

Topics and Details: Getting Started With Writing

RECENTLY, I WAS working with a kindergarten class on their writing workshop routines. At one point, I noticed 5-year-old Mark concentrating hard on his work, brows furrowed, marker pressing firmly into the paper. I wandered over to Mark and asked him what he was writing about. “How do I know?” Mark replied. “I haven’t finished the picture yet.”

For Mark, like many other beginning writers, writing begins with drawing and talking about their ideas. As teachers, we want to nourish that emerging literacy and help students develop a range of approaches to planning their writing. The minilessons in this chapter all relate to generating ideas for writing, adding elaboration and detail, and organizing those details in a coherent form (see Table 9 for an overview of the minilessons). Pick and choose those lessons that best meet the needs of your students.

One of the most challenging tasks for any writer is getting his or her initial thoughts on paper. Even professional writers sometimes find themselves daunted by the blank page. For beginning writers, the challenge is that much greater—not only do they have to think about the content of their writing but they also have to think about where to put the marks on the page, what words to use, what letters to use, how to form those letters, and where to put spaces. It takes a great deal of scaffolding and support for beginning writers to help them take baby steps in writing that soon lead to great leaps in writing progress.

In the past, many of us believed that students in kindergarten and first grade should not be expected to do any writing until well into the school year. The rationale was that students would not be ready to start writing until October or November, when they were familiar with classroom routines and had acquired tools such as alphabet knowledge. However, Martinez and Teale (1988) recommend starting writing from the first day of school, even in kindergarten—*especially* in kindergarten. Their case is a good one: When students are taught and expected to write on the first day of school, students

simply accept it as just one more new experience in a whole day of new experiences. I have found that when we start writing on the first day of school, students rarely complain that they “don’t know how to write.” After all, most students will tell you that they came to school to learn to read and write, and that’s exactly what we are asking them to do—from the first day of school and every day afterward.

TABLE 9. Getting Started Minilessons at a Glance

Lesson Name	What It Teaches	Developmental Level	Trait	Pages
How to Write in Kindergarten	Understanding different ways to “write” in kindergarten	Emergent	Ideas Organization Conventions	39–42
Tuck a Topic in Your Pocket	Generating ideas for writing and saving some to use another day	Emergent Early Adaptable to developing and fluent	Ideas	43–45
Writing Ideas Bingo	Generating ideas for writing	Early Developing Fluent	Ideas	46–49
Topic Tree	Narrowing a topic that is too broad	Developing Fluent	Ideas	50–53
“I Can Write a Book”	“Stretching” a story over several pages using patterned writing	Emergent Early	Ideas Organization	54–56
Sticky Dot Details	Elaborating on a topic	Early	Ideas	57–58
Five-Finger Planner	Generating and organizing ideas	Early Developing Fluent	Ideas Organization	59–61
Storm and Sort	Brainstorming ideas and sorting them before writing	Early Developing Fluent	Ideas Organization	62–64
3-2-1 Planner	Developing a prewriting plan	Early Developing Fluent	Ideas Organization	65–67
Turn It Into a Story	Converting notes from a prewriting plan into a piece of connected text	Early Developing Fluent	Ideas Organization Conventions	68–70

This doesn't mean that we simply hand out paper and pencils and charge the students to "go forth and write." We need to provide careful modeling, demonstration, and thinking aloud, along with sensitive scaffolding, to support emergent writers. The first minilesson, **How to Write in Kindergarten**, suggests a routine for the first day of kindergarten that honors the diverse literacy experiences that students bring to school. At the same time, it establishes classroom expectations for writing in kindergarten.

Unless your students come from a rich literacy background or have had strong preschool experiences, many of them will not know their alphabet letters, much less know how to form them or how to apply them to spelling. Nonetheless, all students have spent their lives in a world of print. They may not have books or newspapers in their homes, but they see traffic signals, business signs, television guides, billboards, and other symbols all around them. Thus, our job is to help children take what they know about print in their environment and apply it to their own reading and writing. This may mean encouraging scribble writing or using random letters at the earliest stages. "Scribbling" is a legitimate stage of writing development; it indicates that the writer identifies something called "writing" but has not made the connection between letters and sounds (Gentry, 1985). Whatever modes—pictures, scribbles, letters, or symbols—students have at their disposal may be used to express ideas in print. By encouraging scribbles or random letters at this stage, we help get students started in writing. Later, as students learn high-frequency words and letter sounds, these words and letters can be added to their writing.

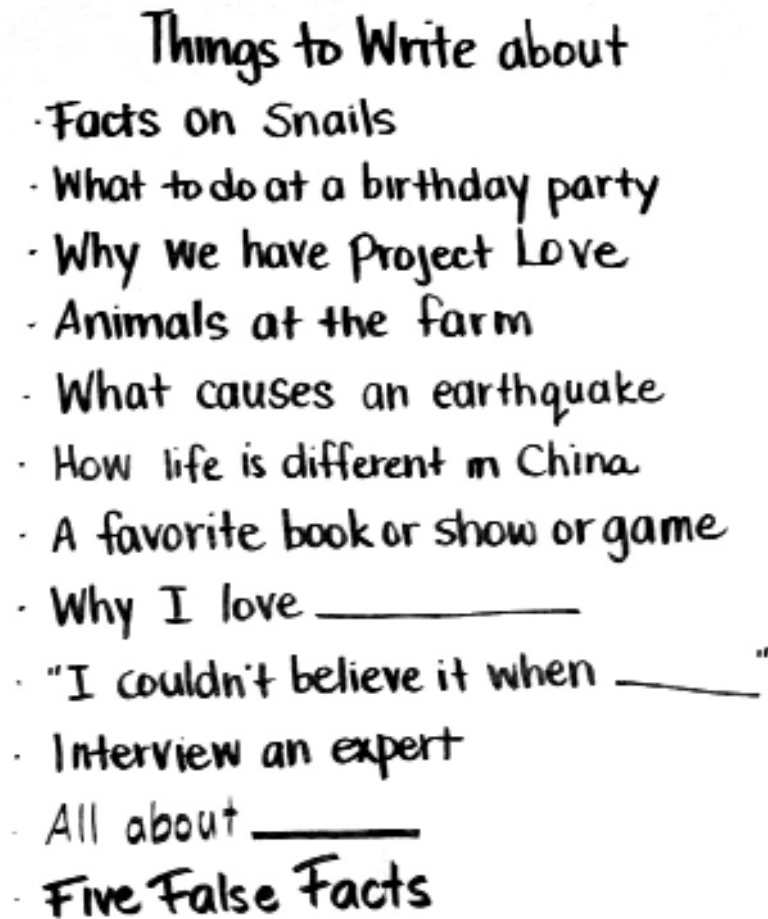
Learning the mechanics of printing symbols on paper is just one "slice" of the whole writing "pie." Every piece of writing, great or small, must begin with an idea. As we support our students in getting started with writing, we want to focus first on content—generating ideas and getting them down on paper. Regardless of the writer's stage of development, these are the two main steps to getting started: (1) deciding what to write about and (2) elaborating on those ideas with details.

Sometimes teachers must assign topics for writing; for example, we may want the students to write a thank-you note to the bus driver, a poem for the school's holiday celebrations, a learning log in science, or a response to reading. However, giving young writers many opportunities to choose their own topics is equally important. A strong writing program should have a balance of prompted and self-selected writing. Self-selected writing is a vital element of the writing process (Graves, 1994). When writers choose their own topics, they are more engaged with the process and are more likely to write with passion, conviction, and voice (Brown, 1996).

There is one topic that interests almost every writer at any age: him- or herself. Primary-grade students in particular want to read and write about the ordinary events in their lives—home, school, friends, and activities. Freeman (1998) maintains that “primary-grade children are strongly egocentric and eager to write about themselves and what they know” (p. 25). Graves (1994) says that students must learn to read the world as writers, to look for a potential story in everything around them.

One way for teachers to support this process is by creating class charts of shared experiences that may be turned into writing pieces (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. Class Chart of Shared Experiences

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- The image shows a hand-drawn class chart on a light-colored background. The title 'Things to Write about' is written in a large, bold, black cursive font at the top. Below the title is a list of ten writing prompts, each preceded by a small black dot. The prompts are written in a black, slightly irregular cursive font. The list includes: 'Facts on Snails', 'What to do at a birthday party', 'Why we have Project Love', 'Animals at the farm', 'What causes an earthquake', 'How life is different in China', 'A favorite book or show or game', 'Why I love _____', '"I couldn't believe it when _____"', 'Interview an expert', 'All about _____', and 'Five False Facts'.
- Facts on Snails
 - What to do at a birthday party
 - Why we have Project Love
 - Animals at the farm
 - What causes an earthquake
 - How life is different in China
 - A favorite book or show or game
 - Why I love _____
 - "I couldn't believe it when _____"
 - Interview an expert
 - All about _____
 - Five False Facts

Each time the class studies a new theme, takes a field trip, discusses an important issue, or celebrates an event, we can list the items on a “Things to Write About” chart. This chart also is an excellent record of classroom events and discussions. When we introduce new text forms such as procedures or reports, the class can generate new charts such as “Things We Can Do” or “Things We Know About.” When the page is full, simply cut the ideas apart and put them in an oversized gift bag labeled “Big Ideas.” (They’re “big ideas” only because they are now on long strips of paper!) If a student is stuck for a writing topic, he or she can draw a “big idea” from the bag.

In addition to class charts of writing topics, students should have their own personal lists of writing ideas. **Tuck a Topic in Your Pocket** introduces the idea of “tucking away” writing ideas for another day. In addition, **Writing Ideas Bingo** helps students generate topics of personal interest by providing a series of sentence stems for them to complete—in words or pictures—in a game format. Even our youngest students need to understand that they have many ideas worth writing about.

As mentioned in chapter 1, a good writing topic is often more a matter of focus than of quality. Sometimes students may choose a topic that is simply too broad to be brought into focus in a short piece of writing. This is true for professional writers, too. In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, author Bill Bryson (2003) looks for the small, interesting story in each broad topic. For example, instead of giving readers a generalized overview of astronomy, he tells the very human story of the discovery of Pluto. Students need to learn the same type of focus. Calkins (2003) refers to “watermelon ideas” and “seed ideas”; watermelon ideas are topics that are too broad and seed ideas are the “small moments” that lend themselves to a strong and focused piece of writing. To help students understand how to “skinny down” the topic or “branch off” from a broad topic to more specific ideas, teachers can use the **Topic Tree**, a minilesson on the graphic organizer.

Any topic may inspire writing; it is how the topic is crafted that leads to great writing. At first, most young writers simply write by labeling pictures, usually pictures of themselves. Patterned writing can support them in extending this range, and lessons such as “**I Can Write a Book**” help students “stretch out” a story over several pages.

Spandel (2003) asserts that young children can recognize and talk about the habits of writers long before they can demonstrate many of those habits. Therefore, we want to help even the youngest students develop and use the language of writers: *topic, details, draft, revise, word, sentence, and describe*.

One of the most important concepts is that of details to support an idea. **Sticky Dot Details** engages students in writing several details on a topic by

placing a “sticky dot” at the end of each detail. Although the objective of the lesson is to build content, the added benefit is that it lays the groundwork for building sentences.

Finding a topic is the first step in any writing task. But the planning does not stop there. Writers need tools to help them clarify their thinking before putting their ideas down on paper. For most emergent writers, talking and drawing are the most important planning tools (Rog, 2001). Young writers know that pictures convey a message, and they are often more than willing to tell the story that goes along with their pictures. With support, these young writers begin to add symbols of various kinds, ranging from conventional letters to letter-like symbols. Some experts call this combination of drawing and writing “driting” (Hall & Williams, 2003).

Talk is an important element of the writing process for young writers. As Freeman (1998) reports, encouraging talking in the writing workshop can increase the quality and quantity of student writing.

Having emergent and early writers “pretell” what they are going to write helps them to rehearse their ideas and enables them to focus more attention to getting those ideas down on paper. Given the many demands on a child’s cognitive energy—topic, details, words, spelling, letter formation, and placement on the page—pretelling removes at least one layer of decision making. This enables the young writer to devote more “working memory” to getting the ideas down on the paper (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). Although we tend to abandon pretelling as students start to write longer and more complex pieces of writing, telling a story aloud can often be a means for even sophisticated writers to organize their thoughts.

An added benefit of prewriting discussions is that they may help a reluctant writer get inspiration from another student. Writers “hitchhike” on ideas from other writers all the time. For example, a student who tells about the time he fell off his bike might inspire another student to tell about the time he fell out of a canoe. Someone who says he is going to write an “all about” book on spiders might remind another student that she could write an “all about” book on bees. Thus, students can start with a borrowed idea and sprinkle in their own words, thoughts, and experiences to make it their own. As Graves (1994) says, we want our students to see the world as writers and one way to do that is to listen to the ideas of others.

The role of drawing as a prewriting tool changes as writers develop. For emergent writers, the picture is central and the “writing” peripheral (Cunningham et al., 2005). We encourage these writers to tell a story with their pictures. By the time the students have reached the early writing stage, the text begins to assume more importance than the picture and students are encouraged to begin to write first and then draw (Cunningham et al.).

Students do not need to abandon sketching or making a storyboard to plan a piece of writing when they reach the developing and fluent levels. At this point though, they can use other planning tools such as the **Five-Finger Planner** to generate details on a topic.

Effective writing is focused on a clear topic with details and elaboration (Culham, 2005), but those details must be organized in a clear and coherent way. Brainstorming before writing is a learning activity that is well supported by research in effective teaching (Marzano, Norford, Paynter, Pickering, & Gaddy, 2001; Tate, 2003). Although brainstorming can be an excellent way to generate ideas on a topic, it sometimes leads to disorganized, “stream-of-consciousness” writing (Rog & Kropp, 2004). **Storm and Sort** takes brainstorming a step further by helping students sort and sequence the brainstormed ideas before converting them into connected text.

Graphic organizers are other prewriting tools that support writers by organizing and connecting ideas to one another, supporting the writer in visualizing the “big picture” and enabling the writer to create a coherent structure for the piece of writing (Roberts, 2004). For reluctant writers, the benefits are even greater. Although a blank piece of paper can be intimidating to even the most proficient writer, an enclosed shape in which to jot a few notes may seem manageable for any writer.

Different writers and different tasks require different types of prewriting activities. Although some writers like to create a web of ideas, others prefer a more linear organizer such as a flowchart or story outline. The **3-2-1 Planner** is for beginning writers and has been adapted from the Four-Square Organizer developed by Gould and Gould (1999). The numbers 3-2-1 represent *three* key ideas, *two* details for each, all on *one* topic. When adult writers create a plan for writing, it is usually a sketchy outline to guide the composing process. Children, on the other hand, generally just copy what they have in their plan without much additional elaboration (Dahl & Farnan, 1998). The strength of the 3-2-1 Planner is that it forces writers to put details into the plan, so they don’t omit or misplace key details or add details that don’t support the main idea when they go to draft.

Although students can create a plan for writing, we cannot assume that they will automatically make the transition from listing ideas to composing a piece of connected text. The final minilesson in this section, **Turn It Into a Story**, demonstrates how to take the ideas in a planner and craft them into connected text. Because planning is an important step in the writing process, teachers need to help students stock their writing toolboxes with a variety of prewriting tools. A strong plan makes drafting easier for any writer and reduces the need for revision later (Cunningham et al., 2005). Prewriting tools do not limit students’ creativity or oblige the writer to stick to a

prescription; they simply enable students to “begin with the end in mind,” not only shaping the piece more effectively but also enabling young writers to devote more energy to putting the words down on paper.

The remainder of this chapter offers a collection of minilessons for teaching students how to move from generating topics to organizing details to drafting a complete piece of writing.



HOW TO WRITE IN KINDERGARTEN

Developmental Level: Emergent

Traits: Ideas, Organization, Conventions

From the first day of kindergarten, we want to establish expectations that students will use drawing, writing, or a combination of both to convey a message. Many kindergartners, however, know nothing about writing and may never even have held a pencil, which is why we always begin with modeling. We use a think-aloud to reinforce the idea that the purpose of writing is to tell a story. This minilesson is a typical “first-day-of-kindergarten” lesson intended to demonstrate the various ways to write in kindergarten—from scribbles to random letters to conventional spelling.

Introduction: Explain to students that you expect them to be writers every day and that different kinds of writing are acceptable in kindergarten.

Boys and girls, one of the things we will do every day in kindergarten is write. [Show students a page from any familiar picture book.] The books we read in school have pictures and writing. And the work we do in kindergarten will have pictures and writing, too. Today, you're going to learn about some different ways that kindergartners can write.

Instruction: Start by thinking aloud about topics for writing. By generating two or three writing ideas and then choosing one, you may stimulate students’ thinking. Following your lead, many students are likely to write about the same topic you chose. That’s fine for now; however, eventually, you will want to extend their thinking.

First, I have to think about what I'd like to tell you about in my writing. What I'm writing about is called my topic. I could write about my cat Cookie or how to play soccer or going shopping for school supplies, but I think I'll tuck away those topics for another day. Today, I'd like to tell you about what I did on my summer holidays. That's my topic: "What I Did on My Summer Holidays." You know what I did? I went camping in the mountains. First, I'm going to draw a picture of me in my tent in the mountains. Here is my tent—and here is a picture of me smiling because I'm so happy to be there and waving out the door of the tent. Now I'm going to do some writing that says, "I went camping in the mountains."

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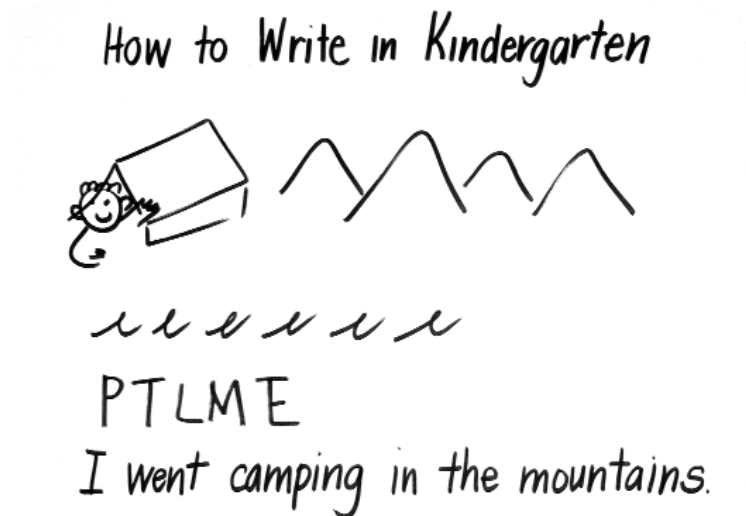
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This think-aloud helps model both the selection of a topic and the pretelling of what the writing is going to say. Next, demonstrate how to do the “writing.” Recall that acknowledging scribbling and random letters honors the students’ existing knowledge and ensures that all students will be able to participate at some level.

There are different ways to write in kindergarten. Today, we’re going to practice three of them. One way to write is to do curly writing, which looks like grown-up writing. [Model writing squiggles or curls as you say slowly, “I went camping in the mountains.”] Another way to write is with some letters. I might know some letters in my name. Or I might copy some letters that I see around the room. [Model writing random letters as you say again, “I went camping in the mountains.”] Yet another way to write is to do book writing, which is the kind of writing other people can read. It looks like this. [Model conventional writing as you repeat your sentence.]

Figure 9 shows examples of these three writing methods. Before asking the students to write independently, teachers must have students practice each kind of writing on paper or on individual dry-erase boards. Students should have little trouble demonstrating “curly writing” and copying a few alphabet letters. Most students will even be

FIGURE 9. Three Writing Methods





able to write at least one word in conventional writing or “book writing”—usually their own name. Tell students that they will be learning lots of words in book writing as the school year goes on. This is an excellent time to teach them an important word in book writing.

You might not know very many words in book writing. Today, you are going to learn an important word in book writing: the word I. Book writing looks the same for everyone. When you learn a word in book writing, you will always write it the same way. It's a very easy word to write; it is a straight line with a little line at the top and the bottom, and it says I. From now on, any time you want to write that word I, this is how you should write it. We can mix up book writing and curly writing. If we know the book writing of a word, we should use it. [You may want to model the word I followed by some scribble writing or random letters.]

Have students practice writing the word *I*. This may be an excellent word to use to introduce the name wall in the classroom. From now on, when a student “reads” his writing to you and it includes the word *I*, require the student to spell it in book writing.

[As you circulate among students to confer with them about their writing, you might say,] I'm so pleased to hear you use that word I in your writing. And you know how to write it in book writing, so I'd like you to add it in right now.

Application: After students have practiced “kindergarten writing” and demonstrated that they are able to write in the “three ways,” give them an immediate opportunity to apply their knowledge on paper or in booklets. It may be necessary to spend some time brainstorming ideas to write about before they begin. You may ask them to suggest things they did on summer holidays and provide some suggestions: Did you go for ice cream? Did you go to visit anyone? Did you ride a bike? Did you play in the water? Invite each student to tell what he or she is going to write about before leaving the group discussion to begin writing.

As soon as each student can tell you what he or she is going to draw and write about, give him or her the writing materials to begin writing. Some teachers like to make it sound like a privilege to get started:

Wow, that's a great idea! You'd better get started right away while it's in your mind. I'll be around to visit you soon because I'm pretty anxious to see your writing and hear your story.

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The process of pretelling will only take a few minutes; most children will have an idea to write about. This leaves you with a few minutes to help the others get started.

Once this lesson is complete, students will have some tools for writing. However, remember that “curly writing” is just a starting point, even in kindergarten. As they add letters and words to their repertoire, guide students in integrating them into their writing.



TUCK A TOPIC IN YOUR POCKET

Developmental Levels: Emergent, Early, Adaptable to Developing and Fluent

Trait: Ideas

Students need to recognize that there are many possible topics that they can write about on any given day. Typically, students choose one topic a day, and save the others to write about another day. This minilesson uses a concrete item—a “topic pocket”—to reinforce the idea of “tucking away” the extra topics to use on another day.

Provide each student with a large envelope to paste into their writing books (see chapter 1 for a discussion of the materials necessary for writing workshop). The envelope is their “pocket” for tucking away good topics to use another day. If students are using writing folders or portfolios, the first pocket can be the topic pocket, as discussed in chapter 1.

The topic pocket may also be used to store pictures, notes jotted on a piece of paper, prewriting plans, or collections of ideas from activities such as Writing Ideas Bingo cards (see p. 49). Although this minilesson models generating ideas for the most emergent writers, students at more sophisticated levels of development will also maintain collections of writing ideas.

Introduction: Start by making connections to some of the topics students have written about in recent writing workshops, which will help remind students that there are many different things they can write about. Use the word *topic* to reinforce the language of writers.

In addition, it probably is a good idea to establish “writing partners” prior to the lesson. Use your own routines for random pairing.

Every piece of writing starts with an idea called a topic. Every day when you write, you pick a topic to write about. There are lots and lots of topics we can write about. I could write about why I love my Grampa or how I made a mud pie just like in our book Murmel, Murmel, Murmel [Munsch, 1982]. I remember the other day Jason wrote about playing T-ball and Kyle wrote about his new baby sister. [At this point, most students will want to share what they've written about. Take a few minutes to let them share their writing with the group or with a partner.] There are lots and lots of topics we can write about, but we can only write about one at a time! I don't want to forget all those other ideas because I might want to write about them

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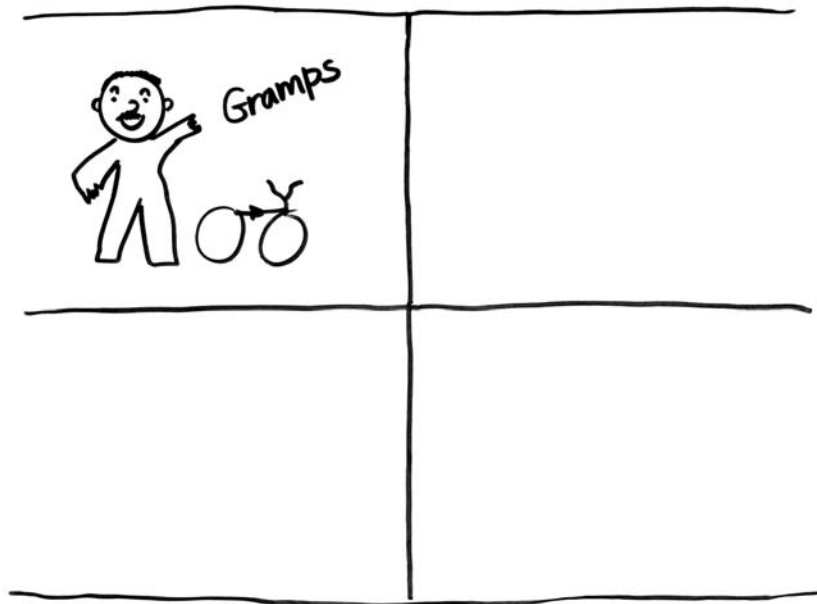
another time. So I'm going to show you how you can use a topic pocket to tuck away those extra ideas and save them for another day.

Instruction: Help students begin to generate topics for the topic pocket by giving each student a sheet of paper divided into four sections. Tell students that in each square they will draw a "quick pic," or a sketch with just enough detail for the student to remember what the picture represents.

Close your eyes for one minute and take a picture in your mind of a person who is very important to you. Turn to the person beside you and tell him or her who your special person is. I'm going to give you two minutes to draw a quick pic of that person in the first box. Remember that a quick pic doesn't have a lot of details; it has just enough detail to help you remember what you drew when you look at this paper tomorrow or another day.

Model how you would draw a quick pic of a favorite person (see Figure 10), and then allow two minutes for students to sketch their own favorite person.

FIGURE 10. Quick Pic Sample





Continue the process with the remaining three boxes, telling students to think about and draw (1) a special place they like to go, (2) a particular food they love to eat, and (3) something they like to do. Provide students with an opportunity to draw and to talk about their pictures as they draw. After they have completed all four sketches, tell the students that these are four topics they can write about.

Now you have four pictures that could be topics for writing. [Point to each picture on your model.] I might write about my Gramps, going swimming, camping in the mountains, or my favorite food—spaghetti and meatballs. I think today I'm going to write about going swimming, and I'm going to tuck those other ideas away to use for another day.

After thinking aloud as you choose a topic, model for the students how you use another paper to draw a detailed picture and add some writing.

Application: Have the students choose one of their topics to draw and write about in their writing books or folders today and tuck the others away for another day. Before tucking them into the topic pocket, you may choose to cut the page into four squares so each topic is on a separate piece of paper. Even if students can't remember what they drew, the activity still reinforces the concept of generating several ideas, choosing one to write about, and tucking away the others to use another day.

Extension: Other ways to generate topics to tuck away including the following:

- If you brainstorm lists of ideas to write about with the students (e.g., "Things to Write About" chart, "Things We Can Do" chart, or "Things We Know About" chart), have each student choose two or three topics from the charts that they can "make their own" and tuck into the topic pocket.
- Tell students to be on the lookout for topics they might write about. They can always jot down an idea and tuck it into their pocket to use during writing time.
- Students can insert photographs in their topic pockets. Students may bring photographs from home, or you may provide them with photographs from school events.

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WRITING IDEAS BINGO

Developmental Levels: Early, Developing, Fluent

Trait: Ideas

Writing Ideas Bingo is intended to help students generate topics of personal interest by completing a series of sentence stems on a card with grids. Each completed sentence can be a potential writing topic. We call it Bingo because students are invited to shout “Bingo!” when they “black out” the card by completing every sentence stem. (The perception that this lesson is a game helps motivate otherwise reluctant writers.) However, the activity should be structured to ensure that all students have an opportunity to complete the card and shout “Bingo!” The goal is to have your students generate a collection of topics of personal significance to tuck into their topic pockets.

This activity may be adapted for less sophisticated writers by reducing the number of squares on the Bingo card, reading aloud the sentence stems to the students, or having students draw a picture in each box in order to complete the stems. Students also may be asked to complete only part of the card at one time. For example, you might tell students that they can shout “Bingo!” after they have completed any four squares.

Introduction: Connect this lesson to previous discussions of writing topics.

Some days, it's easy to think of topics to write about. In fact, some days, we have a topic we're just itching to write about! But other days, it's hard. That's why most writers have a collection of writing topics saved up for those days when they just can't think of anything to write about. The first pocket in your writing folder gives you a place where you can tuck away those ideas that you're saving for another day.

Today, we're going to play a game that will help you think of some writing ideas that you care about. Then you will tuck them away in your topic pocket for a day when you need a writing topic.

Instruction: Photocopy for each student the Bingo card found at the end of the minilesson, or create your own. Make an overhead transparency of the card to use as you demonstrate how to complete it. As you model, read each of the topics on the card and demonstrate how you complete each sentence stem with a phrase of a few words.



Tell the students they may leave the middle box blank because it is a “free” square. They will fill in that square later.

We’re going to play a game called Writing Ideas Bingo to help us think of some writing topics to tuck away in our writing folders. The way you play the game is to think of a few words to complete the sentence in each box. When you have finished all the boxes, you have “blacked out” the Bingo card and you can call “Bingo!” Let me show you how I do it. As I show you my ideas, you might want to think about what you will write on your own Bingo card.

Application: Provide each student with a copy of the Bingo card. At your signal, have students begin completing the sentence stems in each square. It’s important to allow enough time for all students to complete *most* of the card; you might hear dozens of “Bingos!” before you move on. For those students who finish quickly, it’s a good idea to have some “when you’re done” activities in place such as the following:

- List five things you love and five things you dislike.
- List five topics you’re an expert on.
- Write the letters in your name in a column. For each letter, write one thing you know about or know how to do that begins with each letter.
- Draw a border around your page that shows things you are good at or interested in.

When you feel the students have had adequate time to complete their Bingo cards, go around the room in “round-robin” style and ask each student to share one idea from his or her card. Instruct the students that the blank box in the middle of the card will be used to “get an idea” from another writer. Students should fill in the center box as they get an idea from listening to the other students read their ideas. Have students choose one topic to write about that day and then tuck the completed Bingo cards into their topic pockets. Remind students that any of these sentences can become the topic for a piece of writing in the future. In the future, you may want to assign a topic from the Bingo card as a reminder to students to use the ideas in their topic pockets.

Extension: This activity may be repeated at other times of the year with different sentence stems. For example, if you are teaching a unit on

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informational writing, you might create a Bingo card with stems such as the following:

- An animal I would like to learn more about is...
- A place I would like to learn more about is...
- An important person I would like to learn more about is...
- An invention I would like to learn more about is...
- A bird I would like to learn more about is...
- A sea creature I would like to learn more about is...
- A topic about space I would like to learn more about is...
- A topic about weather I would like to learn more about is...

If you are presenting a unit on procedural writing, you might create a Bingo card with stems such as the following:

- A game I know how to play is...
- A food I know how to make is...
- A place I know how to get to is...
- A craft I know how to do is...
- A funny thing I know how to do is...

Writing Ideas Bingo Card

I had so much fun when...	I was really scared when...	I couldn't believe it when...
I got this scar from...		When I was little...
It wasn't fair when...	I laughed so hard when...	I was so mad when...

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TOPIC TREE

Developmental Levels: Developing, Fluent

Trait: Ideas

Sometimes students select topics that are just too broad for focused writing. The Topic Tree is a graphic organizer that helps young writers focus their topic by providing a visual representation of “branching off” from the main topic into more specific topics. The lesson also directs students to think about their audience and consider what the reader might want to know about this topic.

The minilesson described in the following example addresses personal writing, but this activity is also useful for focusing a topic for informational writing.

Introduction: Connect this lesson to students’ background knowledge on selecting topics. Discuss the difficulties of writing when a topic is simply “too big.” If possible, use a piece of existing writing (or create a new piece) for demonstration purposes.

I have been reading about many interesting topics in your writing. Sometimes writers want to write about great big topics like “My Trip to Florida.” The problem with a topic like that is there are too many details to tell in one piece of writing. Look at the following piece of writing that a student from another class wrote:

My Trip to Florida

My family went to Florida for Spring Break. We had to get up early in the morning to go to the airport. I got to sit in Seat 6D on the plane. The lady brought me some snacks and something to drink. I looked out over the clouds till the plane landed in Orlando. When we got there, my family rented a brown van. We stayed in a hotel that looked like a castle. We went to Epcot Center and Magic Kingdom. I can hardly wait to go back to Florida again.

This writer has written some details about the plane and the hotel and what she saw. But she’s tried to cover too much so she hasn’t told enough about the really interesting parts. As a reader, I’m not that interested in what seat she had on the plane or what color the van was. But I’d sure like to know about what she saw at Epcot or Magic Kingdom. I think she needs to “skinny down” her topic a bit. Instead of telling us everything that happened, she needs to tell about just one thing and then add more details about that one thing.

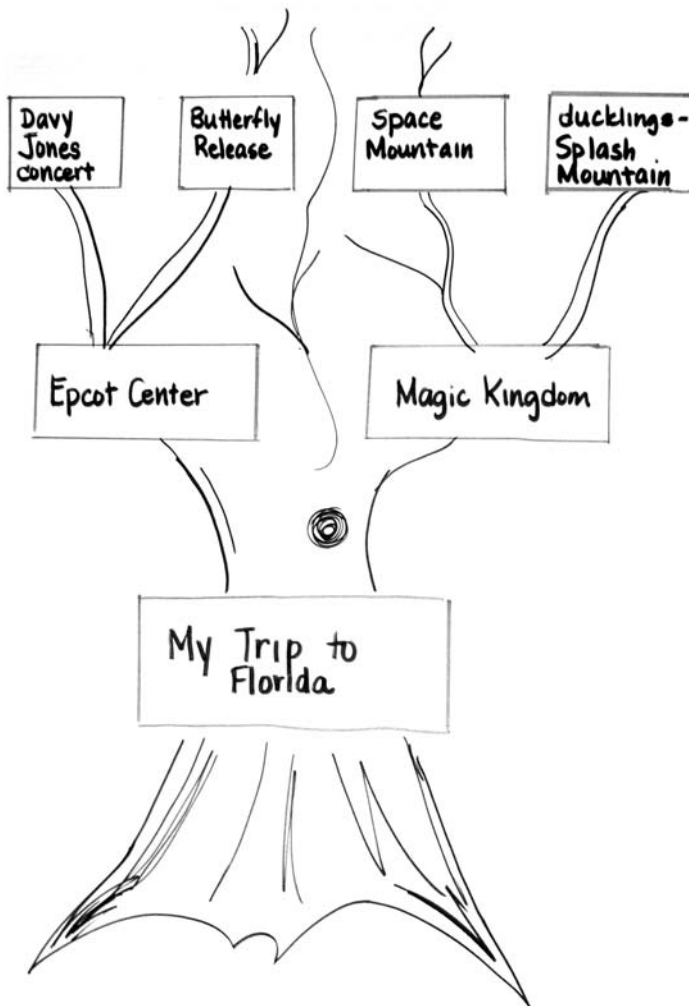


Today, you're going to learn how to "skinny down" a topic that is too big using a Topic Tree.

Instruction: Model for the students how to complete the Topic Tree with a topic of your choice, or use the example provided (see Figure 11).

I would like to skinny down the great big topic of "My Trip to Florida." I'm going to use this Topic Tree to help me. My great big topic is like the trunk of the tree, so I'm going to write "My Trip to Florida" on the trunk.

FIGURE 11. Topic Tree Sample



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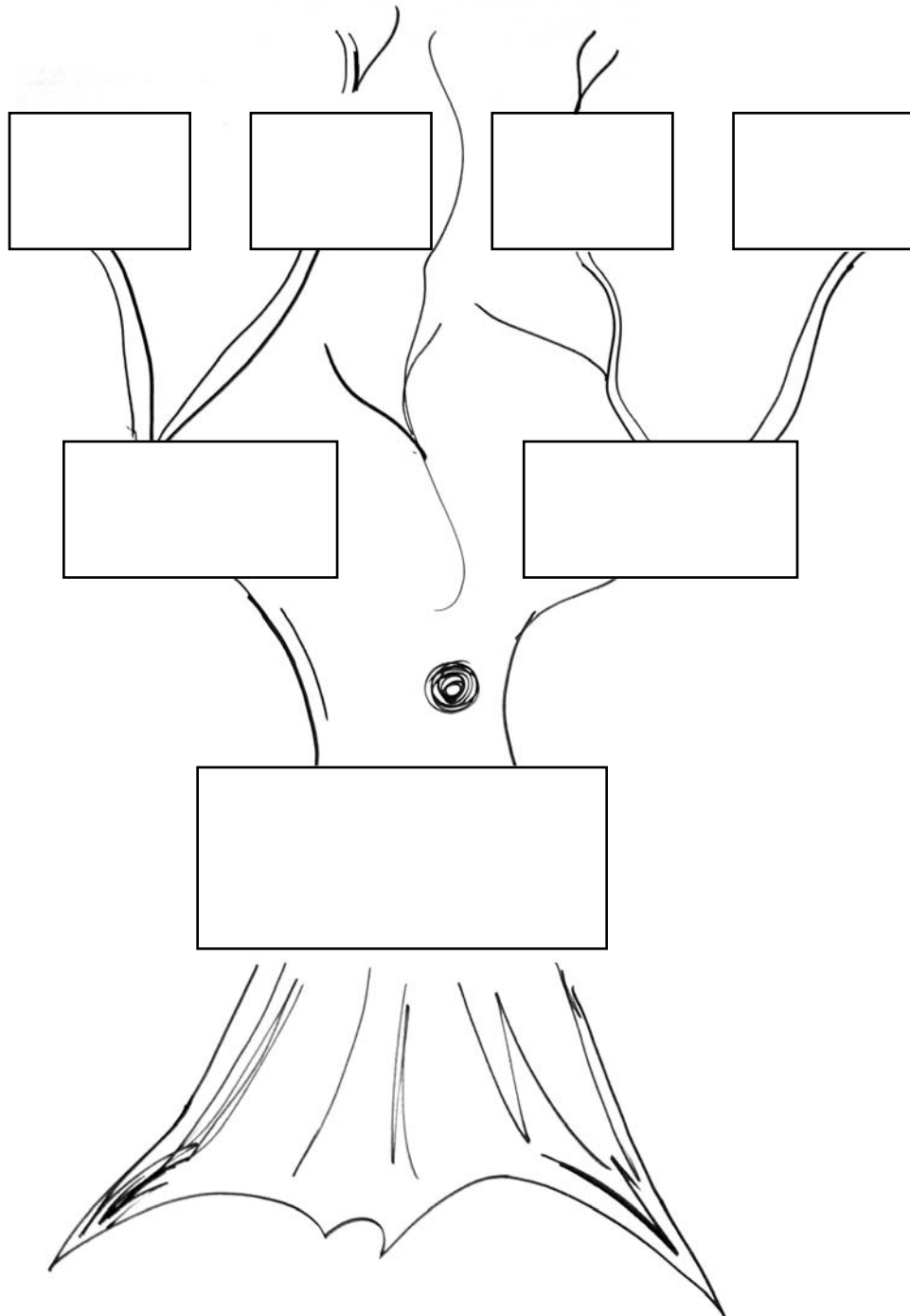
Now, let's see how I could branch that big topic into two little topics: Magic Kingdom and Epcot Center. Each one of these is a little easier to write about.

Maybe I can branch it off even more. I might write about the butterfly release at Epcot or the Davy Jones concert. Or I could branch off the Magic Kingdom topic and write about the Space Mountain ride or the Splash Mountain ride.

Branching off again, I could write about finding the little ducklings floating in the Splash Mountain ride and how I scooped them up out of the water so they wouldn't get squished by the logs. Now I've found the story I want to tell! I can put lots of details into this story. Not only that, I've got three more story ideas to tuck away in my topic pocket to use for another day.

Application: Have students work in pairs to complete a Topic Tree on a common topic. Photocopy the Topic Tree on the next page and provide each pair of students with a copy of it for guided practice. Have them practice skinning down a great big topic such as "Animals" or "My Second-Grade Year." They can tuck these Topic Trees into their topic pockets to use in a piece of writing on another day.

Topic Tree





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“I CAN WRITE A BOOK”

Developmental Levels: Emergent, Early

Traits: Ideas, Organization

Although students should not rely on formulas for writing, sometimes providing students with writing patterns and frameworks can help stimulate ideas for writing, introduce different structures for writing, and build confidence for reluctant writers. Patterned writing with beginning writers is a good way to demonstrate how to “stretch out” a piece of writing over several pages.

The lesson presented here is for emergent or early writers. Patterned writing may be also used with developing and fluent writers for specific purposes.

Introduction: Connecting this lesson to students’ experiences with guided reading texts is effective because these texts are patterned and predictable at this stage of literacy development. Revisit a familiar pattern book by reading it aloud or as a shared reading activity. (A predictable big book also can serve the same purpose.)

The author of the book *Sun Fun*, Elle Ruth Orav (2001), used a pattern to write her book. Each page starts with “I can put on my...” (see Figure 12A and B). Today, you’re going to learn how you can write a book like this one—one that “stretches” over several pages.

Instruction: Review the book you have chosen, and invite students to use the pattern to create their own writing.

Elle Ruth Orav’s book is all about what you put on to go out in the sun. Let’s make our own book about what we put on to go out in the snow. Here is the pattern that we will use for each page: “I can put on my....”

Staple four pages together to use as a demonstration booklet. Using a shared writing format, have the students help compose the text while you act as scribe and write each sentence on a separate page. Model how to add an illustration after you have written the text on each page. The purpose of this exercise is to focus on the text and then draw afterward.



FIGURE 12A AND B. Pattern Book Pages

A



B



From Orav, E.R. (2001). *Sun fun*. Ill. L. Quach. Toronto, ON: Curriculum Plus. Reprinted with permission.

Application: Give each student a four-page booklet to create his or her own pattern book. The first time students complete this activity, you may want to provide a photocopy of the patterned text for each student, which will enable them to focus on their own writing rather than copying the existing text. (See Table 10 for possible pattern ideas for this activity.) It may be necessary to brainstorm some potential ideas for adding to the text. Gradually decrease the support you give students as they work on more pattern books.

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TABLE 10. Ideas for Pattern Books

I can...	I am thankful for...
I like/love...	Dear Santa, thanks for the...
I don't like...	When I'm seven...
I saw...	Things I like
I am...	Things that are red
I am good at...	All about cats
After school, I like to...	At the zoo, you can see...
I went to...	At Halloween, you can see...
I like to eat...	My feet can...
I would like a...	My family is...
If I could, I would...	Ice cream is...
In my garden, I would plant...	

Many ideas for predictable books and charts also may be found in Hall, D.P., & Cunningham, P.M. (1997). *Month-by-month reading, writing, and phonics for kindergarten: Systematic, multilevel instruction for kindergarten*. Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa.

Some students will want to add more pages. Ask these students to tell you what they want you to write, and as long as they can articulate the detail, provide them with another page.

Extension: When students are comfortable with writing multipage books, present a minilesson on adding cover pages, which should include a title and the author's name. Adding "autograph pages" at the end of the book also encourages students to get a signature from everyone to whom they read the book—a great incentive for reading practice.

Making a book is a wonderful tool for the students' writing toolboxes—and many young writers will even want to make books on their own. (In this case, a minilesson on "one-click stapling" is probably in order: Put the corner of the page into the stapler, press the stapler down, and listen for one click.)



STICKY DOT DETAILS

Developmental Level: Early

Trait: Ideas

Most students do their first writing by simply labeling a picture. As they grow as writers, they need to learn to elaborate, or add more details to the topic. This minilesson uses a manipulative—sticky dots—as an incentive to add details to a topic. The dots are used to indicate the end of each detail.

Introduction: Connect this minilesson to students’ understanding of topics and details. Tell them that today they will be learning about adding more than one detail to a topic.

You have become very good at choosing a topic to write about and adding a detail about the topic. But good writers usually write more than one detail about a topic. In fact, sometimes they have lots of details! For example, if my topic is “Popcorn,” I might add details like, “It is my favorite snack, and it is white and fluffy like little clouds.” Today, you are going to learn about writing more than one detail about a topic.

Instruction: Go through the usual process for modeled writing, but place two sticky dots on the back of your hand. Tell the students that these dots are to help you remember to write two details. Model telling what your details are before you write them.

I’ve got lots of ideas for topics in my head right now, but today I’m going to write about the topic “What I Did on My Summer Holidays.” I know I’ve already used that topic, but sometimes I can use it again, if I have different ideas or more details to add. Just because you’ve used a topic once doesn’t mean you’ve used it up. I’m going to use it again because this time I have a few more things to tell.

So, that’s my topic—“What I Did on My Summer Holidays”—and now I need two details. My first detail is “I went camping in the mountains.” My second detail is “I saw a bear.”

Pretell your first detail, and then write it. Put one of your sticky dots at the end of the sentence (the detail). Then, review the second detail, write it, and place the other sticky dot at the end of that sentence. Be

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sure to model rereading after every few words to keep track of your thoughts.

Application: Tell students that now it is their turn to choose a topic and write two details. Require them to pretell their two details—either to the group or to a writing partner—before they get two sticky dots on the backs of their hands. When they can pretell what they are going to write and it is clear that they understand the concept of two details, give them their writing materials to begin. Give them a few minutes for writing before you “align” at each desk for a butterfly conference. As you visit each writer, ask him or her to read what was written. Then ask a few questions and invite the writer to tell more. If the student can add another detail, offer to give him or her one more dot.

Extension: Many students will pretell their details in complete sentences; other students will not—for example, a child who chooses a topic like “My Favorite Foods” might write a list such as “pepperoni pizza,” “chocolate chip cookies,” and so forth. At this point, the objective is to generate details, not write complete sentences.

In time, after the students have had practice adding several details to a topic, this is a good opportunity to make the transition from sticky dot details to writing sentences. Praise students who have written complete sentences, and invite others to see how they can turn a detail into a sentence.

How can we turn the details about “My Favorite Foods” into a sentence? Maybe “I love all kinds of pizza, but I love pepperoni the best” or “Chocolate chip cookies are my favorite dessert.”

Eventually, students will replace the sticky dots with periods. (See chapter 4, “Conventions,” for lessons on teaching sentences.)



FIVE-FINGER PLANNER

Developmental Levels: Early, Developing, Fluent

Traits: Ideas, Organization

The Five-Finger Planner is an organizer that can be used to help students generate several details about a topic. The organizer is in the shape of a hand, and students write the topic on the palm, one detail on each finger, and how they feel about the topic on the thumb. The organizer not only helps writers generate ideas, but it also introduces the idea of shaping a piece of writing with a concluding or “ending” sentence, which is based on how you feel about the topic.

Introduction: Connect this minilesson to previous lessons on adding details to a topic. It is a natural extension of the minilesson Sticky Dot Details.

Boys and girls, I've been noticing that you are including more and more details in your writing. Today, you're going to learn how to use a special writer's tool to help you think about several details about a topic before you write the whole piece. This tool is called a Five-Finger Planner. It's in the shape of a hand, and it's going to help you plan your writing.

Instruction: Demonstrate how to create this planner by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and modeling each step in the planning process as you think aloud (see Figure 13). You may want to have students trace each other's hands, or you can provide students with photocopies of the reproducible figure at the end of the minilesson.

On the palm of my hand drawing, I'm going to write my topic. Today, I'm going to write about the topic "My cat Cookie." On each finger, I need to write one detail about my topic. Let's see, my cat Cookie has bald eyebrows. I'll write, "has bald eyebrows" on the first finger. My cat Cookie has a skinny tail. I'll write, "has a skinny tail" on the next finger. I want to think of an idea that will surprise my reader. I know—Cookie likes to drink coffee! Isn't that funny? I'm going to write, "likes coffee" on the next finger. What else could I write? Hmmmm. I could write, "My aunt has a cat, too," but that's not about my cat Cookie. I need to stick to my topic. I'll write, "jumped in the bathtub." The last thing I need to write is on the thumb of the hand, and that's how I feel about the topic. I'll write, "is a funny cat, but I love her."

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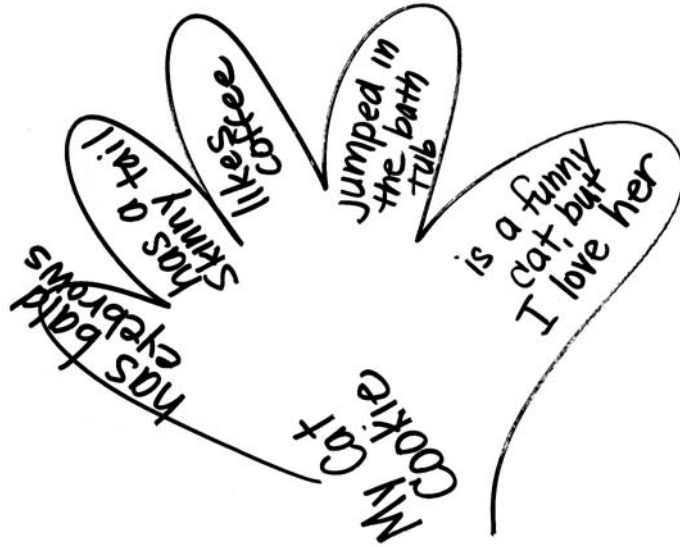


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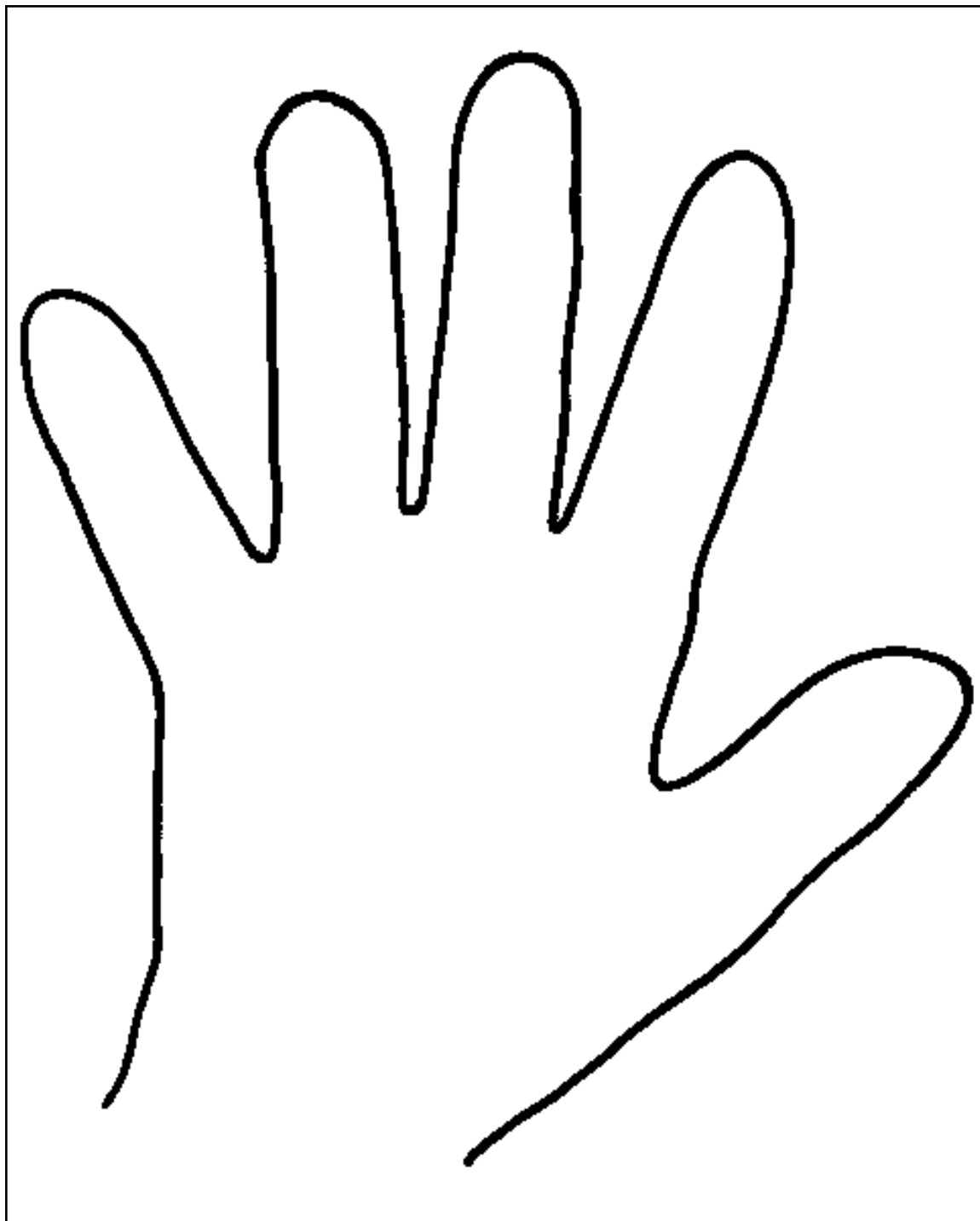
FIGURE 13. Five-Finger Planner Sample



Application: Guide students through the process of completing their own Five-Finger Planners. For example, tell students to write their topics on the palm of the hand outline and ensure that they have completed this step before moving on. Then, instruct students to write one detail about their topics on each finger. Again, circulate around the classroom and guide students as they compose their details. Finally, tell students to write how they feel about the topic on the thumb of the hand.

Extension: Provide the students with several opportunities to practice completing Five-Finger Planners before turning one into a draft. Students can store the extra planners in their topic pockets. Then, follow up with the minilesson Turn It Into a Story to demonstrate how to convert the details into connected text.

Five-Finger Planner



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STORM AND SORT

Developmental Levels: Early, Developing, Fluent

Traits: Ideas, Organization

Storm and Sort involves brainstorming ideas on individual cards, and then sorting and sequencing them before turning them into connected text. Sometimes brainstorming alone can lead to disjointed writing, as young students tend to simply record their ideas in the same random order in which they were conceived. Although older students can organize their ideas in a web, young students seem to have more difficulty visualizing this organizational structure. By writing their ideas on individual cards, then physically manipulating them, writers are able to create a structure for their writing before they actually begin to draft it.

Although this minilesson is designated for early writers and beyond, it can be conducted with emergent writers as a shared writing activity with the teacher acting as scribe.

Introduction: Connect this lesson to previous work on generating and organizing ideas for writing.

I have noticed that you are adding more and more details to your writing. I can hardly keep up with your sticky dot details [see Sticky Dot Details, p. 57]. Some of you don't have enough fingers on your Five-Finger Planners because you have so many ideas. Today, you are going to learn how to use another writer's tool to help you think of details about your topic before you write.

Brainstorming is a word we use for thinking of lots of ideas on a topic. The writer's tool you're going to learn is called Storm and Sort because you have to brainstorm all the ideas you can on a topic, and then you're going to sort those ideas. You can sort the ideas that belong together and then think about what order you want to use.

Instruction: Use modeled or shared writing to generate ideas on a familiar topic. Large sticky notes work well with this lesson; otherwise, you can make your own cards for writing ideas.

My topic today is "Family Fun Night at School." Here are several word cards. I'm going to write one detail about Family Fun Night on each of my cards.



I went on the hayride.

It cost a quarter for three tickets.

I dunked Mr. Johnstone in the dunk tank.

I got to pet the horse.

I had pizza and chocolate milk.

I went fishing for a yo-yo.

I threw a beanbag into a dish.

I bought some candy.

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Demonstrate sorting the ideas and sticking them on a large sheet of paper.

Wow, I have eight different details on my topic "Family Fun Night at School." But if I turn them into a story just the way they are, it will be a little mixed up for a reader. I know that I got to pet the horse when I went on the hayride, but my reader probably doesn't know that. So I need to put those two details together. I'm going to get a big sheet of paper and stick those two details in the same place, so I remember to write them together when I turn this into a story.

It was funny when we got to dunk Mr. Johnstone in the dunk tank! I'm going to put all the details about the games I played in another spot.

Complete the demonstration by sorting all of the details and pasting them on the large sheet (see Figure 14).

Application: Now have the students complete their own Storm and Sort exercise. You may want to have students work in pairs on a shared topic the first time they engage in this activity. By working with a partner, students can extend their ability to brainstorm details and their discussion helps consolidate their understanding.

Extension: After the students have had several opportunities to practice Storm and Sort, conduct a minilesson on how to turn the plan into connected text, as in the minilesson Turn It Into a Story.

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FIGURE 14. Storm and Sort Sample

Family Fun Night

What I did

I got to pet the horse.

I went on the hayride.

What I ate

I had pizza and chocolate milk.

I bought some candy.

Games

It cost a quarter for three tickets.

I threw a bean bag into a dish.

I dunked Mr. Johnstone in the dunk tank.

I went fishing for a YoYo.



3-2-1 PLANNER

Developmental Levels: Early (as a shared writing activity), Developing (with support), and Fluent

Traits: Ideas, Organization

The 3-2-1 Planner is a graphic organizer that represents *three* key ideas, *two* details for each idea, all on *one* topic. This graphic organizer helps writers organize a piece of writing into three parts, usually beginning, middle, and end, and then plan supporting details for each part. It helps writers ensure that all the key information is in place and unrelated details are omitted. This tool lends itself to narrative writing (personal and fictional narratives) but also is adaptable to informational writing.

Introduction: Connect this minilesson to students' experiences with generating many ideas on a topic.

Now that you are writing lots and lots of details on a topic, sometimes there are details that don't belong or that aren't quite in the right place. Before you draft a piece of writing, it is helpful to plan which main ideas and details you are going to include.

Today, you are going to learn how to use a special kind of planner called a 3-2-1 Planner to help you plan and organize your big ideas and details. 3-2-1 stands for three key ideas, two details for each, all on one topic.

Instruction: Use the 3-2-1 Planner at the end of the minilesson to model your own story plan.

Here's how to use the 3-2-1 Planner. I start with my topic in the first box. Then in the three boxes below, I write what happens at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the story.

THE DAY THE RAFT SANK

Julie and I snuck down to the slough and got on our raft.

The raft sank in the middle of the pond and we jumped off.

We hung our jeans in the tree house and sat in our underwear to wait for them to dry.

That's a pretty good start, kind of like the skeleton of my story. Now I'd better add some details to each of those key ideas. [Think aloud as you model completing the organizer. See Figure 15.]

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FIGURE 15. 3-2-1 Sample

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The Day the Raft Sank

Julie and I snuck down to the slough and got on the raft.

> A slough is a dirty old pond where cows drink.

> We were 10 years old and not allowed to go rafting on the slough.

The raft sank and we jumped off.

> the raft was an old waterlogged door

> slough wasn't too deep but our jeans were soaking wet.

We ~~sat~~ hung our jeans in the tree house and sat in our underwear to wait for them to dry.

> cold fall day

> shivering in our skivvies.

With this completed planner, now I can write my story without missing any important details or adding details that don't fit.

Application: Photocopy the 3-2-1 Planner, and provide each student with a copy to complete. Have students select a topic from their Writing Ideas Bingo cards to plan a piece of personal writing. (You may want to present this as a guided writing lesson and walk the students through each step of the process.)

Extension: The 3-2-1 Planner may be adapted to a variety of different forms of writing. For example, students can use the planner to prepare for informational writing, as shown in the following:

SNAILS

Body		Habits		Interesting Facts	
Fact 1:	Fact 2:	Fact 1:	Fact 2:	Fact 1:	Fact 2:
• have eyes on the end of their feelers	• carry their shell on their back	• move by making mucus for sliding	• breathe through a hole in their shell	• its body is called a foot	• leave a trail of mucus

3-2-1 Planner

Topic or starting sentence					
Beginning		Middle		End	
Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail	Detail

Adapted from Gould, J.S., & Gould, E. (1999). *Four Square Writing Method: A unique approach to teaching basic writing skills for grades 1-3*. Carthage, IL: Teaching and Learning.
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TURN IT INTO A STORY

Developmental Levels: Early, Developing, Fluent

Traits: Ideas, Organization, Conventions

This minilesson helps you model for students how to convert the notes from a prewriting organizer to connected text. Although the lesson modeled here follows the Five-Finger Planner, it may be conducted as a follow-up to any prewriting plan. Several writing elements are modeled in this lesson, including combining similar details, editing out repeated words, and writing a concluding statement.

Introduction: Connect this minilesson to students' previous work on the Five-Finger Planner. Show students how you choose one of your Five-Finger Planners and "turn it into a story" (see Figure 16).

We have been working for a few days on Five-Finger Planners. A planner is simply a list of details about a topic. Today, you are going to learn

FIGURE 16. Turn It Into a Story Sample

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows and a skinny tail. She likes coffee. One day she jumped in the bath tub. I think Cookie is a funny cat.



how to take the details from one of your Five-Finger Planners and turn it into a story. I think I've got some pretty interesting details on this planner about my cat Cookie, so I'm going to work with this one.

Instruction: Review each of the details on your planner and think aloud as you convert the details to connected text.

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows. My cat Cookie has a skinny tail.

I think I could combine those two details into one sentence because they're both about how Cookie looks. So I need to remember to use the word and.

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows and a skinny tail.

That's the end of that sentence, so I put a period there.

Now I want to put in the next detail, "my cat Cookie likes coffee." But I have to be careful about saying "my cat Cookie" too many times. It gets boring for a reader if I say the same thing over and over and over. So instead of "my cat Cookie" I think I'll say, "She likes to drink coffee." I'm just going to add that right on to the first detail. It's a new sentence, so I'll start with a capital letter and put a period at the end. I need to remember to leave a space between my lines in case I need to add something later.

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows and a skinny tail. She likes to drink coffee.

My next detail is "My cat Cookie jumped in the bathtub once." I think I'll say "she" again instead of "my cat Cookie." You know what, I think I'll start my sentence with "One day." And I'll just add that right on.

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows and a skinny tail. She likes to drink coffee. One day, she jumped in the bathtub.

And now I'm going to end with how I feel about Cookie. Remember on your Five-Finger Planner, you wrote about how you feel about the topic on the thumb of the hand.

My cat Cookie has bald eyebrows and a skinny tail. She likes to drink coffee. One day, she jumped in the bathtub. I think Cookie is a funny cat.

Application: Now provide the opportunity for students to select one of their Five-Finger Planners to turn into a piece of writing. You may want to review the important items students will need to remember when they write.

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You have a lot of things to remember when you turn your Five-Finger Planner into a story:

First, think about which detail you want to put first and next and so on. Second, you might want to combine two details into one sentence if they go together. Third, if you prefer not to, you don't have to put the details in the same order that you have them in on your Five-Finger Planner. Fourth, remember that it's not interesting for readers if you repeat the same words over and over, so think about using different beginnings for your sentences. Fifth, each new sentence needs to begin with a capital letter and end with a period. And finally, make sure to leave a space between each line in case you want to add something later.

As the students are writing, circulate among them to offer guidance and support.

