



The Robe

Giving a Struggling Young Writer Permission to Write What He Knows

MARYANN GREMILLION

Photograph by Pavel Semenov.

WILLIAM IS NINE YEARS OLD, has Asperger's, and doesn't like to write. I don't know much more than this about him as I arrive at his house, wondering if there's anything I know that's going to help this child. When the front door opens he says hello quietly, peering at me from behind his mother. His light brown hair, parted on the right just above a cowlick, falls straight to his ears. He leads me to the softly lit kitchen where we'll begin our work together. Orchids bloom on the windowsill above the sink, and a black cat watches us from the counter. "That's Tom," he tells me.

We sit at the kitchen table. There's a white bucket in the middle filled with pencils and crayons, and along one side of the table next to the wall is an antique bench. William sits at one end, scrunching his knees up to his chest, and I sit at the other end, pencil ready. "Tell me what you love," I say.

His eyes brighten. "I love Minecraft. I play it all the time."

Maryann Gremillion has taught in schools for twenty years as a classroom teacher and staff developer. She studied at Columbia University's Reading and Writing Project, and traveled across the country presenting writing workshops to teachers. She is currently a writer-in-residence with Writers in the Schools in Houston, Texas, and an education and writing consultant working with children and adults. Her work has appeared in The Sun magazine, Telling Our Stories Press, and in her blog, Tales From the Classroom Door. You can find her on her website at WriteTruly.com.

"Oh, I don't know anything about that game. Can you tell me about it?"

"Sure," he says, poking a button on his iPad. "Okay, the thing to know about Minecraft is, you build a world on a crafting table, and you have to destroy mobs before they kill you." I am scribbling furiously. I ask him what feels like a thousand questions. What is a crafting table? How do you make a diamond sword? Who are the Villagers? I read the information screens he pulls up online.

Minecraft is a game of blocks where a player steps into the shoes of a character named Steve to build an imagined world. Steve needs a house and tools, like a pick axe and a diamond sword, along with food to eat. He must defend himself against the odd assortment of mobs (villains) that try to kill him. "And whatever you do," William says solemnly, "don't look at the Endermen." For fifteen minutes I watch William pretending to be a Villager from Minecraft. He is wearing a soft brown robe, like a bathrobe, with a hood and sleeves that make him look like a small monk. The robe is becoming more and more important to him. It's worn-in and comfortable, and he has it on his seat every time I come. Sometimes he wraps himself up in it, or covers his lap. Some days he hides beneath it when he's tired. But today, he's in character, using the robe as a costume. He pulls the hood over his head, tucks his hands inside the sleeves, and shuffles across

the kitchen floor. He creates his own Villager voices and narrates what he wants to write.

There was a time not long ago when I didn't believe games like Minecraft were useful for young writers. I thought children needed to tap into their own creativity, and the games seemed to take the place of that. But with William it feels different. Along with Asperger's, he has ADHD, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. His vocabulary is amazing and he speaks clearly, but he can't spell accurately. He struggles with getting started and staying focused. His hand can't physically move a pencil very well. And his engagement with the world is limited. He doesn't like to be outside much, doesn't play a sport or a musical instrument. He doesn't have many friends. He does have cats, supportive parents, and a single obsession: Minecraft. He speaks of almost nothing else.

As I prepared for our first meeting, I found myself asking lots of questions. How exactly was I supposed to help him with writing? What if we used a computer so he could type instead of using a pencil? What if I could teach him to forget about spelling on a first draft and focus instead on ideas? What if I could give up my notion that to teach kids writing I need to convince them to get ideas from their own true lives? What if I could teach William to write stories using what he knows about the game? I decided to give it a try.

In today's education climate, it's difficult for teachers to completely meet the needs of students like William. Classes are large and diverse, and it's just not possible for teachers to give every single child the one-to-one attention they need. The emphasis in many schools is on mastering learning objectives and taking a series of tests. But William needs a different kind of support.

I begin by talking with William about characters in stories, how they have personalities, how the main character usually wants something or has to overcome

a problem or a conflict, how there can be a second character who helps, and also a character who causes trouble. I use SpongeBob SquarePants as a model for this, as most kids William's age are familiar with this cartoon. William understands and he decides to use two characters from Minecraft in his story. Steve will be the main character; a pet cat named Sullivan will help Steve, and an Enderman, a skinny black monster with purple eyes, will be Steve's enemy. William draws each character, and then types a list of personality traits for each one. Steve is smart and brave and funny, he loves pork chops and wants diamonds. Sullivan likes raw fish, sleeps on Steve's bed, and is able to teleport. The Enderman is evil and attacks quickly if you look him in the eye, but he is also allergic to water.

As we continue to meet over the next few weeks, I encourage William's thinking and his ideas, helping him make connections between the world of Minecraft and the way stories are made. I read him picture books and short stories, Julie Brinckloe's *Fireflies*, Jane

Yolen's *Owl Moon*, Cynthia Rylant's *Spaghetti*. I teach him about beginnings, middles, and ends using these texts, and ask him to identify the characters, their personalities, and the problems they face.

Then, armed with his iPad, he outlines a plan for his own story, "The Search for the Stolen Diamond." William decides that the Enderman has stolen a diamond and Steve will have to fight the Ender Dragon to get it back. Once we begin to write, I tell him not to worry about spelling. I have him picture the story unfolding like a movie in his mind. He tells me what he sees, and then he writes. We correct spelling errors after he's written, which also gives me an opportunity to teach verb tense and punctuation. And it's working. He writes using what he knows and loves. He's learning about stories and how writers work. Writing this story excites William, and his mother says that itself is a miracle. "He can't wait for you to come," she tells

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me. “Just a few months ago I couldn’t get him to put anything on the page.”

Of course, he still has difficulty staying focused. When I think he might be avoiding the work, I ask him and he says, “Oh no, I love writing.” Sometimes we are able to complete a paragraph or two of his story in an hour. He stops frequently to show me information and videos about Minecraft; he stands and squats and eats and sometimes spins across the kitchen floor. Once again, I realize I need to adjust my own expectations and follow his rhythms. He needs to learn at his own pace. And most important, he needs to see himself as a writer. If we spend twenty minutes writing and the rest of the time talking, researching, and acting out the story, then so be it. When he can’t sit still, he tells me the story out loud and I write it down. Then I dictate his words to him and he types. Sometimes, when we watch a Minecraft video, I have him narrate the story so he practices noticing details like the setting and what the characters are doing. This helps when he writes. For the beginning of his story he types, “It is a snowy night. Steve sits at his kitchen table eating vanilla cake.”

Slowly William begins to improve. He receives treatment for the ADHD, so that after six months of working together, he writes for longer periods (thirty to forty-five minutes). He spells with increasing accuracy and independence, often by saying the letters out loud as he types. “This story is really good,” he says. Or, “I’ve been thinking about this actually and I have the next part in my head.” He sees where his sentences end and knows to type a period there. He’s able to use quotation marks for dialogue and exclamation points and words in capital letters to generate intensity, emotion, and voice. (“OH NO, THE DIAMOND!!!”) He uses onomatopoeia to imagine how

a character might sound. (A creeper walks up to Steve and says, “Hello Ssssssssteve.”)

When “The Search for the Stolen Diamond” is complete, we talk about ways he can publish and share his work. He sends e-mails to his parents and grandparents, his teachers, and his friends. He reads the story out loud at school, and his teacher posts the text outside the classroom door. On the last day of school before the holidays, William gives each student in his class a booklet that his mom made. It has a glossy cover, the story is typed inside, and there’s a picture of William on the back, a large one using the block format in Minecraft, and a smaller one of how he actually looks. He is an author now, smiling for the camera in a dark suit and blue tie.

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Today, when I arrive, I notice two brown robes on the bench, one at his end and another one puddled in the spot where I sit. “William,” I say, “you have two of these robes!”

“Yeah, “ he says, “I get a new one every Christmas. Pretty soon I’ll have three.”

He walks to my side of the kitchen table and reaches down to grab the second robe. He turns around and hands it to me. “I thought you might like to have one too.”

“Oh, thank you,” I say, “this is great. We are writers together.”

He nods once and says, “Yes, I like to write in this robe, it gives me inspiration.”

And I know that the robe, like the game and the story has also given him permission to be fully himself. It is only now, after twenty years of teaching, that I finally understand what it means to step into a child’s world. I put on my robe, sit down at the table and pick up a pencil. It’s an extraordinary place to be. 🍷