

Back to Square One

What to Do When Writing Workshop Just Doesn't Work

GLORIANNE BRADSHAW

The assumption that jump-starts writing workshop is that students have things they want to write about. Not these children. This was the worst case of first grade writer's block that I have seen in over twenty years of teaching. And it lasted all year.

Until I encountered the Class That Would Not Write, writing workshop had been my favorite time of the school day. Even though my students were first graders and at an age some would consider too young for this kind of activity, we were involved in all the elements of writing workshop. My students wrote what they wanted to write, I gave them mini-lessons, and we conferenced. They published, and by the end of the year, they were writing much longer stories than they had been at the beginning.

Then came the Class That Would Not Write. These children had much to recommend them. In some ways, these students were, in fact, the class from heaven. They sat in their desks performing all their tasks without question. In the morning, they came into the room smiling, and at the end of the day, they greeted those who met them with hugs and “guess-what-happened-todays.”

Most of these students knew most of their letter names and some of their letter sounds.

Some could spell their names and maybe “mom” or “dad” or “cat” or “dog.” But as a group, they had one big problem: they had absolutely no writing ideas — at least none that I could drag from them. The assumption that jump-starts writing workshop is that students have things they want to write about. Not these children. This was the worst case of first grade writer's block that I have seen in over twenty years of teaching. And it lasted all year.

“What should I write?”

“What should I write next?”

“I don't know what to write.”

“Write about your pet snake? You know a lot about him.”

“Okay, what should I write about him?”

But I wasn't ready to give up on these students. In fact, we eventually published books for all the world to see. The students beamed with pride. I was proud, too, as I should have been, for I had written these

tomes myself. No, I hadn't actually put the words to paper for the children, but all the ideas in the book were mine.

So what do you do when writing workshop doesn't work? If I had been in my beginning years of teaching, I might have abandoned writing workshop, but I had fond memories of workshops that had worked, and I was determined to make writing workshop work again.

Over the summer, I had time to rethink writing workshop for first grade. I began to wonder what would happen if I put more of the responsibility for writing direction on me. Many of these children seemed to need more guidance than I was giving them. But then, for most people, writing—like other skills—doesn't just happen. It's my guess that long before Julia Child mastered the art of French cooking, someone taught her how to fry an egg. Likewise, a beginning writer might need more structure than I was providing.

Back to Square One

Clifford to the Rescue

Summer is my time to restore order to my collection of trade books that I tote from home to school and back again each year. I was putting all the Norman Bridwell *Clifford* books together on a shelf when the idea occurred to me. Norman Bridwell has probably sold millions of these books. They speak to young children in a way I had not been able to speak to the Class That Would Not Write. Maybe I could just borrow a few of his techniques, such as his predictable beginning sentence: "Hi, I'm Emily Elizabeth, and this is Clifford, my big red dog." (From the book *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*, by Norman Bridwell.)

And maybe, at the beginning of the writing workshop each day, I could read a *Clifford* book or two to the students. Maybe three. I'd use a stuffed Clifford dog to guard the writing workshop folders, and *Clifford* books could be placed around the room inviting readers. Soon, I began making lesson plans . . .

And that's how it all began; that's how I came to rethink writing workshop. In this article, I am going to describe with exactness some of the dialogue that went on between me and my students as we worked our way through this "guided" writing

workshop. My purpose is to demonstrate that, sometimes, for students to learn, we have to begin by taking small steps.

my students write a summer vacation story. This is, after all, not a new writing topic. However, these are first graders; it's new to them.

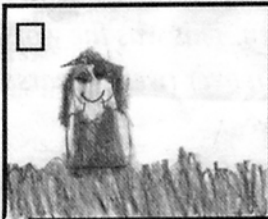

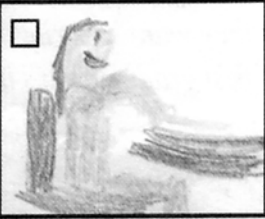
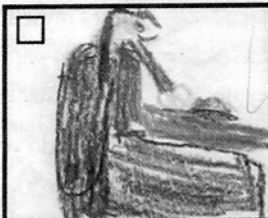
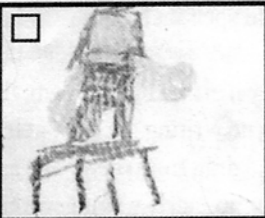

Writing Plan		
Beginning		
Hi.		
My name is <u>Becca</u> <u>Aeneé</u>		
and this is how I spent my summer vacation.		
Middle		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		
<u>went to the lake</u>	<u>went to the waterslide</u>	<u>ate pizza</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		
<u>went to Italian Moon</u>	<u>jumped on the trampoline</u>	<u>went under the sprinkler</u>
End		

Figure 1. Becca's writing plan. The six squares illustrate how she spent her summer vacation and are followed by verb phrases: "went to the lake," "went to the waterslide," "ate pizza," "went to Italian Moon," "jumped on the trampoline," "went under the sprinkler."

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The Beginning

"Hi, (or hello or howdy, hola, etc.) my name is (first name) (middle name), and this is how I spent my summer vacation."

Perfect. Every child has an awesome beginning sentence. You may think I am taking a step backward by suggesting that

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The Middle

A picture is worth a thousand words. Let's start there and condense.

Each student begins working on a writing plan. In each of six squares, they draw a sketch of themselves doing some summer activity. One square per child each day takes about twenty minutes. I need to work with each student individually during this time to write a verb phrase under each sketch. The first three or four squares are easy for them to sketch, but most of them did only three or four things all summer. For the last two squares, I offer some writing prompts, asking questions like these:

What did you do on a rainy day? What did you do in the evening? What did you do when your friends were not around?

I go around to each student and ask, "What did you do?" I want a response in the past tense. I then write the verb phrase on the line below the square. For example, if the child says, "I rode my bike," I say "rode my bike" and write it on the line. I point to each

Back to Square One

word and read the phrase and then ask the child to read it with me. When all six squares are completed, it is time to write sentences. (See Figure 1 for an example of Becca's writing plan.)

Modeling

On an overhead transparency, I show a writing plan on which I have drawn a sketch of me stirring something. I tell the children I made cookies on my vacation. I write the phrase "made cookies" under the sketch. I show them the sentence worksheet I will be writing my sentence on, and I put a sentence worksheet on the overhead. I ask them to help me write my sentence and tell them that if they help me write my sentence, I will help them write their sentences. They readily agree.

I read the words on the sentence sheet: *who, what, where, when*, and *tell me more*. I don't use the word *why* because the response is usually "because" or "I don't know." We are ready to write a sentence.

"Who is in this sketch?" I ask.

"That's you."

"Yes. That's me."

In the space under the word *who* I write "me."

"Do you remember what I did?"

"You made cookies."

I copy the words "made cookies" under the word *what*, and I have the children read the words with me as I point to them.

"Where do you think I would be making cookies?"

"In the kitchen. In your house."

"Yes. I am in the kitchen of my house."

I write the words "in the kitchen" under the word *where*. We read the phrase as I point to the words.

The next word is *when*. Since they would not know when I made the cookies, I say I

Writing workshop is still my favorite part of the school day, thanks to the Class That Would Not Write. Because of these students, I was forced to rethink the workshop for first grade.

made them in the morning. I write in the words "in the morning." We read the phrase.

A Little Editing

I read the entire sentence to the children.

"Me . . . made cookies . . . in the kitchen . . . in the morning."

Laughter.

"Did that sentence sound silly?" I ask and then agree. "It sounded a little bit like the Cookie Monster talking. How do you think I could change this sentence so I won't be talking like the Cookie Monster?"

"You could say I made cookies in the kitchen."

"That would sound better to me."

I cross out "me" and put in "I." I point and read again and ask them to read it with me. On this day, I do not do the **Tell-Me-More** part, or the lesson would be too long.

Back to Square One

Now it is time for the children to begin writing their sentences.

"Look at your sketch in the first square," I say. "Who is in your sketch?"

They write "I" in the **Who** space on their worksheets (see Figure 2). If they have more than one person in the sketch, I help them spell the other person's name and tell them that authors are polite and write the other person's name first.

"What did you do?"

They copy in the verb phrase from the **What** space.

"Where were you?"

"At the park."

"At the pool."

"In my house."

"On the road."

I write these responses on the board in list form. Often, several children give the same response; when this happens, I point out the response, and they can copy it. They write their responses in the **Where** space.

"When did you do this?"

"In the morning."

"At night."

"At 3:00."

Again, I write the responses on the board. They write their words in the **When** space.

"You have just written a whole sentence," I say to them. "Put a period after the last word." I then show them how to make a period.

Then I ask for volunteers to read their sentences. This workshop may take longer than the usual twenty minutes.

Tell Me More

The children have their writing plan pages and sentences from their writing folders. I tell them that I have looked at their sentences and I would like to know more. Now I am working on the overhead transparency for the sentence writing. I read the sentence

Back to Square One

I made yesterday: "I made cookies in the kitchen in the morning."

"Do you want to know more?"

"I want to know what kind of cookies you made."

"Were the cookies good?"

"Who ate the cookies?"

"I think I will tell you what kind of cookies I made. I made chocolate-chip cookies. Will you help me write that sentence?"

"We don't know how to write that."

Spelling may be a problem for first grade writers. They may know how to ask, "How do you spell *dog*?" but when you tell them the first letter is a "d," the next question may be, "How do you make a *D*?"

"I think we can write it together. If you help me write my sentence, then I will help you write your sentences. Say the sentence after me: I made chocolate-chip cookies."

"I made chocolate-chip cookies."

"How many words do you hear?"

I say the words slowly and count them on my fingers:

"Five words." I make five lines on the board, saying the words slowly as I make the lines.

I ask the children to read the sentence with me.

"There aren't any words."

"You're right. I'll try it without words first, and then you can help me put some words on the lines."

I "read the words," pointing to the lines as I read.

I write "I" on the first line and ask them to help me spell *made*. "What sounds is your mouth making?" I ask and then slowly sound out the word *m-a-d-e*.

"What is the first sound your mouth makes?"

"mmm... M?"

I put an *m* at the beginning of the second line.

"What do you hear next?"

"mmm... aa.a... A?"

I put an *a* after the *m*.

"What do you hear at the end?"

"mmm... aaa... d... D?"

"Yes. D."

I put a *d* at the end of the line.

"Let's go to the next line." I repeat I made _____

First-graders will probably not know that the "ch" sound is made with the letters *ch*, so I just tell them. They sound out the rest and come up with *k, l, and t*. So *chklt* goes on the next line.

"Help me with *chip*."

"It begins with *c-h* just like *chocolate*."

"Good thinking. Do you hear any other sounds?"

They respond with a *p* at the end. *Chip* is spelled "chp." *Cookies* is spelled "k e s."

I mention that all the lines are filled, so we can put a period at the end. We read the sentence together.

The worksheet shows a series of horizontal lines. The text "I went to the lake" is written on the first few lines. Below that, "at Golden L" is written on a line. Then "overnight" is written on a line. Below that, "We" is written on a line, and "Watt Kapree" is written on the next line. At the bottom, there are sections for "Name" and "Page".

Figure 2. Becca's sentence worksheet. From her phrase "went to the lake," Becca developed the sentences, "I went to the lake at Golden overnight. We went camping."

"Why do you think some of the lines are longer?"

"For long words?"

"You're right. I need longer lines for longer words. I can spell 'I' because it is on the word wall."

Back to Square One

I help them individually as they need help writing their sentences and encourage them to give it a try. They may use inventive spelling by sounding out the word.

If you are a first grade teacher, you know that when you tell someone that you teach first grade, they will almost always say, "You must have a lot of patience." The **Tell-Me-More** sentences will try that patience but are well worth the effort.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The End

Clifford to the rescue again. We will borrow an ending sentence from the book *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*: "So, I said to Martha, 'that's how I got my dog. Tell me again how you got your dog.'"

"So, I said to my friend

that's how I spent my summer vacation. Tell me about yours."

Each student draws a classmate's name out of the hat to fill in the blank; everyone in class will have a friend, and everyone will be a friend. That helps build a reading/writing community in the classroom.

Publishing

Because I want these books to become reading materials for reading workshop and because I know how much the children have given mentally and physically to this project, I like to publish the books. Each book takes about forty-five minutes to keyboard and prepare for binding. I teach in a small school and usually have only ten to twelve students. When I have eighteen or more, I publish fewer books per child.

After I have completed the keyboarding and formatting, the books are ready to illustrate. I have students illustrate only one page each day. Some would like to illustrate their whole book in one day so they could take it home to share with their families, but I want

a dedication page, the illustrated pages, a page giving credit to Norman Bridwell, a page with the place and date of publication, and a page for readers to compliment the author. The back cover includes a photograph of the author and a little information about him or her. Here is an example:

Becca is a 1999 Valley Kindergarten graduate. She is currently enrolled in the first grade at Valley. When Becca is not in school, she likes to ride her bike and play outdoors.

I laminate the covers of the book and bind them with a comb binder. The children may take the books home to share with their families for a few days. Figures 3 and 4 show two pages from Becca's book.

I keep the rough drafts in their writing portfolios in order to chart progress throughout the year. I also keep dated samples of writing that was done on their own.

The Celebration

The children practice their books until they feel ready to read them in front of the class.

Until the end of the school year, these books can be read for reading workshop as self-selected books. The student-written books are all different but similar enough to be easily read by peers. It is beneficial to have the author in the same room to help with words. The books are recorded on their reading cards with the same respect paid to authors such as Norman Bridwell, Mem Fox, and Bill Martin, Jr.

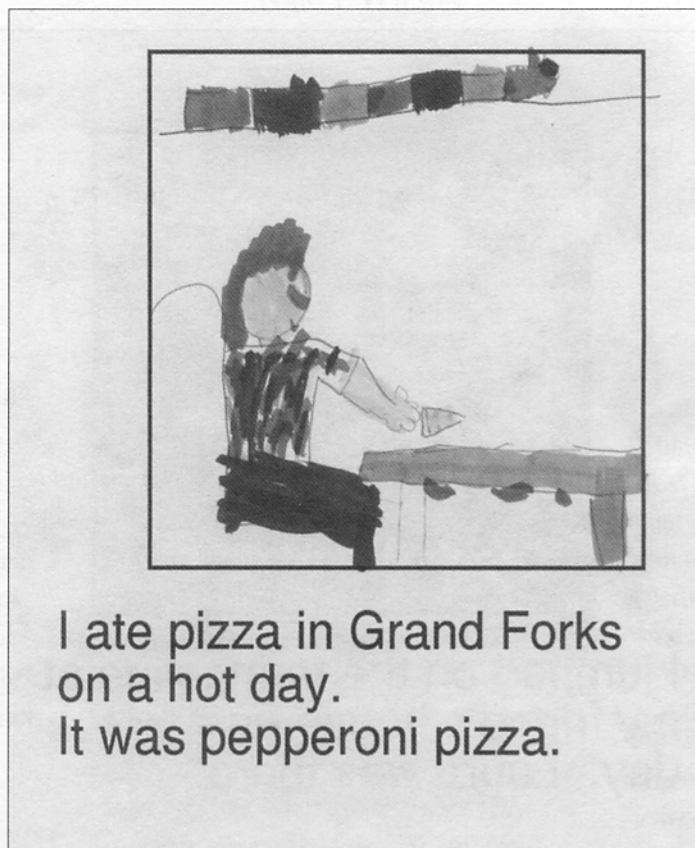


Figure 3. Page 4 from Becca's published book, *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*.

them to take their time. We talk about how the illustrations must go with the words and have a lesson on how to draw a person. (If you draw the head first and add a neck, stick people are unlikely.)

When the books have been illustrated, they are ready to be bound. I have the children bring a photograph from home that was taken in the past summer. I copy each child's photo on a color copier and use it on the front cover of his or her book. I include

Back to Square One

We call the book patterned after Norman Bridwell's *Clifford* books an autobiography. The students also write a biography patterned after Mercer Mayer's *Just Me* books, a book patterned after Sue William's *I Went Walking*, a research paper patterned after Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book*, an historical fiction patterned after Mem Fox's *Tough Boris*, and a tale patterned after a popular fairy tale.

Writing workshop is not the only time that the children write during the day, and I have found that my structured writing workshop lessons have aided students in performing the other writing they are called on to do. They write on their own and during reading workshop to be assessed or to respond to literature, during math workshop in journals and for problem solving, during science lab to record experiments, and during social studies in a travelogue. They also write notes home and thank-you notes.

Writing workshop is still my favorite part of the school day, thanks to the Class That Would Not Write. Because of these students, I was forced to rethink the workshop for first grade. Now I believe that rather than taking away creativity by giving the students a topic, I am instead introducing them to other writing workshop elements such as inventive spelling, mini-lessons, modeling, and editing. The students are still learning to

generate and write their own ideas; I have simply given them a format for writing creatively.

References

Bridwell, Norman. 1972. *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*. New York: Scholastic Inc.

GLORIANNE BRADSHAW teaches first grade in Crystal, North Dakota. She is a 1999 fellow of the Red River Valley Writing Project at the University of North Dakota.

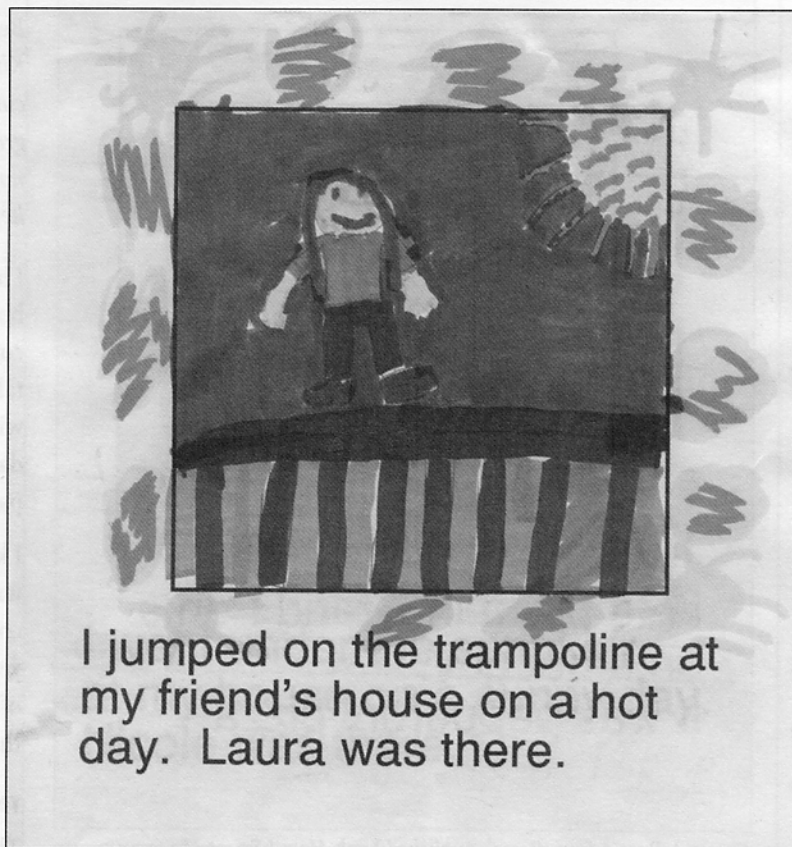


Figure 4. A page from Becca's book *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*.

Brown, Margaret Wise. 1949. *The Important Book*. USA: Harper & Row.

Fletcher, Ralph, and Joann Portalupi. 1998. *Craft Lessons*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Fox, Mem. 1994. *Tough Boris*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Mayer, Mercer. 1988. *Just My Friend and Me*. New York: Golden Books Publishing Company.

Williams, Sue. 1989. *I Went Walking*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.