



## LAUNCHING THE WRITING WORKSHOP

AT THE START OF THE YEAR, you'll tell your children, "We're all going to be authors. Draw and write your story." Your children won't be entirely clear about the details but they'll set to work, role-playing their way into being authors. Meanwhile you may also feel as if you are role-playing your way into being a teacher of young authors! It's okay if you aren't entirely clear about the details of how one confers. When you work with your kids as writers, you'll tell them, "Do the best you can and keep going," and you'll need to follow your own advice.

Your first conferences will be content conferences. "What are you working on as a writer?" you'll ask. "Would you read it to me?" Then you'll pause to admire something the child has done—she added a detail, she wrote letters. Tell her, "I love the way you. . ." and name what she did that she could always do. Act interested in her content; repeat it and add, "Wow! You brushed your sister's hair!" The child will usually say more. Tell her to add that—through drawing or through words—and help her start. Watch—and stay out of the way; let her do it as independently as possible.

You'll also teach children the norms of a writing workshop, communicating your expectations warmly and firmly through expectation conferences. Remember you are teaching each child to be a writer. "Writers don't draw on their arms," you can say. "Do you think Bernard Weber writes on his arm?!"

As this unit unfurls, you'll more consciously use conferences as a time to teach specifics of the writing process. "What I notice you doing as a writer that is so, so smart is. . ." you'll say. Then you'll switch, "One new thing I want to teach you is. . ." Now you'll probably demonstrate what it is you want your youngsters to do and you'll help them get started.





## “WHAT’S THE STORY IN THIS PICTURE?”

► CONTENT CONFERENCE  
► Method: Guided Practice

*Teach the child to draw representationally and to compose oral stories that accompany her drawings.*

### Research

**Observe and interview to understand what the child is trying to do as a writer. In this case, the child is coloring in her picture.**

After watching Bryanna busily coloring in the petals of a flower that looked as if it had grown to dwarf the apartment building that stood next to it on her paper, Zoë knelt down.

“So Bryanna, how’s it going? What are you working on as a writer right now?”

Looking at Zoë as if she should know, Bryanna pointed to her healthy flower and said, “coloring!”

“Oh, yes, I see that you are adding color to your drawing. Can you tell me a bit more about your story? What’s happening in your picture?”

“Oh, I was going into my house with my mom after school yesterday,”

Bryanna replied, continuing to color the flower.

**Name what the child has done as a writer and remind her to do this often in future writing.**

“Wow, Bryanna! That is so smart of you to be telling a story from your own life, right there on this paper. Writers do that, you know. ”

**Probe in order to glean more about the child’s intentions.**

“So, what’s your plan for the rest of writing workshop, Bryanna? What else will you add to your story?”

“I am just coloring it,” the girl looked at Zoe through the fringe of her bangs.



*Zoë rephrases Bryanna’s response in writerly terms – Bryanna is not simply ‘coloring,’ she is doing what writers do as she makes her story more colorful. Eventually, she’ll do this with words not just with pictures. Of course, Bryanna herself truly may be simply coloring, but Zoe wants Bryanna to see herself as an author, and so she describes Bryanna’s actions in writerly ways. Zoë also asks Bryanna to “tell the story” that goes with her piece, even though it is likely that Bryanna has not yet thought of a detailed story to tell. Sometimes simply providing the opportunity to tell a story motivates the child to tell one.*

*Zoë has clearly done enough research at this point to see that Bryanna is not in fact concerning herself much with communicating the important parts of her story on her paper. Zoë decides to focus on helping the child to first tell a more detailed story out loud, and then to record some of those details onto her paper.*

## Decide/Teach

**Decide to elicit oral content. Do this by providing the child with guided practice in telling a sequential story. Be responsive by saying back what the child says and prompting her for more detail.**

“Well Bryanna, you are so smart to be making a story here on the paper that is about something in your own life – but did you know that when writers make stories, they think about *what is happening* in the story? And then they show *those things* on their paper?”

Bryanna nodded, switching from red to orange. It was clear that she was focusing on her coloring project and not on what Zoë was telling her.

“Put the marker down for a second and look up at me, sweetie. I want to help you tell your story so you can put *everything* about it on the paper. That’s what writers do!” As the child set her marker down, Zoë asked, “So you said you were going home after school yesterday – is that your building there?”

“Uh huh,” said Bryanna.

**Help the child get started doing what you hope she will do. In this case, help her tell the story of her text.**

“So what happened first when you went home? Did you go up the steps there?” Zoë pointed to the zig-zag line that led up to the huge rectangular door.

“Yeah, and my doorman was outside because it was nice outside, and he waved to me and my mom.”

**Interject lean, efficient prompts to scaffold the child’s work in a step-by-step fashion.**

“Oh my goodness, Bryanna. Do you realize what a story you have here? At first, I just thought you went into your building and that was that. But there is so much more! First you walked up the steps, and then. . .”

“My doorman said hi to me and my mom. Oh yeah!” she said, suddenly remembering, “he gave me a tootsie-roll pop. The red kind. I like orange better but it was ok. . .” she smiled rather wistfully at the memory.

“So he gave you the tootsie-roll pop, and then. . .” Zoë prompted.

“Well then we went inside the door.”

*When we teach the class, we often say, “Eyes on me, please.” When the class has gathered and one child is speaking, we’ll often say, “All eyes on (the child).” Young children are more apt to attend with their ears if they are also attending with their eyes. If a child in a conference isn’t looking at us, pause and to ask for the child’s eyes.*

*While Bryanna’s story is simple, she has made great strides in both telling it sequentially and telling it with more detail. Because Bryanna is not yet a writer who is ready to*

**Teach the child to record her additional content in a manner that seems appropriate. Take the child back to the beginning of what you elicited through guided practice, and help her get started putting this on the page.**

“Wow, Bryanna. You have really got something there! Do you realize, when I first came over to have a conference with you, and I looked at your paper, I had no idea that all of that happened! You have got to put those things you just told me down, right here on the paper, right now! Writers do that, you know. We put all of the parts of our stories on the paper so that our readers can know even more about what happened. Let’s go over your story again first – how did it start?”

“I went up the steps with my Mommy,”

“And then?”

“And then the doorman said hi, and he gave me the tootsie-roll pop.”

**Interject lean, efficient prompts to scaffold the child’s work in a step-by-step fashion. In this case, help the child to record her story in the pictures she draws on her paper.**

“So you said that you and your mom were going up the steps. Look at your picture. Does your picture show that?”

“No! Because I forgot to put me and my mom there!”

“You better do that, right now.” Zoë said.

Zoë watched for a moment as Bryanna added her usual grinning stick figures, this time hovering slightly above the steps. Bryanna looked up at Zoe as if to ask, “Am I done now?”

“What else did you tell about, in your story? How about the doorman?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, and added a third (slightly plumper) figure, complete with cap and buttons.

*add print to her piece, Zoe decides to end the ‘eliciting content’ phase of her conference with Bryanna, and begin helping her record the details of this story on the page.*

*It is helpful to encourage the child to tell the story more than once, in order to solidify the process that she has just gone through with you help, and to encourage her to feel more comfortable doing this on her own in the future.*

## Link

**Name what the child has done as a writer and remind her to do this often in future writing. Set her up to continue working.**

“Bryanna, you have done such smart work today – when I first came over to you, I wasn’t really sure about your story, because I couldn’t see it on your page! But then, you told more about *what happened* when you went home from school, and now you are making sure to put all of those things on the page, so readers like me can know all about your story. That is what writers do. Now every time you do writing work, you can think, ‘hmmm, does my picture show everything about what is happening in my story?’ Great work, Bryanna. What will you add next?”

“My tootsie-roll pop!” Bryanna said, reaching for the red marker.

“You’ll probably think of even more to add, knowing you!” Zoe said as she moved on to another child.

*Ideally a conference sets a child up to continue work for longer than the time it’ll take to add a tootsie-roll pop, but this conference comes very early in the year.*