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Quick *Writes*

More Than 60 Short Writing Activities from the Practical to the Poetic

By P A M E L A M A R X

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

DEDICATION

To Mark

and to Mr. Sergio and Mr. Silvey for inspiring many students over the years to write well.

Special thanks go to Bobbie Dempsey, Susan Buntrock, Meg Moss, Marlene Culver, Susan Sides Eileen Hatrick, Mark Goldstein, Megan Goldstein, Holly Goldstein, Sarah Leiber McKinner, Martha Gustafson, Janice Mars, Tim Gustafson, Lisa Skylar, and the students of Dahlia Heights and Eagle Rock Schools.

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INTRODUCTION

This book provides students with short writing activities to build and develop their drafting skills. The activities are not intended as a comprehensive writing curriculum for students. Rather, use the exercises here as adjuncts to regular grammar texts and literature books. Most of the writing activities are short—usually one to two paragraphs in length. The first section of the book, Nonfiction Writing Activities, is especially appropriate to tailor to your students' current writing needs. Many of the activities are purposely general, so that if work on complex sentence structure or paragraph organization is needed, you can assign a particular exercise and focus it on the writing technique or problem that needs reinforcement.

A Glance at Content

This introduction includes a section to help prepare students to write. It is followed by writing activities presented in nonfiction, fiction, and poetry sections; an appendix of student writing aids; a writing skills index; and a references index.

The nonfiction section offers opportunities for students to build writing skills with several types of letters, persuasive writing, news, how-to articles, movie and book reviews, short biographical materials, paraphrase, puffery, analytical writing, and journal writing. Many of the exercises can be put to "real world" use. As the book is intended to offer skill-building opportunities, several variations on a certain type of writing are sometimes provided.

The fiction section offers students the opportunity to build and use skills that are important to short-story and novel writing as well as to the appreciation of literature they read. To keep activities short, character, flashback, point of view, imagery, and other creative writing skills are taught in the context of writing a scene or a part of a larger

piece. Students have the chance to rewrite blandly written or boring material so that they can see firsthand how specific descriptive detail builds storytelling and can take stories in different directions. Short-play and screenplay writing activities are also provided.

The poetry section blends adaptations of historical and traditional poetic forms from around the world. Both unrhymed and rhymed verse exercises are included. To build writing skill through experience, the poetry activities, though similar, emphasize slightly different skills. For example, several free-verse activities and several rhymed activities helps students build a level of confidence and comfort with each form. This section, as well as several of the activities in the fiction section, can be used to augment a social studies curriculum or for specific skill building, such as understanding alliteration or onomatopoeia.

In addition to the individual writing activities, four student-aid or skill-builder pages are included at the back of the book. Copy and distribute these to students as appropriate for reference during the writing process. "Things to Watch for When You Write" is a good handout to give to students in conjunction with any of the nonfiction writing activities. Students will also find it useful as a resource with many of the fiction exercises. "Be Descriptive" may help as students write fiction and poetry. A list of "Editor's Marks" makes a useful tool in the revising and reviewing process. "Rhymed Meter in Poetry" offers students a handy reference tool when writing structured poetry.

A writing skill index is provided at the end of the book. Look up a writing skill you are interested in presenting and identify which writing exercises emphasize that skill. Sometimes a writing activity is listed under a particular skill if that skill is mentioned in

the Extended Challenge section or if the exercise can be easily adapted to teach that skill. Of course, you can use any of the prose activities to reinforce sentence and paragraph structure, punctuation, and grammar. A references index alphabetically lists sources that are found on the student page of each writing activity so that you can see at a glance what materials might relate to your curriculum or what references might be handy for the classroom.

Ideas into Words: Getting Ready to Write

The process of writing is difficult for everyone, not just for students. From idea to final edit, the writing process can be one of overcoming road block after road block. The writing activities in this book are intended as short subject skill builders. They can be used as focused, narrow writing activities through which students learn not only specific aspects of word use and writing techniques, but also about the complete writing process from prewriting to editing a final product.

Stimulating Awareness

Conclusory thinking most often blocks students' writing. How was the movie? It was good. They have a difficult time focusing on specifics, and specifics are important to the problem of "having something to write about." Most ideas come from personal experience and observation. Even when writing fiction, students draw on their own experiences, feelings, and emotions to create interesting and compelling characters, scenes, and dialogue. Being a good writer requires that students hone their observation skills, both as those skills relate to their own lives and emotions and as they relate to the outside world.

Before asking students to attempt the writing activities in this book, conduct some free-writing exercises to stimulate students to recognize observations as major source material for what they write.

You might have students explore their own feelings and attitudes by answering the following:

In what ways am I different from others? from my peers? from older people? from younger people?

What do I like? What do I dislike? (People, places, things, foods, animals, smells, etc.)

What do I wish I could change about me?

What makes me really angry?

What makes me happy?

What makes me sad?

What are my fears?

What really ruins a day at school for me?

How do I like to spend my free time?

Who is the most interesting adult I know?

Who is the most interesting person about whom I have read?

What is the most interesting event about which I have read?

What kind of movies do I like?

What do I think is really important in a friend?

In what ways am I a good friend?

Think of a recent situation in which you disagreed with a peer, family member or teacher. Explain the situation from your side or point of view. Then write the same explanation, but write it from the other person's point of view.

Remind students that the answer to any question includes a discussion of the *why* behind the answer.

Exercises in observation can increase students' awareness of detail in the commonplace. Have students conduct one or more of the following observations.

Observe a person sitting somewhere and record everything you notice about that person. Include both physical characteristics and discernible mood.

Observe an animal and record its appearance and actions, including responses to environmental stimuli.

Observe a room or a portion of a room and notice everything from the dust to the way the light casts shadows.

Observe a person in attire interesting to you and describe every detail.

Find an outdoor place and describe the setting and all the actors in the setting. Include how your senses respond to the place (e.g., smells, temperature, sounds, breezes).

Think about your daily routine before school. Explain everything you do in one part of the morning and how you feel about it.

Prewriting

For any given writing topic, you can suggest several prewriting activities to students to stimulate their thought processes and ultimate writing efforts.

Brainstorming for One or More: Brainstorming is usually a group technique. Two or more people work together to throw out ideas on a subject without editing the thoughts as they come. One idea stimulates another, and new directions and ideas emerge. When using this technique with a group, someone acts as the secretary to list all of the ideas raised. Individuals can use a solitary version of this sort of free association. A student records every idea on a topic that comes to mind. Descriptions, related words, verbs, and other thoughts and phrases are all fair game to stimulate writing ideas.

Students can brainstorm alone using a simple listing technique or, if this method is too free-form, use a more structured idea-

web technique. To create an idea web, use any subject word as the jumping off point. From this word, draw five lines and on each write about how each sense responds to the subject word. Each web line must be filled before writing begins. This kind of a structured free-association method can help students who are really stuck for ideas.

Whether done individually or in groups, the free-association methods can produce good results. To be successful, students must be encouraged to throw out all ideas that come to them without editing their thought processes.

Do a Diagram: Diagramming using either the cluster or flow-chart method is another prewriting exercise that students can use to generate and organize ideas. In clustering, write the subject in the center of the paper and proceed to write words and phrases that relate to the subject in a “spoke” format. For example, the word “sports” might lead to words like *football, tennis, rules, equipment, team, sportsmanship, and heroes*. *Football, tennis, sportsmanship, and heroes* in turn might then serve as new subject words to be explored. Circle these words and generate new words from them.

Flow charting serves as a different visual way to generate ideas. Place the subject word at the top of the page and add branches with each word that follows. For example, *George Washington* could lead to branches on *birth, education, achievements, and death*. The birth branch would then include branches on *date, place, and family situation*. Each branch in turn leads to a more detailed exploration of the subject. This method can work especially well with nonfiction assignments when subtopics may be clearer to the writer at the outset.

Act It Out: Another method that works for some students is talking about the subject or acting it out. Some students benefit by talking their subject through. As students develop their ideas this way, they can begin to address how their ideas might go together. This can be especially useful in

persuasive writing when students need to offer support for their positions and may have trouble thinking through their arguments. If working alone, a student can record on audio tape his or her own statement of position and then replay it to identify errors. If working with partners or groups, students can take turns presenting orally. If the activity is fiction writing, acting out scenes or character dialogue can help a writer see inconsistencies in character development and plot holes.

Draft

Once ideas have been generated, the blank page must be faced. Getting started can be very intimidating. An organizational tool such as an outline or a point statement is a good way to structure the actual writing. While the writing activities in this book are very short, students should be aware of how to use these simple organizational tools. For longer projects, a detailed outline in sentence form helps the paper to “write itself” because so many of the writer’s thoughts are already down in black and white. A simpler point outline identifies only the main points of information or story structure, and specifics are not included. This can be sufficient for short writing projects. While the point outline is not as useful an organizing technique for longer projects, those students who resist the sentence outline method might benefit from this simpler technique.

Even with an organizational tool such as an outline, students are sometimes stumped by the opening lines. They struggle with the perfect first paragraph and cannot seem to move on. Encourage students to start somewhere and go with it. Tell them not to worry about the best words and the right punctuation. The first draft is a time to get the ideas down. It is much easier to rewrite and solve problems once you have something on paper.

Revision

Good writing is always the result of diligence, perseverance, and rewriting—again and again and again. Time doesn’t always allow many redrafts, but it is important for students to know that a first draft is never the final product. Improvements can always be made. Try different editorial techniques with students. The most basic is to have them read and edit their own work. Provide students with a copy of the student skill-builder sheet, “Editor’s Marks,” so that they know how to mark changes they want to make. Be judicious in using these marks when you edit students’ work, because overuse can shut down the creative process.

Reading the material aloud can facilitate the rewrite process. A good way to identify problems, it is especially useful to locate holes in persuasive writing pieces. The words on the page have a different sound when read aloud, and students can often see their own problems using this technique. They can also read to another person, perhaps a peer or teacher, and ask for comments. The uninitiated reader is more likely to spot a logical hole than the writer who is close to the material.

Peer editing helps to assure that review and rewrite get done. While editorial marks should be used carefully so as not to discourage the creative process, peer editing can be a good way to introduce them. Students tend to spot only obvious punctuation problems, and such criticism is generally not too difficult for the young writer to handle.

Teacher editing can also facilitate rewriting, but it poses several problems. First, teachers have a limited amount of time for the process. Second, teachers must use editorial marks carefully so as not to overwhelm a student by suggested changes. In fact, noting questions on structure and organization in the margins is generally more helpful than making actual changes or reorganizing with editorial marks.

Both teacher and peer editing of fictional work and poetry should be handled with special sensitivity, as students are more likely to be laying themselves on the line in these types of writing activities. Self-editing for these projects, with some teacher input, is probably the best method.

Whatever editing and rewrite methods you employ, students must know that revision and rewrite are just as important to a good product as the generation of ideas. While not possible for all writing assignments, you may want to consider imposing multiple deadlines to check drafting progress, especially when longer assignments are involved. In most cases, unless the rewrite is part of an organized classroom process of multiple rewrite deadlines, students will at most redraft their assignments only once.

How to Use This Book

Once students understand the writing process, you are ready to introduce the activities in this book as they complement your other curriculum efforts. Each writing activity includes a teacher's page and a student's page that provide the following information.

Teacher's Page

Objective

A quick summary of the activity's purpose.

Background

This section describes the writing activity in general. In some cases, it provides additional historical or background information on the writing form itself, which you can choose to share with students as appropriate.

Guidance for teaching the activity is provided here, as well as suggestions for what aspects of writing technique can be

covered with the exercise. When Internet Web sites that relate to the subject matter of the writing exercise have been identified, the site address is included in this section.

For Instance

Examples of how a student's work on the writing activity might look are included here. You may need to share the examples in this section with the students, especially for some of the less-familiar poetry activities. Sometimes it is useful to see an example before embarking on one's own efforts. However, use the examples with students only when necessary to help them understand the requirements of the assignment. Overuse of examples can stifle a student's original responses.

Extended Challenge

Most pages include an extended challenge that offers different types of opportunities, depending upon the particular writing activity. Sometimes the challenge suggests a new direction for the original writing activity. At other times, it is a way of completing or adding to an existing project. Sometimes the extension uses the same activity from a different point of view. You may sometimes prefer to use an Extended Challenge in lieu of the primary activity.

Student's Page

Write On

This section provides students with an introduction to the writing activity. Background information is sometimes provided. Some definitions of terms also appear here. Occasionally, examples are included. Even though examples are not consistently provided on the student pages, they are always included on the teacher's page for reference and use as appropriate.

To Get You Started

This section offers students some questions and suggestions to spur the creative process and to help direct it. Sometimes actual exercises are included. Usually the section asks questions to stimulate a student's thinking process when he or she faces that inevitable "I don't know what to write" dilemma. Techniques such as clustering or brainstorming are sometimes mentioned here, but these prewriting methods can be used with any writing activity along with the other prewriting methods suggested in "Ideas into Words."

Read On

This section suggests several types of reference books. Study-guide tools, prose or poetry examples by well-known writers and source material for story ideas or information should help inspire students' work. These kinds of references include some picture-book literature to give the students a quick information base. Some children's poetry references are also included.

Last Words

The goal of this book is to stimulate students' interest in writing through a variety of practical and creative writing opportunities. In addition, many of the writing exercises are open-ended enough for you to direct or focus them on a writing skill that needs extra reinforcement. Since each writing assignment is short, you may be able to spend time reviewing each one in more detail than is usually possible. This will enhance the kind of mentoring that encourages a writing student's interest, confidence, and development.

PART ONE

NONFICTION WRITING ACTIVITIES

Informational Writing

Personal Narrative

Business Writing

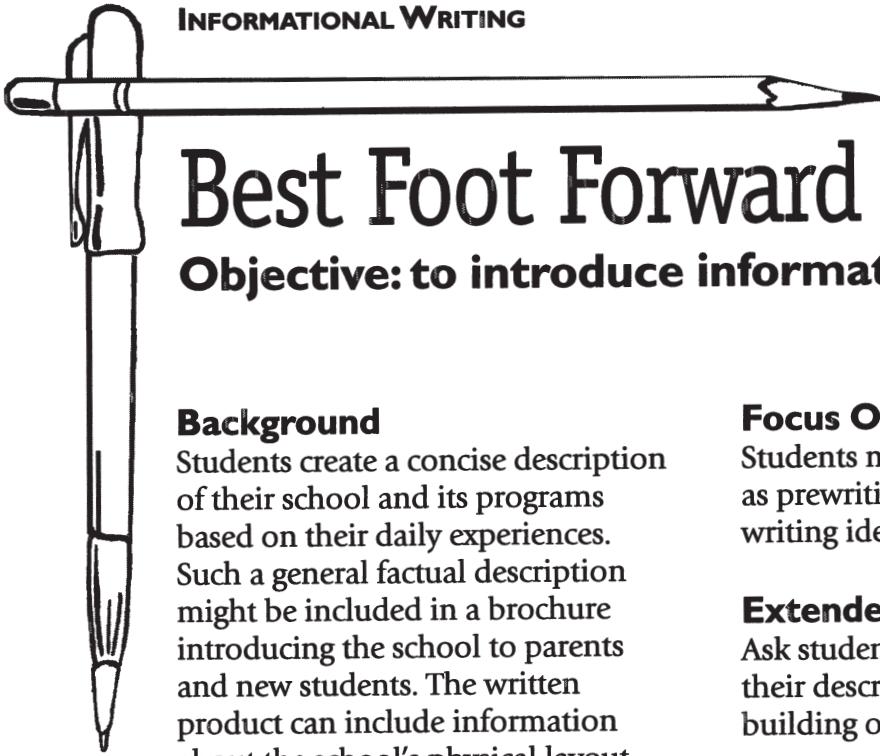
Biography

News Writing

Opinion

Copywriting

Musings



Best Foot Forward

Objective: to introduce informational writing

Background

Students create a concise description of their school and its programs based on their daily experiences. Such a general factual description might be included in a brochure introducing the school to parents and new students. The written product can include information about the school's physical layout, student population, academic programs, and extracurricular activities.

Focus On

Students might use clustering or a word web as prewriting exercises to generate their writing ideas.

Extended Challenge

Ask students to add a second paragraph to their descriptions, detailing a program or building of particular interest at their school.

FOR INSTANCE

A written project might read as follows:

John Doe School is a small academy located near the city library. It serves about 600 students in grades six through eight. Its buildings are organized around a central quad. This enables students to move easily from class to class. The Spanish-style architecture of the school offers a pleasant learning environment interspersed with park-like green spaces. To enhance student life, the school has a large library, two gymnasiums, a cafeteria, and an auditorium for performances and assemblies. The school is especially proud of its excellent band and drama programs, which offer students the chance to develop interests that they can pursue for years to come.

Best Foot Forward

Write On

The student activities counselor at your school has asked you to write a brief description of your school to include in a brochure for new students. In one paragraph, describe your school for the newcomers. When writing a paragraph, remember to begin with a topic sentence. Subsequent sentences provide the specifics about the general topic the paragraph covers.

Consider including the following kinds of information in your description: location of school in the community, student population, physical layout of school buildings, important buildings, and special programs.

To Get You Started

To think of and decide upon information to use in your paragraph, you might want to try a method called *clustering*. When you cluster ideas, you create a web of words and ideas that flow out of other words you have listed.

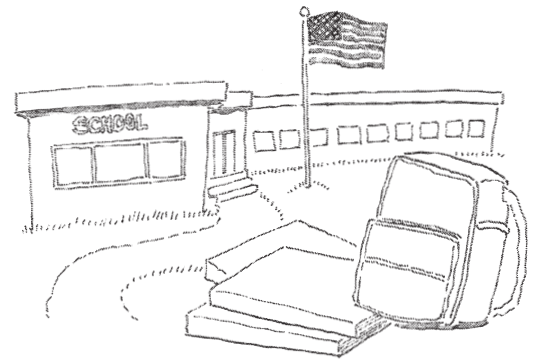
You might start by writing the school's name in the center of a blank paper. Around that word, write four or five general topics about the school that you want to consider including in your paragraph. Then jot down any specific thoughts or ideas that these words stimulate. This technique can be useful to get you started in the writing process. It is also a way of organizing your ideas.

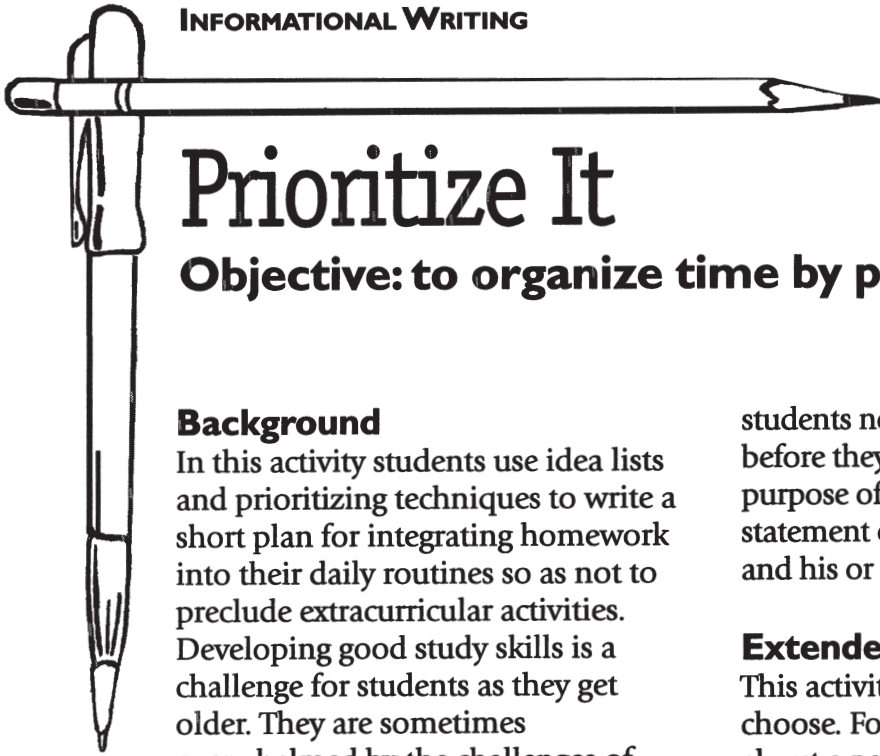
Consider writing about your school's

- location
- appearance or architectural style and landscaping
- classes and facilities such as labs
- special-interest organizations such as bands, sports teams, or choruses
- clubs and extracurricular activities
- student population: size, diversity, ages, or grades

Read On

For examples of this type of descriptive nonfiction writing, look at travel guidebooks and school and camp brochures. A book for young people that provides pertinent writing examples is *The Little House Guidebook* by William Anderson (HarperTrophy, 1996). See the sections on "What to See and Do."





Prioritize It

Objective: to organize time by putting plans in writing

Background

In this activity students use idea lists and prioritizing techniques to write a short plan for integrating homework into their daily routines so as not to preclude extracurricular activities.

Developing good study skills is a challenge for students as they get older. They are sometimes overwhelmed by the challenges of organizing their time and give up

before they have really begun. This is a good project for early in the school year. It can also be useful midyear at times when homework completion becomes a problem for some students.

Focus On

In straightforward, factual writing assignments such as this one, stress a direct and clear style of paragraph organization. Remind students of the importance of topic sentences: not only do they help the reader better understand the paragraph, they also help the writer remain organized. Also, counsel students that the method described in the example below is just one way to organize time. Some

students need free time right after school before they can sit down to work again. The purpose of this activity is to write a clear statement of a plan that works for the student and his or her family's lifestyle.

Extended Challenge

This activity can take other directions, if you choose. For example, ask students to think about a particularly busy day that is approaching. Have them identify the activities expected of them on this day, prioritize them (or eliminate some), and explain how they will accomplish them. Another activity might be to ask students to think about what they have to do during the holiday season (or a vacation break) and prioritize those activities and events. For older students who are beginning to think about college, ask them to analyze those things that are important for admission to college (i.e., grades, recommendations, extracurricular activities at school and outside of school and community service) and discuss them in order of importance.

FOR INSTANCE

My plan for completing my homework assignments requires that I spend time immediately after school completing the work. I receive most of my assignments daily. As soon as I get home from school, I will begin science, which is hard for me. Then I will move to math and English. This will take about one and a half hours. I usually have dance classes from 5:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. This exercise gets my mind off school worries. I will finish any remaining assignments before dinner, which is usually from 7:00 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. in our house.

Prioritize It

Write On

Write one to two paragraphs describing how you plan to organize your out-of-school time to allow you to complete homework without sacrificing your outside activities. Remember to begin your paragraph(s) with a topic sentence. Your paragraph(s) should include a description of the kinds of homework you receive each day or week, what parts of the day you have to do homework (before school, after school, weekends), and the way in which you will prioritize particular assignments to assure that you get them done. For example, will you do the easiest or the hardest work first?

To Get You Started

This may be a hard paragraph to organize. To help develop and organize your ideas about what to write, you might want to use a *structured idea list*. Select several categories of “things to do” that will help you organize the information you will use in the paragraph. List these at the top of the page. Under each heading, list the activity information that relates to that heading. Seeing the information organized in this way will help you decide how you want to prioritize and organize your time and what you want to say in your paragraph(s).

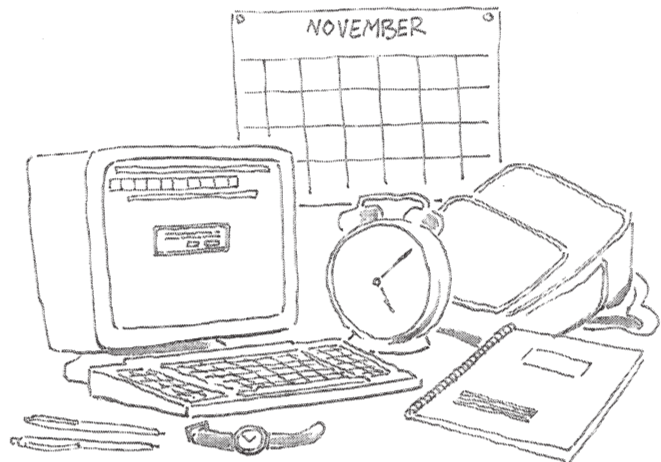
Here are some sample headings:

**Daily
Assignments**

**Weekly
Assignments**

**Family
Obligations**

**Other
Activities**



Read On

Check out *School Power—Strategies for Succeeding in School* by Jeanne Shay Schumm, Ph.D., and Marguerite Radencich, Ph.D. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1992) for ideas about time management and homework strategies, and *Write Right!* by Jan Venolia (Ten Speed Press, 1979) for general writing tips.