



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2012 Volume II: The Art of Biography

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## Author Biographies as Reflected in the Mirror of Their Works

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### Introduction

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When I was in fifth grade, my teacher read to us Jack London's short story, *To Build A Fire*. I was shocked by the cruel nature of that Arctic environment that mercilessly defeated the man but not the dog, which was saved by his instinctive respect for the extreme cold and knowledge of its dangers. I quickly turned to a biography of the author, eager to find out what experiences in London's life might have given him such fine-tuned familiarity with the harsh features of a Yukon winter and such a keen understanding of dogs, their nature and responses to man. Several biographies revealed the answers. It is clear that in Jack London's case his life-experiences served as a rich resource of ideas for his stories.

Biography is particularly appealing to children when the life of a person is told using an engaging storytelling approach rather than simply presenting a collection of facts as do informational texts. Biographies of celebrated authors can inspire young readers because they can envision themselves tapping into their own life-experiences and crafting, through canvas and pen, their own stories. And what do children know better than their own lives and those of the loved ones that nurture them?

For my unit, I will draw upon three award-winning authors/illustrators of popular children's picture-books: Cynthia Rylant, Mem Fox and Ezra Jack Keats. Simplified biographies and interviews with these writers abound on-line (i.e., <http://teacher.scholastic.com/read/all-about-authors.htm>) and in local public libraries. Conducting an author study in my classroom will be an ideal and practicable way to celebrate each author and investigate his/her work. The two major questions we will explore in my unit will be: Where does an author or illustrator get the ideas for his/her stories? How do they integrate their life experiences into their books? The carefully selected picture-books in this unit will allow my students to discover their own personal landscape.

My students will keep a Reader's Response Notebook in which they will record reactions to the stories read aloud to them. This assignment will encourage young learners to think more deeply about the story and to relate it to their own lives. Such an activity promotes forming opinions, judging values and developing critical thinking skills. After writing their responses they will pair up to share and discuss them. Below are some of the sentence starters they will choose from:

Something I noticed about the book/character/author was \_\_\_\_\_  
I liked the idea that \_\_\_\_\_  
I know someone like \_\_\_\_\_  
I wonder \_\_\_\_\_  
It was, or was not fair when \_\_\_\_\_  
If I were \_\_\_\_\_, I would \_\_\_\_\_  
I have a prediction about \_\_\_\_\_  
I like the way the author \_\_\_\_\_  
This reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_  
If I could talk to the character, I would tell him/her \_\_\_\_\_  
I would/would not recommend this book to others because \_\_\_\_\_  
Something that surprised me in the story was \_\_\_\_\_  
My favorite part of the story was \_\_\_\_\_. This is because \_\_\_\_\_  
The message the author is trying to tell us is \_\_\_\_\_  
A question I would like to ask the author is \_\_\_\_\_

I am a first-grade teacher at Davis Street Arts & Academics Interdistrict Magnet School. The self-contained class of students to whom I will be teaching this unit are a heterogeneous group with varying abilities within the 5-to-7-year-old age range. Although I have designed this unit with them in mind, I am confident that it could easily be adapted for use by teachers in other primary and intermediate grades as well.

This curriculum unit will be interdisciplinary in scope, incorporating reading, writing and art. My students will work in both small and large group settings on the activities included in it. The unit lessons will be taught four times a week for a period of 40 minutes over a 3-month period. I plan to divide my curriculum unit into six sections:

Section 1: From Inspiration to Published Story

Section 2: Why Author Studies?

Section 3: Cynthia Rylant  
Section 4: Mem Fox  
Section 5: Ezra Jack Keats  
Section 6: Telling Your Own Story

## Content Objectives

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- To identify biographical clues found in a writer's stories.
- To identify common themes found in a series of stories written by the same author.
- To participate in an author study to learn about his/her life and works.
- To make text-to-self connections with specific anecdotes found in a writer's biography.
- To learn about the process that various writers/illustrators of picture-books go through in creating a book.
- To engage in various planning activities before writing an autobiography.
- To choose a particular format or frame on which to tell an autobiography.

## Teaching Strategies

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- To reflect on the influential events in a writer's life through written response in a reader's response notebook.
- To compare and contrast story elements in a series of stories by the same author using a matrix.
- To use a heart map (introduced by poet, Georgia Heard), a list or a number-line as a prewriting tool.
- To write about one's own life choosing between writing a vignette, a snapshot or an instant bio-poem.
- To revise and edit one's life stories so that both voice and elaboration are apparent.
- To discuss one's responses to text both in small and in larger group settings.

To evaluate and respond to an author study by writing a letter either to the author or to a character in one of the stories.

## Section 1: From Inspiration to Published Story

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In the book, *If You Were A Writer*, by Joan Lowery Nixon, Melia tells her mom that she wants to be a writer just like her so that she can work with a typewriter. Her mother wisely responds that really the typewriter has nothing to do with it. "A writer" she says "works with words. If you were a writer you would think of words that make pictures." (p. 1) Sounds appealing!

Let's ask some children's book writers how they express their ideas in writing and about the ups and downs they experience being a writer.

Helen Lester is particularly famous for her 'Tacky' books—stories about a wacky penguin who relies on his friends to help get him out of the ridiculous situations he finds himself in—purely a result of his own doing. In her book, *AUTHOR: A True Story*, she explains that she began as a writer while a mere child by making lists for Mom. These are humble origins but my students can certainly relate to them. In primary school she struggled as a mirror writer—that is, someone who writes his/her ideas from right to left. Eventually she overcame it and learned to write from left to right. Lester's description of her writing slumps as a child are ones any writer can identify with—no ideas coming to mind, getting stuck in the middle, losing your pencils, and wondering why on earth you were writing at all.

In Virginia Woolf's book, *Orlando*, the main character, who at one point fancies himself a writer, often experiences similar frustrations. Alone in his room at night equipped with his old writing book stitched together with silk, he prepares to continue writing his poem. But, to his dismay, "as he scratched out as many lines as he wrote in, the sum of them was often, at the end of the year, rather less than at the beginning, and it looked as if in the process of writing the poem would be completely unwritten" (Woolf, p. 82).

During the time that Lester worked as a teacher people encouraged her to write a book for children. It was no easy task getting her first one published—she had six rejections before her story was accepted! She admits freely that even as a published author she experiences writing slumps but quickly adds that her periods of inspired writing—where the ideas come so fast she can hardly keep up with them—far outweigh the periodic writer's block. She also emphasizes the value of revision as she searches for the ideal word choice that makes her story better. Yes, she admits, writing can be hard at times but it is what she loves to do and plans to continue doing.

Laura Numeroff, the best-selling author of *If You Give A Mouse a Cookie* series, describes her writing experiences in her book, *If You Give An Author A Pencil*. At nine she started writing stories and drawing pictures. Not convinced yet of which direction in life she wanted to go, Numeroff tried studying fashion and photography but it was a class on writing and illustrating children's books that inspired her to become a writer.

One homework assignment was to create a book of her own. It was called *Amy for Short* and was later published (after four rejections). She got her ideas for *If You Give a Mouse A Cookie* from playing a game with a friend during a long car trip. This time she experienced eight rejections before the book was finally accepted.

Like Lester, Numeroff describes the importance of choosing the right illustrator who will interpret her stories in creative ways. She explains where she gets her ideas for writing—sometimes waking up with a great one and other times getting them from conversations. Since ideas for stories can come at any time she keeps a pad of paper nearby to jot them down. Numeroff finds that not looking at a first draft for a few days helps her bring a fresh outlook to her revisions. She keeps making changes until she is satisfied. Photos of Numeroff show her writing in different places—while floating in her pool, sitting by her dog on the veranda, lounging in her pajamas at her desk, or propped up on the couch and munching cookies. Sometimes, she says that she writes for hours late into the night. She ends by exclaiming how good it feels to inspire children to draw and write just as her father inspired her.

David McPhail is a famous author/illustrator of children's books, best known for his pig and bear characters. His books include: *Pig Pig Grows Up* , *The Bear's Toothache* , *Pigs Aplenty*, *Pigs Galore* and *Lost* . He has been drawing since he was two years old and in his autobiographical account, *In Flight with David McPhail* , he claims to have produced thousands of pictures and still loves doing it. He maintains that stories can come to him at any time and he also needs to be ready with pen and paper nearby. Sometimes the words flow and other times he'll be writing and the story will just disappear. McPhail describes three places, none of which are at home, where he writes with the most productivity: in the car—regularly pulling over to jot down ideas, in a local coffee shop and in a hidden corner of the town library.

If an editor decides to publish the story McPhail then moves on to the illustrations. He begins by reading the story over and over and then starts doing little thumbnail sketches. He often draws the same scene from different perspectives. When drawing the characters he has to decide whether they will be cartoony or realistic. After filling many sketchbooks he is ready to start the final artwork. He describes spending hours agonizing over a drawing of Henry Bear in the rain. Exhausted he finally left it and went to bed. It was his young son, Tristian, who woke him up the next morning and told him how good his picture was. At that moment he felt blissfully content with his efforts. McPhail ends his book by affirming his love of both writing and drawing.

By reading these books aloud to my class and discussing them, I plan to lay the foundation that will show them how writers like themselves can begin and sustain the writing of their own stories. Although frustrating at times, this will be for them a rewarding experience.

## Section 2: Why Author Studies?

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Teachers have found the author-study approach to be a very effective one because it allows students the opportunity to explore the author's writing/illustrating style and to appreciate the recurrent themes found in his/her stories. By reading a collection of books by the same author, students can also begin to make connections between the writer's life-experiences and works. Such an approach encourages young readers to develop strong bonds with favorite authors, making reading a more personalized experience.

There are basically three types of author studies. In the first type students make connections between an author's life and work, looking for biographical clues found in the story. In the second type the reader evaluates the author's themes, characters and writing style, with little or no focus on the author's life-experiences. The third type encourages the reader to develop a personal response to each of the stories by looking at story events and reflecting on the connections he/she is able to make in his/her own life. It would be a more comprehensive reading experience if the teacher could incorporate all three types so that the student could study the life of the author and trace biographical clues in his/her books, enjoy his/her books as good literature and make personal connections to them.

To spark initial interest in the author's life I will begin by using my Interactive Whiteboard to post and present some intriguing facts about the author under the title, 'Did You Know?' This exercise will serve two purposes: 1) my students' fascination with some of the unusual information will increase their desire to learn more about the author and 2) they will later be able to recall and trace some of these biographical clues back to each picture-book that is read aloud and discussed. I will then also read aloud some touching or funny excerpts from various biographies of the author which will further pique my students' interest and allow them a longer detailed look into the life of the writer.

For each of the three author studies described in the following three sections I will create an author center in my classroom where the books will be exhibited and a tri-fold display board will be set up. On this board will be photos and interesting tidbits of information that highlight the author's life and work. A timeline detailing the author's life will also be included.

As we read each picture-book in the author study, we will compare it with the others through the use of the following matrix, noting the similarities and differences:

Title	Characters	Setting	Plot	Theme

Preceding each picture-book that I read aloud I will present, in storytelling fashion, a biographical snippet of information that is clearly reflected in various parts of the story. Trying to determine an engaging way for my young students to see how an author's life-experiences can impact the stories he/she writes has led me to choose this approach. The purpose of this whole unit is to show them that their life-experiences, often similar to those of authors at some basic level, can be written about and shared with others.

As a culminating activity for each author study I plan to have my students write a letter to the author in which they can comment on their favorite book, character or scene, ask questions and give compliments. This will allow them to further bond with the author and to focus on some particulars from a story.

## Section 3: Cynthia Rylant

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Did you know that this author:

- was part of a coal-mining family whose granddad came home from work every day covered with coal dust
- was a tomboy who loved to ride her bike and play cops and robbers
- lived in Appalachia as a child with her grandparents in a house with no electricity or running water and no car
- had no public library or bookstore where she lived so she read comic books and then traded them with her neighbor, Danny
- fell in love with the book, *Goodnight Moon*
- has a white dog that loves pizza and chasing tennis balls
- loves going to the movies

From this initial presentation I will refer to my display board where I will show my class photos (obtained online or from biographies) of Cynthia Rylant and briefly describe her life. We will then begin our study of her books. For each one I will begin with an anecdote taken from her life. It will be through the picture-book reading that the author's life-experiences and values will come alive for the class.

Anecdote

Cynthia Rylant's many hours of solitary walks as a child in the woods and on dirt roads made her acutely sensitive to the sights and sounds of her Appalachian surroundings. With no electricity in her grandparents' home, she had to go to bed early and no doubt many a night remained wide awake, intently listening to all the night sounds.

Book

*Night In the Country*

This is a story that describes in evocative prose nighttime in a quiet rural place in Appalachia where even the sound of an animal drinking water or an apple falling from a tree can be heard.

Anecdote

When Rylant was four, her parents separated because of her father's heavy drinking. She and her mother moved to West Virginia to live with her grandparents. Mom soon left to go to nursing school and Cynthia felt the sting of loneliness (even abandonment?) and terribly missed both her parents. Her mom would come for short visits but Cynthia would cry whenever she had to leave again. Fortunately, she never felt lonely for too long because she lived her grandparents, and a young aunt and uncle (stoic, resourceful mountain people) in that white four-room home with no electricity or running water. Ferrell, her granddaddy was a coal miner and had been one since he was 9. Working in a coal mine was hard work that didn't pay very much.

## Book

### *When I Was Young In the Mountains*

Rylant tells the story of how she spent her childhood in the Appalachian Mountains in Cool Ridge, West Virginia in her grandparents' home. She recounts many of her experiences there like swimming in a swimming hole, pumping water, watching out for snakes and greeting granddaddy when he came home from working in the coal mines. The family took great pleasure in the simple things of life.

#### Anecdote

Growing up in a poor coal-mining family in West Virginia, Rylant was surrounded by relatives—her mother, grandparents, many aunts and uncles and lots of cousins. Family bonds were tight and what they lacked in money was more than made up for by the benefits of strong, meaningful relationships with relatives. Relatives helped each other out regularly and faithfully.

### *The Relatives Came*

This is a story about a fatherless family (like Rylant's) who has relatives come up from Virginia to visit and help out—gardening, fixing broken things—for the whole summer. They share a small space willingly—laughing, talking, and eating lots of food together. Although their departure is melancholy, all are heartened by the fact that they will come back again next summer.

#### Anecdote

Living for many years with her grandparents and visiting aging neighbors on her daily walks down country roads gave Rylant an understanding of old people and their ways.

### *The Old Woman Who Named Things*

In this story an old woman who has outlived all her friends and lives alone, keeps herself from feeling lonely by giving names to those things around her that she cannot outlive—Betsy, her car, Franklin, her house and Fred, her chair. A stray dog comes into her life and she becomes very fond of it, eventually allowing it to stay even though it may live longer than she will.

#### Anecdote

Pets—dogs (Martha Jane, Gracie Rose and Leila) and cats (Edward Velvetpaws and Blueberry)—have played an important role in Rylant's life in Ohio where she and her son Nate lived for many years and later in Oregon. She writes about them with a keen understanding of their instincts and behavior.

### *The Great Gracie Chase*

The quiet predictable routines of daily life in a quiet house are broken one day when the painters come and Gracie the dog doesn't like it one bit. When put outside for barking too much, Gracie leads a comic chase of townspeople and animals across town.

#### Anecdote

Rylant's relatives and neighbors in West Virginia relished celebrating Christmas not only because of its



religious significance (they were Baptists) but also because of the family traditions (i.e., cutting down a tree and decorating it, leaving Santa a note, a saucer of cookies and some milk). Celebrating Christmas Day was a time where loved ones attended church, ate big meals and shared gossip together.

### *Christmas in the Country*

This charming story describes how a little girl and her grandparents, who live in a rural setting, prepare for and celebrate Christmas with relatives and friends.

### Anecdote

Rylant gives an account of a train that would travel through the Appalachian Mountains during the season of Christmas from which volunteers would toss lots of treats and toys to the awaiting children of coal towns. They called it the Santa Train.

### *Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story*

Every December 23<sup>rd</sup> a rich man travels on the Christmas Train through the coal towns of Appalachia and throws gifts to the children waiting along the tracks. One boy, Frankie, longs for a doctor's kit but instead receives more practical gifts like socks or mittens to keep him warm. Later Frankie returns to his home town as a doctor eager to help people there.

## **Section 4: Mem Fox**

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Did you know that the author:

- was born in Melbourne, Australia
- moved to Africa with her family when she was only six months old
- was the only white person in her first school experience
- initially learned to write by drawing her letters in the dirt
- loves to dye her hair red
- has two little dogs, Nellie-belle and Lucy
- went to drama school in London and sang Beatles songs and wore mini skirts
- loves to walk on the beach
- has visited the United States over 100 times
- wrote a wonderful first book that was rejected 9 times before it was later accepted
- almost got crushed in her car by an angry mother elephant at a game park

In the same way we will begin this author study by considering the above facts about the author and then perusing the display board that highlights information about Mem Fox's life. Following this we will dive into our picture-book study.

## Anecdote

Mem Fox took a course in children's literature so that she could learn about books that would interest her daughter, Chloe, who was then seven years old. One of her assignments was to actually write a children's book which she did calling it *Hush The Invisible Mouse*. Her teacher loved it and encouraged her to have it published. It was no simple task! Over a five-year period it was rejected nine times by publishers! The 10<sup>th</sup> publisher asked her to make the story short and to change the mice to possums. *Possum Magic* later became the best-selling picture-book in Australia!

### *Possum Magic*

Grandma Poss, who is very adept at using magic, helps make her granddaughter, Hush, invisible. Hush grows tired of it after a while and asks to be changed back to normal. Together these two possums travel across Australia trying to find the magic food that will do the trick.

## Anecdote

Fox developed a very close relationship with her grandfather, Wilfrid Partridge, during the last six years of his life. She would often go visit him in the old folks' home in North Adelaide called the Helping Hand. She described the quiet dignity of the old people that lived there and bemoaned the fact that children were not there for them to regularly interact with. In fact, her father's full name is Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge—the title of the following book.

### *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*

Wilfrid is a small boy who lives next door to a nursing home, which he visits frequently. His favorite person there is Miss Nancy who one day finds that she has lost her memory. With the help of the other elderly residents (who define memory for Wilfrid in helpful ways) her young friend discovers a way to regain it for her.

## Anecdote

Fox comes from a family of pacifists who value tolerance and the belief that all people are equal and deserving of rights shared by all mankind. On her website she lists among her loves: world peace, and social justice and among her loathings: the effect of war of children and racial intolerance.

### *Whoever You Are*

This is a book about peace and equality that celebrates the diversity of our world's cultures. It leads the reader to the conclusion that, although on the outside people look different, speak different languages and live in different places, inside they feel the same joys and pain.

## Anecdote

Fox's grandfather died suddenly at the age of 96 of pneumonia and she mourned the loss of her very wise and vibrant friend with whom she had shared many long conversations.

### *Sophie*

This is a story about the loving relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter. It begins when

Sophie is born and ends when he dies. It speaks of the natural cycle of life and the love that endures throughout.

#### Anecdote

Growing up, Mem Fox was the oldest of three girls and had to compete for her parents' attention. It was Jan, the second oldest, (who displayed an exceptional intelligence early on) with whom she developed an ongoing rivalry, particularly in terms of academic success. She attributes her sometimes obsessive drive to succeed to the competitive spirit she felt with Jan to gain her parents' approval.

#### *Koala Lu*

Koala Lou is the firstborn and wallows in her mother's frequent affirmations of love. But as more children are born, and mother becomes busier she often forgets to tell her how much she loves her. So Koala Lou decides to enter the Bush Olympics in the hopes of winning the gum tree climbing event and winning back her mother's approval and love. Despite all of her training, she comes in second in the event but learns that her mother will always consider her first in her heart.

#### Anecdote

Fox worked at Flinders University with a colleague, John Hunwick. He was dedicated to saving the endangered bilby, a tiny native animal that is a rabbit-eared bandicoot, that lives in the Australian desert. At one point he ambitiously started a movement for an Easter bilby rather than an Easter bunny.

#### *Hunwick's Egg*

In this story Hunwick , a bilby in Australia, finds what he thinks is an egg and makes friends with it. He talks to it daily and takes care of it and, along with his neighbors, vigilantly waits for it to hatch. It never does because, as he eventually discovers, it is a perfectly shaped-rock. But Hunwick doesn't mind and loves it anyway.

## **Section 5: Ezra Jack Keats**

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Did you know that the author:

- grew up and lived in a poor section of New York City
- kept warm by sleeping on a cot next to a coal stove
- drew pictures of small houses and people from many lands directly on his family's kitchen table
- would often climb to the top of his apartment building to look out at his neighborhood
- often had to confront gangs of bullies in his neighborhood. Once he showed some bullies some of his paintings and they started to treat him better
- loved reading art books
- earned a quarter for painting a sign for a candy shop

- decided to run away from home but came back the same night
- often saw homeless men on the street huddled around a fire to keep warm
- grew up in a family that always worried about having enough money for food and rent

Once again, our author study will begin with a discussion of the above biographical facts and will be followed by a presentation of Keats' life and works as detailed on the display board. Then our book study will begin.

#### Anecdote

Keats worked illustrating 25 books for other writers for almost 10 years. Never during that time was there a story with a black child as the hero. He decided that when he wrote his first book, its hero would be a black child. One day in his art studio he came upon a *Life* magazine picture of a young boy from rural Georgia. He was impressed by the strong resolve in the boy's eyes and decided to use him as the model in his first book, *Snowy Day*.

#### *Snowy Day*

This is a story of a young African-American boy named Peter, who experiences all the excitement of a snowy day—walking in the crunchy snow, building a snowman, watching a snowball fight and wishing he could participate in it. He even takes a snowball home hoping to save it for the next day.

#### Anecdote

As a child Ezra often felt invisible and that nobody at home really paid much attention to him except when he drew something. He got the idea to run away from home from a story he had read in school. Like that boy he decided to carry his bundle of belongings on a pole. To his surprise, instead of discouraging him from leaving, his mother responded by tying the bundle tighter for him and then resumed scrubbing the floor. His adventure was short-lived when he ran into bullies, darkness fell and he started to get hungry. He had to plead at his apartment door before his parents would let him back in.

#### *Peter's Chair*

Peter is having trouble adjusting to the newest member of his family, a baby sister. He tries to hide his favorite chair because he fears his parents will paint it pink and give it to her. He decides to run away, taking his dog and a shopping bag filled with cookies and dog biscuits. He only gets as far as the front of his building and stands there for awhile. Later he sneaks back in and soon reveals himself. He decides he will give his chair, which he no longer fits into, to his sister and will even help his dad paint it pink.

#### Anecdote

Ezra lived in a rough neighborhood in Brooklyn where every block had its own gang who jumped on trespassers. He often relied on his older brother Willie to stand up to them and scare them off or take them on. Willie was known to give a mean wrist burn to opponents. But the day Ezra ran away he was alone and he came across a group of bullies on the street who knocked him down and grabbed his bundle of belongings. Later that same evening he found himself running away from another gang on another street.

#### *Goggles*

In this story Peter and his friend Archie find a pair of yellow motorcycle goggles which they are delighted with. A gang of bigger boys tries to bully them into handing them over. Brain over brawn wins out as the two boys very deftly elude their would-be tormentors.

#### Anecdote

One day Ezra heard harmonica music coming from a neighboring apartment. The man inside shouted for him to come inside. Ezra soon realized that the man was blind. As the weeks wore on, he took many spring walks with his newfound friend and was surprised with how much the man noticed (the spring wind, the smell of fresh budding leaves) about his surroundings even though he could not see.

#### *Apt. 2*

Sam and Ben hear the sweet sound of harmonica music drifting through the hallways of their tenement. At the end of their search for the source of the music they find a blind man who does his seeing through his ears. They become friends and agree to take a walk together the next day.

#### Section 6: Telling Your Own Story

We have learned about the lives of three well-loved authors by examining their stories. As we prepare to write our own life stories I plan to begin teaching writing by putting on my storyteller hat and telling stories from my life. Kate Bartley, a first-grade teacher, describes the purpose of this in the book, *Guiding K-3 Writers To Independence* by Patricia L. Scharer and Gay Su Pinnell. She wants her students to know "that they are telling a story to an audience and it is their responsibility to captivate their listeners by sharing real-life stories and telling them with panache!" (p. 35-36) My goal is to help children realize that storytelling supports story writing.

After telling my story I will create a simple title for it like 'My Pet Story'. I will keep the titles generic so that they reflect universal themes that my young writers can connect to and consider writing about. Each title will be charted on a poster entitled 'Topics We Can Write About'. In the following days I will move from telling my stories to having willing students tell theirs to the class. This exercise promises to be a meaningful one because they will be telling stories that have really happened to them—ones that they can more easily supply story details to and that they are emotionally invested in it. Lesson Plan 1 will describe one way to help a child organize the details of the story before writing which I have adapted from a lesson described in Megan S. Sloan's book *Teaching Young Writers To Elaborate* . (p. 40-42)

How can one begin writing his/her life story? The first logical step is to jot down possible memories, people and things from your life. In this unit I will use two of the planning strategies suggested by Ralph Fletcher in his book, *How To Write Your Life Story* , with my class. Each of these approaches will help the young writer "to dig up the raw clay for your life story." (Fletcher, p. 18).

The first strategy involves brainstorming a list of possible memories and then highlighting 5-6 key moments. I will impress upon my class the importance of selecting events that produce a vivid and colorful story that will engage the reader. These events can be placed on a simple timeline that might look like this:

Born \_\_\_\_\_ Now

The second planning-for-writing strategy is to create a heart map, originated by poet and teacher, Georgia Heard in her book, *Awakening The Heart* . On this map, which is shaped like a heart, the writer includes in

both pictures and words, events, memories, people and things that are close to his/her heart. It is important to note that this can be an organizer that one fills up over time as more ideas come to mind. See Lesson Plan 2 for further details on helping children create a heart map.

Compressing prose is the trick of good writing and can be effectively facilitated by offering the young writer a frame into which he writes his life story. Forcing it into a frame is part of the creative process. Once the student has selected some events from his life he is ready to mold the clay into his story. Fletcher, in his afore-mentioned book, describes different forms that a writer can use in presenting his life story. The vignette or micro-memoir is a short literary sketch that describes an aspect of one's life (like your name). A student can opt to focus on using one vignette or a series of vignettes to tell his story. When using this form the writer will need to keep his description brief yet vivid.

The second form is shorter than the vignette and is called a snapshot, consisting of only a few sentences or one paragraph. Barry Lane, in his book *But How Do You Teach Writing?* describes a snapshot as "a picture from a camera that has more lenses. It can smell and hear things as well as touch things." (p. 155). Using this form a student describes each memory and is very selective about which details he chooses.

With either form it will be essential to cohesively pull your story together. Fletcher suggests using a photograph at the beginning of each chapter which thus provides the "connective tissue" for your life story. (p. 41)

A third form is poetry and I have chosen the instant bio-poem format for my first-graders having had a great deal of success with it in the past. The form looks like this:

I wish \_\_\_\_\_  
Like \_\_\_\_\_  
And I dream \_\_\_\_\_  
I am \_\_\_\_\_  
I used to \_\_\_\_\_  
But now I \_\_\_\_\_  
I seem to \_\_\_\_\_  
But I'm really \_\_\_\_\_

It is amazing how poignantly this poem can describe a child and his/her experiences. Lesson Plan 3 will describe how to teach children to write a poem about their lives using this format.

During this time of planning and finding our own voice for writing I will return to Joan Lowery Nixon's aforementioned book and read excerpts to the class which describe a few elements of good writing. The first one is using precise verbs to describe action in your story. In writing about a life-event the writer needs to show not just tell. Melia's mom advises her to "think of words that *show* what is happening. You'd use words that let people see what you see." (p. 3)

A second element of good writing is to begin with an interesting lead: asking a question, using a sound, using dialogue or beginning with an action. Melia's mom answers her query of how to start a story by telling her to begin "with something interesting, so people would want to know what happened next." (p. 10)

The book ends powerfully with Melia's mom telling her that the most important ingredient of all for good stories is that they "belong to you because they'd be a part of you." (p.14) A book that exemplifies this philosophy is *The Best Story* written by Eileen Spinelli. In the story the young female writer starts off taking the ideas of various members of her family in writing her story for an upcoming contest. But no one is satisfied with the end product, least of all her. Near the end of the story her mom suggests to her that the best story is one that comes from your heart. The young writer finds her own voice, writes her story and is content to know that the story is her own regardless of whether she wins the contest or not.

We all have stories from our own lives to tell and by thoughtfully and skillfully sharing our life-experiences we can both learn from and teach or entertain others.

## Lesson Plan 1

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**Objective:** To create notes about a child's chosen topic to help him/her elaborate.

**Materials :** blank paper, post-it notes, marker, pencils, lined paper

**Procedure:**

1. Have the students sit on the carpet together and ask a volunteer to come up and tell the class about a life experience he/she would like to share (related to previous topics discussed).
2. While the student talks, jot down in phrase-form 4-5 specific details of the story on separate post-it notes.
3. Display these notes collected on a larger piece of paper and review each one, praising the student on any use of descriptive language. Ask the class if there are other details they remember and include a few of those.
4. Give the notes to the student to refer to as he/she begins to write the story just told.

## Lesson Plan 2

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**Objective:** To make a heart map on which you will draw and write meaningful ideas about life-experiences that you could later write about.

**Materials:** outlines of a heart on 8.5 x 11 paper, pencils, markers, crayons, colored pencils

**Procedure:**

1. Gather the class on the carpet. Tell them one good way that you have found to think about what is important to you is to draw a heart map. Show your own partially completed heart map and explain how it helps you get lots of ideas to write about your life.
2. Point to one piece of the map and relay the story behind the words or sketch. Show another one that is less serious and more funny in nature and tell about that. Remind the class that the events, people or things written on your heart map can be serious or silly but should be ones close to your heart. A good sample of a completed heart map can be found on p. 19 of Ralph Fletcher's aforementioned book.
3. Have students talk with a buddy before beginning their individual heart maps to help them brainstorm ideas. Then send them off to their desks to begin working on them. Emphasize that there is no need to fill it all up in one day and that as ideas come to them, they can include them.
4. These completed heart maps can be attached to the inside cover of their notebooks for easy access.

## Lesson Plan 3

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**Objective:** To write an instant bio-poem

**Materials:** instant bio-poem template, 8-box graphic organizer and pencils

**Procedure:**



1. Before class create your own instant bio-poem (following the format given in Section 6 of this unit). Gather the class on the carpet and tell them that today they will be writing a poem that tells about themselves. Then show and read your poem and ask them to give examples of what it tells about you. Encourage them to ask further questions as this poem can easily serve as a springboard for delving into deeper descriptions of your life- experiences.
2. Continue by explaining how you came up with your ideas and show them an eight-squared graphic organizer with a sentence starter heading each one. It might look like this:

I wish I	I used to
Like	But now I
And I dream	I seem to
I am	But I'm really

3. Point out all the ideas written in each category and explain that from these boxes you choose the most important ones for your poem.
4. Have students pair up and talk about the ideas they might put and then send them off to jot those ideas down. Be prepared to confer with struggling students.
5. Once the graphic organizer is completed hand them the template on which they will write their poem. Guide individuals through this process as needed.
6. Once the poems are all in final draft form the class can share them on the carpet.

## Appendix

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Common Core Standards For Grade 1

RL.2 Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

RL.9 Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in a story.

RI.1 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

RI.7 Use illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas.

W.3 Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.

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