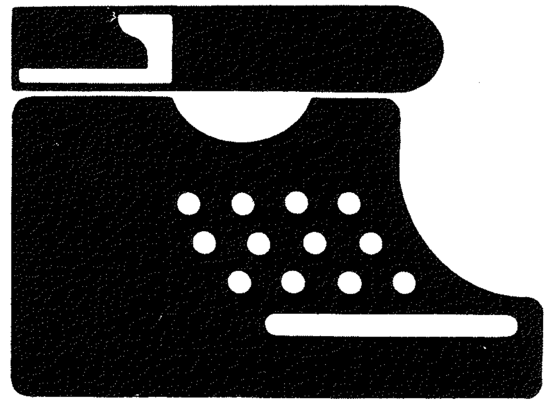
Teachers & Writers



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PLAYMAKING

Children Writing & Performing Their Own Plays

The following article is excerpted from Daniel Judah Sklar's *Playmaking: Children Writing & Performing Their Own Plays,* a new book from T&W. The book is a moving account of a playwright's teaching residency in which he guides the children from start to finish in writing and performing their own plays. His collaboration with the classroom teacher is particularly interesting: at first they don't really understand each other. As the book progresses, they, as much as the children, are transformed by the whole experience. The excerpt below is from the first two chapters of the book.

by Daniel Judah Sklar

"WHY WRITE A PLAY?" THAT'S THE FIRST question I asked the kids at P.S. 34, the Bronx. "Why not a letter or a clear paragraph describing your best qualities?"

"So we can get rich?" answered Hector, a chunky boy of eleven in a turquoise sweatsuit. Hector belonged to Ms. Finney's fifth-grade class, but like many younger kids, he seemed to assume that writing a play is the same as acting in a soap opera and that plays are the same—or poor cousins of—TV shows and movies.

DANIEL JUDAH SKLAR is a playwright whose work with children was featured recently on NBC's "Today." He has taught playwriting in many settings, from rural Georgia to the South Bronx.

I had to explain that very few people, alas, actually get rich from writing plays.

Maria Margarita, a tall girl who spoke with great precision, said that plays have a "moral." Her tone was dutiful and correct. She sounded like the many students who tell teachers what they want to hear.

I agreed with her, but again asked why she and the others should have to write a play. If they learned to write proper letters and essays, those skills might help them get jobs. But a play?

To my delight, Luz, a pretty girl with long black hair in the second row, said, "It's fun."

"Yes, yes, but why?" I asked. And we began discussing how much fun it is to get up in front of other people and how cool it is to put on a costume and make-up and be someone else.

"What happens when we're being somebody else?" I asked. "What part of ourselves are we using?"

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Monique, an intense black girl who sat next to Maria Margarita and whose proper skirt and sweater mirrored the tall girl's, said, "Brain."

"What part of your brain are you using when you make up a story?" I asked.

"Mind," said Hector. He sat just in front of Ms. Finney's extra desk at the back of the room and looked around to see if she had heard his contribution.

"There's a special kind of thinking when we let our minds go, when we make things up. Does anyone know?" I said and waited.

Finally Kim, a light-skinned black girl, who wore a grey polyester pullover, said, "Imagination."

"Yes. Writing a play helps develop the imagination," I agreed, "and a healthy imagination will help you sooner or later in life, regardless of whether you become an explorer discovering a new island, a parent breaking up a fight between kids, or a carpenter bracing a building that almost fell in an earthquake. It's how we solve problems when there are no instructions or rules."

The kids, like most other kids—especially teenagers—found that explanation satisfying, so I pressed on. "But why write a play to develop the imagination? Why not a poem? Or a story? Or science fiction? They all use the imagination, don't they?"

The kids agreed guardedly. "So," I persisted, "what's different about a play?"

"The actors," Luz called out. It took a bit more probing for the kids to acknowledge the set designer, lighting person, make-up artist, backstage crew, etc. But once they did, they realized that doing a play means working together. And that it's a way to learn cooperation and discipline.

At that point I recapitulated: "Fun. Imagination. Cooperation. Discipline. Those are all fine goals. If we accomplish any one of them, we will have used our time well. But if we put them together we can do something really special: we can make magic."

This assertion, greeted by smiles at P.S. 34, has elicited cheers, doubtful glances, and even cynical stares at other schools.

My reaction to the smiles was the same as it has been to the stares, glances, and cheers: I showed a video of *The Twins in the Lobby*, written by Erica Hore, an eleven-year-old from Harlem.

In *The Twins in the Lobby*, Sissie and Sally, eleven-year-old twin girls, wait in the hospital lobby while their mother gives birth. Frightened and lonely, the two girls bicker—until Annbellemay, a bag lady, slips into the lobby and teaches them a song and gives them fruit. Annbellemay not only gets them through the wait, she also helps them to understand and appreciate the Annbellemay's of this world.

The P.S. 34 kids loved the video, but when I asked them why, only Kim raised her hand. She said, "It seemed real."

I agreed and asked the other kids if they thought so too. They nodded tentatively, so I asked if they could name a specific part that seemed phony. Monique raised her hand and asked what I meant by "phony," and as I explained, I realized that she and a number of others believed the video was real, a kind of *cinéma vérité*. (It had actually been shot and edited by Theresa Mack and directed by me.) Still others refused to believe a child had actually written the words.

To reinforce the point, I said, "Yes, a child just like you wrote every word. She lives less than twenty blocks from here—five minutes on the subway." As I spoke, my eyes scanned the classroom, finally resting on Jaime, a small boy with a devilish look in his eye.

He cried, "Not me!" as if I had just accused him of running the local crack house.

"Oh yes, you and you and you. Everybody. As I said, you're not only going to write a play, it's going to be magical."

"But how?" asked Kim. The intensity of her expression made me feel that she planned to write her play as soon as I revealed my secret formula.

"That," I said, "is the question I've been waiting for. Can anybody guess the answer?" I paused. Nobody responded.

"The answer is 'honesty,' " I said. "You are all going to explore yourselves—your private worlds.

"That may mean writing about the time you let down your best friend. Or the time you felt so silly that you rolled over and over in the mud or sang the same song fifty times in a row. Or the time you really hated your mother. Or the time you went up on the roof and stayed half the morning, doing nothing. . .without knowing why. But whatever you choose, it will be yours and yours alone."

"But you said the video wasn't real," said Maria Margarita. Her body seemed to rise in righteous indignation, and I looked down at her feet to see if she had stood. She hadn't, but I noticed how close together the desks were—and how scuffed the floor was.

"The story was made up, but *the feelings* were real. The writer's imagination transformed—does everybody know that word? It means *to change*, like the way you change a transformer toy. So in this case, Erica, the girl who wrote this video, transformed what she felt into a play.

"And that's my job," I continued, "to teach you how to do the transforming. Sometimes the transforming will lead to a serious drama, sometimes to a crazy, wonderful comedy, sometimes to a mystery or a piece of science fiction. But always it

will start with you: what you really want, what your bodies, senses, and emotions tell you—what you really feel. What you care about."

"I don't care about writing," said Hector.

"Then maybe you'll write about that: some stupid drama teacher coming in and making you do the most horrible, monstrous task—write about your feelings. You can start with that and maybe it will end with you tricking him and him catching you or not catching you and. . . ."

Hector looked at me carefully.

"Yes, I'm kidding, but I'm also serious. If you write what you really feel, you can't lose. And more than that: we're going to have fun."

"He's crazy," said Jaime quite audibly.

"Maybe. But I'm going to be honest with you—and I'm glad you're already being honest with me.

"You will have to be honest when you act, too," I continued, looking right at Jaime and then at Saul, a big, husky boy in a dark blue sweatshirt with a hood. Saul's eyes darted to the coat closet, which extended from the front door to the back door along the hall-side wall. I imagined him trying to hide among the winter gear when it came time for acting.

"And when you direct. Or design the set or costumes. And if you are honest, you will be saying This is who I am. This is what I believe. So when your parents and friends and neighbors see and hear your play on the stage, they will enter your world. Not Walt Disney's world or even Hans Christian Andersen's. It will be yours, the world of you people in Ms. Finney's class at P.S. 34.

"And that's where the magic comes from: all those people—your parents, friends, and neighbors—learning from you, appreciating you, and discovering what you believe—really embracing who you are. All of them at once."

The kids paid attention, but clearly had difficulty digesting what I said. I was about to try again when Luz raised her hand and said, "Could we see the video again?"

Somehow that made more sense than another explanation. They would be learning this point in action soon enough. So the kids watched the video and I looked out the window of that fourth-floor classroom at a large housing project a few blocks away. In between, all of the buildings had been burned or demolished. I meditated on that scene and my "explanation" until the bell rang.

"I'm a little confused by this 'magic' business," said Ms. Finney. We were depositing fifty cents each in the kitty and getting coffee from the pot in the teachers' lounge. "Is it a good idea to use such words with kids? Especially if I have to do the explaining when you're not here," she added with a wry smile as we sat down. (These weekly sessions, part of an artist-in-residence program sponsored by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, included work with the classroom teacher.)

Looking at Ms. Finney, a handsome woman in her early forties dressed in a grey skirt, white blouse, and a baby blue cardigan sweater, I thought, "You could do this with your eyes closed," but diplomatically replied, "It's all based on a technique with clear exercises."

"Honesty exercises?"

"Oh yes. Most of them are."

"Well," said Ms. Finney, also trying to be diplomatic—not wanting to burst my bubble too abruptly—"where I live in Westchester County, we have a children's theater and it does Creative Dramatics—as well as stunning productions of classics—but it is hardly magic, as nice as it is. I don't think it's wise to set kids up to. . . ."

"Creative Dramatics is only one part of a play written and produced by children," I asserted.

"Don't the kids make things up in Creative Dramatics? Isn't that the point?"

"Yes, but that's just the beginning for a playwright. The playwright starts with the kind of spontaneity that goes into Creative Dramatics games and goes on to writing exercises, which lead to deeper exploration, which leads, in turn, to the writing of the play, which leads, finally, to the production," I said a bit pompously.

Ms. Finney seemed dubious.

"Creative Dramatics nurtures creativity," she said. "Formal plays and elaborate costumes and sets squelch it."

"Think of Creative Dramatics as step number one in a three-step process," I said. "Exploring feelings through games and exercises, writing, and a production." Then I described how one Creative Dramatics exercise had grown into a play.

It was an improvisation done by twelve-year-old boys in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. Each child had developed a character through Creative Dramatics techniques. As a next step, we agreed to assemble those seven characters, whose ages ranged from six months to seventy-three years, in a rumpus room. We also agreed on a situation: the seven characters would be the male members of a family and they would be setting up a bachelor party for the twenty-three-year-old character. As the improvisation progressed, a conflict between the boy playing the fourteen-year-old and the boy playing his forty-year-old father grew progressively intense and finally overshadowed everything else.

At that point, we agreed that it should be the central conflict for a "real play." The play was then written and rehearsed and finally performed with

an extraordinary ending that emerged during the writing: the fourteen-year-old would go to live with his mother.

The mother had not existed in the earlier improvisations, but with time to think and write the boys decided the fourteen-year-old rebelled because his parents had divorced. His confusion about the situation surfaced as rage at his father.

When the kids performed the play, the audience of parents and friends, many of whom were divorced, watched transfixed. And afterwards almost every adult told me they were "shocked" or "chastened" or the like. The kids had started with Creative Dramatics but had taken it much further.

Ms. Finney found that example interesting, but said she had questions. Which she didn't have time to ask; she had to return to class. We agreed to meet after every session. I felt as if I had survived the first cut.

After my talk with Ms. Finney I began thinking about the word *magic*. Was it pretentious, as her tone implied? I was certain that children writing and performing their own plays was different from Creative Dramatics. I also firmly believed in the magic of a truly realized theatrical production. But how could I claim that the kids at P.S. 34 would make magic?

I forgot about that question as I headed home, making my way past a burned-out building in front of which stood young men with their hands in their pockets. They had been there at 8 A.M. when I passed on my way to school.

Not breaking stride, I continued on 138th Street, the bustling main drag of P.S. 34's neighborhood. If I had taken a few more steps I could have entered the subway and headed downtown, but I looked up and saw an espresso machine through the window of La Taza de Azul, a Puerto Rican restaurant. The thought of *café con leche* (hot milk and espresso coffee) seemed much more attractive than the subway.

Over the steaming cup, I looked out the window at the shoppers and the tacky Christmas decorations on the store facades, and contemplated the drug supermarket half way between the school and 138th Street.

Unable to make sense of it, I decided to return my attention to "magic," and began reviewing the other places I had taught kids to write plays. It was a long list, including many places in New York City, various towns and cities in Georgia, and a few on the West Coast. But as I thought about the work in each of those places, my eyes kept returning to the street and suddenly I realized why teaching children to explore an impulse and then helping them to develop it into a fully written, fully produced play makes magic: it brings back the first function of the theater, evoking a community.

Today we associate theater with Broadway and its road companies or comfortably established regional theaters—professionals dispensing entertainment to us. Or we imitate what they do with our own amateur companies. Sometimes these plays relate to our lives and we identify with the characters—but always from a distance.

It was different in ancient Greece, in twelfth-century English cathedral towns, and in villages throughout the Third World. Plays emerged from the local community. The writer and his compatriots, who produced and acted in the play, spoke directly to family, friends, rivals, elders, and outcasts. And when all those people came to see the play, they experienced a new understanding of their world. The magic came from the community's embracing and reevaluating itself.

Which is exactly what happens with plays written by children, I thought, and *The Mansion* came to mind.

The Mansion, a mystery drama written by preteens, told a story of reclaiming a large abandoned house.

That action, it turned out, mirrored what had happened in Stilson, a farming community of 600 people in south Georgia: as the farm crisis grew and farm after farm failed, the community shrank significantly—until a major highway connected Stilson with Savannah, a city of 200,000. At that point, ex-farmers began commuting to factory jobs and city people moved to Stilson. The play's action illuminates the changes the people of Stilson faced as they redefined their farming community.

Looking out the window again, I found myself excited by the memory of that powerful play. Or was it anticipation of the plays that would come out of this neighborhood in the South Bronx? Probably both.

SETTING THE TONE

At the beginning of the next session, I announced that we would create a work space by pushing the desks and chairs against the walls. Some of the kids groaned, others waited, but a third group jumped up and began banging chairs and dragging desks as loudly as possible.

"Freeze," I shouted, and everybody did—except Felix.

Felix, a lithe, dark-skinned boy, had gotten up and was sauntering in the direction of the front door. "Is that freezing?" I asked, but Felix kept walking. "You in the green tee shirt. What's your name?"

"Me?" he answered innocently.

"Yes."

"Felix," he said, tossing a crumpled piece of paper into the wastebasket by the front door.

Photo: Jim Alexander

Daniel Judah Sklar and Playmaking students

This was clearly going to be a test, so I told the other kids to unfreeze and sit.

"Now, Felix, let me explain something about the theater: when a director tells an actor to freeze, the actor freezes. And if he tells a lighting person to bring up the house lights, the lighting person brings up the house lights.... Does everybody know what I mean by 'house lights'?" I said, interrupting myself. Nobody knew, so I, ever anxious to teach, explained that house lights are those that shine upon the audience, not the stage.

"And that's true of everybody else who's part of the theater," I continued. "Do you know why?"

Felix's answer was "I had to throw out some paper."

"Because we count on each other in the theater. For example, let's say Luz is acting"—Luz's smile at this suggestion was love itself—"and she's counting on you to pull the curtain after she says 'And I never want to see you again,' and at that moment you decide you want to throw out some paper or go to the bathroom or joke with your friend. What happens? She's stuck on the stage saying 'And I never want to see you again...I never want to see you again...I never want to see you again,' till you get back to pull the curtain."

"That's her tough luck," answered Felix. And the kids laughed.

"No, it's yours—because you'd be fired. And do you know why?"

"Because you got it in for me."

"Because you've let her down. You'd have also let down the kids working the lights, the rest of the crew, the director, the playwright, the other actors, and the audience."

Addressing the class as a whole, I said, "We don't let each other down in the theater. We need each other. We count on each other. And if we can't count on you, you go down to the principal's office. We don't waste our time with you."

At that point, Ms. Finney looked up from her desk, where she had been working on her roll book, and said, "Oh, we don't need the principal. We can take care of him right here," and the kids murmured.

"Actually, I wasn't talking about Felix specifically," I said quickly. "Because now that he understands, he won't be doing it again. I meant anybody," and scanned the room.

After that significant pause, I said, "Now we're going to move the desks row by row. When it's your turn, pick up your desk and chair, move them against the nearest wall as quietly as possible, find a spot in the center of the room and stand on it—without talking."

The kids executed these instructions remarkably well, and a twenty-foot by fifteen-foot scuffed wooden work space emerged.

I moved to the center of that space and said, "Now, why do you think I had you move?"

"To waste time," yelled Jaime. "So you don't got to teach nuthin'." He stood near the back of

the room. On the wall behind him I noticed the words HARD WORK PAYS OFF in multicolored construction paper.

"Yeah, you just keep us runnin' around," seconded Felix, who stood right in front of me.

"Well, Jaime—and Felix—you may have had teachers like that, but I'm not one and I have a strong hunch Ms. Finney isn't either." The kids giggled nervously. They clearly agreed with my assessment of Ms. Finney.

"So why?" I asked again.

"Man, you ask *why* a lot," said Felix.

"It's my favorite word," I said. "So...why?"

Finally Luz raised her hand. "To get more space to act," she said.

"Right, that's definitely part of it. And what else?"

When nobody responded, I said, "To shake you up. Now why would I want to shake you up?"

"I don't know!" Maria Margarita blurted. Her tone revealed her irritation with such foolishness.

"When you're in your regular seats, you can rely on habits. But when you're out here, you don't know what's next, so you feel more, think quicker, and really use your imagination. All of which makes your writing and acting better."

"It's hard to just stand here," said Deana, a pale, sad-looking girl in jeans and yellow sweater with a gaudy, green flower design. She stood near Ms. Finney's desk at the back of the room and stole a glance at her teacher as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

"Good point. Ordinarily I would have had you sit on the floor Indian style, but so many of the girls are in dresses and...."

"I wouldn't sit on that floor if you paid me," said Tyrone, a short black boy. He was wearing neatly pressed brown slacks.

"Not today, but let's do it next week. Wednesday, a week from today, everybody wear jeans or clothes they can sit on the floor in."

"What does all this have to do with writing a play?" asked Monique, who stood next to Maria Margarita just as she sat next to her in their seats. They, I surmised, worked well in their seats.

I answered Monique by asking her if she remembered what I said last week. Monique dutifully said we would learn to use our imaginations, and we would learn cooperation and discipline.

After complimenting Monique on her memory, I asked, "Does anybody remember anything else?" Nobody did—until Felix said, "Yeah, you said something about magic."

" 'Magic,' " mimicked Hector, who stood behind me. I was between him and Felix. Felix said, "What you lookin' at?"

"Nuthin' much," said Hector.

"Hector, what do I mean by 'magic'?" I asked quickly. Hector didn't answer.

"Do you know, Felix?" I asked, switching gears when I saw Felix smirk. He didn't answer either.

"Does anybody remember? What makes the 'magic'?" Nobody responded.

"OK," I said, "the magic comes from honesty about yourself. What you really feel in your heart, what your body tells you, and what you sense with your eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin. And sharing all that with an audience. So the question is 'How do we do that? What's the first step?' And, the answer, Monique, is that we have to switch the setting—to shake ourselves up. So we'll be alert and open, and so our imaginations will work as well as they can. We will do that every time we work."

"And that's it?" asked Maria Margarita. "Just standing up in the middle of the room will do that?"

"No, once we change the setting, we begin working with our bodies, senses, and feelings. We begin the transforming I told you about last week."

"How do you work with feelings?" asked Kim. She wore the same jeans and pullover as the week before.

"Actually, we're not going to get to feelings today, but that's because feelings are often built upon the body and senses; they help us get to feelings. So we do body and senses first. And of the two, it's best to start with the body. Does anybody know why? No? Then let's think about football. What do you do before you play?"

"Warm up," said Clarence, a tall, rangy black boy, who apparently considered himself the class authority on sports.

"Right. So you get loose. And what happens when you get loose?"

"You move better," said Clarence. He stood still, evenly balanced on his feet, arms dangling. I felt he could have moved effortlessly in any direction.

"And what else? You move better. You're looser, you're focused on what you're doing, you're not worried about anything else. You're what?" I looked at a girl with bright eyes. She wore tan pants and a pretty, beaded blue sweater. Her name was Venus. "What do you think, Venus?" I asked, feeling she had followed the lesson as intently as she had the first day's.

"Relaxed," she said firmly, and then gave me a shy smile.

I smiled back and was about to say "Yes, and when you're relaxed, you can express who you really are," but the bell began ringing and the kids lined up in front of the green chalkboard in the front of the room for a fire drill. I made a mental note to emphasize that link between relaxation and self-discovery, as I followed the kids down the stairs to the street.

"I couldn't help agreeing with Felix on one point," said Ms. Finney when we were sitting in the teachers' lounge later that day.

"Actually, I thought I headed him off quite well."

"Oh you did. Your instinct was absolutely correct there. In fact, it bolsters my point. I was referring to the 'why' business. You do ask that quite a lot."

"It may seem like a contradiction, but when they're loosening up. . . ."

"Yes, I understand all that. But there was a lot of standing around."

"I felt they should understand what they are doing," I said defensively. "I want them to be responsible and you can't do that if you're just following orders."

"We're dealing with a forty-five-minute session," said Ms. Finney, ignoring my whine.

"Less," I thought, remembering the fire drill, but I decided to tell Ms. Finney why moving desks and finding spots in the center was a pallid compromise.

"If I had my druthers, I would do what I did in a private school in Atlanta. I would have the kids take off their shoes and lie flat on their backs. I'd also turn off the lights. It would be so much easier for their unconscious impulses to emerge."

Ms. Finney nodded politely and said, "And another practical consideration—Deana, who said she was tired. She is. She lives with her grandmother. They are extremely poor. But more important, when her father died of AIDS, her mother threw herself out the window." Ms. Finney paused and said, "She died too. Deana is exhausted."

The enormity of what Ms. Finney said brought me out of my defensiveness. Teaching in the South Bronx was different from the more affluent neighborhood surrounding Emory University in Atlanta. Worrying about unconscious impulses "emerging" seemed terribly precious. What these kids needed were basic skills to deal with grim realities. I needed to work more directly and let go of the frills. That was what Ms. Finney had been gently telling me.

After Ms. Finney left, I went back to pondering my technique. Was "setting a tone" an indulgence for the upper middle class? Kids with time and space to slow down and "get in touch" with themselves could benefit enormously from this "professional" approach. But what did it do for kids in the South Bronx? Wasn't their time better spent on fundamentals, as Ms. Finney had hinted? Wasn't I just wasting valuable class time moving furniture? Especially if there wasn't space and a nice soft rug like the one in Atlanta?

On my way home past the burned-out building and its denizens, those questions seemed even more pertinent. I decided to stop for a *café con leche* and re-examine the notion of "setting a tone."

Taking the same booth by the window, I thought about how I had set the tone in other inner-city schools. What about the Harlem school where I had taught the previous year?

In that school, we had changed the tone without a rug or proper space, and without moving our chairs to the side of the room (the teacher had preferred that we did not). The kids had stood behind their chairs. But even that small change had distanced the children from the security of their seats. And they had gone on to write wonderful plays like *The Twins in the Lobby*. Their teacher, who clearly distrusted me as yet another "specialist," agreed the plays worked and even said that after the playwriting section the kids seemed to like writing—some for the first time.

Taken by itself, this example proved little, but it reminded me why I had developed the technique. I had designed it to appeal to non-readers and non-writers as well as to the speedy, the plodding, and the average. "Shaking the kids up" puts everybody on an equal plane. Non-readers and plodding readers can perform as well as anybody else. Equally important, the non-readers feel motivated to learn: after they are shaken up, they go on to create scenes through improvisation and other theater games. That, in turn, leads to an interest in grammar and spelling, because they realize those skills will help them build their improvisations into plays.

So an interest in writing skills often depends upon the success of the improvisations. And good improvisations often happen after a break from traditional classroom thinking. That's why I try to shake the kids up, why I set a special tone. ●

Playmaking: Children Writing & Performing Their Own Plays is now available from T&W in paperback ($11.95) and cloth ($21.95) editions. Shipping is free. *Playmaking* is not just for drama teachers. Steve Seidel, of Harvard University's Project Zero, says, "Anyone concerned with children's creativity and the classroom as a workshop for invention and discovery will find an encouraging and provocative gift in this powerful book." For more information, contact Teachers & Writers, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003 (212/691-6590).

How to Start a Poem and Then Continue It

by Len Roberts

IMAGES

One of the first things to do with beginning writers is to get them to think concretely, in terms of sensory details. If they can't do this, their poems will consist of general statement piled upon general statement, more like poorly written essays chopped into short lines. To avoid this, show them how to use images.

One useful exercise for this is what I call the "bird" or "flower" exercise. Ask the students if the word "bird" is an image. If they answer yes (the incorrect answer), ask them what bird they see in their minds. They may answer parrot, sparrow, parakeet, bluebird, et cetera, but the important thing is that they will have moved from the general to the specific in their thinking, and then, we hope, in their writing. If a student says that the word "bird" is not an image, then I ask him for an image of a bird, which leads to the same answers as above. I usually work with this concept until most of the students understand what an image is—a specific sensory detail.

The next step in the process is to entice the students to extend the image. So, when a student says "cardinal," ask him where the cardinal is: on a white post? A black Mercedes? A snow-covered hedge? And then ask what the cardinal is doing: is he cracking a seed open in a light rain? Is he flapping his wings in the blue spruce? Is he staring back into the window where the student is staring out? These kinds of questions will cause the beginning writers to think of images in context, and will thus help them to continue writing about the image which they conjured up. Other questions that help to extend the image are, "Is the cardinal doing anything unusual? Is it raining or snowing? What else do you hear as you watch the cardinal?" And so on.

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The Cardinal

Rolling through the field,
white petals caught in my hair,
I topple over the rows
of gleaming white lilies,
pause a moment
to look up in the sky
where a fire-red
cardinal passes by,
cardinal without a care in the world.
It really put things
  into perspective.
    —Stephanie Laub, 7th grade

The "flower" exercise follows the same procedure. If the student says "tulip," ask him what color it is, where he sees it (suggesting that a tulip in a garden may be too usual), what time of day or night it is, and so on. Again, this kind of questioning prepares the students to get in the habit of extending the image, and thus it helps their poems to develop.

Here are two examples of the flower exercise:

Streaks of Light

Adjusting my eyes
from a sound sleep,
I see the soft, pale blue carnation
as dew drops fall onto
its dead petals
surrounding
the crystal-clear vase,
the morning sun
gleaming,
leaving streaks of light
on the white, leather armchair.
    —Stephanie Laub, 7th grade

Milkweed Pods

Milkweed pods grow
along fence posts
all fluffy
and full
like the soft down of feathers,
gentle, misty clouds
that angels might stand graciously upon.
    —Joy Bacher, 3rd grade

A NOTE ON STRESSING THE UNUSUAL

I do not like surreal poetry, so I tend to steer beginning writers away from images or comparisons that are too fantastic for my taste. However, the student must also be guided away from choosing images or extensions of images that are so usual as

to be clichés. For instance, if the student selects an eagle as his bird, he is setting himself up for a cliché reaction, for that eagle is nearly always soaring through a blue sky, looking for prey; similarly, a dove is nearly always cooing, and inevitably it becomes a symbol of peace and love. So I ask the beginning writers for images of birds they actually see, such as pigeons, sparrows, and robins, and then I ask them to place these birds in surroundings that may slightly surprise the reader. The pigeon, for instance, may be strutting by the red swingset; it should not always be by the green park bench, with the same old man throwing it bread crumbs. Likewise, the sparrow might be on a barn's white gutter, or it might be in the shadow of the blue Buick station wagon; it should not always be in the branch of a tree. The flower, too, does not always have to be in a garden. Why not put the yellow tulip in a vase on the window sill? The salmon rose climbing the black fence? The dandelion growing by the slanted grave stone?

Following is a student poem that places a usual image (bluebird) in an unusual setting:

American Gothic

Standing here
next to my beloved husband
with the sharp whispering pitchfork
in his trembling hand
I feel like telling him
in his open ear
to look up
at the bluebird
sitting in the big oak tree
standing up so brightly
in the purple sun.
—Heather Glaal, 4th grade

There is a thin line, for me, between the unusual and the fantastic. If a beginning writer tends toward the surreal, the fantastic, then by all means encourage his inclination—he may be a good poet in that mode. But most students I have encountered like to write fantastic images at first because they think that is what poetry is. Once they understand that reality itself is fantastic, and that they can represent that wonder by merely creating a slightly unexpected image-extension, they then accept the idea wholeheartedly.

Sap

As I was standing in my dining room
pouring a cup of tea,
a drop fell to the edge
of the table.
It's like sap,
beautiful,
dripping from a young maple tree,
so thick,
slowly falling,
like an amber bead
hanging from a thin piece of string.
—Monica Sweigard, 4th grade

Smoke

Rising
from a red bricked
chimney, in
little
white
puffs.
Then slowly,
slowly
disappearing into the
dark
evening sky.
—Kristen Wilson, 3rd grade

Writers, students or not, often do not know what they want to write about, but if they can start with an image that, through extension, leads to another image, they will eventually discover what it is they want to express. This process of discovery will also free teachers from the frequent complaint from the students that they do not know what to write about. They do not have to. The teacher is not asking the students to know; the teacher is asking them to begin with an image, and then, perhaps, to find out. Thus, the writing becomes an exciting process of discovery rather than a boring report of known information. This sense of discovery is part of the joy of writing.

CONTINUATION WORDS

Another good technique that enables a writer to continue writing is the use of words such as "now," "suddenly," "soon," "while," or other transitional words of time or place. Words like "outside," "inside," "there," as well as phrases such as "out in the wheat field," and "past the oak tree," enable the writer to change his perspective, and, with luck, to continue writing in some new but related vein. If the writer wishes to change the pace of the poem, words such as "slowly," "quickly," or "surprisingly" work well. There are many such words that might be used, and I have found it helpful to put some of them on the board while the students are writing, and to encourage them, if they are stuck, to use one of the words. If such words detract from the poem, the students may remove them later, when they revise.

"Dad" and "The Fight" both use such continuation words:

Dad

Lying down,
looking up at the stars,
like a fish
looking at his bait,
suddenly
I feel my father's arm
wrap around me.
Hum of the cricket
seems to go down.
The fire dims,
the red sun
sets over the horizon.
—Todd Eubanks, 5th grade

The Fight

Sitting in my room after the fight,
I can hear the tears rolling down my face.
I can hear my brother punching the blue wall.
I can hear my mother making a call.
Now, when I listen very carefully,
I can hear my grandmother singing to us,
I see her suddenly sitting beside me,
Humming "Amazing Grace," telling me to calm
down.
When I do, she calmly slips away into the dark.
—Diane Battista, 11th grade

THE FIVE SENSES

Another way to help students continue is by having them refer to the five senses. I write the names of the five senses on the board and, whenever the students are unable to continue, I encourage them to use one of the senses to create another sensory detail and thus keep writing. Sometimes this approach merely produces a list of sensory comparisons, but more often than not it helps students to add material to their poems that they might or might not decide to use. This inclusiveness during the first draft writing is something I work for; the writers should put anything and everything into their first drafts. They should not censor any word or line that might come, for that might turn out to be the best word or line of the entire poem.

Here are two student poems that use the five senses to continue.

The Beach

Walking down the beach
I saw the dead Great White Shark
half buried in the sand.
I walked up to him
and put my ear to his cold, wet
skin,
hearing the endless sound
of silence.
No sound, no movement,
not even the sound
of waves pounding and slapping,
just nothingness.
His mouth partially closed
while his large teeth smiled at me,
looking at me with green eyes
where I could see the still pools
of his pupils, and when I woke
I could still see that same shark
lying there in the silence.
—Ed Transue, 7th grade

Sailing

Sailing in my light
blue sailboat,
I hear the white waves
prancing and dancing
across the side
of the little boat.
The stars sing
a short, beautiful lullaby
as I lie,
my eyes deep in thought.
The moonlight sprays
on the silent
sandy beach.
The sail looks like
a blanket swaying
on the gentle breeze,
as my shoelaces dance
up and down my feet
in a lovely rhythm.
—Renee DeHart, 3rd grade

REPETITION OF A WORD OR PHRASE

Another technique that may help the beginning writer to continue is repetition of words and phrases. The word may be the name of a person, thing, or place, such as Li Po, diamond, or Broad Street, which is repeated at certain intervals during the poem in order to continue the rhythm that is being set up. For instance, if the writer gets stuck, the repetition of "Li Po" may very well help him to conjure up another sensory detail about Li Po; the same is true for diamond or Broad Street. This repetition does not have to form a strict pattern; it may be random, and in fact probably will be, since its purpose is to provide a new breath to the writer when he needs it.

Green

Sitting in the green field
with green as far as the eye can see
except for the blue of the sky and white of the clouds,
like we are lost in a world of green
wondering where the greenness ends.
—Erin Brady, 3rd grade

Black Yellow

Back in the night
when I was born
I heard honking taxis—
black
yellow

checkered
in the bustling city.
Back in the night
when I was born
my mind
was full
of questions
like the nest
was full of hornets—
black
yellow
striped
resting on the limb
of a shrub.
Back in the night
when I was born
I felt my mother
trembling
like the desert surface
after the cheetahs—
black
yellow
spotted
stampeded by.
Back in the night
when I was born
we looked down
at the sky—
black
yellow
twinkling
in the heavens
before I came to earth.

—Jennifer Dyer, 7th grade

I have found the repetition of a phrase to be even more helpful because it not only provides a new starting place for a continued line, but it also establishes a rhythm which in itself may help the writer to continue. For instance, the phrase "Back in the night when I was born" has a certain rhythm that the writer may not be able to describe in metrical terms but that she certainly hears. The relation of stressed and unstressed syllables in such phrases sets up rhythmical expectations the writer might or might not choose to fulfill. What is important, however, is that the rhythm of the phrase might help the writer to add more. ●

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