

# Tensing Up

## Moving From Fluency to Flair

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*I needed to find out how to move from developing confident writers to developing really good writers who knew the difference between getting words down and writing well.*

Developing fluency in young writers is easy. I know; I've been doing it for years. Colleagues constantly ask me how I get my students to write so much, and while the answers seem pat, there really are only a few simple coaching techniques that lead to fluent writers. No matter how much we may want to bypass developing fluency, there are no shortcuts. Good writers are fluent writers. However, all fluent writers are not good writers. I'm interested in not only developing fluency, but in what it takes to move our writers from just being able to write, to being able to write with passion and flair. Nevertheless, we begin always with fluency. The key word here is "begin." Fluency is a place to start, not the goal itself.

The first step in developing fluency is obvious. Our students need to write daily for a variety of purposes and audiences. The teacher who has the time to read all of her students' writing is simply not asking for enough writing. The purpose of this type of informal writing is to use writing as

a support for learning. It is not to assess a student's writing ability. Informal writing includes a wide variety of writing experiences, such as:

- quick writes, which are motivating and allow for enough student choice to ensure that all students have something to write about
- writing in response to reading, including learning logs and response journals
- writing to solve problems, from math to social problems
- writing to complain
- writing to summarize.

This writing not only increases the student's ability to write, but demonstrates multiple uses for writing. At best, these invitations to write eventually include all students—something for everyone.

Next, the classroom environment must be designed to support fluency. Students constantly ask, "How much do we have to write?" The response to that question needs

to be, "I won't tell you 'how much,' but I *will* tell you how long." Setting a timer allows the teacher to impose a limit on students' writing (even if it's his name over and over). This is one way to discourage the "I'm done" syndrome. In my classroom, being done is not the goal; perseverance is.

Further, behavior expectations must be clear. I expect my students to take risks, make mistakes, and share what they write, but I am not orchestrating a sixties love fest. My expectations are high. However, it is also my job to provide an environment in which all students can succeed. Even my weakest writer can write for ten minutes and manage to say something worthwhile.

I don't expect my students to have great ideas, but they do need to have ideas. We work hard to make sure everyone has something to say, and then it's up to the individual to actually say it. No one gets to choose to not participate.

Another important factor in building fluency is the sharing of writing. Motivation

for informal writing remains high when informal writing is paired with informal sharing. My students are required to share what they have written. This sharing time is simple and unstructured. The instructions aren't fancy: "Find someone close to you to share with and do it. You have ten minutes." The purpose of this sharing is to quickly explore ideas, and I'm not a player in the process. When I get involved, the purpose of sharing immediately becomes evaluative rather than interactive. Interaction is a key to motivation, and it's the interaction that keeps everyone writing.

So yes, my students are fluent—especially after the two years they spend with me in our third and fourth grade loop. But after they build this fluency, my response must be, "So what?" Really, so what? For years, I've had no trouble getting students to write a lot about a little. In far too many classrooms, that is where writing development stops. Our writing project mantra, "fluency, form, correctness," too often gets mired down in the development of fluency. Year after year, young writers build their self-esteem based on how much they've written, not on how well they've written. I needed to find out how to move from developing confident writers to developing really good writers who knew the difference between getting words down and writing well.

My goal was not only for my own students, but for the students working with other teachers in the Northern California Writing Project. In my role as inservice director for our site, teachers looked to me for ways to improve their students' scores on holistically scored writing samples as well as in writing in the content areas.

As I have thought through how to best help my students and the teachers with whom I work, I have come to the understanding that

an increase in writing activities alone does not necessarily lead to improvement in the craft of writing. If writers are to develop more than fluency, writing teachers must coach students in the skills essential to writing with flair. For me this has been an evolving understanding. I have, in fact, been coaching writing as long as I have been teaching it. In the early days, I could hear my coaching voice in my third-graders' writing. Ray's writing (below) reflects what his teacher asked him to do. You can almost hear me asking students to limit their "I remember" piece to one incident, to include sensory details, to describe the setting, and to make sure the incident actually has an ending.

### *Skiing Struggle*

*I remember the time I went skiing on Mount Shasta on April 18, 1994. I was wearing a coat, turtleneck, fleece sweatpants, wind pants, ski hat, ski goggles, socks, and ski boots.*

*On my first run, I skied perfect, and it was the first time I skied in 1994! On my second run, I took one harder. It was called "downhill" because it was exactly like a course without the gates. It was really steep.*

*After that we went back to the van and had lunch. I had tuna and hot chocolate.*

*Then we went back up. On the chair lift [I] saw one ski pole and a glove. When we got to the top we took a new run.*

*We took about ten more runs and went home.*

Ray is a competent third grade writer. His spelling and punctuation are perfect. He

wants to please his teacher. He is able to check off everything I had asked him to do, from detailing what he saw to listing what he ate, and he even provides a conclusion of sorts: "We took about ten more runs and went home." So what's the problem? The problem is that nothing happens. He's writing because he's supposed to, not because he has something that he really wants to say. This is not the gift of writing that I wanted to give to my students.

About the same time as I was struggling with my need to move my writers from fluency to flair, two of my writing project colleagues, Ron Scudder, a middle school teacher, and Kevin Dolan, a high school teacher, were struggling with the same demons. We began to search for current work on the craft of writing that reflected the ability of good writing teachers. We examined our own students' writing and discovered common elements that made their writing sing to us. And then we set about searching for ways to give the gift of the writer's craft to all our students.

My students began keeping writer's notebooks that celebrated the writer's craft . . . theirs and others. Ron, Kevin, and I copied Patricia Pollacco's line, "She had a voice like slow thunder and sweet rain," from *Chicken Sunday* and wished we had written it. Kevin coached his students in the use of juxtaposition, placing interesting ideas side by side, and Ron worked with identifying tension in student writing the way Ralph Fletcher describes it in *What a Writer Needs*:

*Now the story becomes interesting.*

*This is such a fundamental expectation that while we read we are always on edge, slightly tense, awaiting the first signs of calamity. We actually*



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*get disappointed when events unfold smoothly: Nothing is happening (101).*

All of these approaches are less directly prescriptive than the kind of direct coaching I had engaged in at the time Ray wrote "Skiing Struggle." But it is Fletcher's and, by extension, Ron's notion of tension that has now had the greatest impact on my teaching. By tension I do not mean conflict. I don't spend much time discussing conflict with my students. They think conflict means a fight between good guys and bad guys and that's it. But the notion of tension is one that they can really grab on to and actually use as they write.

I explain it with rubber bands. As I hand them out, I tell my students to leave the rubber bands on their desks. "Don't touch them." Of course, they are jittery waiting to get their hands on the bands and "accidentally" shoot them off. As they wait, I take a large one and just dangle it on my finger. However, when I stretch it out and point it (not at a student), the rubber band suddenly becomes more interesting. It's the tension, the potential energy that rivets our attention. It's the same in their writing. Too often, students believe humor or fear are the only elements that make writing engaging. I believe that tension is a much better place to start. The difference is illustrated in Derek's "I remember" piece.

### **Skiing Struggle**

*I was at the Mount Shasta Ski Resort on a Sunday. Everything was fine. I was having a fun time there, but one run was not very much fun.*

*I had to start off on steep slope. It might have fun for the rest of the family (including Ray, my dad, and my mom), but it was a struggle for me. The snow was almost as hard as ice. I*

*had to turn and stop and turn and stop all the way down the mountain. Every time I turned, the snow crunched, and finally I had made it down that run.*

*After we made it down that run, it lead us to a chair lift that was brand new, so we decided to take that chair to see where it went.*

*When we got to the top, it looked like we were in the clouds. We went on to a run that was just as steep and icy as the one before, but this time it was worse because it took me about an hour to get through that run. One time I fell and slid, but my dad caught me.*

*I never went on that terrible, no good, icy, sliding run again!*

The similarity in the two third grade pieces is not a coincidence. Derek is Ray's little brother. His writing is in no way stronger than his brother's. The difference in the writing clearly reflects the difference in coaching. Derek has a sense of his audience. Even his line, "Everything was fine," lets us know that everything wasn't fine. We understand that the entire family, except for Derek, was confident on the runs, and we get the feeling that they were probably unaware of his tension. His details are included for a purpose. He wants us to know that this was indeed a challenging run, not a wimpy bunny hill. Finally, he demonstrates an ability to work his writer's craft as he closes with his version of Judith Viorst's line from *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

One way I demonstrate the use of tension to students is through children's literature. I look for tension and develop ways to bring it into our discussion of a piece. There are plenty of wonderful choices. In *Ira Sleeps*

*Over*, by Bernard Waber, Ira wants to bring his teddy bear when he goes to spend the night at Reggie's house. His parents assure him that Reggie won't laugh. His sister says, "He'll laugh." The tension is set and all young writers get it. The Mercer Mayer classic, *There's a Nightmare in my Closet*, is a natural for any discussion of tension with writers of all ages. *The Wednesday Surprise*, by Eve Bunting, develops a secret between Grandma and Anna. Everyone believes that Grandma is babysitting, but the reality is that Anna is teaching her to read.

Tension is inherent in all learning experiences. I tell my students that it's the tension, in my case terror, that keeps me skiing. I'm scared every time I push off and exultant every time I get to the bottom of the hill alive. My students are enthusiastic about exploring their own struggles to learn and are willing to reflect back on their experiences and see how far they've come. Nick writes:

### **Do I Really Want to Water Ski?**

*It was a hot summer day when we were going to our friend's house. When we got there they said that we were going water skiing. I was really excited. But by the time we got to Lake Oroville, I was having second thoughts. My dad and Paul were putting the boat in the water. It took a longtime so my mom, Carol, my sister, and I went down to a little shop to look around.*

*Finally, my dad and Paul yelled to us to get into the boat. By now I was so scared that I was shivering all over. The skiing order was Paul first, then me, then my sister. We all watched Paul ski. He is an excellent skier! Then it was my turn. I put on my life vest and said to myself, Relax and*

*concentrate,” over and over again. I was ready! My dad held onto the back of my skis to keep me balanced. I said, “Olly!” That tells the driver to go slow. I held onto the rope tight and said, “Hit it!” I was water skiing! But I was only up for about forty seconds. After I skied, I swam up to the boat and shouted, “I want to do that again!”*

*Now I am an excellent water skier. I love water skiing. Now I am practicing knee boarding!*

Writing prompts without tension lead to flat prose that lacks life and sparkle. A third grade writing prompt reads:

**Personal Narrative:  
“A Special Possession”**

*Writing Situation: Everyone has something in his/her life that is very special or important. This possession may have been received as a gift. It may be a prize or award, or it may be something that has been bought or found.*

*Directions for writing: Write about the special possession you have. Tell what it is and how you got it. Describe what it looks like. Use lots of picture words. Tell why it’s special or important to you.*

In my view, this prompt is deadly. First, it assumes that all students have a special possession, when in reality many live in environments that don’t lend themselves to possessions with stories. And even if a student can write about her baby blanket, what can she say? “My Noni crocheted it before I was born. I dragged it all over the house. It’s faded yellow and white yarn and is now in the cedar chest as a special possession.”

The prompt itself leads to flat writing without passion. By design, the writing will be filled with description that is designed to fit the prompt rather than to move the piece along.

A fourth grade prompt was a bit better, and with a little tweaking, actually worked.

**Personal Narrative:  
“A Special Friend”**

*Writing situation: Everyone has a friend—or would like to have one—that is special. This may be a friend that you had in the past, have now, or will have in the future. This friend may be the same age as you or younger or older.*

*Directions for writing: Think of a friend who is special to you. Write about something your friend has done for you, you have done for your friend, or you have done together. Tell important details about when and where this happened. Tell how and why this happened. Share why it was memorable.*

At first reading, I was reminded of using a similar prompt when I was teaching at California State University, Chico. The papers were deadly. They all said something like, “My best friend is really good to me. She is always there for me,” and so on. I also cringed at the line, “. . . has a friend—or would like one,” envisioning some poor student writing about a fantasy friend because they didn’t have a real one. Nevertheless, I thought that if we brought some tension into this prompt, it would have potential for all my students. So during our prewrite discussion, we talked about how hard it is to stay friends when we’re met with a challenge. Students talked about times they had let their friends down

and times they had been let down and discussed how they managed to stay friends in spite of their problems. In other words, we talked about some tense situations.

And suddenly these students—all of them—had stories they were burning to tell! These are the openings of a sampling of fourth grade papers:

**The Hate-Like Friendship**

*I used to hate Terra when we were in kindergarten. We never played together. I was jealous of her. I thought that she was better than me in rollerblading and coloring. Then in first grade we became best friends.*

*I remember one of our most exciting adventures . . .*

**Stuck!**

*Me and Chelsea have known each other since birth. But, I didn’t say we liked each other! In fact Chelsea bought a diary so she could write, “I hate Becca,” in it. Even so, now we’re inseparable. And sometimes I have to admit we’re pretty good when it comes to mischief-making. One of our biggest on a summer Saturday was something like this. . . .*

**My Best Friend Jessy**

*When I first came to this school it was hard to make friends. I got in trouble a lot and I was lonely. Then I met Jessy . . .*

Many of the incidents they described had to do with spending the night, which for fourth-graders is always a bit tense. These essays were not negative. Our discussion had merely reminded students of incidents that had an edge.



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After our discussion of this prompt, a greater percentage of student than ever before managed to produce essays that presented clear, fairly well-developed ideas. The difference was not in that these students were hand picked or gifted, nor did they all score “sixes.” However, more students managed to score in the proficient range than students from many of the other classes tested.

In informational writing, tension also plays a role. I have long championed the use of powerful, well-written nonfiction or informational books in primary classrooms. Personal narrative has a role in all writing programs, but for writers to become not only fluent, but skilled, they need experiences far beyond the realm of fiction and personal narrative. I struggled with getting my students to interact with information instead of regurgitating it. Young writers love to write information books in which they copy countless facts that they can neither read nor understand. I’ve managed to avoid some of these problems by asking young writers to record key words instead of “notes” as they read nonfiction and then to use these key words to reconstruct their understanding of what they’ve read, first in a discussion and then in an essay. Darcy Weagant, a Northern California Writing Project teacher-consultant, developed this concept. I needed to fine-tune it so that it worked for my students.

In experimenting with this idea, I began to understand the connection between tension and surprise. I discovered that if I ask my students to explain what surprised them as a result of listening to an article, reading a piece, or conducting an investigation, I am able to accomplish two things. First, they have to interact with their information in order to respond, and, second, they develop

another element of tension. They are tensed as they read or listen and are ready and expecting to be surprised. It’s almost a competition between themselves and the writer. They are disappointed if they truly find no surprises. That usually indicates that the material they chose was too simple. When they write about these surprises, their writing comes alive in ways lacking when they write, “What I learned was. . .”

For example, I read my students an article called “Mummies” from the “Pyramids” issue of *Kids Discover* magazine. As I read, they write down key words that strike them as important. Then they discuss the article using their note cards with their key words only. Involved in the process, students are tense, waiting to be surprised. One key word always appears: brain. They then explain that the Egyptians used a hook to pull the brain from the body through the nose. While they think they know a great deal about mummies already, this bit of information really surprises them. I extend this notion of surprise throughout their responses to reading and to larger assignments such as their “I Search” papers.

This fourth grade “I Search” paper concludes with a series of surprises:

### **Star Wars Conclusion**

*It surprised me that I didn't find answers to lot of the questions that I have. Most of the questions that I didn't answer were the questions about prices and costs of the movie. I did find out more things about the characters and other details about the action in the movie.*

*I was surprised that it took more than one person to play some parts.*

*It surprised me that Imperial Walkers stood over 45 feet tall. I was surprised*

*that R2D2 and C3PO had names for the kind of droid they are.*

*My most interesting discoveries were that Darth Vader's real name was Anakin Skywalker and that blaster pistols were the most used weapons throughout the galaxy. I didn't even think Darth Vader had a name before Darth Vader. I knew he was on the light side before he was on the dark side, but I didn't know that he had that name. When I saw about the blaster pistols I thought there would be a different (sic) that was used because you don't see blaster pistols that much in the movies, but a lot of people do have them if you really think about it.*

*I was surprised how hard it was to find information. The web site was always full, and when I finally got in, it didn't have that much information. Star Wars is a big thing now and I just thought there would be a lot of information on it.*

*If I were to do this again, I could make it better. I would go straight for a book sooner, and I would go to the internet sooner because once I got on I did get information, but I did not have enough time to use it all. I would also interview more people. If I had more interviews it would be more interesting, because I could find out what people know ad like about Star Wars.*

*I really enjoyed this project. It was fun and interesting for me and maybe for you!*

For years, I had been reading conclusions that did not convince me that the writer actually knew what he or she was writing

about. They tended to rehash a list of facts mentioned earlier in the paper. By adding the element of surprise (tension), the writer becomes involved in an evaluation of the learning experience and is able to set realistic goals for a future research experience.

It's important, as I conclude, to return to the role of fluency in a writing program. Our students need to develop fluency at all levels. If a student who comes into my classroom is confident, sees himself as a writer, and is capable of writing a great deal, I can coach that writer from fluency to flair. If a writer is fearful and incapable of getting any ideas on paper, I cannot avoid the need to help that writer develop fluency. Our writers must be writing for all sorts of reasons if we are going to find the one topic that will light a spark in each of our students. My goal is not that of a

minimalist. I am a maximalist. I don't want my students to merely be able to write. I want them to love to write. I want them to be great writers. I want them to have fluency, form, correctness, and pizzazz!

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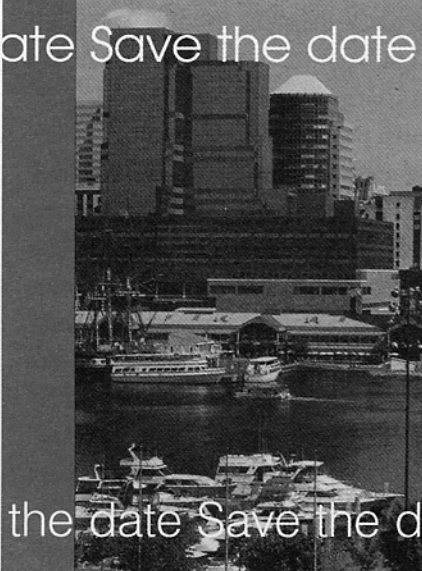
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