

## 2002 NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award Essay

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My name is Lisa Cleaveland and I teach First Grade at Jonathan Valley Elementary. I am honored to submit these pieces of writing and to share just a few examples of things that my class has worked on this year in writer's workshop. I value and appreciate the many talents that my students are capable of and I believe they can do anything that they try. The growth that each one has made this year is phenomenal. Please accept my application for the Donald Graves Award for excellence in the teaching of writing.

If you walk into our first grade classroom at Jonathan Valley Elementary, located in the mountains of North Carolina, between 8:45 and 10:00 a.m., you will see children writing all around the room, each of them working on different writing projects in a variety of different genres. Most of them will be writing with great intention, crafting their books and poems with repeating lines, and circular text structures. Some children will be writing in their notebooks, while others will have stapled paper together—some with lines and some without—to make a book. This is what you will see everyday, any day, in my room during writers' workshop.

During the year we surround this writing work with lots of teaching. We engage in units of study where we look closely at author's craft (Donald Crews, Frank Asch, Nicola Davies, etc.), text structures, interesting punctuation, and at genres like nonfiction and poetry and memoir. We also study parts of the process like peer conferencing and how writers get ideas. We study illustration and how they extend the meaning of written words. All our studies support and extend what children are doing from their own intentions as writers.

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### Child A

When I looked through Child A's folder, I could see all the mini-lessons and things just touched on this year. It was clear to see where she had made attempts at new types of craft and used them intentionally. Child A writes with focus and intention. When she sits down at a table during writer's workshop with her friends, she knows that she is going to use a repeating line, or if she wants her text to seesaw. When she uses ellipses, it is almost always used effectively. Child A finds ways to "play with her words" and when she is writing poetry, her poetic voice is clear.

Child A's earliest piece was written after I had read New Shoes, Red Shoes by Susan Rollings. This is typical for children to "write off" a book. This early in the year, she was not yet reading like a writer, she was more writing her own version of someone else's text. In her next two pieces, Child A talks to the reader and has very intricate drawings with labels. It also shows in these two pieces that she was capable of writing her ideas and thoughts down very early in the year. My focus with students at this time of the year is to get them writing bigger pieces. Not necessarily lengthier, but filled with intentional use of craft. In her next piece, it is easy to see Child A's use of craft. She intentionally included a repeating line and wanted to have her text seesaw. She chose to "play with her words" by making the word "boring" big and bold. These were all her ideas that she used in telling a story about her and her brother attending a local amusement park. The sheet beside the original draft is an editing sheet that the class uses before we "big fancy publish" any piece. "Big-fancy publishing" is what we call publishing at the computer. The editing sheet shows things we worked on and talked about before publishing. On the back of the editing sheet we worked on how to make logical page breaks so the text would work with the repeating line and the seesaw within the story.

After working through the editing Child A wanted to "big-fancy publish" her piece. During publishing, the student sits down with my assistant or me while we type their piece on the computer. This publishing time is also an excellent teaching time. The students decide where capital letters and punctuation marks should appear, while noticing conventional spellings of words and where and how the text looks on the page. We give them choices about word text, font, size, and layout—just like real publishers give real authors. Then, the finished piece is the student's work, but printed with conventional spelling so as to support children's reading and spelling development.

In April our class took a dive into poetry. We took “poetry walks” outside where we encouraged children to be “wide awake” for poetry. The children’s garden near our classroom provided students with many opportunities to look, listen, and feel poetry. It was during the poetry study that I chose to introduce the writer’s notebooks. I felt that notebooks would be a good place for them to “hold” ideas they might want to revisit later. Child A used her writer’s notebook in this way almost immediately. She began to make lists of things she heard or saw on poetry walks. When she revisited her notebook during writers’ workshop she turned those lists into beautiful poems.

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## **Child B**

Child B began the year with very little confidence in himself as a writer. Child B’s writing would usually consist of many drawings with some labels—often random strings of letters and less frequently beginning sounds, but always with neat, uniform letters—due in part to his kindergarten teacher’s emphasis on handwriting rather than real writing than were he had to do the hard work to generate spellings on his own.

Around the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> week of school, Child B became quiet brave with his writing. Once we pointed out ellipses in books and how they were used in writing, Child B started trying this type of craft in his own writing. In these pieces Child B tried using the ellipsis and used it effectively most of the time. Upon his suggestion, we placed The Fair in the tub of books that used ellipses. Child B’s confidence was increasing dramatically. (The addition to his work we did this May. The students chose a piece from earlier in the year to add more writing to make their piece “more developed.” Child B chose his fair piece and added to it. He told more things about riding each ride and added the repeating line “and then we got off”).

The students know that writer’s workshop is a risk-taking environment where we encourage them to try new things. Child B noticed how some books have a different author than illustrator. He wanted to write a piece involving his ideas about grasshoppers and gravelhoppers. So, Child B wrote the book and worked with his friend to illustrate it. When it came time for Child B to fill out the editing sheet for his book, we noticed there were several words that needed to have spelling corrections. Our spelling strategies include using the word wall in our classroom to find high frequency words and using books, charts, and other words around our classroom. Child B also wrote down on his editing sheet that he used “playing a guessing game” as a type of craft. This was a use for ellipses that he came up with on his own. This was a huge leap for Child B—he was seeing himself as a real author with such purpose and intention.

Child B turned into quite a poet during our poetry study. Unlike Child A and her list method, Child B wrote complete poems while sitting outside. He wrote with a powerful poetic voice, almost as if he were talking direction to the reader—addressing the reader as “you” (a quality we noticed in many books). We first noticed Child B’s wonderful ability to describe and name things in Grasshoppers and Gravelhoppers and again in his poetry with words like “daisylions.” In “The Wind” Child B again uses the familiar ellipses, showing that he knows authors’ craft can carry across all genres.

Child B’s latest piece was a book that he made for his mother for Mother’s Day. This piece proves what Child B knows about being an author. He wrote with intention and purpose, using several types of author’s craft he’s learned from books as well as inventing techniques of his own. He presented the reader with an idea, then went through all of the things that his mom does—using the repeating line “thank you” and ellipses. Child B intentionally made his book a “circular text” by ending the book with the same line he used at the beginning: “My mom does everything for me, I thank her for that.”

From random letters and labels to intentional craft and phonetic spelling; from picture books with little meaning to real books that affect a mother’s heart; from “I can’t,” to “I am” —Child B has indeed become an author in our eyes and most importantly in his own.

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## Child C

By looking at Child C's earlier pieces we noticed classic portrayals of unconventional drawings and writing. The first piece shows how he took a book that he liked, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, and made his own book from it. His drawings look like blobs and do not tell much of a story. Child C also copied words he saw in the room and used them in books of his own. He illustrated these books with more unconventional drawings.

Mid-March our class was working on a nonfiction genre study that we referred to as "Wow! Nonfiction." Our study involved looking at books that give nonfiction information in a different and interesting ways, as opposed to those written with a reference-book sound. We looked at books like Tiger Trail by Kay Winters that has a tigress speaking in first person and Bat Loves the Night by Nicola Davies where the bat is heavily personified. The students loved the idea of writing nonfiction books about their individual topics and making them "wow!" Child C latched on to this idea when he began writing about his research topic: snakes. He wrote the piece as if he himself were the snake, talking to the reader, inviting us into his world, all the while providing factual information about snakes.

It is obvious to see from this piece how much Child C grew as a writer. He was no longer copying words with no meaning, but writing words of his own—often misspelled but full of intention. I am the Snake, had the language of nonfiction and the "wow" to make it interesting.

When the class began studying poetry, Child C was still caught up in the world of "wow nonfiction" and was reluctant to join our new study. When we asked him why he wasn't writing poems, he said, "I'm kind of into this non-fiction stuff." We loved his new sense of self as a writer, even though it meant we'd have to nudge a little bit to get him to try poetry. But when Child C finally came around to writing poetry he put fear aside and jumped right in.

The students had the option to sign up to go outside on the patio during writers' workshop—to look, listen and feel for poetry. Watching Child C outside that day, diligently writing in his notebook was powerful. He was so completely serious about what he was doing. At the end of writers' workshop that day someone overheard Child C talking to a fellow student, one not known for taking much pride in his own writing. Child C said to him, "Why don't you do something more talented with your writing?" The other student looked puzzled and said, "what do you mean?" Child C replied, "Like play with your words, or say fancier things." Child C was showing his confidence and his own interest in writing, interest that had not always been there.

Child C's last piece really shows how much he has grown as a writer. It isn't so much in the piece itself, but in the story behind it. The students were given a small, blank "observation book" to record their observations on a field experience to Ripley's Aquarium. Child C drew detailed drawings of the creatures he like in his book and made a point to remember their specific names. While other students were talking, playing, and sleeping during the two-hour bus ride back, Child C was authoring. He was taking the illustrations he drew earlier and writing sentences to go with them. This was truly amazing for me to see. To Child C, writing was no longer a block of time in school, but a way of expressing ideas and thoughts. Child was finally joining the parade of writers in this world...it just took him a little longer to learn how to dance.