

Reluctant Writers and the Memoir

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Introduction

“Writing,” just saying the word causes children to cringe, cry, and find many other things to do. In this unit I want to take some heartache out of writing. I have found that with the students that I teach, 3rd, 4th and 5th grade Special Education Students, have no desire to put words on paper. So far, this year, one student has been very vocal about how hard it is to write, even after I told him that he could record his story on a google drive document and the words would be typed for him, this complaining was accompanied by crying and screaming. Another student, however has embraced the idea of recording his story and then adding detail to it on the computer. My goal for this unit is to encourage these students to write and have a finished memoir; whether it is by speaking into a computer, having a paraprofessional record their thoughts, or by writing on paper with their own hand.

The finished product for this unit will be a personal memoir. According to Vanessa Gregory, an assistant Professor in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi, writing a memoir is one of the better ways to get students to start writing, because they are telling a story in their own words about an event that happened to them.¹ I will also be writing a memoir along with the students so they will have a model and can see what kind of questions need to be asked to get more details into their writing. I will be using the mentor texts *Ralph Tells a Story*, by Abby Hanlon and *Stella Tells Her Story* by Janiel Wagstaff, I will also be using the same graphic organizer that is in *Stella Tells Her Story*, the students also be using the same graphic organizer.

I am choosing to use the memoir/personal narrative, because it is based on facts and true events that have happened in someone’s life. Students have to recount an event that has happened, instead of making up an event. In the article, “Why should students write memoirs?” by Vanessa Gregory, she states, “Students actually like writing memoirs. Nothing makes students want to write well quite like asking them to write about themselves.”² Students all have stories to tell and many times they want to share them during instruction time, as a teacher diversion. I find myself listening to their stories even when I should be teaching, because their stories are so fascinating that I can’t help but listen. I want to convince my students that they can take those everyday stories and turn them into a longer writing memoir. I am taking this approach to teaching because when students are told that they have to write a 5 paragraph essay the students will sit and look at the paper for hours and never write a word.

I have tried many ways to entice students to write, some of the ways I have tried to get them to write include giving them sentence starters, funny writing prompts, having them write on a subject for just a few minutes, and having them do a brain dump on the paper so there is a place to start. I hope that writing memoir will be more enticing because it is about their life and they have ownership over the event that they are writing about.

I teach Special Education students in a small group setting, but this unit can easily be adjusted for use in a General Education classroom. I will be adding the Common Core Standards for 3rd -5th grade. I am including all the standards because this unit can be used by all teachers, not just small group teachers. See Appendix A, for the Common Core State Standards that are addressed in this unit. There is only one thing that will have to be adjusted when this is used by a general education classroom teacher, and that is that you will have to adjust are how often you are able to meet with students to talk about their writing, and the questions can be asked by a classmate instead of the teacher. The students can be given a list of questions to ask the writer as they are reading and editing their pieces.

This year I have been experimenting with different techniques to get my students to write. My first experiment was to have the students tell their story to either me, their paraprofessional (a person that is with the student most of the day), or to their computer using Speech to Text software. Having the students tell their story to someone helped one student to describe an event with minimal details and sentences, the second student was only able to give a 2-sentence answer. Then I had the same students speak their story into the computer using a speech to text software. The first student describe above was able to give more details and was much more willing to be asked questions about his story. He was also more willing to have someone read his story and make changes. He was able to complete a narrative that consisted of 3 paragraphs. The second student was able to complete a one paragraph essay, but still did not have many details in his sentences.

Demographics

Red Clay Consolidated School District is located in Northern New Castle County in Delaware, the district includes urban and suburban settings within its borders. The district has 28 schools that service about 18,000 students. 12.8% of the students in Red Clay Consolidated School District are Special Education Students, this number is on par with the averages for most states in the country.

Cooke Elementary is the newest school in the district and has about 630 students. Demographics for the school year 2016-17, 6.6% of students were African American, 0.2% of students were American Indian and Hawaiian, 8.6% of students were Asian. Hispanic/Latino students account for 15.3% of students and Multi-Racial Students comprise 4.0% of the student body. 65.2% of the students in the school are white. Other

student characteristics include 12.4% English Language Learners, 16.6% Low-Income students, and 7.4% Special Education students.

I am a Special Education Teacher and primarily teach students in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades. For the 2017-18 school year, there will be 15 special education students in those grades. Approximately 80% of the students that I see for special education services are African American or Hispanic/Latino. I pull students out of their regular education classroom for small group instruction. I collaborate with the grade level teachers, so I can teach many of the same concepts that are being taught in the general education classroom, as well as focus on the goals the that students have on their Individual Education Plans.

Rationale

Many students are convinced that they cannot write, or read because it is a little more difficult for them, and by 4th grade, most of them have given up trying. Part of the reason for this feeling of frustration is that they may have gone to several schools over their years in school, thus there has been no consistency with writing instruction for these students. Ruth Callum author of *The Writing Thief* writes, “Most schools don’t have a scope and sequence or a set of materials and strategies that outlines a core writing curriculum for each grade across grade. So, although students may have an exemplary writing experience and make great gain one year, they start all over the next year because the new teacher doesn’t know what was taught the previous year or has a different set of objectives in mind. Think of the impact on student writing performance when this happens year after year.”³ There are also the students that move from school to school or state to state and have had different teachers and curriculum, because of these factors students have difficulty succeeding in writing.

The fact that students move around, have different teachers each year, and different curriculum undermines the desire for the student to succeed in writing. For example, my students will say that they are “done” when they have written one sentence. Many students have a hard time understanding that one sentence is not a paragraph, or an essay. They also cringe at the thought of having to revise, and will often refuse to do so, because they have written all they are going to write. My hope is that writing a memoir the students will have more ownership over their writing and will care more about what they are writing, because it is their story.

Regina Richards writes, another reason for the lack student success is: “It is common for students in today’s educational system to dislike and/or avoid the writing processes. Many students feel writing *takes* too long. For some, writing is a very laborious task because there are so many sub-components which need to be pulled together. For others, the reason lies in some processing difficulties, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia. Some educators wonder if students no longer enjoy the slower, more refined process of written

communication because they spend so much time watching the faster-paced visual modality of television.”⁴

My students are the classic reluctant writers that need to be motivated into thinking that they can write. They also need to be convinced that their stories are worth writing down. They also need to be given topics to write about that interests them. Even though, I teach some students that are girls they still suffer from the same conundrum, they haven't found the right topic to write about. Paul Kropp and Lori Jamison Rog in the *Write Genre* write: "Most classrooms are places we cannot expect writers to write willingly and well. Reluctant writers do not learn to write willingly through direct teaching – quite often that is what has gotten them into difficulty in the first place. Too much teaching and too many restrictions on their choices for writing can cause them to backslide into boredom and lack of interest or concern for their writing."⁵

In her article "The Visual Learning Style," Kelly Roell discusses the use of a graphic organizers and why they are important for visual learners. "Visual learners need things in front of them to help solidify them in their brains."⁶ Using graphic organizers are helpful to with getting thoughts on paper in a cohesive and sequential way. Visual learners need to have things organized so that they can see and retain information, so the use of graphic organizers is key to students staying on topic and in a sequential order when writing.

Content Objectives

Writing Strategies

With the Special Education students that I teach, I have only had minimal success with getting the students to write. I have tried giving them story/sentence starters and I only get a couple of words out of them, they will finish the sentence and stop. I have tried giving them a picture and having them describe what they see, with this method I get a list of items in the picture. I have also tried giving the students a quick write and having them write for only 5-10 minutes. I have had better success with this because the students see that there is an end in sight, but they will still sit there and only write a couple of sentences. Graphic organizers are useful but need significant instruction on how to use them. This is why I am adding in questioning strategies to this unit. It is important to have someone ask the writer questions about the story that they are writing, by asking the student questions the student is able to add more details and remember more about the event.

After reading the book *The Writing Thief*, by Ruth Culham, this quote sticks in my mind "I am always on the hunt for mentor texts, and because I'm a reader and a writer, I find great stuff. I look at the world of print and non-print through the eyes of a writing thief because I search for models of good writing that can inspire students to look at writing from a fresh perspective."⁷ I think using mentor texts are important when

teaching students to write because they need to have examples model their writing after, until they are able to write using their own style.

Not only will I be using mentor texts to model writing, I will also be writing my own memoir along with the class, while doing this we can talk about the story, and the students can see the different parts of writing. I will start the process of writing with recording my story as I am telling it to the students. It is important to give the students time during class to have them either record their stories on paper as they tell them, or have them use a speech to text software that will type the story for them as they speak into it, by using these methods it gives the student a base to work from. Andrea Heckner, author of the article, "Writing Our Way to Success," written for the National Writing Project writes, "The project I created contained seven writings and a culminating exercise to pull them together. I would write beside and with my students, share my writing and thoughts with them, and enlist their help with my story. I talked about my writing struggles, so the students could know that even teachers wrestle to find the right words." ⁸ I think that by writing a story along with the students, I will be able to model how to write, edit and question about my writing.

I want to change the way my students think about writing and make it more fun for them to do. To do this I will use mentor texts, *Ralph Tells a Story*, by Abby Hanlon and *Stella Tells Her Story* by Janiel Wagstaff, will be the main stories that I will use. In the book *Ralph Tells a Story*, Ralph can never think of anything to write, until he must stand up in front of the class and read his story, because he thinks he has no stories in him he has nothing on the paper but tells the class that he went to the park and saw an inchworm. The students start asking him questions about the inchworm and suddenly he has a whole story. This story mirror's how the students in my class feel about writing, they feel that they have nothing to say or that what they say is not important. I want to make them feel like their stories matter, and what they write about is important because they are important. This sentiment also follows along with my use of Teaching with Love and Logic in my classroom, where you make every child feel like they are important and cared for.

Stella Tells Her Story, is about a girl that is asked to write about something that happened over her summer vacation. The starts with another student talking about his new puppy and how excited he is about it. The teacher then guides the students through writing a narrative. She starts with what a narrative is, then discusses topics with the students, then she continues with making a graphic organizer that shows First, Next, Then, and Last. The students then fill in their thoughts, once they have their thoughts organized they have to write it "Story-ish." This story is great because it illustrates how to use a graphic organizer, and then how to use that to write the story. Stella ends the book with showing her published book to her grandmother that can't remember anything, but once she sees the book she remembers what happened.

Teaching Strategies

Voice

Discussing voice with students is difficult, students do not understand that writing is like talking and that they can write how they talk. When I write, I think about what the person sounds like when I talk to them. Voice also depends on who the writer is writing for, when we look at Shakespeare or Edgar Allen Poe, they both had a very distinct way of writing. When you read Poe's works your mind goes straight to very dark and spooky places. In contrast Shakespeare's writing is written more like conversations between people, and is a very ornate style of writing and can be very difficult read and understand.

Voice when writing a personal memoir or narrative should really mirror how a writer talks, an example of this type of voice is; one of my students writes random thoughts on paper. The way that she writes is that she writes whatever comes into her mind. Her writing reminds me of 'stream of consciousness writing,' but this is how she talks so this how she writes. When she talks she jumps from one topic to another without a breath, and most of the time doesn't make a lot of sense, her writing is exactly the same. Before I start editing her writing I have to sit down with her and discuss what she is trying to say. When I read her writing I have to stop and think about what her overall writing about and how I can help her funnel her ideas into a piece that other people would want to read. Trying to figure out what my students are trying to write about is a challenge but using questioning techniques helps.

Questioning

Reluctant writers I have found need to be questioned about their writing on a daily basis. When you have many students in a classroom it is impossible to meet with students daily, but those that are unable to get thoughts on paper should be checked in with daily. I have had success with using questioning to get more details out of students as well as to clarify what they are talking about.

I ask the students questions when I conference with them to help them add more details to their writing. All the questions that I use when clarifying content and ideas are open-ended some examples are: I don't understand this part, what are you trying to say? What was this person doing... when you were...? Who else was there? Where does the story take place? Describe person, place, or thing. What else do you remember? What happened before...? What happened next? How did you feel when this happened? What was going on around you when...was happening? What were the characters saying to each other? I also have the students pair with each other and ask each other clarifying questions. They can use the same questions that I do or they can make up their own. I have found that it is easier for the students to think of the questions if they are written out

for them in advance. While the pair is talking they should be recording the answers to the questions so the author can go back and add in the information.

Organization

When having students write it is important for them to use graphic organizers to organize their thoughts and keep themselves focused. There are many different types of graphic organizers but the one that will be used for this project will be simple to use and only have 4 parts. The graphic organizer will only have the words First, Next, Then, and Last. There will need to be space for the students to write their answers to each of those parts.

Characterization and Dialog

In the book *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, she says that it takes time to get to know your characters when writing a story, and that you may not like them. “Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time.”⁹ I think it is important for students to understand that they have to develop all the characters in a story and to think about what it is about them that makes them interesting. In class, we spend a lot of time talking about character traits when reading stories, and how important it is to understand each character, so this is not a new concept, but it is very difficult for students to do on their own. My students have a tendency to write one-dimensional characters. In an effort to make the characters more dimensional, I think it is best to add dialog to the writing. The teacher can help the students with adding dialog, by using questioning techniques. When the teacher is questioning students about their writing, the teacher should ask them what was being said by the people around them. Adding dialog will make the characters more believable and interesting. Writing characters using traits and dialog will be two of the areas that we will concentrate on while writing memoirs.

Setting

Setting is an important part of writing, because it helps the reader to visualize where things are happening. My students read and think about where stories are taking place, on a daily basis, but when it comes to writing a description of a place they are only able to come up with a couple of sentences. I think it is important for them to draw what they see in their minds as they read or write, this will help them be more descriptive.

Objectives

Students will draft a creative nonfiction memoir about a short event in their lives that is important or has meaning to them. I will give the students some guidance on this so that they are writing about a happy time and not a sad time that brings up bad memories. They

will start the writing task by listening to and deconstructing mentor texts; mini-lessons, and graphic organizers.

The first thing that the class will do is that we will listen to or read mentor texts together so that they can understand why details are important when writing. I will also be using the mentor texts as models of creative nonfiction and they will be used to model different parts of writing. The texts will be used to model how to use a graphic organizer, and how to use questions to improve your writing. The two mentor texts that I will be using are *Ralph Tells a Story*, by Abby Hanlon, and *Stella Tells Her Story*, by Janiel Wagstaff and illustrated by Dana Regan.

After reading the books and recording ideas on a graphic organizer. The organizer will have the words First, Next, Then, and Last on one side of the paper in big type, and there will be lines underneath so the students can write. I will tell the kids a short synopsis of my story that I am going to write. Using the same graphic organizer that the students will be using, I will fill it in as I tell them the story. I will leave out a lot of details so the story doesn't make a lot of sense. The class will then have to ask me questions so that I can fill in what happened and why. I will record the questions as they ask them, so that I can give them a list of questions to ask later. After the class has asked questions I will fill in more details on the graphic organizer. Then I will begin to write my story as a model. While I am writing I will be modeling how to write an introduction and a conclusion, and I will also be editing as I go along so that the students can see that it is acceptable to have someone look at their writing and change it. After each draft I will read my story to the class and have them ask me more questions about the events.

As I record my story and write it out for them, I will be able to pick apart what I have written, and show the students that it is okay to have someone look at your work and to question things that they don't understand. While I am writing my story, I will be talking about the setting, character development, voice, and dialog.

Then I will have the class record their stories, either on paper or on the computer. They can either use the computer to type their story, or they can use a speech to text software and record their thoughts. As they are telling their stories they should be filling in their graphic organizer, with what happened First, Next, Then, and Last. By taking this approach, the students will have a place to start from and they will be able to expand their stories. The class will be broken into pairs and will meet on a regular schedule to discuss what is happening in the stories. The students will again ask questions to try to get more details about the story. As the students read and ask questions about each other's work, they will be editing the writing.

As a culminating activity the students will illustrate and publish their story in a book. The book will include pictures on each page to illustrate the setting and to show what the

characters are doing. The book will be several pages in length, but will be stapled at the edges for a finished product.

Teaching Activities

Activity One

Reading Mentor text: *Ralph Tells a Story*, by Abby Hanlon

Before reading the story discuss with class what makes it difficult for some of them to write stories? What would make it easier for the students to write a story? What are some ideas of things to write about? Write down their ideas before reading about Ralph.

Read the story about Ralph and discuss how he has the same problem as many students. He doesn't know how to get started writing and feels he has nothing to say. When the class has finished reading the book make a list of questions they can ask each other to help them get more details in their writing. After completing the list make a copy for each student to put in their writing folders.

Have each student make a Sequence of Events list of all the things that Ralph went through before he got to tell his story about the inchworm at the park. Give them a graphic organizer with the words First, Next, Then, Last to use for making their list.

Activity Two

Review what a Sequence of Events list is, and that each student made one in the previous lesson. The students were asked to make a graphic organizer that shows what happened First, Next, Then, Last. Ask students to get into pairs to read their First, Next, Then, Last graphic organizer of the events and combine the events on a separate graphic organizer. Then put students into small groups of 4 students, to discuss and combine their graphic organizers. Give each group a large piece of paper for them to write out a combined list of events. Give them 10-15 minutes to combine the lists, then post the lists and compare them. Discuss with class which list has the most complete list of events. Once the lists are posted, it is time to read the story *Stella Tells Her Story*.

While reading *Stella Tells Her Story*, by Janiel Wagstaff and illustrated by Dana Regan, stop and explain what a narrative is and why it is important to write one. Discuss how the students (Max and his friends) are talking to each other. The students can turn and talk to each other about "What makes this talking a story?" People talk to each other every day and tell stories; how can these stories be transferred into writing? Since writing is just telling a story, writing a narrative should be painless and easy. Getting the students to write the main events of their story in the order in which they happened on a graphic organizer is crucial to getting the story on paper. Most student will be able to write their main event on a paper graphic organizer using First, Next, Then, and Last, but for those

that are struggling to get these ideas on paper, have the students that are struggling use a computer to tell their story, and fill in their graphic organizer.

As you continue to read *Stella Tells Her Story*, talk to the students about what steps Stella take to write her story. Stella starts to write, and then she reads her story to another student. He questions her about her story and she is then able to fix the ending and make it more interesting. Revisit the list that was made in Lesson 1 about story ideas. Have the students start thinking about what story would be easiest for them to write. Give them a graphic organizer with First, Next, Then, Last, and have them start to draft their ideas.

Activity Three

As a whole class, you will start this activity by telling the students a very basic story (with no details) about an event that happened in my life. Next, choose something that is funny and easy to add details to later. After telling them the story, get out the big paper and use the same graphic organizer that they are using to graph out my story. Then you will fill in the basics of the story on the organizer and then have the students ask you questions about your story. As they ask questions add the details to your graphic organizer, add only a few details to the graphic organizer on this day, so that the students can witness going back to add more details later in a story.

Using the graphic organizer that you made the day before start to draft your introduction to the story. While writing the introduction focus on “voice” and how your writing sounds like you talking and telling a story.

Reading the introduction and starting the body of the writing piece. This part can be done in advance of class and can just be discussed, so the students have more time to write. Using the graphic organizer, you made with the class, start to draft the body of the story. While writing the body of the story, focus on “voice, setting, and characters.” Try to add as many details about the setting as possible, so that the students can visualize the scene. At this point with your Special Education Students, have them draw a picture of the setting of the story.

Next, use the graphic organizer, to start to draft the conclusion to the story. While writing the conclusion of the story, focus on “voice, setting, and characters.” write a very basic conclusion, so that you can edit it later, to show they students how important it is to rewrite and edit their writing. Editing and rewriting will continue for several days, at this point the class should be writing and then having someone look at their paper to edit and ask them questions so they can remember more details.

The answers to these questions should be written on a separate piece of paper. The students can write a number beside the section that they are questioning, and that number

will correspond to the section that has the answer to the question. As needed, for Special Education Students the teacher will need to meet with them to do this part of the editing.

The last phase of the project will be that, once students have a completed editing, have them publish their writing pieces. They should illustrate it and make a book, but if time does not allow for them to illustrate, color, and bind the book; they can either rewrite the piece in their best handwriting, or type it on the computer. Once the pieces are written and illustrated and ready, the students should present their writing to the class. Have students stand in front of the class and read their finished writing piece to the rest of the students or this would be a great time to invite parents in to have an author's "tea."

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Appendix A

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts-Literacy-Writing that are covered in this unit are for 3rd through 5th grade. There are several standards that are covered in this unit, and some of the standards are the same for all three grades, so they are grouped together. The standards that are for 3rd-5th grade include: ELA-W.3.3, W.4.3, W.5.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. ELA-W.4.3. A, W.5.3.A Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. Under *Production and Distribution of Writing*: ELA-W.3.4, W.4.4, W.5.4 With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task

and purpose.

Standards that are only for 3rd grade writing include: ELA-W.3.3. A establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally, ELA-W.3.3.B use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations. ELA-W.3.3.C, use temporal words and phrases to signal event order. ELA-W.3.3.D provide a sense of closure, and ELA-W.3.6 with guidance and support from adults, use technology to produce and publish writing (using keyboarding skills) as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

The Standards that are the same for 4th and 5th grade: ELA-W.4.3.C, W.5.3.C use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events, ELA-W.4.3. D, W.5.3.D use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely, ELA-W.4.3. E, W.5.3.E provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events. ELA-W.4.5, W.5. with guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing, and ELA-W.5.3.B use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

Notes

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