SESSION I

UNDERSTANDING A SMALL MOMENT STORY

One way to begin this unit is to read aloud a few pages from a familiar picture book. A carefully chosen excerpt can help children understand what it means for a writer to write about a Small Moment in ways that make that moment seem big. The text you read aloud needs to match what you'll ask your students to do. You will be asking your children to write across a sequence of pages in small booklets. (The pages provide concrete support for the chronological nature of stories.) You'll want your children to learn that in true stories from our lives, one thing happens and then the next and the next.

This session will use your own writing or a published text to show children that when an author writes a Small Moment story, the author stretches out the sequence of actions across several pages to make the moment feel important and interesting.

GETTING READY

- Selected few pages from a familiar, loved text in which a writer has written about small, true moments
- Supply of stapled booklets in the writing center, each containing three or four pages—kindergartners may need blank pages, while older children may need space for a picture and a line or two or more for writing
- Cleaned-out folder (work from the previous unit should be filed away in the classroom)
- See CD-ROM for resources
Connection

Celebrate that your youngsters have been writing true stories from their lives. Tell your students that today they will take Small Moments and stretch them out to make even longer stories.

Abby waited until children had settled in their rug spots and their eyes were on her. “We have been talking a lot over the last few weeks about how writers write about their own lives. As writers, we have been thinking of stories from our own lives, making pictures in our heads and putting our stories on paper. Today we are beginning a new unit of study. Together we’re going to learn how writers catch Small Moments from their lives and stretch those moments out, turning Small Moments into stories that cross several pages.”

Teaching

Read an excerpt of a familiar exemplar text. Juxtapose the vibrant, detailed story with a limp, bland version in order to highlight the value of details.

Abby held up Vera B. Williams’ *A Chair for My Mother*. “I read this aloud to you a few days ago. Today let’s notice the way Vera takes a Small Moment and stretches it across a few pages. Remember the part where the mother and her daughter are walking home and they see their building on fire?”

“Vera could have told that part quickly in just one or two sentences. Her story could have gone like this,” Abby spoke blandly and quickly, her intonation suggesting this would have been a very dull story indeed. “We got home and saw the fire. Everyone was safe.”

Notice that Abby’s teaching is lean. As the year unfurls, our minilessons become longer, but for now, it is very important to keep them tight. We’re teaching youngsters that this is a time to listen. It’s easiest to do this if we don’t ramble!

If you read aloud wonderful literature in order to illustrate a quality of writing that you hope children incorporate in their writing, the problem is that children do not necessarily grasp what qualities of writing make the literature effective.

Abby accentuates the craft-technique she wants her children to notice by showing that the author could have written this content in a different way. This is a very effective way to draw children’s attention away from the content only (there was a fire) and toward the author’s craftsmanship.
“But instead of just telling it like that, Vera decided to stretch the moment out by telling us tiny little details. Listen closely.”

Continue reading the selected excerpt aloud, pausing briefly to highlight the writing technique you hope children notice—using details to stretch out an important moment.

Abby read slowly, looking intently at the text to show her attention to detail.

My mother and I were coming home from buying new shoes. I had new sandals. She had new pumps. We were walking to our house from the bus. We were looking at everyone’s tulips. She was saying she liked the red tulips and I was saying I liked yellow ones.

“What details!” Abby reread the last bit in admiration, then continued.

Then we came to our block. Right outside our house stood two big fire engines. I could see lots of smoke. Tall orange flames came out of the roof.

“I can picture it, can’t you?”

All the neighbors stood in a bunch across the street. Mama grabbed my hand and we ran. My uncle Sandy saw us and ran to us. Mama yelled, “Where’s Mother?” I yelled, “Where’s my grandma?”

If children intervene with little comments, try—warmly and clearly—to signal that this isn’t the time for a big discussion.

Liam was on his knees, his hand waving in the air, “She saw a fire, like the one at the Twin Towers.”

Abby spoke warmly, “Yes. There was a fire in this story also. It is so sad, isn’t it? But Liam, let’s try and think about how Vera gave you such a clear picture of what she saw when there was a fire in her apartment. She stretched out that moment, didn’t she?”

Notice the way Abby refers to Vera B. Williams by name often, and even assumes the class can be on a first-name basis with her! It’s important that authors live in our classrooms, becoming co-teachers.

Abby is trying to give her children a general image of the sort of thing she hopes they will write. It helps if learners have an image of the whole thing that they are trying to make before striving towards a particular component. It is common, therefore, to begin a unit of study with examples that illustrate the big concept of the unit. You may read aloud a published exemplar, write publicly, or show work by former students.

If you read aloud a portion of a published text in the writing workshop, it will usually be an excerpt of a text the class already knows well. We do this because it is easier for listeners to attend to how a text is written when the text is familiar and because it is easier to appreciate an excerpt if one knows the larger text from which it was taken.

Don’t let the particular content of some of children’s interruptions lead you to be inconsistent in your message that it is not time for interjections. You can say, “Early on in a minilesson I will talk to you. Your job will be to listen. Then later in the minilesson, I’ll ask you to try what I’m teaching, and that’s a great time to talk.”
Active Engagement

Get your students started thinking about the author’s technique: the use of details.

“Writers, will you think in your minds about the tiny details that Vera B Williams added?”

Abby bent her head, touched her forehead and muttered, “They were coming home from buying shoes . . . that’s a detail . . . and they passed the . . . uh. . . .”

Stopping midsentence, Abby whispered, “Keep thinking. What else did Vera put in her story that was a little detail?” She was coming home with her mother from buying shoes. They were walking home and they passed. . . .”

Ask students to tell their friends the details they recalled from the text.

Abby waited a few seconds. “Turn and tell a friend the tiny details that Vera B. Williams added to stretch out her Small Moment.” The children turned their bodies to face a friend, still sitting cross-legged and knee-to-knee, but now with each child’s knees touching the other child’s knees.

Signal for the class to come back together and ask them to share the details discussed.

“What were some of the tiny details Vera wrote to stretch out her Small Moment?” Abby rephrased the question, “What did you notice about Vera B. Williams’ writing?”

Milo raised his hand. Signaling for him to speak, Abby whispered “Eyes on Milo” to all her children, as if reminding them of something they knew well.

Notice that Abby demonstrates and draws children into the process of recalling the details from the read-aloud text, then she lets them continue doing this without as much reliance on her. This is scaffolding at its best.

Abby uses carefully chosen key phrases often, and in this instance she repeats the phrase “to stretch out her Small Moment” because she wants this to become part of her children’s repertoire of writing goals and strategies. Repetition is helpful to all human beings, and especially to young children. Don’t try to say the same thing in twenty different ways—settle on one phrase and use it often so that your children internalize it.

You’ll need to decide on how you will signal the class to return. You may say, “Writers,” and wait. You may start a hum that you teach your children to join in to. You’ll be signaling like this many times across every day and so you’ll clearly want to plan this ritual and to even have some practice sessions helping children do their parts well.

Asking your children to look at the speaker is one step toward teaching them to listen to each other. You should expect your children’s heads to visibly turn when a classmate speaks (teach them that necks allow for heads to turn!). If children visually cue in to the speaker, they are more apt to intellectually cue in as well. Invest a lot of attention in teaching students to listen to each other.
“She wrote one thing and then another and then another,” Milo said. “Then she put it together.”

“Huh!” Abby's tone suggested Milo had just given her a brand-new and illuminating insight.

To encourage others to take in what Milo has said, Abby repeated his insight as if she was listening to it again, responding to it with wonder. “‘She wrote one thing and then another and then another, then she put it together!’ You are right. She did do that, Milo! That’s how Vera slowed her writing down, isn’t it?”

“She didn’t just say ‘We looked for our family,’ did she? She said, ‘Mama grabbed my hand and we ran. My Uncle Sandy saw us and ran. . . . That’s such a helpful observation, Milo.”

When one child speaks, be sure the child speaks to the class, not just to you. Your role is to listen as one of the class, drawing the class in to join you in listening. Don’t listen-as-teacher, as the solo recipient of what the child says. Regard your role as a model of good listening and notice whether your model is influencing the others to do likewise.

If you wonder why, by some miracle, Abby knows to call on a child who produces such an astute comment, the secret lies in the fact that Abby had overheard many of the children’s one-to-one conversations. When she calls on someone, she usually has a good idea what that child will say.

Instead of judging Milo’s response, saying, “Good idea,” Abby pays Milo the ultimate compliment: She listens to him. By doing so, Abby visibly models listening in such a way that another person’s ideas change her own.

Abby rephrases what Milo said, accentuating what Vera Williams did do, and again highlights the technique by reminding children that Vera could have written this differently. Abby adds onto Milo's observation so that what he said becomes all the wiser because Abby has paraphrased it. She does this in a way that suggests she's merely rephrasing Milo's comment. Children are left feeling that this smart observation belongs to Milo.
Sophia raised the hand that wasn’t churning the ruffles on her sundress, “Yeah, Vera didn’t just say they saw the fire. She told us about the pretty yellow and red flowers they saw.”

**When children point out particular things the writer has done, remind them that these are techniques toward the writer’s larger purpose, which you will explain, was “to stretch out a Small Moment.”**

“Exactly! Sophia noticed how Vera B. Williams stretched her Small Moment out and made it big. She did this by telling us details like the detail about the yellow and red flowers they saw, right, Sophia?”

**Link**

**Encourage the children to write Small Moments like those written by the author of the exemplar text.**

“When you write today, think about taking a Small Moment from your life. Try stretching it out by writing in detail.”

**Show them the booklets to use.**

“We’re going to be writing our Small Moments in books so you’ll see our writing center has paper like this.” Abby opened the pages of the booklet, “When you write your Small Moment, try and stretch it out across these three pages.”

“Okay, if you are at the red table, go choose your booklets.” After the children at the red table had left the writing center, she continued. “Blue table.” After a moment, “Green table. Yellow table.”

Good writing often shifts between generalization of detail, and this is true of teaching, too. Abby has named the guiding principal, and now she and Sophie collect examples of that guiding principle.

Although teachers try to teach just one idea in a minilesson, we sometimes break this rule. Abby tucks her postscript about paper choice at the end of this minilesson because she knows the sequence of pages in a booklet can provide a valuable scaffold, helping her children think of their stories as one thing that happened, then the next, then the next.

Abby has lots more final comments, but her internal clock is ticking. Teach yourself that less is more. The lean, uncluttered nature of Abby’s teaching is a great strength.
You’ll want to organize space and time so children can get started on their writing and so you can move among them, conferring. As Abby’s children dispersed, they each collected a booklet from the three trays of paper she’d set out. Each booklet contained three pages, stapled together. Because Abby’s children are kindergartners, one tray of booklets had no lines and the booklets in the other trays contained one or two lines for print.

Although you will have told children about writing narratives across the pages in these booklets, chances are good that you will need to show children what is entailed in writing a narrative. Plan on holding lots of conferences in which you scaffold children as they retell a focused vignette from their lives. Study the conferences at right to learn the most essential new conferences for this unit. If some of your writers struggle to tell a coherent story, you may also want to look at the conference “Can You Tell a Story and Show It on the Paper?” Try to see the way all these conferences are similar to each other. This is not a tricky type of conference, and it has tremendous power. Above all, notice that you are shifting children into a storyteller voice and helping them to unroll a focused story across several pages. You want to scaffold a literate, flowing story even if it is mostly an oral story, captured through a sequence of pictures and labels.

As you confer today, you’ll want to look for a few children who write Small Moment narratives, so that you can celebrate that work in your share session.

This conference in The Conferring Handbook may be especially helpful today:
- “Will You Touch Each Page and Say What You’ll Write?”

Also, if you have Conferring with Primary Writers, you may want to refer to the following conference:
- “Is This a Story about Your Life?”
- “Can I Show You How to Write What Happened, First, Then Next, Then Next?”
- “Can You Tell a Story and Show It on the Paper?”
Ask a child to read aloud a Small Moment (or read it aloud yourself), reinforcing what you want your writers to notice.

"Writers, listen to Sophie's story. She wrote this." [Fig. I-1]

I was at a hotel.
I was in the pool.
Then I went to the hot tub.
Then I saw a hummingbird.
It was red and green.

"I love the way Sophie told us what happened first, next, and last. And I love how she zoomed in and told us details about that hummingbird. And I love that she wrote something true that happened in her life. Notice that Sophie labeled her picture. Beside this little bird, she wrote, 'hummingbird' and beside this round pool, she wrote 'hot tub.' Writers do these things. Let's keep trying to write true stories just like Sophie and Vera have done."

It's a lovely touch to put young writers in the same category as published authors and to refer similarly to all these writers as models.
One session isn’t nearly enough to teach children to focus their personal narratives. The upcoming Session II works toward the same objective.

- Before or after Session II, you could also repeat this minilesson using a different text, perhaps an excerpt from *Owl Moon* (Yolen) or *The Snowy Day* (Keats). “Yesterday, we looked at the way Vera Williams used details to stretch out her Small Moment. Today let’s listen to a Small Moment story that another author wrote, and this time I’d again like you to listen for details.”

- You could ask the class to contribute to a shared writing story about a Small Moment they experienced together. The class could compose the Small Moment story together in the minilesson, writing either on paper or “in the air” (which means the story could be talked through but not written). You might say, “So if we were going to take lessons from Vera Williams, only instead of writing about seeing our apartment on fire we decide to write about yesterday’s field trip to the bakery, we could focus on when we walked in and found all those smells. If we started our story, ‘Yesterday we walked to the bakery . . .’ would you tell your partner the Small Moment story of our visit to the bakery? ‘Yesterday we walked to the bakery. . . .’” You’d then ask the class to turn and talk. Later, you’d elicit one version only. You’d avoid scribing the child’s suggestion to prevent the minilesson from becoming a maxilesson.