

But maybe you don’t feel like a writer. Here is a way to assess your and your students’ attitudes toward writing.

TRY THIS!

WHEN I WRITE, I . . .

1. Begin with this phrase: “When I write I . . .”.
2. Now set a timer for seven minutes and quick-write.
3. Read over and discuss what you wrote with a partner or with the class.

RULES OF QUICK WRITING

- Write fast.
- Don’t cross out.
- When you get stuck, write your thoughts.

Debriefing

Look over what you wrote. What assumptions can you make about your attitudes toward writing? What is the advantage of quick-writing? What are the disadvantages? How can you use quick-writing as a tool for your instruction?

Look at the example of a fourth grader’s quick-write on the next page. What do you notice about the writing?

Maybe you have a good attitude toward writing but you have a critical voice in your head that puts down your writing. This critic might be a teacher from the past or that grammatically zealous friend who red-penciled your letters and sent them back for correction. Here’s another way to reclaim your spark.