



# A Sea of Faces

## *The Importance of Knowing Your Students*

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Donald H. Graves

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*To Betty Graves*

*Who Relishes the Company of Children*



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## Acknowledgments

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These poems actually began as prose pieces in Pat Werner's room on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. We were composing e-mails about the various children. Pat was always encouraging and had many questions for me about language. For example, I was concerned about using the word, "stoop." Was it an old word or one that survived the times? We decided to leave it in. Teachers need to know their children; Pat certainly knew all the various children in her room. She was a joy to work with.

I also read the poems aloud to my wife Betty, then Dr. Rob Richardson. I wanted Rob to listen to my descriptions of the children in poetic narrative to make sure they were consistently drawn.

A little more than a year ago I turned to poems over to Sue Ann Martin to read and share in her fifth-grade classroom. The children were very thorough with their comments. I am grateful to them for their hard work.

From time to time I have read these poems aloud to the Pine Tree School in New Hampshire, and in various local gatherings.

My editor, Lois Bridges, has been encouraging and put me in touch with others who could help with the manuscript.

Penny Kittle edited this manuscript, especially the poems. She claims she doesn't write poetry but she sure knows how to read the poems and point out all the little things an author needs to know. Penny laughed in all the appropriate places and fed me comments especially from the Pine Tree faculty. In one sense I feel as though this is "our" book—if she will allow me the privilege of including her.

My dear wife, Betty, has pushed and pushed to get this collection in print. She laughs and shares in the children's ills and delights. This book is dedicated to her.



# Introduction

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The purpose of this book is to help you get to know the children in your classroom. I have learned many approaches over fifty years of teaching that may be useful to you. Our children lead many lives in school and out. Facets of lives are revealed throughout the day, but about 75 percent of the stories that are on their tongues never get told.

Our days are pressured and we push children aside in order to get on with the lesson. The more I know a child, the more I can expect of him. When a student perceives my face as one with intelligent expectation, we have a challenging classroom. My face and my voice carry a tone that says, “You know things and I can’t wait to find out what they are.”

Chapter 1, “A Sea of Faces,” shows how I strive to get to know my students by first memorizing the children’s names. When I enter the classroom on day one, I know the names; it is just a matter of placing a name with a face. Calling a student by name is the beginning of respect for a child. While I am learning the names, I am also engaged in finding three nouns that will characterize each child. I may also choose three verbs that create pictures of what the child does. When children know that I want to get to know them alone and together, the community begins to grow.

Chapter 2, “Behold, the Class,” introduces the notion that classes have personalities. Most of all I want the class to have things they do together. So much of teaching is geared for individuals. Children need to know where they are in a group. In this chapter, I introduce a fictitious fifth-grade class I worked with in Manhattan on the Upper East Side, taught by Ms. Burns (also a pseudonym for a teacher I created based on many years of observation and classroom experience). The dicta “Work hard; be kind; no excuses” encompasses so much of the activity in that classroom. When Ms. Burns encounters differences of opinion, she asks each child to speak the other’s point of view. A class has to be conscious of choral speaking, music, construction, and drama

in order to be a cohesive whole. Focusing on just individuals breeds a kind of selfishness too rampant in today's society.

All of the poems in Chapter 3, "One Classroom, Many Lives," take place in Ms. Burns' fictitious classroom in New York City. I have written at least ten poems about each of three boys: Marshall, Marco, and Amadeo. I have also written ten narrative poems about Gina, Stacy, and Rebekah. Finally, I have written ten poems about Ms. Burns. These children appear quite regularly in each other's narrative poems. I have attempted to cover their lives both in and out of school, as well as within the family. My sincere hope is that you will see your own children in these poems.

Narrative poems offer big thinking in a small space. You will see these children with all of their problems as well as their good points. We have to remember that we teach with high expectations. We approach children through their good points.

In Chapter 4, "Reflections for Discussion," I have written discussion points about each child for you and your staff to consider. Within each section are also discussion points for you to present to your students. Children are just as capable as teachers in discussing these narrative poems.

Chapter 5, "Listening," focuses on listening, the forgotten language art. I immediately show what listening entails and then expand that listening to an entire building in San Diego, California.



## A Sea of Faces

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September 2006 marks my fiftieth anniversary teaching school. I began teaching seventh-grade reading and science. I taught with only eight weeks of teacher preparation from an intensive summer program. The shortage of teachers was so great that the state of Massachusetts offered courses to assist the public schools.

Helen Porter, principal of the East Fairhaven School, who observed me teaching in the summer, said, “This will be the last time you’ll ever see twelve children in your class.” I was oblivious to her meaning. “In fact,” she said, “you’ll be teaching thirty-nine seventh graders.” If she thought I could handle the situation, I would, no big deal.

On that first day the children kept filing in while casting furtive glances at me, studying me, wondering who I was, and pondering their next moves. I wasn’t used to having so much scrutiny. One boy, David Brown, stared at me with large brown eyes. I stared back. “What does your staring mean?” I challenged. He challenged.

I lost my plan about ten that morning and had to teach the rest of the day by telling stories and reading aloud. A sea of faces tilted upward. They paid attention for a while but soon grew restless. The students began to talk, nudge, and poke at each other. I was teaching on the fly; they knew it and I knew it. I was totally exhausted at the end of the day and sat in a stupor, wondering what I’d ever do the next day.

I wanted the class to like me. What I didn’t realize is that students don’t like you unless you know the details that allow you to like them. Further, I needed to know the details of how they learned, what they wanted, and what interested them. Such detail was beyond me, so I taught them as a whole group.

Tone is important. I wonder what the principal or other teachers would have thought had they listened from the corridor. I was just out of the U.S. Coast Guard. I imagined I was the students’ commanding officer barking out

orders. I had to be in control, be the authority on all subjects, and grant permission to go to the bathroom or to take another piece of paper. The tone of authority begins in the belly, moves through the chest, and pours from deep in the throat. Occasionally, we need to use that tone, but not *all the time*, as in my early teaching days.

When I walk the corridors in a school, I listen for a variety of tone. Voice controls tone. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Blink* (2004), describes this as he listens to partners speaking in a marriage, as the chair addresses the board, or as a doctor speaks to a patient. Their tones suggest complete authority, sometimes modulated, and in rare cases, the silence of listening and attending.

Once in a while I'd pick up a shard of information while the students were busily filling in my profile. Of course, the children are filling in the details of our personalities. They talk about me at recess. "Is he strict? Does he yell? Do you think he likes us? How can we get him mad?"

Two days into teaching, my wife, Betty, had our second child, Alyce. The good news is that she arrived on a Saturday so I could recover by Monday. But my preparation for Monday's class was less than adequate.

Five days into teaching, my wife and I bought a used 1953 Dodge coupe. I drove into the school lot in our new car. Within five minutes I was confronted in class by three boys.

"See you got a new car."

"Fifty-three Dodge Hydramatic."

"Is that the best you could do?"

As Penny Kittle writes in *Public Teaching* (2003, 15), "We are their entertainment." The children mimic us, laugh at us, and choose details for their own little playlets.

It is a long way from seeing a sea of faces to seeing individuals. And it is a long way from seeing individuals to knowing what is significant in their lives. I've been pondering shortcuts for nearly fifty years. Although you may not be able to apply the shortcuts, you will at least be able to understand what territories are involved.

### *Three-Column Exercise*

My first move is to memorize the names of the children. I circle the number of students and post it in the upper right-hand corner of my paper. Sometimes I have three to four classes to learn student names. This takes time but learning about students begins with their names. I am curious about ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes I ask a student, "Tell me the story of your name." Some students

don't like their name because they were named after a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandmother they don't respect or because the name is from another era.

Some of them cringe as they go out to the playground. I moved to East Greenwich, Rhode Island, when I was in fourth grade. I was immediately given a nickname, Rabbit, because I was small and especially because I had big ears. I didn't like the name and had to endure its use until I moved away to New Jersey three years later. Of course, as I got to know my friends in Rhode Island I got used to the name; they just spoke it automatically.

After I have memorized the names in alphabetical order, I begin to stick some traits next to each name. I memorize the names from beginning to end, or I try to write them from memory. Of course, I first learn the bright and the tough students; they are memorable. It is the children who are less engaged that are difficult.

I try to place solid nouns opposite each name. William Carlos Williams writes, "No ideas but in things." For the column opposite Timmy, I write: football, books, desk. And for Alison I write: sweater, pen, braces, sewing, recess, CDs. It is up to me to fill in the details that characterize each student. See Figures 1-1 and 1-2 for my two trials in learning the students' names. Figure 1-1 shows my first memory attempt for one class, on the second day of school.

Beyond the learning of names, in some way I need to confirm that the child knows what I have observed. Remember, the children in the middle, the ones who want to be part of the woodwork, are the ones to whom you must especially pay attention. I can put an X in the third column if I can confirm with specifics: "I see you made quite a catch at second base. I didn't know you could run so fast," or "What's the story behind you hating green beans?"

Figure 1-2 shows my final attempt at learning the children's names, a week after school had begun. Note that the third column is filling in.

This book is about absorbing the lives of your children. Until they know you are in the process of absorption, their will to learn may be suspect. I can't make children learn, but at least I can provide solid appointments for learning.

Nancie Atwell tells the story of B. J. Sherman. She says, "Until I could put writing in the path of what he wanted to say I was wasting my time with him. In this case B. J. wanted to write about going to live with his father. He tried personal narrative and it didn't work. I suggested that he switch to fiction and that freed him up to express" (phone conversation).

What do I learn from this incident? The first thing is that Nancie was searching for a way to help B. J. Indeed, she was actively searching for each one of her students. The second is that she saw that writing was a means to B. J.'s own ends. The third is that she had a hunch that fiction, the chance to be free from the accuracy of events, would allow him to tell his story. This is

<b>First Memory Attempt</b>		
	<i>Experiences and Interests</i>	<i>Confirmation Column</i>
1. Fred Gallo	Sharks	
2. Marcella Cowan	Horses	X
3. John Pringle		
4. Allison Goodrich		
5. Norman Frazier	Sister in hospital	X
6. Delores Sunderland	Sea life, birds	
7. Frances Sawtelle		
8. Johnathan Freedman	Prehistoric animals	
9. Charles Lentini	Motorcycles	
10. Aleka Alphanosopoulos	Singing	
11. Jason Beckwith		
12. John Finlayson		
**		
13. Joel Cupperman		
14. Mark Andrade		
15. Patricia Rezendes		
16. Betty Oliver		
17. Margaret Teixeira		
18. Marcus Washington		
19. Patricia Show		
20. William Frost		
21. Paul Gardner		
22. Jason Tompkins		
23. Ford Park		
24. Laurie Kunstler		
25. Albert Guimond		

\*\* All children below the line were not remembered on first attempt on the second day of school

**Figure 1–1.** First memory attempt

the art of teaching: to observe, to pick up the details of our students and piece them together for successful teaching, and to know the process so well that options become obvious.

I am in the process of learning about how to use my iPod, a nice device for playing music wherever I am. But I became so tangled with directions and wires that I had to hire Sean Doucette to make sense of the situation. (Yes,

<b>Second Memory Attempt</b>			
	<i>Experiences and Interests</i>	<i>Confirmation Column</i>	
1.	Marcella Cowan	Horses, birth of foal	X
2.	Norman Frazier	Sister well, fishing	X
3.	Jonathan Freedman	Tyrannasaurus rex, brontosaurus, draws well	X
4.	Marcus Washington	Athlete, kick ball	
5.	Delores Sunderland	Any craft, especially painting, sea life	X
6.	Jon Finlayson	Football, collects cards of athletes	X
7.	Betty Oliver	Takes care of little sister, cooks	X
8.	John Pringle		
9.	Frances Sawtelle	Cat and kittens	
10.	Ford Park	Works with father on road-moving equipment on Saturdays	X
11.	Joel Cupperman		
12.	Jason Beckwith		
13.	Fred Gallo	Sharks, movie "Jaws"	
14.	Aleka Alphanosopoulos	Collects records	X
15.	Charles Lentini	Collects motorcycle brochures, brother has cycle	
16.	Allison Goodrich		
17.	Mark Andrade	Fishes with father	
18.	Jason Tompkins		
19.	Paul Gardner		
20.	Margaret Texeira	Cares for little brother and sister, this angers her	X
			**
21.	Albert Guimond		
22.	Patricia Snow		
23.	Patricia Rezendes	Knows something about weaving	
24.	William Frost		
25.	Laurie Kunstler		
** All children below the line were not remembered on second attempt one week after school started.			

**Figure 1–2.** Second memory attempt

the simple iPod.) I watched his face as he used cold logic, yes or no, to get to the bottom of my problems. I wanted the iPod to connect in with my main sound system. His face showed calm and confidence. What struck me was that he kept trying one solution after another until he hit the right one. This was a puzzle he had to solve.

Of course, Sean was dealing with inanimate problems. Human ones are quite different. On the other hand, our calm demeanor in the face of the learner's upset can go a long way toward a solution. I may ask the child, "I'm sure you've thought about this a great deal; what might you try next? Relax a minute and give me a hint." If the learner can't think of something, I'll say, "Experiment with this."

Sadly, when learners don't want to work or can't solve problems, we blame ourselves. Sometimes we blame the student.

### *Invitation*

Choose one of your children and do a quick write for about five to six minutes. Write it in the first person and the present tense. I wrote through Timmy's eyes:

I am the smallest kid in my classroom. I have to keep my eye on two kids who beat on me. Jason and Ricky say, "Hi Twerp," and then they belt me on the arm. I go way over to the edge of the playground and play with Andy who is about my size. But they find me. I wish I could just swing and hit one of them in the stomach but then it is two against one.

And next I took my quick write and turned it into a poem.

#### **Why Poetry?**

I choose poetry because it can be written quickly and concisely. Nancie Atwell says, "Writing begins with poetry. Everything about writing can be taught through poetry" (phone conversation). Poetry is big thinking in a small space. I may start with prose, but my second revisions go right into poetry.

I am the smallest,  
The shortest,  
The pigmy,  
The runt,  
The rabbit.

Jason and Ricky  
Beat on me.  
They bunch their fists,  
Crack me on my arm,  
Trip me, push me.

Just once, oh just once  
I'd like to spin,  
And plant my fist  
In Ricky's gut.

Do I dare?  
Can I?  
Will I?

Now I will write through Cindy's eyes:

I love to go to the cafeteria. I like to eat but mostly I like to sit with my friends: Kathy, Willie, and Jean. We comment on the food but mostly we talk about the other kids like Rosalie. Every day Rosalie sits alone. She's just different so we study her clothes and what she eats. Her clothes aren't much.

And here is the poem.

About 11:50 I follow  
Kathy, Willie, Jean  
To the cafeteria.  
I follow them,  
Not the smell of pizza.

We sit together  
On a bench,  
Lean into our conversation  
Across the table  
So we can talk  
    About girls, boys,  
    Who are cute, who are not.  
There is Rosalie  
And her oily, stinking sandwich,

Her dress with the patch  
On it. I tell Willie  
She is so ugly  
It makes me want  
To puke.

Now I will write through Rosalie's eyes:

I wish Mom would make American sandwiches like ham and cheese on white bread. The oil from my sandwich drains all over the table top. I can't resist looking up to see if anyone notices. Cindy notices, puts her hand across her mouth while smiling and talks to Kathy and Willie. I wonder what they are saying about me.

Here is the poem from the prose.

This wreck of a sandwich,  
This oily, soaking bread.  
With tomatoes and olives  
Leaking on to the table.

I wish Mom would make  
American sandwiches  
With cheese and ham  
On white bread.

The oil is on my fingers,  
Draining down my arm.  
I cast a glance at Cindy  
Who is watching.

She says something  
Behind her hand  
To Willie, Kathy, and Jean  
And I know,  
I mean I know  
It is about me.

About five years ago, I was interviewing a woman about her junior high school days. She was plenty upset when the oil drained from her Italian sand-

wich. The small picture is draining oil. The big picture is she wants to be American. That is her wish. I used my knowledge of that woman to consider what it might be like for a child in my class to wish to be American.

Quick writes give you a fast sketch of a child. As you did this, you may have been conscious of the process of placing nouns and verbs in the text. If not, change some of the nouns and verbs after you've written. Writing or attempting a poem means taking those nouns and exploding the moments in the words. Keep asking, What does this child want? and then write from the child's point of view. Try to write three poems through the eyes of the child that you did a quick write for.

### *What Does Writing Do?*

Writing is different than speaking. I could tell someone about what it was like to be small and in the fourth grade. But when I simply write, "I am the smallest kid in fourth grade," I immediately say, "So what does that mean?" and I stop and ponder it. That's the difference between speech and writing. In writing I can look back over the line and think. Thought gets slowed down and I wonder about the big and small pictures here. How do kids react to me?

I stop, ponder, and write. I also write with very low standards. That is the way it is with first-draft writing. I know that I will return to rewrite this text.

Consider this review of writing poetry. Here is my section on moving from prose to poetry. It is characterized by

1. *Repetition*—Certain lines or words are repeated.
2. *Exaggeration*—I pack in the emotion. Events are larger than life itself.
3. *Narrative*—The story unfolds.
4. *Strong nouns and verbs at the end of the lines*—I rarely use prepositions.
5. *First person and present tense*—The poem is written through the child's eyes. I become the child as I write.

### *What Are the Children's Wishes?*

Wishes or wants shape narratives. Something stands in the way and I write that in.

In the first instance, Timmy doesn't like to be picked on. He wishes he could fight.

Cindy wants to maintain her group of friends but at another's expense.

Rosalie wishes her mother wouldn't make Italian sandwiches. But she also wishes she could be part of some group. She wonders how to be accepted.

Narratives are built around the wishes of the main characters. Children quite naturally have wishes, both for the small picture and the big picture.

## *Sharing About Yourself*

One of the prime rules in journalism is "Share information in order to get information." Children are like vacuum cleaners; they suck up any bits of information about us they can. But why not do it overtly through your own writing? Children are perceptive. Unless you are invested in your piece, they won't be invested in their own. This is also a new venture for many. A good share of the children, especially the older ones, will not involve themselves emotionally. Voice, so closely related to emotion, is what drives the writing ahead. It is also critical that I share a wide range of emotion in order to bring children into the process. When I speak of a wide range of emotion, I mean the following: shame, regret, joy, humor, embarrassment, sadness, excitement, anger. That's the short list.

Remember, emotion is the engine of the intellect. Unless I can show emotion through my narratives, it will be difficult for students to show a range of emotion in their own texts. Notice that I rarely use adjectives and adverbs: *angry, sad, joyful, miserable*. The real job is to show the emotion by what the character does.

Young women are very different than young men in this regard. They easily slip into a character, and their characters reflect. Men are different. They project emotion in what their main character does. "I put a move on the goalie and slapped the puck beyond his reach." I might ask the author, "Tell me about all of the feelings associated with scoring."

Here is a poem I wrote through the eyes of Rebekah. You will meet Rebekah later on, in Chapter 3. Rebekah is ten and is a very sensitive child. She lives in New York and ponders the meaning of the bombings on September 11, 2001.

### ***One Day***

One day, three years ago,  
When the fire engines  
Were screaming in the streets

And smoke was in the air,  
I heard about the terrorists  
Who drove planes  
Into the Twin Towers.

I asked Mama  
Who did that,  
And she said there are people  
Who hate us,  
Who hate our country.

I asked her  
Do they hate me?  
No, they don't hate you,  
They just hate us  
All together.

We talked about it  
At school; it was on the radio,  
On TV, and I still wonder  
What we did  
To make them so angry,  
That they'd give their lives  
Just to punish us.

When I go to bed  
I wonder what  
I have done wrong  
To bring so much hate.

### *Final Reflection*

When you first viewed your children, they were a sea of faces. Some stood out; a few were very loud, many were quiet. The beginning of knowing a child starts with the child's name. Even before my first class I want to learn their names in alphabetical order. In some classes children are coming and going, meaning that the list doesn't get stabilized until the second week.

I go through two memory attempts. Above all I want children to be represented with at least three strong nouns, followed by three strong verbs. Of

course, as the year continues the nouns and verbs will change. Remember the Williams quote, “No ideas but in things.”

I invited you to become a child and write prose for five minutes through the child’s eyes. You probably chose a child who stood out and displayed good nouns and verbs. Finally, I asked you to write three poems based on the narrative you sketched about the child. These may have been the first poems you’ve ever written. No matter; you lowered your standards and got words down on the page.

This book is about absorbing the lives of your children. You have worked hard to get started on this important journey.