

PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S GROWTH IN WRITING

In order to prepare for a unit of study, a teacher must look at what his or her children are already doing as writers and imagine how the unit of study can be multilevel enough to provide each kind of writer with a learning pathway. This was especially important for Abby Oxenhorn and me, because as we entered this unit, many of Abby's kindergarteners were still having problems saying good-bye to their parents and getting to the bathroom. They seemed very, very young to us. In order to plan this unit, we studied what Abby's children were already doing as writers and imagined the way our teaching in conferences and minilessons across this unit could help each of them progress. We found the easiest way to do this was to roughly categorize her children, then to imagine the work we'd do with each particular cluster of writers. Here are several suggestions for how to proceed with writers at different stages.

If children are . . .	You could . . .
<p>A few children may still be drawing non-representational pictures and not writing with letters.</p>	<p>Encourage <i>representational</i> drawings that show the crucial elements of the story. "Where's <i>you</i> in this picture?" "What are you doing?" Then push in ways described below.</p>
<p>Some children might be using accompanying oral language to <i>comment on</i> rather than <i>create</i> a story. That is, when asked, "What will you write?" these children will point to their pictures and create texts that are captions or comments rather than stories. When asked, "What will you write?" such a child might say, "That's me," or "I'm going fast," rather than using story language, such as, "Saturday I went skateboarding. First, I got on the skateboard. It went fast. . . ."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Support storytelling across the day by reading a few favorite stories over and over (books such as <i>Corduroy</i>, <i>Caps for Sale</i>, and fairy tales) and by encouraging children to approximate-read these very familiar, rich stories on their own. All our kindergarteners and many of our first graders study the pictures and tell the accompanying stories. As they know the stories better and internalize more story language and story structure, the stories they tell take on more of the rhythm and language of stories. ▶ Create many opportunities for children to storytell about their lives. "Tell your partner a story that happened to you at recess today." ▶ Elicit and support storytelling in conferences. "Will you tell me the story that goes with your picture? [Silence.] What's happening?" ["That's me skateboarding."] Oh—so does your story go, 'One day I was skateboarding?' [Nod.] Then [turn the page] what did you do next? So you should draw that here! [Turn the page.] Keep going. [Turn the page.] How does it end? Draw that here. So let's go back and remember the whole story. It starts, 'One day I was. . . .' Would you continue it?"

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<p>Some children will still be writing strings of letters that seem random (that is, they won't seem to be the result of the child saying a word, segmenting it into phonemes, and then putting the sounds the child hears onto the page).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Notice and support ways their writing-like marks reflect growing knowledge of written language (e.g., top to bottom, left to right, etc.). ▶ Show children how we label drawings: "This is my skateboard, so here I need to write <i>skateboard</i>. Watch how I do it. <i>Skateboard. Skateboard. /sk/</i>— and then I write <i>S</i>. Now I reread the <i>S</i> and say what I want to write . . . <i>/ska/</i>. Now I will say the word and hear more sounds- <i>/t/</i>- and write <i>t</i>." We reread <i>S</i> as "ska," so that a <i>/t/</i> sound comes next because we know this particular child will first write with initial and final consonants. After writing <i>st</i>, reread and continue to add on sounds, now saying, "<i>skateboard skateboar /d/ /d/</i>." Write <i>d</i>, and reread as <i>skateboard</i>. "Will you help me label the sun? Say it with me. <i>Sun. Sun</i>. Listen for what you hear first at the start of <i>sun</i>, then write that. [Child does so.] Put your finger under what you just wrote and let's read it: <i>s - /s/ Sun. Sun</i>. What other sounds do you hear? Write that. . . . "
<p>A few children might try to write fictional stories.</p>	<p>Tell them that for now we are writing small moments of our lives and lure them to find these vignettes equally fascinating.</p>
<p>Some children's stories will seem constrained by a concern for what they can spell.</p>	<p>You can model choosing a moment of time from your life and then enact how you become stymied by spelling, but hurrah, you then get past this. "Let me show you how I write. Let's see . . . I want to tell about how my cousin and I made a fort out of blankets. [Quickly draw and then write <i>my</i> so that you're ready to write <i>cousin</i>.] Wait! Can I spell <i>cousin</i>? Oh no. I don't know how to spell it. I can't write about this [your voice is downcast.] You know what, [your voice is now exultant], I'm going to just <i>do the best I can</i> and keep going!" Later you will come to <i>blankets</i>. "Oh no, I can't write <i>blankets</i>. Maybe I won't tell about the fort. What do you think I should do now?" Elicit the idea that you need to just "do the best you can" until this becomes a mantra.</p>

If children are . . .	You could . . .
Most children will write on broad, general topics.	Teach children to focus on specific, small moments. "You've told a lot about your mom. I can see you love her. Can you think of <i>one particular time</i> you had with your mom recently? How did it start? What happened first? You should definitely write that down! So page one will be [such and such], and then what happened? So that'll be page two!"
Some children will write tiny jewels of a story almost by accident.	Be ready to run along behind children, telling them what they just did . . . and making it more likely they will provide an encore.
Some children will write stories that contain only one episode.	Your challenge will be to help children grasp the concept of zooming in on one small moment . . . but to not go overboard with focus. You are hoping they will retell small sequences of events, such as retelling how they built a sand castle, added flags to the towers, then watched the wave wash it away. Be sure the stories you model have a sequence of events. You can always help a child find the small events within a big one (I went to the beach. It was fun).
Some children will write sequential stories, but they may sound more like lists than like stories. (I ride my bike. I ride fast. I ride a lot. I go home.)	These children will benefit from being immersed in a culture of storytelling, from being asked to first tell their stories really well to a partner, and from learning that stories can make listeners worried, excited, scared. . . . Often it's when a writer builds tension in a story that we begin to use language to create drama.