

# What a Writer Needs: Thinking About Writing in the Early Childhood Classroom

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## General Categories of Independent Writing Development

1. Writing by drawing
2. Writing by scribbling
3. Writing by making letter-like forms or shapes
4. Writing by reproducing well-learned units (letters in name) or letter strings
5. Writing by using invented or hypothesized spellings using correct letter forms (includes letter reversals)
6. Writing by using conventional spelling

Adapted by Margaret Immel for the School Literacy and Culture Project from Literacy Development in the Early Years by Leslie Mandel Morrow. (1997, third edition) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

## Writing Center Supplies in Preschool and Primary Classrooms

### Markers

Pencils. (Thin and thick lead. Colored pencils. With and without erasers.)  
Markers. (Fine-tipped in a variety of colors—scented markers are especially fun.)  
Alphabet letter stamps (upper and lower case), design stamps and ink pads.  
Pens like the teacher's pen.  
Chalk.  
Crayons.

### Surfaces

Paper. (Plain and colored typing paper, white and colored construction paper, lined paper. Pads cut in shapes like cats or apples. Paper in a variety of sizes.)  
Stationary. (Especially school stationary with names the children know.)  
Envelopes.  
Index cards.  
Notepads.  
Post-it notes.  
Chalkboard and sock to put over hand to use as eraser.  
Magic slates.  
Write-on, wipe-off board.  
Paper bags.  
Paper plates.  
Steno pads.  
Accounting ledgers.  
Receipt books.  
Restaurant order pads with carbons.  
Carbon paper.  
Carbon and writing paper stapled together so children can write their stories the way the teacher does.  
Blank books made by stapling several folded pieces of paper together with a colored paper cover.

### Supplies

Baskets, desk trays, folders for organizing the paper and materials.  
Tape.  
Stapler.  
Brass paper fasteners.  
Hole-punch.  
Stick-on labels.  
Letter and design stencils. (With openings large enough for a fine-tipped marker.)  
Picture dictionary.  
Beginning dictionary.  
Cards with children's names and other words they want to write.  
Erasers.  
Scissors.  
Glue or gluesticks.  
Pencil sharpener.  
Wallpaper samples.  
Yarn.

Potential sources for free materials—copying companies, like KwikCopy; offices where the letterhead is changing; donations from office supply companies; printing or publishing companies that have ends from their rolls of book paper; parents; local businesses.

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## THE WRITING CENTER – GETTING STARTED

*Here are a few simple ideas to get your writing center started. Remember to spend time introducing materials so children understand expectations for how materials are to be used, where they are to be stored, etc.*

Mailbox with a personal letter for each child inside

Wet chalk on dark paper

Writing on cookie sheets using various substances (sand, shaving cream, salt, gel)

Gel pens on dark paper

Writing on personal notepads

Writing on blueprints with markers, good in block center

Shape books of any kind (use die cuts for front, back, and pages, then staple together)

Banner writing on butcher paper on floor

Mystery writing with white crayons on white paper (reveal by painting with water colors)

Writing on dry erase boards with wipe-off markers

Name cards, themed word cards, or picture dictionaries to copy words

Writing on individual blackboards with chalk

Magnetic letters on cookie sheets (great with word cards)

Magnadoodles

Playdough with alphabet cookie cutters

Playdough roll in ropes to form letters

Flannel letters on flannel boards

Stamp pads with letter stamps on sentence strips (names or alphabet)

Alphabet cookie cutters, dip in paint and print on paper

Alphabet stickers on paper

Paper and carbon paper on clipboards

Write around the room, with clipboards and paper

Writing in wet sand in discovery table, with fingers or popsicle sticks

Writing on blank cash register tape

Dictated or interactive writing of pages for class books

Simple child surveys on clipboards

## **Our Top Ten Ways to Use Children's Names To Encourage Writing**

**1. Have the children's names displayed** in many places throughout the room. HINT: At the beginning of the year make photocopies of everyone's picture to put beside or under each name on some of the lists or at some locations. As the year progresses, use name labels without pictures.

Places to display names: Job chart, cubby/locker, places to sit, sign-in, bulletin board, pocket chart, writing center, mailboxes, centers management chart, storytelling list, dramatization list, turn-taking for centers or popular toys and manipulatives, easy-to-read charts with **simple** frame-pattern sentences with stickers or other clues, cots or sleep mats, on the outsides of journals or personal poetry books, etc.

**2. Magnetic names.** Give each child a baggie with magnetic letters that are in his/her name. Let them spell their names using the magnetic letters. Once they are successful with their own name, create CHALLENGES: spell a friend's name, combine the letters of 2 or 3 children and have them each spell his/her own name then each others', have a tub of magnetic letters and have the children spell as many names as they can, etc,

**3. News of the Day and Morning Message** are other ways that children's names can become a focus. (Refer to news section of this handout).

**4. Make a class book -- "The Letters in Our Names".** Let the children who can write their own names correctly write for themselves. For the others, you can write for them. Allow each child to write on all the pages for letters that are in their names, not just on the page for the letter that is at the beginning of the name. Circle the target letter. Ex. Ethan would write his name on the Aa, Ee, Hh, Nn, and Tt pages and would circle the correct letter for each page.

**5. Daily sign-in** (Refer to sign-in section of this handout).

**6. Encourage children to write their own names** on papers--artwork, writing center work, etc.

**7. Name Word Wall.** Put children's names at the beginning letter of their name. If there is space you might want to display names that have the letter in the name as well. (Remember the "The Letters in Our Names" book idea.)

**8. Initial Charts.** Each day or week, target a different child. Create a graph on a chart that has the child's initials (use middle names, too) at the top. Brainstorm whose name it could be until the targeted child is identified. Write each of the child's name parts under the right initial. Brainstorm additional names or words that begin with each initial. When you run out of children in the class, use other names—principal, favorite author, favorite character. Give clues when using people other than the children.

**9. When dramatizing adult-authored texts,** make a reduced-size photocopy of the book cover. List characters and cast (children who play each part). Add to class dramatization book or post on wall or bulletin board.

**10. When taking children's dictated stories,** list the cast that is chosen to help the child-author act out the story. Keep a copy of all dictated stories in a class binder so that the children can revisit it often. (See When Stories Come to School by Patsy Cooper.)

As Adapted from Margaret Immel, by Judy Rolke and Sharon Dworaczyk, School Literacy and Culture Project, Rice University Center for Education (April 2001).

# Sign-in Sheets

## Purposes:

- Attendance
- Real world purpose for writing name
- Name recognition (own and friends')
- Left to right progression of print
- Letter recognition
- Letter/sound correspondence
- Handwriting/letter formation
- Pencil grip
- Literacy start to school day
- Problem solving start to school day

## Suggestions for implementation:

### Preschool (3's)

- ◆ Beginning of year
  - ∅ Have each child's name hand printed on a piece of sentence strip or large index card.
  - ∅ Attach a photograph of the child after the name.



- ∅ Spread name cards on table so that as each child arrives s/he finds her/his card and puts it into a basket.
- ∅ When they begin to recognize their names, remove photos from front and glue to back sides of name cards so that they can "check" their choices.
- ◆ Mid-year
  - ◆ Divide a sheet of legal or letter-sized paper into sections with lines, 3 for legal-size, 2 for letter.
  - ◆ Hand print one child's name in the upper left of each section as a model. Photocopy. Date\_when used.

Name
Name
Name

- ◆ Spread sheets out on table and provide pencils, crayons, and/or markers. (Pencils and crayons should often be a choice so children can develop hand strength when writing and drawing. Markers do not require any pressure to make a mark. Children need to apply pressure in order to develop strength in their grips.)
- ◆ Allow each child to sign in his or her space **in his/her own way**. You may need to "x" the starting place. This should be a "no pressure" situation. With daily exposure "signatures" begin to have aspects that resemble the model. Some children will be able to write their first names by the end of the year.
- ◆ As a paper-saving measure, some teachers laminate a copy of the sign-in sheets and have children sign-in with water soluble markers most days of the month. (However growth occurs almost daily at this age.)
- ◆ At least one day of the month the children should sign in on an unlined dated paper so that day's signatures can be cut apart and become a part of children's portfolios to show growth over time. Remember to date each child's.

## **Pre-kindergarten (4's)**

- Begin year with the sign-in sheet as described above but with names in alphabetical order. For the first several weeks, you may want to have a photograph of each child in front of the name. This is so classmates can begin to recognize each other's names. Photocopy.
- Have pencils, pens, markers and/or crayons available (see information under Preschool above.)
- As the year progresses, put more names (up to 8) on each paper so that the children must work in a smaller space and remove the photographs.
- Name models may also be computer generated, BUT be sure to use a font that has lowercase letters formed the way you want them to print---"a" instead of "ɑ" and "g" instead of "g̃". (This font is "Comic Sans MS" on my Mac Microsoft Word. "Moderne" is also a MS Word PC font that has the right "a" and "g".)
- Several times during the year, cut apart and use as portfolio growth over time documentation. Remember to date each child's.

## **Kindergarten**

- ∅ May begin just as Pre-k above or can have just first names (no photos) in ABC order.
- ∅ Once children are proficient with their first names, have them write only their last names (also in ABC order).
- ∅ By mid-year as many as 12 names can be on each letter-size page.
- ∅ By March children should be able to sign in with both first and last names, with models in ABC order sometimes by first name, sometimes last name, or sometimes in random order. (Sign in sheets can be cut apart and used as an alphabetizing activity in a center or work station.) Near year's end eliminate the models and have children sign on numbered lines or boxes.
- ∅ Several times during the year, cut apart and use for portfolio growth over time documentation. Remember to date each child's.

## **First Grade**

- For the first week or few weeks you may want to have students sign in with first name only with models given as described above in ABC order.
- Soon give them last name models in ABC order.
- After 6-8 weeks the children should sign in using both first and last names. You may alphabetize models sometimes by first name, sometimes by last name, and sometimes put them in random order. (Cut apart for alphabetizing game.)
- Around mid-year children should begin to sign in without having a model to look at, just numbered lines or boxes. You may bring out "model sign-in sheets" on occasion.

## **Second Grade and Above**

- ◆ Second grade students should be able to sign in using first and last name without a model, just on numbered lines or boxes. (Cut apart, can be alphabetizing game at a literacy center.)
- ◆ When students begin learning cursive handwriting, a sign-in sheet with a handwritten model is great practice.
- ◆ At upper levels this can become an attendance record with names printed on dated sheets. Students sign in next to name.

# News of the Day

## Purposes:

- ◆ Language Experience Activity in which children learn
- ∅ What I think is important
- ∅ What I think I can say
- ∅ What I say can be written down
- ∅ What is written down can be read
- ◆ Children's oral language and vocabulary can be further developed.
- ◆ Children can learn about each other—what they: think about, like, dislike, value; important people, places, and things; home and family life. The teacher learns those things as well as what the children are learning about reading and writing.
- ◆ As the news is written children see print conventions modeled—left to right, top to bottom, letter formation, capitalization, punctuation, etc.
- ◆ Children can see the one-to-one correspondence between the spoken and written word.
- ◆ Provides an easily remembered, personally significant text that children can successfully read.
- ◆ Provides relevant, meaningful text with which the teacher can teach the skills and strategies the children need to become proficient readers and writers.

## Suggestions for implementation:

### Preschool

- ◆ The news is taken on an individual basis during centers or as the children arrive.
- ◆ The teacher can let each child decide on the color, size, and type of paper or use the same kind of paper for all the students. At this age the news is usually written on individual sentence strips or sheets of paper instead of a large chart.
- ◆ The teacher goes to the news giver or has him come to a table. The child's first time, the teacher talks about what news is and encourages the child to come up with a short piece of news. Often it will be "I love my mommy."
- ◆ The teacher echoes the child's words slowly as she writes them down. (phonemic awareness)
- ◆ The child's name is added.
- ◆ The teacher helps the child point to the words as they read the text together.
- ◆ The news is then posted low on a wall or pocket chart and is sent home with the child that day.
- ◆ The news may be taken from 3 to 5 children each day. If time allows children who request to give news every day should be accommodated. It needs to be a routine activity with children having a turn at least once a week.

### Pre-kindergarten

- ◆ News can be taken as a part of morning circle or group time.
  - ◆ Each day three to five children can give news which the teacher writes on posted sentence strips or a piece of chart paper.
  - ◆ As the news is written the teacher can vocalize while she models, keeping in mind the children's ability to sit. The important things to concentrate on at this age are:
    - ∅ the starting place on the page
    - ∅ the pattern of word-space-word-space
    - ∅ punctuation at the end of a sentence
    - ∅ the letters in the children's names
- Early in the year, you may only concentrate on one or two—starting place and period at the end of sentence. The words should be spoken as they are being written and can be stretched out (spoken slowly) so that individual sounds are more distinct (phonemic awareness).

- ◆ Some teachers like to start out the year putting quotation marks around the child's words and explaining their function. Ex. "I went fishing with my grandpa." Kevin OR Kevin said, "I went..."
- ◆ After the news is written, it is read. At this age, early in the year, read each piece of news after it is written while the words are fresh on the child's mind and s/he can read along successfully. The news giver can be given the pointer to point (with the teacher's help) to the words as they are read. Some teachers allow a choral reading of each piece of news while the news-giver tracks the print.

## Kindergarten

- ◆ (See Pre-K above) Skills building work here is limited only by how long they can sit and be engaged and their levels of development and understanding. The news chart can be used in small group work for groups with similar strengths or needs, when the whole group doesn't need the work, or when you need to be sure that all the children are "getting it."
- ◆ Write on a large chart tablet mounted so that the children can see as the print goes on the paper.
- ◆ Definitely use quotation marks and speaker's tags ("said Kevin") often. Use indented paragraphing for each speaker. Explain why you indent and show it to them in published material.
- ◆ At this level I take all 3—6 news reports, pointing out certain skills as I write, maybe one thing for each person's news, before reading them aloud (ex. if "write" were in a child's news I would point out the silent "w".) After all the news reports are written, I begin with the first and have the child echo read (at the beginning of the read or for non-readers) or read alone. Then I invite the whole group to read together. Then go to the next news report. Once I am sure that the students understand "left to right" I choose someone to be the "news tracker" for that day.
- ◆ The amounts and types of direct, explicit skills instruction that can be given is only limited by the children and their development and needs. I can cover many language arts skills using this high-interest text and don't need to use low-interest worksheets or workbooks. Some of the skills that I have addressed in My K classes are:
  - Ø Alphabet (upper and lowercase) and number recognition
  - Ø Writing with spaces between words
  - Ø Titles
  - Ø Dates
  - Ø Punctuation (. ! ? " , )
  - Ø Capitalization
  - Ø Form: paragraphs, complete sentences, statements, questions, dialogue
  - Ø Phonemic awareness: rhyme, word families, segmentation
  - Ø Phonics
  - Ø Compound words
  - Ø Possessives
  - Ø Contractions
  - Ø Abbreviations: month, day, year, Mr., Mrs., Dr., etc.
  - Ø Homophones: for, four; eye, I; their, there, they're; etc.
  - Ø Sight words
  - Ø High frequency words and letters
  - Ø Verb tenses
  - Ø Plurals
  - Ø Parts of speech
  - Ø Spelling: phonics-based (temporary or invented) and dictionary; interactive writing
  - Ø Cueing systems for reading strategies
  - Ø Handwriting instruction
  - Ø Structural analysis
- ◆ The news chart stays posted and becomes a part of "read around the room" work station.

## First and Second Grade

- ◆ Handled the same as kindergarten, teaching and extending the skills that are appropriate.
- ◆ Mid-year, first grade (or as soon as the children have the skills) the news can be written with omissions of capitals and punctuation and with misspellings (as appropriate) and the

- children can make the corrections as the daily edit activity.
- ◆ May be used as an interactive writing activity. For this, limit to only one news report each day.
- ◆ When children are able, each may write his/her own news on the chart when entering the classroom. Skills work can occur during large or small group time, depending on the needs of the students.

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