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V. Andree Bayliss
Northwest Missouri State University

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Fluency in Children's Writing

V. Andree Bayliss

Ask local elementary teachers which children in their classrooms are their best writers, and, usually, they will spontaneously name three or four students. Teachers know their best writers. They also know some of the contributing factors. These children are often good readers, who love a good story and seem to have a natural talent for telling one themselves. Where writing is concerned, they are a teacher's joy.

On the other hand, the teacher's challenge is knowing how to nurture the writing development of the majority, the students for whom writing comes less naturally. Teaching these children requires more than intuitions about writing. Teaching these children requires understanding the writing process and recognizing the signs of writing maturity. The intent of this article is to focus on the latter — signs and characteristics of maturity in children's writing.

These signs of maturity are not easily described. They are neither readily quantifiable nor necessarily sequential (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986). Children gain maturity in writing as they conscientiously work to incorporate newly learned ways of thinking about things and as they learn more about the needs of their audience. Their increasing maturity is identifiable, though often characteristically personalized. However, there are signs of maturity basic to children's writing that are distinguishable. These signs of maturing fluency have been identified (Bayliss and Walker, 1990) in the

following order: 1) providing details; 2) elaborating on the subject; 3) varying sentence patterns; 4) deepening the presentation; 5) unfolding the presentation; 6) sustaining focus of the topic, often with insight or liveliness of imagination.

Children begin to write, much as they begin in their ability to tell a personal experience, by merely listing events. Take for example Paul's piece (first grade) about his experience at his uncle's farm:

The Funniest Thing That Ever Happened To Me: I went to my unklc house. I got to ride his hrs. I had fun. I got off the hrs. I got to melch the cou. I got to fead the cou. The End.

Paul's readers can easily read into his story and imagine the fun he had in riding the horse, not to mention feeding and milking the huge Jersey, or perhaps Guernsey, cow. At this point, however, Paul is only able to remember and list the basic events that occurred in his exciting day.

This simple listing is by no means restricted to the abilities of first grade children. Tammy, a grade three student, writing an imaginary piece about being two inches tall, limits her story to a few facts about herself and the brief telling of an experience:

The Day I Was Two Inches Tall: I am two inches tall. I live in a mushroom. I have lots of small friends. I have brown hair and I am a girl. I have an ant. Lets stop talking about what I am and lets me tell what happened yesterday. Well yesterday I went to go to the meadow and a tiger started running after me. I was scared but an elephant all most steped on me but fianlly I got in the house and in bed with soup.

Tammy demonstrates that she can imagine herself as being two inches tall. However, she provides minimal details and does not elaborate. She leaves her readers wondering such things as what the mushroom house looks like, who her small friends might be, and whether or not her ant is her pet.

Providing details and elaboration

Young writers signal efforts toward fluency by providing details for a reader. They know that details make a piece more interesting and understandable. At the simplest level, beginning writers merely use modifiers to enhance a description, such as "my black and white cat," or "the poor old woman." As they move beyond this simplest level it is usually in combination with the next characteristic of maturity in writing — elaboration. A grade one child, Kelly, shows a beginning awareness that by elaborating, she helps her readers to understand why her family loves the kitchen.

My Family: I have a tall house. I have five people in it. I have a sister of course, thats me. And to brothers who are pretty sweet. My Mom is a teacher. My Dad is a pulmer. My family play's with me. I play with my family. We go out. And other stuf. We love the kitchen it's food. And dosert's are deleshes. We have turkey and dresing, too. Boy are they good. And I love it.

Two authors from grade six, also telling about their families, share their family members' characteristics through elaboration. Jill's excerpt about her half sister is an example of what could be described as simple elaboration.

My Family: I have a half sister, she is always busy. She goes to college. When she has time, she doesn't spend it with me. She sunbathes when it's sunny and

she's always with her boyfriend. She likes to go to bars at night. My sister has blond hair and green eyes.

Jill provides her readers with a few details about her sister and through simple elaboration makes it quite clear she feels her sister neglects her. Sharing this emotion with her audience makes this the strongest part of her piece.

Sentence variety

By comparison, Jill's classmate John is a stronger writer. His discussion of his father shows an increased level of fluency not only because of greater elaboration, but also for other reasons. First, John's excerpt about his father:

My Family: My Dad grew up in Plad on a farm. He had seven brothers and sisters. He had a twin brother, but he died as an infant. He learned how to work hard as he grew up. He had to quit school early to help support his family because they weren't very well off. He helped his dad at a sawmill and then began working at Stiles Roofing where he has worked for the last twenty-two years. My dad's favorite pastime is pulling his Belgian draft horses. My dad is honest and hardworking. He teaches us kids how to work and makes sure we behave properly. My mom...

John demonstrates greater fluency than Jill because he shares more information (Nathan, Temple, Juntunen and Temple, 1989) about his father and includes several specific details: "My dad grew up in *Plad* on a farm... began working at *Stiles Roofing*, where he has worked for the last *twenty-two* years... and he has *Belgian draft horses*."

Additionally, there are other qualities that make his writing more sophisticated. John uses non-basic sentence patterns to build his message. Through the sentence, "He

learned how to work hard as he was growing up," he introduces the point that his dad is hard working. John also communicates that this quality developed early in his dad's life. Further, by writing "... as he grew up," John uses foreshadowing to alert his reader that more elaboration about this quality is forthcoming. His next sentence is also well beyond the basic level, "He had to quit school early to help support his family because they weren't very well off."

These two sentences are worthy of even further analysis because they exemplify another characteristic of maturing fluency. Through these two sentences, John explained what caused his dad to learn hard work early (a family necessity) as well as the consequences of the necessity (his father having to quit school). These ideas represent substantive qualities of thought. Through cause/effect discussion, John helps his readers understand a quality of his dad's character he admires. His readers recognize his ability to analyze his dad's circumstances and respect his ability to communicate this analysis in writing. Calkins (1983) describes this as an executive function. Characteristics such as these mark higher levels of writing and indicate children are truly maturing in fluency.

Even at grade two, children demonstrate the ability to communicate an analysis in their writing. Kevin has done this in his description of not being able to find his dad in a hide and seek game.

*The Stranges Thing That Ever Happened To Me:
One night I was playing hide-and-seak with my dad and my brother. I was it. I counted to ten. My brother was esey to find. He was in the closet. It was dark so I couldn't see in the dim light. Dad was in the simpelst place in the whole house! He was in the corner and I couldn't find him!*

Deepening and unfolding a presentation

Carla, grade four, demonstrates her ability to deepen a presentation as she analyzes her feelings about her best friend, her grandmother.

My Best Friend: My best friend is my Grandma, Bessie Naugle. She died when I was in first grade, but she helped me look at things differently. Like when I was four I was afraid of the doctor, but I had to go so she helped me see there was nothing to be afraid of. I've always wanted to be like her, so I put on her apron, her bonnet and her snow shoes. That was when I was three...

Young writers demonstrate the ability to control a presentation of ideas much as does the captivating storyteller. They are aware their audience prefers that they select ideas and use descriptive vocabulary to reveal events and evoke clear mental images. Carla's classmate, Jennifer, has done this as she begins her story about reading people's minds:

The Day I Could Read Everyones Mind: One morning I woke up feeling awful. I told Mom. All she said was "You'll probably feel better when you eat." Well I didn't. But, I went on to school. When I go there I could read peoples minds, it was absolutly wierd. All the girls were thinking about boys. Trish was thinking about Shawn. Elsa was thinking about Bobby S., and Misti L. was thinking about Justin L. The boys were thinking about kick ball and racing. I was too...

Andy, grade five, also demonstrates this ability to control his presentation of ideas. He also demonstrates a beginning ability to select image provoking vocabulary (*big stud, froze, and strike*).

The Funnies Thing That Ever Happened To Me: I was playing my first baseball game and it was going O.K. I was playing centerfield and the last pitcher we had just got called off the field by our coach. I watched him walk off the field. Then I heard my name, "Andy come in and pitch" the coach was calling me. I walked in like a big stud. The coach told me to go warm up. I warmed up for about two minutes then walked out on the field and threw a couple of pitches. Then the first batter got up to the plate. He was real big. I froze, right there on the pitchers mound. It took me awhile to get back to earth, but then finally I threw the first pitch. Strike, I heard the umpire call...

Sustained focus

At the highest level of fluency, children demonstrate the ability to maintain control through sustained focus on their topic. This requires attention and consideration of all of the characteristics: analysis of situation, selection of ideas, selection of vocabulary, and a controlled presentation to create a clear picture in the reader's mind. Two students demonstrate they understand this quality of sustained focus. First, a grade three student, Jake.

The Day I Was Two Inches Tall: One day I woke up and found myself two inches tall! I got a tiny piece of paper and parachuted down to the floor. Ouch! Hard landing! I went to the clock in the hall to see what time it was. But right when I got there it went off! It blew me right into the laundry shoot! Wow! This is fun! Wee! I went up and down. Finally I hit the bottom, right into a pile of dirty underwear! Yuk. This smells terrible! Just then my mom come in. She put me into the wash. When the water came out I began to grow larger! But just then it stopped. The lid got opened up. My big brother picked me up and put me in his mouth! He thought I was bubble gum. He sucked me in! I

grabbed his tongue and held on tight. That made him choke, I flew out of his mouth and landed on his hand. I said "Gabe I'm Jake!" "Your not Jake, your buble gum." "Just take me to Mom" I said. He brought me to mom. After Mom saw me she said "My heavins!" I said "Mom I was in the laundry machine when" "You were what?" "I was in the laundry machine. When the water came out I grew bigger. So you better put me back in the barrel." Mom put me back in the barrel and filled it with water and I grew back to normal size.

With a few less exclamation marks, Sara, grade six, tells her story about reading minds.

The Day I Could Read Everything's Mind: As soon as I woke up that morning I knew it wouldn't be normal. The sun was shining unusually bright, even for Florida. You see, I was on vacation and sharing a rented house with Mom and Dad for the summer. When I trudged down the stairs for breakfast a tingling started in my fingers. As soon as I entered the kitchen my mind was full of little voices. I just shut them out and asked "Mom, when will the pancakes be done?" "How did you know what was for breakfast" she asked. "I have no idea" I replied, and I didn't. I was baffled. As soon as Mom placed the orange juice on the table I heard "Don't drink me, I've already been squeezed." At that point I thought I had really gone off the deep end, I didn't know what to think.

The rest of the morning went fine, but when we entered Disney World it was a whole different story. When I first got in I saw a person in a Micky Mouse suit. In my mind I heard "It sure is stuffy in here, I hope I don't have as long today as yesterday." Just then I realized what had been happening. I had been reading minds. Throughout the day I tried this out on the people that looked like they were foreign. One Chinese

lady wanted a rice cake and to be back in Hong Kong. A little French boy hoped Micky Mouse would pick him up. I had never had so much fun.

A teacher's challenge

These children demonstrate they are developing their understanding of how writers craft a good story. Working with writers such as these is a challenge because writing is a highly personalized process. It is the highest form of literacy and as such is built on a foundation of learning one's language and a maturing use of reading as a tool for learning. Therefore, the teacher's role in guiding young writers is, first and foremost, a secure professional belief that children can and will write in a supportive classroom environment. Next, this supportive environment should be based on guiding beliefs such as those Atwell (1987, pp. 17-18) evolved to understand:

Writers need regular chunks of time...

Writers need their own topics...

Writers need response...

Writers learn mechanics in context...

Children need to know adults who write...

Writers need to read...

Writing teachers need to take responsibility for their knowledge and teaching...

Helping children gain fluency requires the view of writing as a process, a craft. As craftsmen, the children and teacher work at writing — appraising their own work and the work of others, and learning about themselves as writers and about other writers. As they go about this process, fine tuning their understanding of the differences between talking and writing (Calkins and Harwayne, 1991), they learn the importance of details, elaboration, selecting vocabulary, explaining reasons, reactions and insights.

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V. Andree Bayliss is a faculty member and chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Northwest Missouri State University, in Maryville Missouri.