

## Teaching Informational Writing in the First Grade Classroom

By Jeannie Muthard

Although writing standards are a part of the instructional calendar in my district, I find that a lot of my colleagues feel hesitant about teaching writing because they "don't know how." Our school is making an effort to change this through the LVWP, in-services, and providing time for grade-level teaching teams to talk about writing. This year, we started using student writing folders and a standard rubric to assess writing. The goal is for all students to be evaluated in the same way. A lot of time and energy have been invested during the Lehigh Valley Writing Project experience reading, talking about, and creating narrative pieces. Since I am required to instruct my students on how to write informational as well as narrative modes of writing, I would like to take some time to wrap my brain around this genre. In order to accomplish the goal of teaching writing well, specifically informational writing, one needs to have a clear understanding of its components, value, and how to teach it.

According to Lucy Calkins and Laurie Pessah (p. V), non-fiction writing includes procedural, informational, and persuasive writing. As my district asks us to select between the narrative, informational, and persuasive modes; for my professional purposes I will lump informational and procedural under the informational heading.

Through reading books by Calkins, Pessah, Fletcher, and Portalupi; I understand that while both narrative and informational writing can be taught using the writing process, certain portions of the writing process may be highlighted in different ways in informational writing than in narrative writing. Informational writing may have the power to show students the value of some of the six writing traits that may not be clear to them through narrative writing. Whenever you apply a learned skill in different ways, to various modes of writing for example, your learning becomes more sophisticated.

Procedural writing requires a child to be able to clearly communicate how to do something. Calkins and Pessah explain, "To write a How-To book, a child recalls a procedure he or she can do and then lays out the directions for that procedure, starting at the beginning and proceeding in a step-by-step and explicit fashion to the end" (p.V). Perhaps a student who learns how to write a highly organized How-To book can transfer this skill to his or her

narrative writing. Maybe a student who doesn't understand what organization means in terms of narrative writing will see its importance through the development of a procedural piece.

Procedural writing forces students to write with explicit detail and to write for an audience (Calkins and Pessah, p. V). The idea of writing for an audience becomes clear to young writers through a How-To book that is shared with others. The teacher can explain what audience is and the audience can follow along with the student's writing step by step. The idea of audience is abstract usually, but in procedural writing it can be made concrete. Can the readers understand how to do what you have written, or does the writer have to go back and revise? The revision step becomes important in the mind of the child if the instructions are not clear. I can hear a child say, "No, that's not how you do it!" "Well, that's how you wrote it!" I would reply. Imagine the child rushing to his or her seat to revise his or her writing to make it clear.

I can think of other procedural writing formats that also have value such as recipes, assembly directions, and traveling directions. Wouldn't it be exciting to use some of these formats as pre-writing and interest-building activities during a unit about procedural writing?

Informational writing includes reports, feature articles, and non-fiction books. Calkins and Pessah have developed a unit on writing All-About books. Calkins and Pessah say that in order for children to develop the writing and thinking skills that will enable them to tackle more sophisticated work in later grades, we need to teach K-2 students "accountable talk" which means that they can talk about things that they are reading and learning about. They also point out the need for K-2 students to write informational text effectively.

If a child can take a topic like seagulls, divide it into sub-topics, and write with structure, clarity, sequence, and information about those sub-topics, he or she will have the writing muscles necessary to do similar work when the topic is "Hatchet and My Side of the Mountain are both stories of boys who like to think they can go it alone" (p.VI).

How do you start to teach informational writing to first grade students? Calkins and Pessah recommend that the teacher starts with having students write about what they know, next students can write about a whole-class inquiry project, finally young writers can learn to divide their topic into sub-topics that can become separate chapters in a book (p. V-VI).

Informational writing on the part of students does not have to be dull.

There are many lessons, rubrics, and checklists available for the teacher of informational writing. My school has restructured our teaching day, so we have an "extra" thirty minutes to teach writing. I plan on using materials from Calkins, Pessah, Portalupi, and Fletcher during this time next year.

What is the value of teaching non-fiction writing? Students will be asked to write reports, take notes, and defend their ideas in late elementary school. Calkins and Pessah explain that it is our job as primary teachers to "...plan a sequence of opportunities that will equip them by moving them step-by-step along 'a gradient of difficulty' in non-narrative writing" (p.V). "We need to create classrooms in which they can learn more about the subjects that interest them, and can write about them in a way that is appropriate to their age level" (Portalupi and Fletcher, p. 19). Ways to do this include reading and listening to books about a subject, writing down things you have learned about the subject, and talking about what you are learning with others (Portalupi and Fletcher, p. 11). This sounds like what we are doing in the LVWP!

There are a number of resources for teachers to use to help them develop lesson plans and units to teach informational writing. For that reason, I will not provide a laundry list here. However, there is an interesting piece in Fletcher's book, What a Writer Needs, that I think explains a way of teaching, or rather of allowing informational writing to be learned. Fletcher states that while most informational writing is writing that "transmits information; the writing has authority and expertise" (p. 77); the goal is for this to be done in a "...strong, unpretentious prose that will carry their (students') thoughts about the world they live in." (p. 77) In other words, good informational writing has meaning to the writer. It is not a regurgitation of sources, but rather carries with it the writer's voice. How is this to be done? There is a whole type of exploratory writing that needs to take place between research and the final copy. Fletcher says that this writing might include "learning logs, interview questions on a subject, hypotheses or guesses, diagrams, notes, maps or informal outlines." Fletcher talks about how he writes a piece. He does all sorts of exploratory writing and then...

"unfortunate friends got dragged to the local pastry shop (my treat) so I could tell them what I'd been learning. I was trying to get comfortable with all the new material; I needed time to talk about it until I could hear myself speaking naturally, with voice." (p.78)

After he reaches that place, he writes his final copy. I know I was not taught that in school. What a magical step of informational writing! I know I don't want to miss it with my students.

Next school year is approaching and I am thinking of my first grade students and what I will teach them. Maybe I will teach them procedural writing in November. It depends on the writing skills they show me in the beginning of the year. I can envision modeling informational writing in March and giving them the opportunity to experience informational writing in April and May. Picturing them interviewing a family member for a biography piece and researching an insect while we are studying them in science gets me excited to go back to the classroom. I think the most important thing that I have learned while writing this paper is that students need to be given the time to do exploratory writing and to talk, talk, talk, about what they are learning. That is the only way for them to write informational pieces that are meaningful to them and are well written. I keep thinking of Fletcher in a donut shop bending the ear of a friend about a subject that he is reading about. It is the same with me and how I talk to my colleagues and my husband about what I am learning. I have to talk things through before I can understand them. Children need to be given the same opportunity. I think they will love it.

## Bibliography

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