Writing Mini-Lessons for Kindergarten: The Building-Blocks™ Model

by

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We have divided this book into two sections: Early in Kindergarten and Later in Kindergarten. Early in the year in kindergarten, Building-Blocks™ teachers focus on writing for and with children, as well as some early writing lessons to let children know that there are different ways to write. Later in the year in kindergarten, we focus on daily writing mini-lessons and provide children with an opportunity to write daily. How many lessons you do and how many times you need to revisit a mini-lesson with another example depends upon your students. This we do know—the more writing you do in kindergarten the better readers and writers you will have in kindergarten. Everything that kindergarten children write, they usually can read, too! Writing is also a wonderful mirror into each child’s word knowledge.

Early in Building-Blocks kindergartens, we emphasize writing as putting down on paper what you want to tell. We write a morning message every day and predictable charts every week. Later, we do some interactive charts and interactive writing when children are ready, and most of them know something about what writing is and can use letter/sound correspondence to “write.” Early in the year, we show students the different ways people write. We model writing and let children write (draw and write). We encourage children’s writing attempts. We are both coaches and cheerleaders, and we realize that at this stage of writing, kindergarten students do not need editors!

**Morning Message—Showing Young Children What Writing Is**

When teachers write morning messages, they provide students with models for writing. Children need to know how people think as they write and what people do when they write. As children watch and listen, they begin to understand what they are to do when asked to write. Young children learn many skills, such as swimming or riding a bike, by first watching someone else. When they are ready, they try it for themselves. This can also happen when a teacher writes a morning message. It is one of the most powerful ways to help children understand what writing is and how people think as they write. For children further along in their literacy learning, watching the teacher write a morning message can move them quickly toward independence in writing.

The morning message is usually written on a large piece of lined chart paper with a thick, black (or other dark-colored) marker. Many teachers do this activity as a part of the opening or right after the class meeting. The first morning messages are simple, using just a sentence or two.

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**Dear Class,**

**Today is Monday.**

**We will go to music today.**

**Love,**

**Mrs. Hall**
Each day as the teacher writes and talks about what she is writing in her morning message, she lets students know what she is writing and why she is writing it. For the first weeks, the teacher will be doing the work and the children will be listening and learning what to do and why. When the teacher finishes the message, she asks the children to count the sentences (2), count the words in the first sentence (3), count the words in the second sentence (6), count the letters in the first sentence (13), and count the letters in the second sentence (20). She counts these words and letters with the children to find the correct answers. Next, the teacher asks which sentence has more words (second), then which sentence has more letters (second). She again counts the words and letters with the children to find the correct answers. She calls on a child to answer her questions, then exclaims, “You’re right! The second sentence has more words and more letters than the first!” Each day teachers do a morning message, they are showing children what writing is—but kindergarten teachers teach so much more during the morning message.

Early in the year, the teacher concentrates on saying the words and writing the letters as she says them. Some kindergartners are learning to recognize the letters of the alphabet as the teacher writes them. During the morning message, the students also learn: what you say, you can write; where to start writing and the left to right movement in writing and reading; how to say the words and letters, one at a time; how to use capital letters; how to use punctuation; how to count words; how to count letters; and how to start and end a message. The morning message stays up in the room all day and at the end of the day, the student of the day (important person of the day—whatever you call it!) takes the message home to read.

**Predictable Charts—Shared Writing**

Writing for children in kindergarten also includes predictable charts. For example, after spending several days learning about fall, the teacher might begin a predictable chart about fall. The teacher titles the chart “In Fall” and begins writing the first sentence, “I like to rake leaves. (Mrs. Hall).” She writes her name and puts parentheses around her name to show that the sentence is her sentence. The children add their sentences to this chart using the same (predictable) sentence starter (I like to . . . .) by telling something that they like to do in fall. After sentence dictation, which takes a day (if you have a small class) or two, the next day is spent “touch reading the sentence” or learning to track print. The fourth day is spent writing two or three sentences on sentence strips, cutting the sentences apart, then building two or three sentences. On the fifth day, children paste their cut-up sentences on large sheets of paper and illustrate their sentences. The teacher then puts these pages into a class-made big book and places the big book in the reading center for students to read and enjoy again and again. (If you have a small class and your sentence dictation only takes one day, use the extra day to read the class big book together.) Some kindergarten teachers give each child one of these books when the school year is over. Other teachers date the pages as the children write these books, take them apart at the end of the year and send a “portfolio” of their predictable sentences home so that parents can see the growth over the kindergarten year. This is a great product for the children to read during the lazy days of summer while waiting anxiously for first grade.

Early in the year, the teacher may write the sentence on the page for the child to illustrate. Later, the teacher writes the sentence, cuts it apart, and the student pastes the cut-up sentence on the page and illustrates it. As the year progresses, the student does the cutting and pasting. At the end of the year, the student may be writing, cutting, and pasting the sentence on the paper before illustrating the page. What a wonderful snapshot of a child’s progress in kindergarten reading and writing. To learn more about predictable charts see Predictable Charts: Shared Writing for Kindergarten and First Grade by Hall and Williams (Carson-Dellosa, 2001).
Interactive Charts—Shared Reading

Interactive charts provide young children with opportunities to manipulate text and interact with print. These interactive charts also transfer oral language skills to written language. An interactive chart can be based on a nursery rhyme, a familiar poem or finger play, or theme that children are learning or have learned about. The first thing the teacher does is to write a chart and then read it to the children. The first reading (and possibly the second or third reading) are just for enjoyment. Repeated readings of the chart help young children remember the words. As emergent learners, children are active, concrete learners who need a lot of support, which interactive charts provide. The charts also help young children match oral words to written text and provide children with an opportunity to self-check and self-correct. As children read these charts and gain control over printed words, they develop an “I can read” attitude.

The steps to writing an interactive chart are quite simple:

1. Write a song, poem, or finger play on sentence strips, one sentence per strip. Four lines is an appropriate length for kindergarten. Always use your best printing so that students will see a nice, neat model for handwriting. Be aware of the size of letters, formation of letters, and spacing of your writing.

2. Place the sentences in a pocket chart, or write the chart on lined chart paper.

   Choose a part of the sentence strip for children to manipulate—a name, a rhyming word, a number word, etc. When using sentence strips and a pocket chart, the manipulated part can be placed in the pocket chart at the correct spot. (We draw a picture to go with each interactive word to help the children with the words. For the color words we put that color above each word.)

Here is an example of an interactive chart:

![Interactive Chart Example]

To learn more about interactive charts see Interactive Charts: Shared Reading for Kindergarten and First Grade by Hall and Loman (Carson-Dellosa, 2002).
Morning Message, Later—Interactive Writing

Another way for children to interact with text is to have them “help” write the morning message after the first few weeks. This shared or interactive writing is done with the teacher and students working together. They compose the morning message together, talking about it as the teacher writes it. The teacher may ask children how she should start the morning message and even how to spell “Dear” and “Class” and other familiar, high-frequency words. She may also ask children what she should write about today. Often the teacher asks questions to clarify the meaning. Sometimes the teacher lets children share the pen (or marker) and do some of the writing. (When we do this we always choose students who write legibly and who can write quickly so we do not lose children who are sitting there watching this writing.) Interactive writing starts early in the year and continues throughout the year. As the year advances, the teacher does less of the work and lets children do more and more of the composing and writing of the morning message.

The First Writing Mini-Lessons

It is best to use plain paper for the first writing lessons with your Building-Blocks kindergarten class because not all students will be ready to write on lined paper. You will have more success with students if they are familiar with morning messages (writing for children) and predictable charts (writing with children) before they are asked to write by themselves. In the first writing lessons, begin by telling the class the many ways people can and do write. Let your kindergartners know they can use pictures, lines, letters, words, pictures and words, letters and pictures, or any combination when they write. Tell students, “When you write today, use what will help you tell me something.”

Early in kindergarten, emphasize writing as putting down on paper what you want to tell (we do all of our mini-lesson drawing and writing with markers). For one early mini-lesson, place a large piece of unlined paper on the board and talk as you draw a simple picture. Write a few words—labels, names, or a simple sentence. You are modeling the drawing and writing that many preschoolers do (we refer to this kind of writing as driting). Next, give the children large pieces of drawing paper and ask them to use crayons to draw and write what they want to tell you. As they draw and write, circulate around the room and “encourage” them. Respond to what they are drawing and ask them to tell you about it. Don’t spell words for them but help them stretch out words and point to places in the room where they can find the correct spellings of words (names, colors, etc.). After 10 minutes of drawing and writing time, gather the children in a circle and have them “tell” what they were drawing and writing about.

Kindergartners vary greatly in their entering literacy knowledge. In some schools, many children come to kindergarten knowing how to write most letters, as well as how to read and write some words. These children have usually experienced, either at home or in prekindergarten, the writing-approach-to-reading. They know what the little black marks are, and they know that reading is just translating those marks into words they can say. They come to kindergarten already reading or pretending to read and pretending to write. For these children, writing time can soon become a time to focus primarily on learning to write better. Unfortunately, many kindergartners have not had these early writing experiences at home or in day cares, and they need longer periods of time where the emphasis is on what they want to tell and not on how well they write. In Building-Blocks kindergartens, we try to provide opportunities for all children to learn more about reading and writing.