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# Constructivist Teaching by Heart

## *Newsletter, May 2025*

*"Putting the child at the center of their learning."*

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*\*\*\*This is the second in a two-part series on writing instruction, where Dana and Krista each take a part. Analyzing children's writing development showcases what children know and where they are in their literacy learning. Our two-month focus on writing comes from our belief that writing is one of the most constructivist learning processes children possess.*

### **Stages of Writing: A Developmental Approach to Writing Assessment**



As a follow-up to our April newsletter, I (Dana) would like to explore the assessment of writing. I use stages of writing to assess where children are in their writing development. These stages illustrate the predictable levels that children achieve in their learning. Understanding the order of these levels provides us with insight into what a child currently knows and, more importantly, what they are ready to learn next. While we cannot determine exactly how long it will take for a child to move to another level, this framework helps us understand how we can support them in progressing.

#### SCALE OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Level 1 Child attempts to write in scribbles or draws patterns.

Level 2 Child pretends to write. Writes in mock letters over the page.

Level 3 Child copies words he sees around the room. Letters are in line across the page.

Level 4 Child has a message and asks the adult to write it for him. Letters don't match sounds.

Level 5 Child labels drawings. Letters have connections to sounds. Child writes lists. Child separates words with a space or marker. Child writes a message. Child writes familiar words.

Level 6 Child invents spellings. Story is a single factual statement.

Level 7 Child writes the start of a story. Child uses both phonics and sight strategies to spell words. Child writes several short sentences.

Level 8 Child writes a short story with beginning, middle and end. Child makes revisions to a story. Child begins to use punctuation.

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Level 9 Writing includes details, dialogue, sense of humor or other emotions. Child retells a familiar story or follows the pattern of a known story or poem.

Level 10 Child is willing to revise and edit. Child writes creatively. Child writes original poetry. Child writes clearly. Child use more complete punctuation.

Level 11 Child uses a variety of strategies for revisions and editing. Child uses writing techniques to build suspense, create humor, etc.

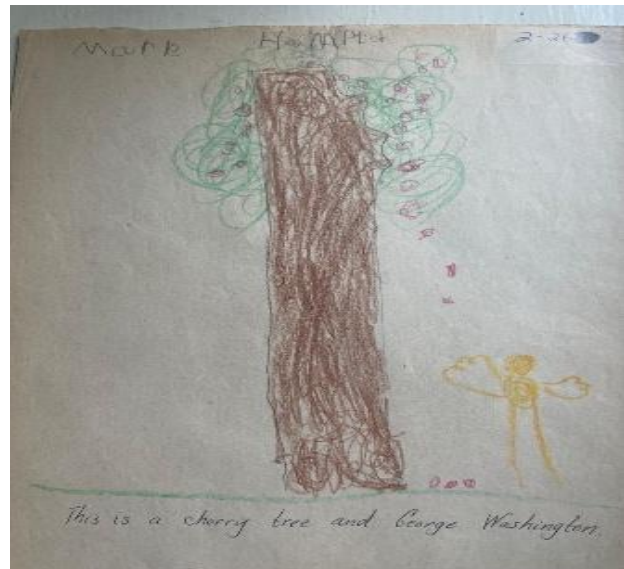
I love helping grade-level teams use these stages to assess their students' writing development. Some of the most enriching discussions occur when a group of teachers analyzes their students' work for this purpose. To begin, collect several writing samples from one or two children, noting the dates on their work. Then, make copies of the Scale of Writing stages from page 1. During your grade-level meeting, each teacher can present their students' writing samples. Discuss where the child currently stands in their writing journey, and then examine the next level to enhance the conversation about how to encourage the child to improve their writing skills.

Let me demonstrate exactly how this process works. I have writing samples from Mark, which span from pre-K to the end of first grade. You can see Mark's development in writing over time, and his writing also provides insight into his interests and aspects of his social development. Although I have not had the privilege of meeting Mark, I feel as if I have learned some things about him during his early years simply by reading what he wrote.

In pre-K, Mark drew pictures of what he knew about and was interested in, such as Ninja Turtles, hamsters, and cockroaches. Moving on to Kindergarten, Mark's drawings were carefully collected with the date and an explanation by his teacher.

In February of his Kindergarten year, the teacher read a story about George Washington cutting down a cherry tree. Mark's writing (above right) from that day shows that he understood the cherry tree, but the picture of George Washington indicates that he was unclear about that figure.

Mark dictated this message to his teacher: "This is a cherry tree and George Washington." I would assess that Mark is at Level 4.



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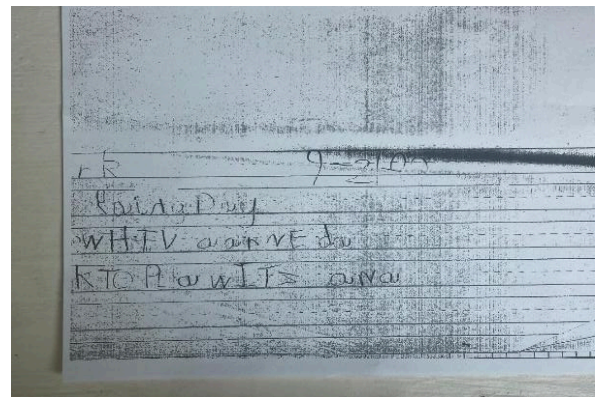
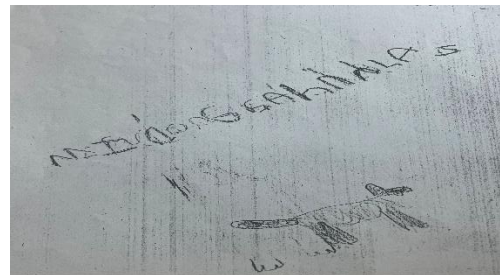
A few months later, Mark does a piece on one of his favorite topics Batman and Robin, and he labels them himself. Now he has moved to Level 5.

By the end of Kindergarten, I have a piece from him showing what appears to be an apartment building with suitcases outside. Although there is no writing, this picture can offer a significant hint about Mark's life at that time.

At the beginning of first grade, it seems that Mark may have lost a level or two over the summer vacation. This is not surprising to those of us who teach in the early primary grades, as this occasionally happens. This piece is hard to decipher, but the teacher kindly noted on the back what Mark told her it said: "My dog stands on his hind legs." Although it appears to be a string of letters, upon closer inspection, you can see that Mark started the "sentence" with a capital letter 'M' for "my," and "doog" is present with a backward 'd' and a capital 'G'. We could debate his level, and that's what makes these discussions so rich, but I believe he is between Level 3 and 4. What we want to look for in his upcoming pieces is whether he can make more connections between sounds and separate the words in his sentences.

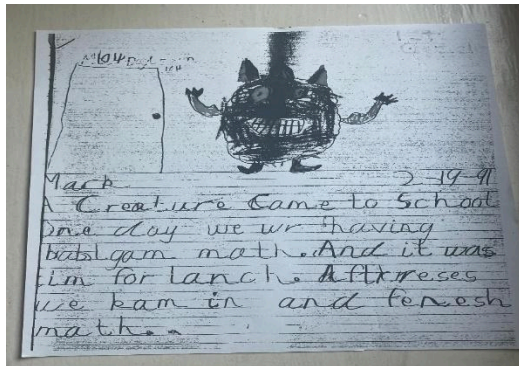
The next example is from just a month into first grade. Here, Mark's writing is separated into words. I suspect the teacher provided the topic, and while most of the words are difficult to decipher, he now understands that words need to be separated. The capital letters are used sporadically, and there is no punctuation, so I would assess this piece at Level 5.

However, just three months later, we see Mark making significant leaps in his writing with his story titled "How to Make a Sowman." Last month, Krista wrote about the strategy of encouraging kids to write how-to stories, and that is what Mark has accomplished. Writing about how to make a snowman is perfect for a first grader living in the Midwest, and he delivers it with the correct sequence and necessary details. Each word is



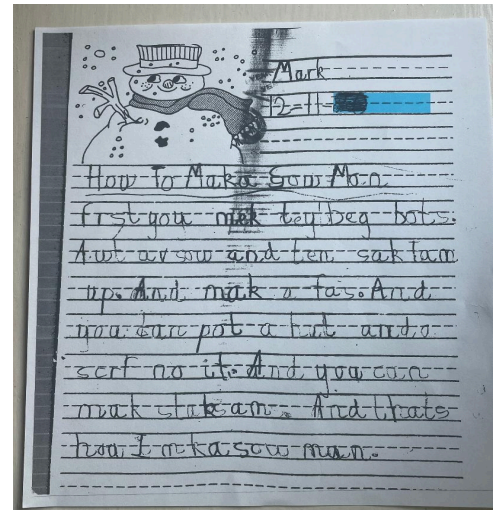
separated, with some correct capitalization, mostly correct spelling, and my favorite part: when young children are starting to understand punctuation, they often use bold periods to ensure we notice their effort. Thank you, Mark, we see your punctuation! I would assess this at Level 7 and possibly Level 8.

The next sample from February of first grade is similar and still likely Level 8, though the focus appears to be on spelling. He writes “wr” for “were,” which is a familiar mistake, and “tim” for “time,” which we’ve all seen many times. I couldn’t help but notice his attempt to write “finish” as “fenesh,”



showcasing his effort at sounding out the word.

This story doesn’t seem to connect much with the title, but I see the effort Mark is putting into his spelling at this stage.



The last piece I have is from May of first grade (see page 5), likely close to Mother’s Day. This is a true masterpiece. Note the attention to his penmanship and the details in the story. Everything included supports his topic sentence about why his mother is special. My

favorite part is his signature at the end. When I read this piece to teachers, I always do so “loud and proud”: MARK (LAST NAME), FIRST GRADE. I believe he is finishing the school year at Level 10.

If we go back to his writing at the end of his Kindergarten year and compare it to this final piece you can’t help but notice the improvement. Mark moved five levels in just one calendar year. He was in a classroom where he wrote every day. His teacher employed many of the techniques that Krista outlined in her April newsletter on writing, and we can see the results.

It’s worth noting that I have Mark’s file because of his unique situation. After gathering writing samples and various artifacts from his early primary years, Mark’s family moved, and the school was never informed of their new location. His teacher mentioned that Mark was living with his mother, they moved frequently, and she did not always have transportation to attend his conferences. He was not a child of privilege but rather a little boy who became a confident writer in a classroom that focused on writing development and valued his creations.





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## Stages of Writing Reflection Questions:

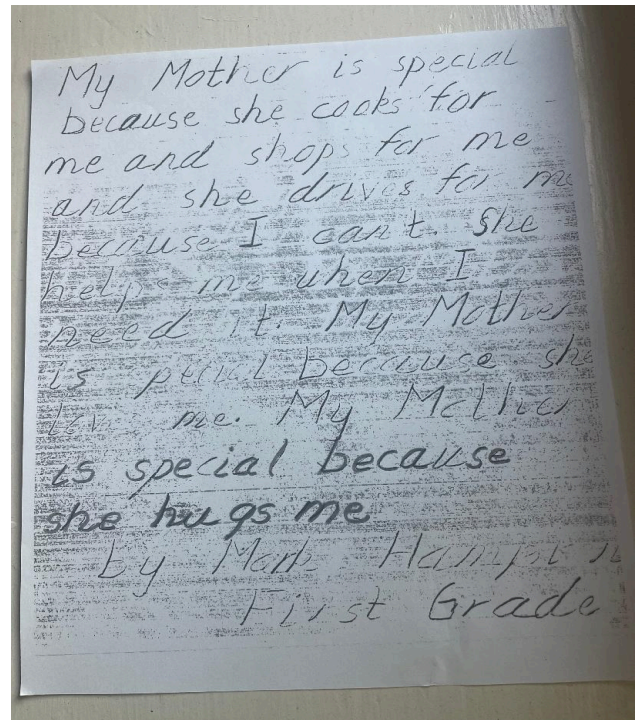


How do you monitor your children's development as writers over time?

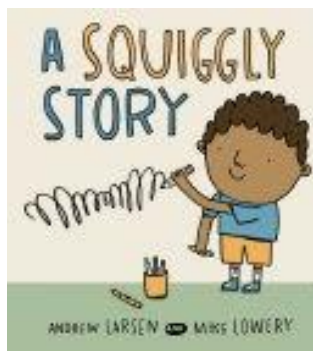


What are one or two actions you can take to support your children's writing development?

*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Stages of Writing** [here](#).*



## Teaching with High-quality Children's Books



Perfect for this newsletter topic, \*A Squiggly Story\* serves as a reminder that each child develops as a writer at their own pace, with progress tied to their interests and skill development.

In this delightful children's book by Andrew Larsen and Mike Lowery, a young boy discovers that he has a story to tell. With real-time support from his sister, teacher, and classmates, he learns how to write the story he wants to share.



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## *Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...*

**Q:** My first grader's handwriting is so unconventional and hard to read. Do I need to reteach handwriting?

**A:** Reteaching handwriting should be embedded in daily writing activities, rather than as a separate subject. Look for opportunities to incorporate handwriting instruction naturally throughout the day. First and foremost, ensure that your own penmanship uses correctly formed letters so you can provide a solid model for your students, emphasizing when you make those letters they need to form correctly. When you demonstrate writing, create group charts, write on the whiteboard, or have one-on-one writing conferences with students, take the time to emphasize the proper formation of letters.



It's also important to recognize that many young children struggle with handwriting because their fine motor skills are still developing. Their hands may literally ache due to weaker muscles. To help strengthen their hand muscles, I like to incorporate special tasks that focus on fine motor skills into some of my learning centers. One example is a game I created to support fine motor development involved cotton balls or craft pompoms. I placed cotton balls in one bowl and provided a clothes pin (or tongs) and a second bowl. I challenge the students to transfer the cotton balls from one bowl to the other using the pin. While this may sound quite simple, the students thoroughly enjoyed the activity, and, using what is known as their "pincer muscles", helped them improve their fine motor control. Occasionally, I added a timer, allowing the children to compete to see who could move all the cotton balls (one at a time) the fastest.

*Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions  
for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)*

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