

# From Scribbling to Writing: Smoothing the Way

Lynda Fender Hayes

---

"My kindergarten went crazy over mailboxes! They scribble notes all the time. But now it is December and many of them are still scribbling. I'm concerned that they will never start really writing. I feel I should start teaching them how to form alphabet letters."

---

Most kindergarten teachers become concerned when children's initial enthusiasm for writing does not result in improved writing ability. Current research about the process approach to writing (Clay, 1975; Bissex, 1980; DeFord, 1980; Graves, 1983), as well as expert practice over the last century, suggests that children will make progress if they

---

*Lynda Fender Hayes, M.A., is a doctoral student in Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Florida, where she teaches kindergarten at the P.K. Yonge Laboratory School.*

*The author wishes to thank Dorene Ross, Linda Lamme, and Suzanne Krogh for feedback and suggestions regarding earlier drafts of this article.*

are provided the time, materials, information, and freedom needed to manipulate and invent meaningful written language.

A kindergarten teacher, I have been inspired by this research and have tried out its ideas in my classroom. I have found some strategies and activities to be particularly helpful in encouraging children to "emerge" as writers. In a literacy-focused environment, children naturally follow a progression from scribbling to writing meaningful messages. The progression is not always smooth, however.

What are some teaching strategies and classroom activities teachers can use that will enhance the natural development of writing?

## *Children's writing development*

Clay (1975) suggests that, sometime between three and five years old, children begin to understand that the marks adults make on paper have meaning. As they strive to construct an understanding of this process, children move through ~~three~~ stages of "scribbling for writing." Initially, children randomly scribble purely for pleasure, without any concept of print or intention of meaning. As children continue to develop, they acquire the concept of sign, that written symbols can convey meaning; yet they are still unsure of just how an exact message is written down. They believe that adults can understand and read their scribbling, although of course adults cannot. Clay suggests that many children fail to move smoothly beyond this stage and that this slowing of progress is paralleled by a lack of progress in reading. Children who do continue to develop move to the third stage of "scribbles for writing" by creating mock messages. Children describe their messages by telling others what they hope they have "written." It is within this stage that mock letters and beginning letter forms appear. Children who are at this point understand that print conveys a message, but have difficulty determining the precise form. Here too, children fail to progress if they are not presented with conventional models and meaningful forms of written language.

Though mock letters clearly are not alphabet letters, they do reveal progress in children's development from scribbling to writing. DeFord (1980) carefully analyzed mock letter forms and found that they reveal the following concepts of letter form: symmetry, uniformity of size and shape, inner complexity, left-to-right directionality, linearity, and appropriate placement. Clay (1975) writes, "Such creative efforts sug-

gest that the child is reaching out towards the principles of written language and any instruction should encourage him to continue to do this" (p. 15). From these forms children progress to writing alphabet letters and eventually to invented spelling (Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1982).

When teachers provide short, meaningful, functional forms of writing and emphasize them throughout the curriculum and classroom environment, children will naturally progress from scribbling to writing mock and alphabet letters. Teachers must provide children with an array of print to observe and imitate. Encourage children who are scribbling to write and scribble every day.

### ***Modeling writing***

Children who are still scribbling need to observe an adult writing several times a day so they can see how letters are formed and how language gets on paper. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) found that children's first efforts in writing are deliberate imitations of adult writing. Modeling the concepts, processes, and functions of writing are teaching strategies that many good teachers have used with large and small groups and individual children for many decades. It is gratifying to learn that research is finding that we have been on the right track.

***Be a "public" writer.*** Announce whenever you are writing; it will focus the children's attention on the writing process. The announcement should include the purpose of the message and a verbalization of what is being written. While writing, use terms such as *word*, *sentence*, and *letter*. Spelling aloud occasionally and describing how to form some of the letters will focus the children's attention on letter names within a meaningful, communicative context (Cochran-Smith, 1984).

For example, a teacher may announce that she needs paper from the office: "We are almost out of paper. I'm going to write a note to the secretary so that she will know to send us more paper." Then the teacher should read the words aloud as she writes. Or, use notes as reminders. For example, "I'm going to write a note and put it on the door so we will not forget to take our paintings home today."

***Take dictation.*** Taking dictation daily from children who are still scribbling provides a model of the processes and concepts of writing. When children talk about their scribble drawings, write down what they say. Help children learn to pace what they are saying with what you are writing. Use the strategies and terms described above, and encourage children when they initiate tracing and copying the dictation.



***Meaningful writing such as letters and notes motivates beginning writers.***

Joyce Ury Dumtschin

---

## Children who are still scribbling need to observe an adult writing several times a day so they can see how the letters are formed and how language gets on paper.

---

All this is the traditional "language experience" approach. When teachers follow up on children's leads, they are providing encouragement and developmentally appropriate experiences for children. If there are not enough adults in the classroom to take dictation daily, train some older children, perhaps fifth graders, to come to the classroom for 15 minutes a day to write for their "buddies."

Daily dictation also includes making charts with small groups of children (McCracken & McCracken, 1979). As teachers note growth in children's understandings of the writing process and the need for more information, teachers can most efficiently provide this new knowledge by talking about how they think while writing. For example, many of the children may have learned most of the letter sounds but are unsure of how to use them in the writing process. You can model this process by talking about letters and sounds and how they are used as you record a meaningful message. For instance, your class wishes to write a thank-you letter to the firefighter who came to visit. The children begin by saying, "Dear Mr. Jones." You take your pen in your hand, ready your paper, and then pause saying, "Dear, duh-duh, dear, what letter is that I hear at the beginning of dear?" And the children call out, "D!" You write down *D* and continue writing "Dear Mr. Jones." Next, one child says that he would like to say, "Thank you for bringing the fire hose." You begin writing what the child has said and pause when you come to the word

*hose*. You say, "Huh-huh, hose, what letter do I hear first? The child responds, "H!" You write down *h* and slowly begin to sound out the rest of the word. You pause on the letter sound of *o*, and the children call out that you need to write the letter *o*. Going through this process of occasionally sounding out words as they are written helps children see a thinking process they can use and what information they have available for writing a message. However, it would not be appropriate to sound out words for children to name letters if the word is not spelled as it sounds.

**Use experience charts.** Chart topics include songs, finger plays, or nursery rhymes that the children know and chant. Have children dictate experience charts after a field trip or classroom activity—for example, "Our Trip to the Zoo" or "Baking Cookies." Predictable, repetitive, patterned sentence stems, such as "Susie liked . . . ; Rodney liked . . . ; Tony liked . . .," make good charts. Charts that consist of sentences or experiences dictated by the children can be considered as a beginning form of publication. Children will sense audience approval as the entire class chants the chart in unison and individuals read it throughout the day. None of these ideas will seem unique to most kindergarten teachers. We do these things. But we need to do much more of them.

Children's play with print will be enhanced when the teacher makes available old language experience charts for children to "mess up."

These charts, which provided a model of the function and meaning of written language when dictated, now provide a model of the forms and patterns of written language. The children might scribble on the charts, color in alphabet letters, trace letters, or try to copy the language on the charts in their own drawings (Lamme, 1984b). Teachers may also copy the words to songs to make a song book, or provide each child with a copy of rhymes the class knows. In addition, children may play with the print in magazines and newspapers. Clay (1975) suggests three processes children use while learning to write: tracing, copying, and generating. Teachers can promote these processes by providing children an access to print. Children will actively explore letter forms, interior complexity, and the size and shape of letters when they are provided with print.

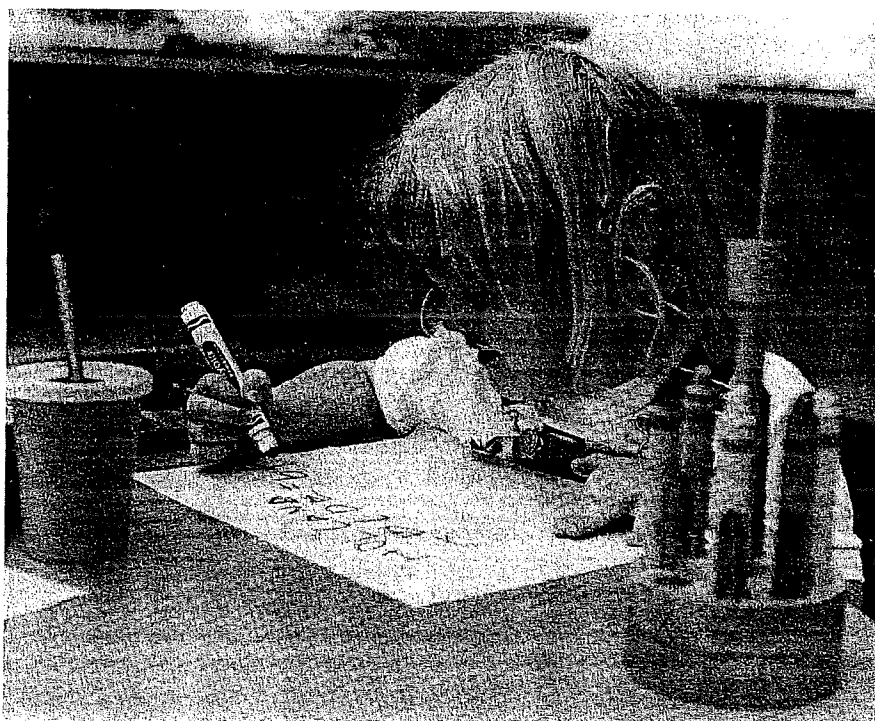
**Be a "private" writer.** Writing involves real communication. For children who are scribbling but should be moving toward making letter forms, short messages from an adult relevant to the children's personal experiences and feelings provide a personal model of how writing communicates. Suppose you are watching Susan scribbling, and she tells you, "This is a picture of the monster that lives under my bed." You might respond, "Would you like me to write that under your picture?" Later you can extend the meaning of this conversation by putting a note in her mailbox.

Dear Susan,

The monster that lives under your bed looks really friendly. What does he do?

Love,  
Mrs. Hayes

After receiving such a personally meaningful message, Susan will ask an adult to read it to her. She may memorize the message and "read"



*Progressing from scribbling to writing involves experimenting with letter forms.*

it over and over and eventually begin to trace, color, or copy the print from the letter in her drawings (Lamme, 1984a). As you continue to communicate with Susan in this way, she will probably try to write messages back to you. At first the messages will be composed of mock letters or random letter forms; however, Susan's string of letters will be carrying a message that she can tell you so that you can respond.

### *Using children's names*

Varied and functional reasons for children to write their names daily smooth the way from scribbling to writing. Clay (1975) suggests, "This provides those first mental models for letter forms [and] increases the child's power over written language enormously" (p. 46). By repeatedly using this short, personally meaningful, written model, children direct their attention toward the features of print and discover more letter forms.

For children still unable to write their names, written models should always be made available. Children's names can be used in a variety of meaningful games and activities that include individual cards or pieces with their names printed on them. Children who require a

## **Write publicly for children—charts, signs, letters, notes.**

model for copying or tracing their names can use the cards from their favorite games. The following games, songs, and activities are easy ways to incorporate children's names in the daily program.

● **"Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?"**—Have the verse written on a chart and a can or jar with paper cookies with the chil-

dren's names written on them. As you chant and follow along on the chart, draw a cookie out of the jar to see "who stole the cookie" and have the children read the name.

● **"Jack be nimble"**—Have sentence strips with the Mother Goose rhyme in a sentence strip chart and a box of sentence strips with the children's names on them. Sit in a circle with an odd-looking candle in the middle; have the children chant the rhyme by substituting the child's name that is drawn out of the box for Jack's; the child whose name is read jumps over the candlestick as the children chant the rhyme.

● **"A tisket, a tasket"**—Have a poster or chart with the song on it for children to follow along. Substitute, "I wrote a letter to \_\_\_\_\_" for "I wrote a letter to my love." Have a green and yellow basket with envelopes with the children's names written on them in the basket. Draw one out of the basket for the children to read as you sing the song. (If you like, have the child who is chosen skip around the outside of the circle and then choose the next name.)

There are many useful reasons for having children write their names during a school day.

● **Waiting for a turn**—There are many occasions when children need to wait their turn to do or use something during the day. Have them sign up on a waiting list.

● **Checking out a book**—Children like to take books home to share with their family. Have them sign a check-out sheet.

● **Taking roll**—This is a daily necessity in public schools. Have the children sign in on a roll sheet.

● **Making choices**—If you are planning two or three different activities for a day, have the children sign up for their preferred activity.

● **Record keeping**—Perhaps you need to account for the centers children go to every day. Just leave

a record sheet or book at the center for the children to sign.

● **Author/Artist**—What do all authors and artists do? They sign their name to their stories and on their masterpieces. Folded index cards make nice name labels for art projects.

As children become more confident and fluent in writing their names, they will begin to experiment with alphabet letter forms. Starting with the familiar letters in their names, children gradually add variations until they have created new letter forms—Clay's generating principle (Clay, 1975). Children continue to experiment by seeing how far they can deviate from the appropriate letter forms to invent new signs and letters—Clay's flexibility principle (Clay, 1975). Children will incorporate these newly acquired letters and letter forms into their writing as they continue to expand their scribble and mock messages

in their search to find the appropriate way to convey meaning in print.

### ***Functional print in the classroom***

The desire to convey meaning through print is contingent upon the existence of an environment filled with purposeful and meaningful print. Knowing this, many expert kindergarten teachers incorporate a variety of functional signs and labels into their classroom environments. As the children's attention is directed toward the presence and purpose of these signs and labels, they begin to sense the authority and the meaning that print possesses (Cochran-Smith, 1984). Eventually, children begin to imitate and experiment with these short, easily composed forms of writing as they attempt to communicate with others (Dyson, 1982).

Use labels such as *snacks*, *large*

*blocks*, *markers*, *paper*, and *envelopes* to organize classroom materials. Direct the children's attention toward the function of these labels by saying, "Tommy, you will find the large blocks here, under the label that says *large blocks*," or "While we're cleaning up the writing table today, let's be sure to read the labels so that we know where things belong."

Signs are a form of print familiar to children before they begin school (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Children have repeatedly encountered the location, appearance, and meaning of signs like *STOP* and *McDonald's* in their environment. This awareness of function extends into the classroom when teachers make signs with and for the children in order to inform others. For example, make signs to issue a warning, "Caution: Wet Paint"; to make an announcement, "Today is Beth's birthday"; or to regulate behavior, "Wash your hands before lunch."



Marietta Lynch

***Children writing together develop a sense of communicating with an audience.***

With a bit of encouragement, children use these forms and functions of writing in an effort to express themselves through print (Bissex, 1980; Lamme, 1984a). Include making signs as a natural part

## Write privately for an individual child—put a note in her mailbox or cubby.

of children's play. The house-keeping corner is quickly transformed as new signs are posted: "Fire Station," "Do Not Enter," or "Quiet: Hospital Zone." Use labels to name children's clay creations ("Cookies," or "Beth's Birthday Cake"), or to present items brought from home ("Laura's Beehive," or "Tom's Snake Skin"). Gradually make signs and labels more complex as the children's awareness and understanding of print grows: for example, "Katie's," "Katie's rose," "Katie's yellow rose," "This is Katie's yellow rose."

Encouraging writing informally as it is relevant to children's play provides alternate examples of forms and functions of print. Children might make tickets for the bus, create menus for their restaurant, or write prescriptions for sick babies. One teacher had her students draw and write about their block structures in a small chart tablet she kept on the rug. Classes can keep growth logs for a plant experiment, record reactions to a play, or make a graph of "Our Favorite Ice Cream" that includes each child's name on a cone.

Occasions naturally arise in early childhood classrooms that involve written communication. For birthdays, children can make cards, banners, birthday stories, or

"\_\_\_\_\_ is my friend because \_\_\_\_\_" books as gifts. Children can write thank-you notes to guides and drivers after field trips, to mothers who provide holiday parties, or to another class that has shared something special with your class. Have children write or dictate letters requesting information about something they are interested in. The class can also write a letter to its favorite children's book author or illustrator.

## The children's literature model

Quality children's literature is a powerful model of good writing and should be included daily in the program. Children who have heard stories told and who have had stories read to them will probably become good story writers.

Literature provides an excellent structure for sentence frame writing, in which a favorite children's book, song, or rhyme is adapted for class dictation. Choose a short, repetitive sentence structure, and have each child dictate to fill in the blank. *A House Is a House for Me* (Hoberman, 1982) provides the repetitive sentence frame "A \_\_\_\_\_ is a house for a \_\_\_\_\_" that can be illustrated and dictated by each child. For example, the first page of the book reads,

A hill is a house for an ant, an ant.

A hive is a house for a bee.

A hole is a house for a mole or a mouse.

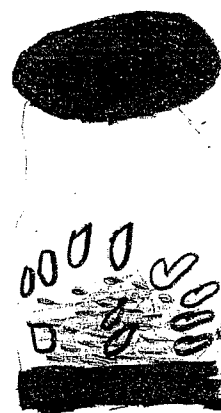
And a house is a house for me!\*

A child's page in the class book would look like the following samples.

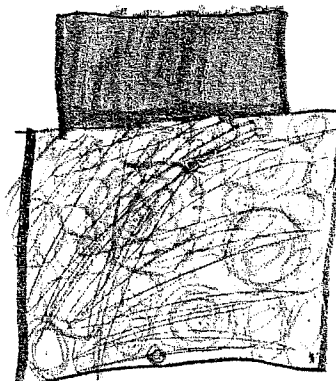
\*From *A House Is a House for Me* by Mary Ann Hoberman. Copyright © 1978 by Mary Ann Hoberman. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc.



A HAD is a house  
for a ORAN.



A bug house is a house  
for little bugs.



A Katie box is a house  
for Katie.

*The language in good children's literature provides models and frames for new writers. (Sentence frame from A House Is a House for Me by Mary Ann Hoberman, Penguin, 1982.)*



During a farm unit one teacher showed the Weston Woods filmstrip of *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1972). Later the children created their own illustrations of where Rosie the hen went for a walk. Then they dictated prepositional phrases. When each child's picture had been attached to a roll of paper, a roller movie resulted in which Rosie the hen went for a walk "up a tree," "under a horse," and so on. Repetitive and predictable sentence structures such as these also enhance the process of reading and make it possible for every child to "read" a class-dictated version of the rhyme or story (Smith, 1979).

Children actively manipulate story sentences and structures through the use of prop boxes, flannel boards, puppets, and dioramas (Stewig, 1975). The teacher enhances this process by extending literature beyond story reading and re-enactment to having children dictate or write their own versions of the rhymes.

Children's books provide examples of various forms of writing. Poems, rhymes, picture books, fairy tales, nonfiction stories, and song and recipe books serve as models for children to imitate in their own writing. "Big books" are especially effective for group study. Talk about the various forms, and have the children identify their features as they are introduced into the curriculum. One child "wrote" his own recipe for biscuits after several class baking activities involving recipes written on charts.

### Talking while writing

Children talk naturally while they are writing. They challenge each other's ideas, provide an audience, and help each other to grow, particularly when children of various levels are sitting together. It helps scribblers to observe children who are making alphabet letters, so it is not advisable to put the scribblers in homogeneous groups during writing time.

Graves (1983) and Dyson (1982, 1983) stress the importance of listening to children talk about their writing. For scribblers, talk is especially important if they are to develop an understanding that what they say can be written down. By allowing children to talk about their scribbles, we enable them to elaborate verbally on the meaning of what they are conveying on paper. Otherwise, others would not understand the intent of their message.

Children sense the importance of being coherent, that to communicate through writing one has to be aware of others' expectations for letter forms, language structures, and spelling. Obviously, these are not skill lessons the teacher has to initiate if a real audience is available. When children sit together, talking and writing, they exchange points of view, interests, and understandings and begin to view their own written products through the eyes of others (Piazza & Tomlinson, 1985).

### Writing to communicate

By being aware of how young children naturally progress in writing, by watching and listening to children as they write, and by noting and responding to their questions, teachers can observe children's progress in becoming writers and can provide the information and instruction that are developmentally appropriate for each child. When children are intrinsically motivated to understand and learn how to do something, they do so quickly and easily. A classroom environment that is filled with purposeful and meaningful print, coupled with a teacher who shares her or his excitement and enthusiasm for communicating through writing, motivates children to learn how to communicate through writing. Just as children learn to talk by being immersed in meaningful oral communication and learn to read by being read to and reading meaningful stories, they learn to write by writing for meaningful communication.

Worksheets and dittos filled with lines of isolated letters and prefabricated messages to be traced and copied do not motivate children or provide meaningful written communication. We write so we can communicate, and children will share in this medium of communication if they are well and thoughtfully encouraged.

### References

- Bissex, F. (1980). *GNYS AT WRK*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brittain, W. L. (1979). *Creativity, art, and the young child*. New York: Macmillan.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1984). *The making of a reader*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Clay, M. (1975). *What did I write?* London: Heinemann.
- DeFord, D. (1980). Young children and their writing. *Theory Into Practice*, 19, 157-162.
- Dyson, A. H. (1982). Talking with young children writing. *Childhood Education*, 59, 30-36.
- Dyson, A. H. (1983). The role of oral language in early writing processes. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 17, 1-30.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before schooling*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Harste, J. C., Woodward, V. A., & Burke, C. L. (1984). *Language stories and literacy lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Hoberman, M. A. (1982). *A house is a house for me*. New York: Penguin.
- Hutchins, P. (1972). *Rosie's walk* [Filmstrip]. Weston, CT: Weston Woods Studios.
- Lamme, L. L. (1984a, November). The amazing power of print. *Early Years*, pp. 39-68.
- Lamme, L. L. (1984b). Take time to let children write. *Children Our Concern*, 9(1), 9, 23-24.
- McCracken, M. J., & McCracken, R. A. (1979). *Reading, writing, and language: A practical guide for primary teachers*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: Peguis.
- Piazza, C. L., & Tomlinson, C. M. (1985). A concert of writers. *Language Arts*, 62, 150-158.
- Smith, F. (1979). *Reading without nonsense*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Stewig, J. W. (1975). *Read to write: Using children's literature as a springboard to writing*. New York: Hawthorn.
- Temple, C. A., Nathan, R. G., & Burris, N. A. (1982). *The beginnings of writing*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

TC