

# Writing in Response to Reading

In creating the instructional program Writing in Response to Reading, teachers in River Forest, Illinois, devised an original method of assessment.

Three years ago, we teachers of the River Forest Public Schools in Illinois, were pondering new ways to encourage our students to write. In doing so, we found ourselves breaking new ground in reading and writing assessment.

Although we had often used reading to motivate or to provide models for writing, we usually taught reading and writing separately. But after looking at the evidence for the view that reading and writing share common essential skills, we began to understand how attention to both affects the thinking process underlying them (Raphael and Englett 1988).

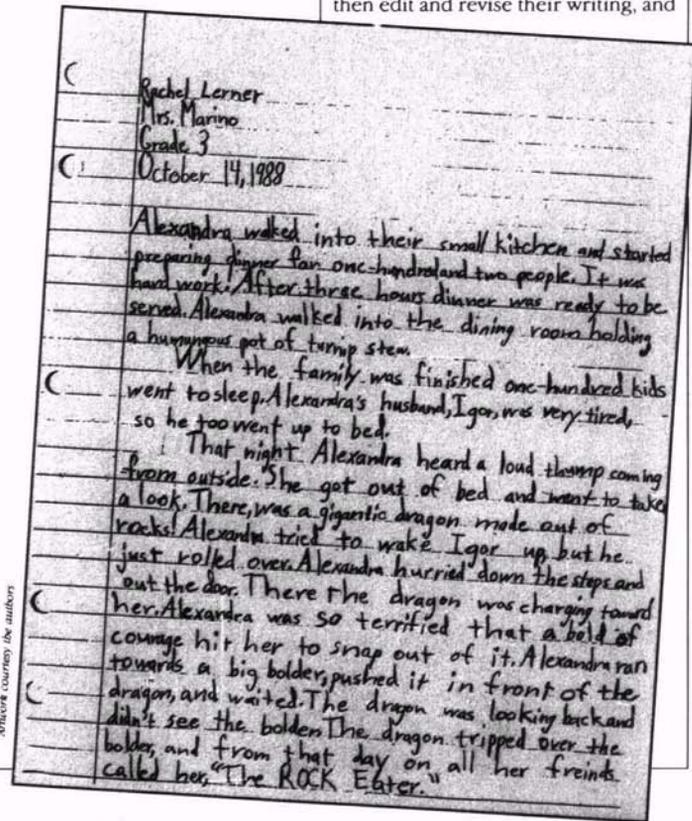
## Developing Our Own Instructional Program

We decided to create a program that would use reading as a prompt for writing and writing as an indicator of how well the reading was understood. Initially we agreed to focus on three types of writing.

- **Retelling.** Retelling, and at higher levels, synthesizing, are valuable methods to promote reading comprehension.
- **Extending.** We had experienced some success with having children write as a means of extending things they had read; many of our students were familiar with writing new beginnings, new events, or predicted endings.
- **Critiquing.** We were eager to promote critical thinking by involving students in critiquing ideas they encountered in reading.

After identifying reading selections that would successfully prompt these three general types of writing, we began trying out the new emphasis that first semester.

During that first semester, we read student compositions aloud without indicating who the authors were. The students discussed each piece critically, and its author was free to claim it or let it pass anonymously. They could then edit and revise their writing, and



the new versions could be critiqued again. At the same time, we began collecting writing samples into individual portfolios. We used a variety of teaching strategies: sometimes students wrote with a partner; sometimes discussion was conducted between partners or in small groups rather than with the whole class; sometimes the teacher scored papers and discussed them with individual students; and sometimes the teacher read only a few examples aloud.

### **Applying the Connection Across the Grades**

We called our new program Writing in Response to Reading, and we began to use it in all grade levels. In kindergarten, retelling and extension sessions took place with the whole class. The teacher read a story and the children would retell it aloud while the teacher wrote their version on the board. In the lower primary grades, verbal composing and group writing experiences preceded students' writing on their own.

In the higher grade levels, students were assigned a greater variety of writing tasks, which emphasized the development of specific writing skills. Their writing frequently served as a springboard for further instruction in communication skills. In all grades, teachers emphasized appreciation of an author's style and the ability to write in that style.

### **Recognizing the Need for Evaluation**

By the end of the first year, language instruction in River Forest schools had become much more process oriented. Workbooks were used less throughout the system; in fact, they had become almost obsolete in some classrooms. We were excited about our results, but concerned that our emphasis on the process was not reflected in the district's formal assessment of reading and writing, which for the most part evaluated isolated skills with multiple-choice items. Even writing was assessed with multiple-choice test items that focused primarily on sentence-level mechanics.

## **Students are given the chance to develop their abilities as critical thinkers in peer critiques that promote social learning.**

We were evaluating our progress in the same way that we had taught reading and writing in the past: separately. So, we decided to develop assessment that both matched and could measure our new emphasis in instruction. We also wanted to assess how well our students were attaining goals that could be reasonably and consistently defined from assignment to assignment, student to student, class to class, year to year, and ultimately, from grade to grade. The school board and administrators supported this consensus, and, as a result, we became much more comfortable with the program and our intentions. Gradually, we decided that evaluating Writing in Response to Reading would involve the development of grade-level prompts, which could be administered at the beginning and the end of the school year. We then needed to find some dependable way to compare the results.

### **Building Our Criteria**

We would, of course, need guides to consistent evaluation of the student writing collected from the fall and spring test administrations. We decided that teachers in grades 3, 6, and 8 would work within grade levels to establish these for the initial assessment. In the second year of the project, teachers in

all grade levels did so, and we began to work to make the criteria (often called rubrics) and system more consistent across grade levels.

With enthusiastic support from our administrators, teachers selected the prompts and prepared the instructions to be used at each grade level. After the activity was administered systemwide, they met within grade levels to develop the criteria, then developed scales for the factors selected and decided on descriptions that distinguished one rating from another. Then, with such a rubric charted and in front of him or her, a teacher could read the written work of children and assign each piece a rating number. We'd be able to assess the reliability of our scoring by having different teachers judge the same writing samples and then compare their ratings.

The following rubric developed for grade 3 is an example of those developed across the system. The prompt passage was taken from a story entitled "Alexandra the Rock-Eater" by Dorothy Van Woerkom in the book by Clymer and others, *Ride the Sunrise* (1982).

The story is a fable about a couple who end up protecting their brood of 100 children from a dragon by tricking it. In the segment used, however, the dragon is mentioned only in the "directions" above the title, and is shown in the artwork used with the prompt. The title contains the only reference to the way the dragon is tricked. The artwork used also shows some of the children doing many things, including eating.

The segment tells how the couple are first childless and, finding themselves with plenty of turnips for food, wish successfully to become the parents of many children.

The 3rd grader is instructed to write the next part of the story. The papers from the initial administration of the activity were used to develop this rubric for extension writing (fig. 1).

Note that the rubric developed for this grade level rates each piece of writing on four general aspects, which span the rating numbers with descriptions horizontally. The first two—how well the story appears to have been understood and how well the writing is connected to the prompt—can be

Fig. 1. Anchor Points Criteria—3rd Grade

Rating Aspects	1	2	3	4	5	6
Comprehension	Does not understand the story.	Has some understanding of the story.	Good understanding of the story.	Good comprehension of the story.	Good comprehension of the story.	Excellent comprehension of the story.
Connection to Story (Prompt)	Writing does not have connection to the story.	Writing has some development of a complete story and some connection to the story.	Writing has a connection to the story.	Writing has a connection to the story.	Writing has a connection to the story.	Writing has a complete connection to the story.
Structure	Writing does not give a complete ending to the story.	Writing gives an ending to the story.	Writing gives an ending to the story.	Beginning to develop ideas and main idea.	Good development of ideas and main idea. Writing stays with the same subject. Good sentence structure. Good story development.	Great development of ideas and main idea. Writing is creative. Superior word use. Variety in sentence pattern. Complete story—beginning, middle, and end.
Use of Reading Strategies			Weak story development. Does not incorporate the following reading strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predicting</li> <li>• Use of picture clues</li> <li>• Use of title</li> <li>• Use of introduction</li> </ul>	Story development—beginning, middle, and ending. Does not incorporate strategies.	Uses some reading strategies.	Complete use of reading strategies.

rated using the numbers 1–6, but the descriptions do not distinguish the ratings 3, 4, and 5. Unless the rater can give the effort a 1, 2, or 6, he or she must consider the other two aspects below these two.

The third aspect considers the structure of the story, beginning with whether the writing supplies an ending to the story and going on to a sense of beginning, middle, and end. The fourth aspect—use of reading strategies—is used to rate the story for indications that the child has used strategies associated with good reading. The rater must decide how well main ideas are developed. Topic focus, a sense of style, and story development are additional considerations. All these help distinguish among compositions that rate 3, 4, or 5.

### Selecting Anchors

To further assist teachers with rating compositions; the teachers designing

the criteria also identified samples of actual writing efforts—*anchors*—that represent the ratings of 1–6. So, in addition to the rubric above, a teacher rating papers has the set of *anchor* papers to help in the task. The following paper (printed here exactly as the student wrote it), which is the anchor for a rating of 6, demonstrates all of the qualities described under the 6 rating:

Alexandra walked into their small kitchen and started preparing dinner for one-hundred and two people. It was hard work! After three hours dinner was ready to be served. Alexandra walked into the dining room holding a humungous pot of turnip stew.

When the family was finished one-hundred kids went to sleep. Alexandra's husband, Igor, was very tired, so he too went up to bed.

That night Alexandra heard a loud thump coming from outside. She got out of bed and went to take a look. There, was a gigantic dragon made out of rocks! Alexandra tried to wake Igor up, but he just rolled

over. Alexandra hurried down the steps and out the door. There the dragon was charging toward her. Alexandra was so terrified that a bold of courage hit her to snap out of it. Alexandra ran towards a big bolder, pushed it in front of the dragon, and waited. The dragon was looking back and didn't see the bolder. The dragon tripped over the bolder, and from that day on all her freinds called her, "The ROCK Eater."

### Weighing the Positive Results

By the end of the year, the prompts were administered systemwide again, and teachers met within grade levels to score all the papers. Not only did they find remarkably improved writing, but they also reported that the rating process was much easier than at the beginning of the year. The rubric and anchors for each grade had systemized the procedure and made holistic scoring more consistent and efficient.

Further, the administration has accepted these assessments as a district evaluation of reading comprehension

and writing abilities. The school system is working with the teachers to educate the community about the value of this kind of assessment and instruction. We share the scoring criteria for the three types of writing with parents at conferences, along with samples of their child's work.

Our experience in developing our program has confirmed that:

- Reading and writing are closely tied to thinking abilities: summarizing what one reads by writing about it involves synthesis and analysis. Extension demands synthesis, and a critique demands analysis for evaluation.

- Instruction, practice, and assessment are interlocked aspects of teaching and learning, and they ought to be compatible—if not the same—activities.

- Reading and writing are very personal behaviors, enhanced when the student retains ownership of the activities that develop language abilities rather than when imposed by teachers.

- Language development crosses all disciplines and subject areas.

### Considering Some Important Concerns

Writing in Response to Reading is not complete. Teachers have begun to organize a curriculum that includes samples and ideas for selecting reading prompts and presenting questions that initiate the written student response. All types of writing are being incorporated into the program, and Writing in Response to Reading has spread across the curriculum to social studies, science, and the arts.

The River Forest program now faces the new challenge of coordinating objectives across grade levels. New teachers will need ample information about the program and some inservice training to help them learn to use Writing in Response to Reading effectively and easily. Parents and the community will continue to need information about the program.

The River Forest program places extensive student input in the instructional process, goal setting, and evaluation criteria. It encourages peer

reaction and other cooperative learning techniques that emphasize social learning. Students are given the chance to develop their abilities as critical thinkers in peer critiques that promote social learning. The activity makes students aware of what constitutes good or poor reading and writing and encourages them to set new goals for themselves.

The emphasis on the reading/writing connection in the River Forest School District is one that all teachers welcomed. However, the development of a means of assessment of student progress was essential to the success of the program. When the administration and teachers in the district began to feel comfortable with using actual reading/writing results as an important aspect of the district's evaluation program, the teachers felt more at ease in moving away from isolated practice and into integrated, more holistic reading/writing activities. □

 Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

## WHOLE LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM SUMMER 1990 WORKSHOPS

- Join in a four-day celebration of literacy.
- Investigate the successful New Zealand model for teaching reading and writing.
- Reaffirm your commitment to child-centered learning.

Summer 1990 workshops are scheduled for the following areas:

JUNE 11-14 KNOXVILLE, TN

JULY 16-19 LONG BEACH, CA

JUNE 18-21 ATLANTA, GA

JULY 16-19 FAIRFAX, VA

JUNE 25-28 DENVER, CO

JULY 23-26 HOUSTON, TX

JUNE 25-28 PHOENIX, AZ

JULY 23-26 NASHUA, NH

JULY 9-12 COLUMBUS, OH

AUG 6-9 LONG ISLAND, NY

JULY 9-12 DANBURY, CT

For further information write or call: 135 Katonah Avenue  
Katonah, New York 10536  
(800) 336-5588

### References

Clymer, T., and R. Indrisano, D.D. Johnson, P.D. Pearson, and R.L. Venezky. (1982). *Ride the Sunrise*. Boston: Ginn and Co.  
Raphael, T. E., and C. S. Englett. (April 1988). "Integrating Writing and Reading Instruction," Occasional Paper No 118. East Lansing, Mich.: The Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University.

**Roger Farr** is Director, Center for Reading and Language Studies, and Associate Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47401. **Mary Lewis, Jean Faschholz, Ellen Pinsky, and Sarah Towle** are Teachers in the River Forest School System. **Judy Lipschutz** is Principal of Willard Elementary School, and **Betty Pruitt Faulds** is Principal of Lincoln Elementary School, both in the River Forest School District. The River Forest School District Administration Building is located at 7776 Lake St., River Forest, IL 60305.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.