

## WRITING ACTIVITY #6 OPEN-ENDED WRITING ACTIVITIES

### LEARNER EXPECTATION

Having open-ended writing activities ensures that all levels of writing development are accommodated in a single classroom. Open-ended writing activities allow some students to go beyond the confines of a particular writing activity if they wish. Other students can have a writing activity structured in a way that allows them success when they might otherwise have difficulty.

### BACKGROUND

By bringing an open-ended aspect to all the writing activities students do, teachers have a better opportunity to meet students' needs as writers. One teacher-researcher points out, "My students are my curriculum. I want to nurture that uniqueness, not standardize my classroom so that the students become more and more alike, their aim to pass minimum competency tests" (Rief, 1989).

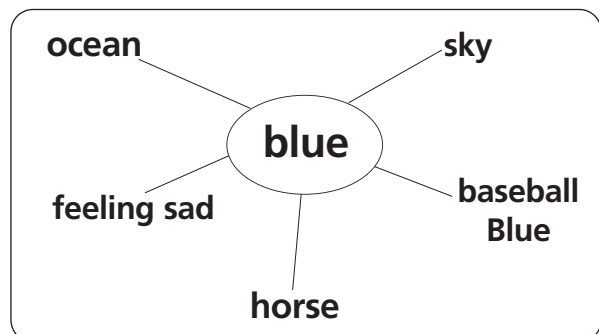
Writing Activities #1 and #2 are examples of open-ended writing activities. Writing "Who Are You?" stories and "Family" stories allow students to sample a variety of responses based upon their own experiences. Students can engage in these kinds of writing even if they do not know how to spell: they are using writing and drawing to express themselves. Each story is different, because each writer is different.

### DESCRIPTION

- Examine the writing activity or assignment that students are working on, and ask yourself, "How can students demonstrate their individuality through this work?"
- Try to ensure that final written products are not identical.
- Encourage students to suggest ways that the writing activities could be changed to meet their own needs and interests.
- Provide students with choices of ideas, topics, and forms for their writing.

Encourage students to write on topics of interest to them through prewriting. One prewriting activity is brainstorming. Individually, with a partner, or in small groups, have students list on paper as many topics or ideas as they can write about. For many students, this is as much encouragement as they need to identify a topic for writing. For others, you might demonstrate how to find a topic that is personally relevant to them.

In such a demonstration, write a word, such as *blue*, in large letters on the board or on chart paper. With your class, brainstorm ideas that come to mind when thinking of this word, and create a mind map or word web. The board might look like this:



This activity shows how one word can be interpreted in many ways. Tell students that only the writer can decide which topic is interesting enough to write about. Also tell students that the writer chooses the form of writing to use. For example, one writer might create a poem about the word *blue*, focusing on feelings. Another writer might create a story about going to a Blue Jays game, and still another might write a factual piece about his horse, Blue. In this open-ended writing activity, students make decisions (with help when needed) about ideas, topics, and forms for their writing. More important, the writing they produce is unique and accurately demonstrates their own level of writing development.

### **NEXT STEP**

If students are writing fantasy stories, show them and read to them a variety of fantasy-type books, such as fairy tales, ghost stories, *pourquoi* tales, science fiction, and others. Have students choose the type of fantasy story they want to write.

## **S T O R Y   B O X**

### **POETRY AS AN OPEN-ENDED ACTIVITY**

As a grade-one teacher, I can remember working very hard to make a beautiful poster (colored and laminated) entitled, "I Like Bugs." Bugs were described using adjectives such as *like, big, green, ugly, tiny, spotted, and fantastic*. After chanting the poem several times and pointing out the adjectives, I handed out pages of the copied-out poem with blanks for all the adjectives. I suggested to the students that they "make their own" poems about bugs by writing in the adjectives wherever they wanted to. In retrospect, the students were not making their own poems about bugs at all. They were simply recopying the words in a different order to create the illusion that they had created their own poems. At the time, this was pointed out to me in a rather unceremonious way, when one student simply refused to do the work and offered the honest explanation, "This is boring!" Now, it's very likely that some students in my class benefited from the structure provided. But I first needed to find out which students needed explicit structuring for writing and which students would take risks and discover things about writing for themselves. In my early years of teaching, I wish I had had the benefit of Marie Clay's (1993) words:

"Be careful not to establish a pattern where the student waits for the teacher to do the work. This is the point at which the student must learn that he must work at a difficulty, take some initiative, make some links."

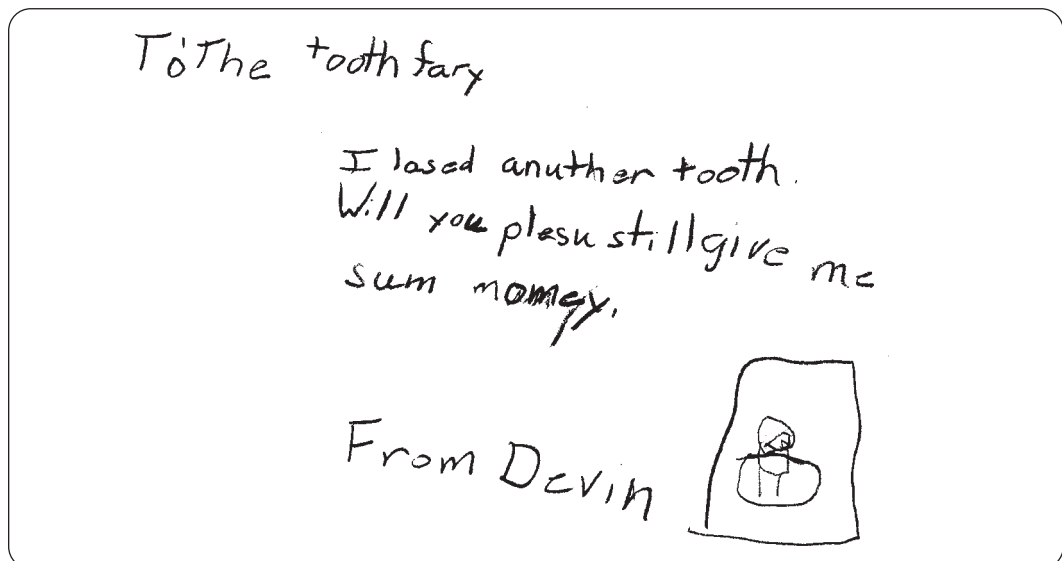
## YES, BUT...

*Don't some students need writing frames and story starters to be successful? Is copying ever okay?*

According to many researchers, students do rely on copying as a way to learn how to write. They copy print from the environment or from reading material to make a story. One teacher described her experience with copying in a grade-one classroom: She was giving a lesson to introduce journal writing to her young students. She showed the students their new journals (half the page was lined and the other half was blank). She asked them to do some writing so that she could write something back to them. She gave some examples and said, "You could tell me about something you like to do." Once the students had their new books, most began to write eagerly. However, a few students looked around at their classmates and appeared unsure about how to proceed. The teacher went over to each student individually and asked, "What would you like to write?" These particular students indicated that they would like to copy some printing from the board. The teacher encouraged them to copy the print, recognizing that some students needed more structure than others in writing activities. Over time, and as students' confidence builds, the teacher gradually helps them to rely less and less on copying.

Researchers suggest that some students rely on copying before they have developed an awareness of the connection between letters and sounds (Clay, 1975). A student in grade one, whom I recently observed, often copied the alphabet into her writing book. This girl apparently relied on the alphabet surrounding her classroom as a means to produce writing for her teacher. Her actions demonstrate an understanding that writing consists of letters; she also shows a somewhat less mature understanding of the correlation between letters and sounds. Through their copying behaviors, students demonstrate their level of understanding about writing.

However, as a teaching strategy, copying is not helpful to a young student's overall development as a writer. In his book, *The Meaning Makers*, Gordon Wells (1986) calls young students "re-inventors" of language. He refers to students' ability to learn how to speak their first language, not by mimicking or copying other speakers, but by trying



**Figure 4.5.** In this sample, a seven-year-old student uses writing to communicate his own message.

out their own combinations to get what they want. The same can be said for writing. The writing sample in figure 4.5 shows a student who is trying to use writing for his own purposes. Consequently, the writing may appear to be mistake-ridden to the adult eye. But upon closer examination, a message is being communicated, and the writer is showing us what he knows about letter-sound correspondence.

When young students copy perfectly what we have written for them to imitate, we are lulled into a false sense that these same students now understand the spelling, spacing, punctuation, and purpose of that writing. If story starters and copying are used in the classroom, the teacher can ask students if this is helpful to them as they learn to write. A seven-year-old who says, “The teacher’s ideas are all right, but I have better ones to write about,” does not need a story starter. But a student who is reluctant to begin writing without such assistance may be helped by these aides. Students, as always, help teachers make appropriate decisions about how to proceed with story starters and copying.