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## ABSTRACT

Journal writing provides daily opportunities for students to express themselves, practice using the features of print they controlled, and extend their knowledge of print. By publishing the journals, two additional benefits are gained: the creation of more readable text for emergent readers; and the motivation to write more. "Life Stories" is an umbrella term for independent writing that includes any event or feelings pertaining to a student's life. At first Life Stories are composed of disjointed thoughts relating to a variety of topics. Eventually the text evolves into real stories with connected events. Writing Life Stories in journals proved to be a natural way to promote independent writing in one teacher's first grade classroom. This article describes the step-by-step process of young writers writing Life Stories in journals. The article discusses the following steps: getting students ready to write; the writing process itself; after the writing; after proofreading; ready to publish; bringing "Life Stories" to life; and sharing with an audience. (NKA)

# Life Stories: An Easy Way To Promote Journal Writing.

by Cheri Slinger

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# Classroom Connections

## Life Stories:

### An Easy Way To Promote Journal Writing

Cheri Slinger

[Cheri is a Reading Recovery Teacher in Upper Arlington City Schools, OH.]

As I returned to the classroom after teaching Reading Recovery for five years I was determined to do a better job with helping children become independent writers through journal writing. Journal writing provides daily opportunities for students to express themselves, practice using the features of print they controlled and extend their knowledge of print. By publishing the journals two additional benefits are gained; the creation of more readable text for emergent readers and the motivation to write more. The more written, the more children shared and the more children shared, the more written.

After I discussed my quest for a better way to nurture independent writers with my co-worker Janet Berry, she shared her successful experiences using Life Stories, a form of journal writing.

Life Stories is an umbrella term for independent writing that includes any event or feelings pertaining to a student's life. It could be something a child has experienced in the past (a family vacation), in the present (losing a tooth), or in the future (deciding what pet to buy). At first Life Stories are composed of disjointed thoughts relating to a variety of topics. Eventually the text evolves into real stories with connected events. The rationale for writing Life Stories is that they provide opportunities for children to fulfill a natural need to share their world and a bottomless reservoir of ideas to use in their writing. Writing Life Stories in journals proved to be a natural way to promote independent writing in my first grade classroom.

#### GETTING STUDENTS READY TO WRITE...

Before Life Stories could be written we found that it was important to make sure all the children were aware that they could generate and write a message

by putting down the sounds they heard as they said words aloud. Through interactive writing, my students became aware of many of the concepts about print, directionality, spacing, punctuation, capitalization and sound symbol relationships as well as the belief that they could contribute to the actual writing. What they didn't learn was that it was acceptable to only write the sounds they heard and not have the teacher insert the missing letters and sounds. Many students needed to be taught how to risk and say words slowly and record the sounds they heard. It was important for them to know that an attempt, even a partial attempt, was acceptable. Otherwise, some children would write nothing or "safe" sentences using only known words. (I like mom. I like dad.) So with



Students writing and illustrating their life stories.

modeling and explicit praise for all attempts the children became confident and started to write more. When writing was very difficult for a child I scaffolded by doing interactive writing in his/her journal and gave the child opportunities to write some of the words recording only the sounds he/she heard.

Just as adults learning to use the computer need manuals and notes to help

*This column is designed to serve Reading Recovery partners: the classroom teachers who work together with Reading Recovery teachers to teach children to read and write.*

them as they explore and grow in their computer skills, writers need support tools to help them develop their writing ability. The most powerful support tools were charts that were co-created by the students and teacher. Everyday for the first few weeks of school, we read together our display of the illustrated alphabet. (Apple starts with the letter a.) (Baby starts with the letter b.) We also created and often read together an ABC chart with a picture above the capital and lower case letter. This chart was made smaller and laminated so that each child had one in his/her book box to use whenever they choose to write. Taping alphabet strips on each table was another way to provide quick support for children as they wrote.

Word of the day charts and word walls also provided support. The word of the day chart was a pocket chart that was slowly filled with a different high frequency word in each pocket. Following mini-lessons students would record the words worked with and those charts also got added to our walls as the year progressed.

Mini-lessons were usually done with magnetic letters on the overhead projector and focused on how words work. We dealt with contractions, spelling patterns (looking, going, playing) (all, ball, called taller), endings (love, loves, loved, loving, lovely), and a few consistent rules (cap-cape, bit-bite, tub-tube, not-note).

We also brainstormed and came up with a long list of possible topics for Life Stories and posted it where we could revisit it often. It not only helped students to generate ideas, but also generated enthusiasm for writing in their journals. As they entered the classroom each morning overflowing with news to share with me it was easy to comment about what a great life story that would be and to encourage them to write it in their journals.

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To further ensure success at all levels of writing development, I needed to structure the writing. This environment also had to be negotiated and established with the children to empower them with ownership. The focus was to make sure everyone was feeling successful with the writing experience and that routines and rules were being established. The first day of journal writing I walked around listening, sharing, giving feedback and praising all attempts. I often stopped the whole class with a, "Wait till you hear what Jared wrote," or "Oh, put your pencils down for a minute, you've got to hear what Emily just wrote." By sharing in this manner as well as setting aside time to share during group meetings, children were encouraged to write and understood that their writing was valued. Before the first day of school was over everyone had the chance to share, even if someone wanted me to read it for them. Eventually they picked a special page or part that they wanted to read to the class and as time went on they needed to share less frequently and wanted to wait until the process was completed into a published book.

Determining the amount of time allotted for writing wasn't just a teacher decision. By asking the students how long they would like to write, I invited them to have ownership of the writing period. The timer would be set for short amounts of time and I would occasionally stop them and ask them to assess how things were going; "How's your table doing?", "Do you need more time?", "Are you able to concentrate on what you're doing?" I found that problems that came up were honest problems and by solving them as a group they didn't keep reoccurring. Another finding was that the majority of children could sustain writing for a fair amount of time and usually wanted a little more time. And those children who were struggling I constantly instilled in them the belief that I would never ask them to do something that I wouldn't help them do. Sometimes I worked with them in small groups, taking dictation or doing interactive writing so they could express longer messages and keep the flow of

the message going. Finding ways to support children with the process of writing wasn't only done by structuring the writing time but also by structuring the format of the journals.

**AFTER THE WRITING...  
THE NEXT STEP...**

Once a student had completed a journal or had written 8 to 11 complete thoughts (a book using 3 pieces of paper would have eight or nine pages of text and a book with 4 pieces of paper would have 10 or 11 pages of text), he/she put the finished writing in a box marked "Ready to Proof-read." Then we met and I listened to him/her read the journal. I wrote under any words that were unclear as we discussed and enjoyed the message. We then engaged in proof-reading that was very limited in the number of corrections made and teaching points were carefully selected. Marie Clay's book *What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behavior* tells us that as children learn to master the conventions of print it is important for the teacher to assist them in attending or focusing on only one or two features of print that appear to be learning hurdles for them. If we correct too many things in children's writing, it is not only ineffective teaching but it quite often squelches children's desire to write. So I made decisions about teaching points according to the individual child's stage of development and what was most helpful for him/her to learn next. To support the child in making a shift in his/her writing I often made a quick note on the inside of the cover of the journal. For example if a child was writing the word "they" as "thay" throughout their journal, we would decide together that it was a word they should know, and then we would write the correct spelling on the inside cover and the child would go through and circle and correct the approximation. Or if a child controlled many features of print but continued to use capital letters throughout the writing, I would have the child pick two letters to concentrate on and then write them in lower case on the inside cover as a reminder.

**AFTER PROOF READING...**

Typing the first journals was a very

quick procedure because they usually consisted of one sentence per page. We were fortunate enough to have two fathers that came in once every other week for an hour to type our journals. A lovely senior citizen also helped us once a week for an hour and a couple of parents typed them on their home computer once they knew the format. And of course I typed whenever I had a chance. The nice thing about the way Life Stories evolved was that they were finished at different times so I never had more than a few journals to proofread or type at one time. The format for typing them was to use a size 16 print, double space between each word, and triple space between lines on the early journals so the published books supported emergent readers. Margins were set to fit the 7 inch page. As the children wrote more and read more, the type went to a 14 or 12 size print, but still double spaced between words and lines. A large space was left between each section of text to make it easy for the students to cut them apart and glue each section onto the appropriate page with a glue stick. I typed a model and made copies to send to volunteers and to post by the computer. Once journals were typed they were given to the students or placed in the "Ready to Publish" box.

**READY TO PUBLISH...**

Before children could publish their journals, materials had to be collected and arrangements made for volunteers to assemble the guts and the book covers. All parents helped by sending in cereal boxes to be cut and used for book covers. Some volunteers offered to collate the guts (3 to 4 pieces of 11" by 14" paper), stitch them up the middle and return them to school. All sewing was done on machines and wasn't very time consuming. Other volunteers offered to come to a morning workshop where we cut cereal boxes into 9" by 7" pieces, covered them with wall paper, secured the wall paper with clear mailing tape, and then bound the two sides together with duct tape. I spent half an hour modeling the process and then the volunteers worked together to create about 50 book covers to get us started. Some

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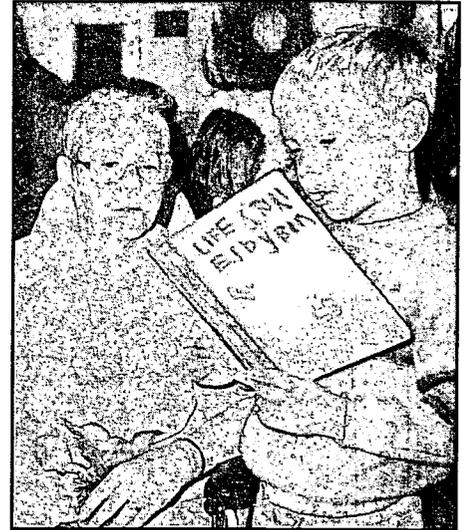
parents helped by making books at home throughout the year. Once the covers and guts were assembled I stored them in two separate boxes on bookcases.

### FINAL STAGES... BRINGING "LIFE STORIES" TO LIFE...

After the first two or three children completed their journals, proof read them with an adult, and received their typed copy, they collected a cover, guts, rubber cement, and a glue stick and met me for instructions. Rubber cement was placed on the inside front and back covers. Then matching up the seam of the guts and the cover, each outer page of the guts was glued down on the inside front and back book covers. When these students learned how to assemble the published books, they became the teachers and each taught another person how to make a book and then that child became a teacher. Once the text was glued into the book, quality illustrations were the next step. Children understood that what was put into a published book was expected to be of good quality and that quality work required time and effort.

### THE GRAND FINALE... SHARING WITH AN AUDIENCE...

Completed Life Stories filled with personal thoughts, family events, funny happenings, silly stories, and a variety of illustrations were placed in the "Ready to Share" box right next to the author's chair. This is where Life Stories became success stories. As stories were shared and comments were made children received the message that their thoughts, their writing, their work and their illustrations were valued and appreciated. With the celebration of each finished book, the community of learners found out more about each other and grew as writers and illustrators. Some books were composed of disjointed thoughts and statements while others were complete stories. Through sharing and comments, children were extended and invited to try different ways of writing Life Stories and making illustrations. Anxious to share their Life Stories with more than just their classmates, we often packed our books and trotted off to nursing and retirement homes in search of an appreciative audience. Books were sent to relatives to be read. Books were read to other adults and children in the school. Books were



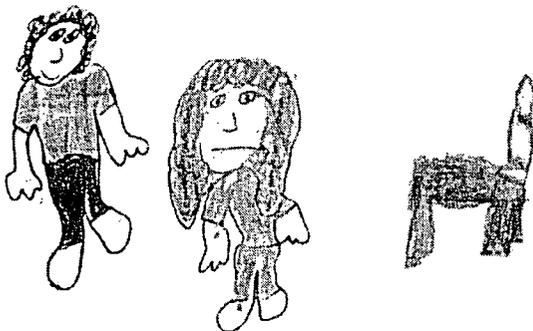
Student shares his published life story with a friend in a near-by retirement home.

placed in our classroom library to be read by other children. And every time they were shared, praise and encouragement were abundant.

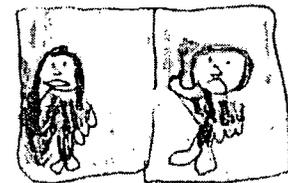
### MY LEARNING...

A mother of one of my former students wrote me a letter in response to a request I made asking to borrow some of the children's Life Stories to share with other teachers.

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"I had the right not to feel good on monday, because I was not healthy." "I had strep throat." That night my mom took my temperture. I told my mom my throat hurt. My tempature was 101. My mom called the doctor.



The doctor said "Rebekah probably has a fever and a sore throat." That same night, I went to the doctor. The nurse took my temperture. I think it was 99.8. The doctor took some stuff off of my throat. It took 3 minutes for the doctor to tell me what I had. I hate the Bubble-gum-oil medicine. I still have to take it for eight more days. (What a horrible thing.)

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The letter, tucked inside a pile of books published by her current fifth grader brought tears to my eyes. She told me that she had spent the evening reading through all the books and realized that Rebekah had personally and in her own perspective recorded every important family event that took place during that year. There were stitches and Strep throat, a new baby and a car accident, vacations and visits with grandparents. This was their family history recorded by a seven year old. The mother let me know that she was placing her trust in me that I would take good care of these heirlooms and make sure no harm came to them. I was so touched by her letter and it made me realize that through Life Stories the children had not only gained skill in writing but had discovered the true essence of "journaling" ..... recording moments in life in their own personal way.



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