

# HOW TO ESTABLISH WRITING AS A WAY OF LIFE

BY SHELLEY HARWAYNE

*Shelley Harwayne is currently acting superintendent of Community School District Two in New York City, but for eight years she led the Manhattan New School, also in District Two, of which she was founding principal. The following article, which recalls her experiences as principal, shows how writing can become an important part of a school community and a tool that even the youngest children want to use and use well.*

—EDITOR

BY SHELLEY HARWAYNE

**W** RITING IS a way of life in our school, an almost automatic response to practically every occasion. Students are encouraged to write, throughout the school day, for the same various reasons you and I write. When children tell their teacher they have changed their afternoon travel plans, the teacher is most likely to say, "Have you sent a note down to the office?" When a child is worried

---

*Shelley Harwayne is the author of several books, including Lifetime Guarantees: Toward Ambitious Literacy Teaching (Heinemann, 2000), from which this article is excerpted, and the forthcoming Writing Through Childhood, which will be published by Heinemann and from which the article on writing conferences on page 27 is drawn. Both articles are reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

she will forget to bring a snack when her turn rolls around, the teacher is likely to suggest the first-grader write a reminder note. When a student complains about a broken hook in the classroom clothes closet, it's no surprise that she is asked to put her request in writing and leave it in the custodian's mailbox. Our students quickly learn that writing is a tool that helps you get things done.

It comes as no surprise then that children begin to write on their own without teacher prompting. When kindergartners are sent to borrow snacks from another class and the 5-year-olds find a box of cheese crackers in an empty room, they know to leave a note. When second-grader Mark is frustrated with how his soccer career is going, he sends a "retirement" announcement to our physical education instructor. When fourth-grader Lindsay wants her class to view "All My Children," a soap opera in which she is appearing, she leaves a letter of request on my desk. When second-grader Sam doesn't know which restroom the boys on the fourth floor are to use, he automatically sends me a note, complete with check-off boxes for my response. (See Figure 1, page 24.)

There is an extra bonus to all this real-world writing. When children use their writing for real purposes, they understand why they need to edit their work. They become serious about checking their spelling, punctuation, and grammar and even using their best handwriting.

Over the last seven years, I have kept all the children's letters in scrapbooks. They make for some wonderfully en-

tertaining and nostalgic reading. Someday I should probably categorize their contents. I could imagine creating separate sections for requests, complaints, "love letters," birthday and holiday greetings, tributes, reminders, and one entitled "Writing Our Wrongs," filled with all the letters containing explanations, apologies, and promises to never repeat wrongful acts.

The latter is the kind of writing we ask children to do when they have forgotten about gracious living and the need to resolve conflicts in a just and peaceful way. Classroom misbehavior is relatively rare, but bus rides and lunchroom and playground times seem to bring out the feistiness, daring, and mischief we could easily live without. There have been times when I wished I could dramatically whip out a cellular phone, just for the effect, and announce to the rascal in front of me, "I'm calling your mother!" More times than not, my first response is to ask children to cool off by writing an explanation of what went wrong.

Although this kind of explanatory writing is valuable, I much prefer looking back over the writing that suggests more positive school moments. For example, I'm always delighted when graduating seniors decide to write tributes to the school. (It might be a very lovely graduation ritual to require each senior to write a tribute to the school. These could be placed in a separate three-ring binder and added to each year. It would make for some fine nostalgic reading.)

### Confer About Purpose and Audience

Conferring can help children understand what writing is for. When teachers continually ask, "Where in the real world does this piece of writing belong?" students appreciate that their words can make a difference to the people, places, and causes they care about. Students revise their writing keeping in mind the destination they envision for their work. If I suggest to a child that her writing has potential to become an article for the school newspaper, a text to teach reading in the first grade, or an appropriate gift poem for a teacher who is about to have a baby, she approaches revision more purposefully. If children understand the constraints of the chosen genre and audience, they can establish clear ways to make their work the best it can be. (See also the accompanying article beginning on page 27 for conference guidelines.)

### Elevate the Genres Particular to Schools

The following is a list of many other kinds of writing I encounter because I am working in a school:

- welcome notes
- school brochures
- phone messages
- bus schedules
- floor plans
- journals on plant and animal growth
- birthday greetings
- get-well messages
- good-bye messages
- congratulatory notes
- procedural writing
- minutes of meetings

- yearbook pages
- interviews
- curriculum guides
- permission slips
- class lists
- reading recommendations
- invitations and programs for school events
- resumés for school jobs
- application letters

Figure 1.  
A query to the principal

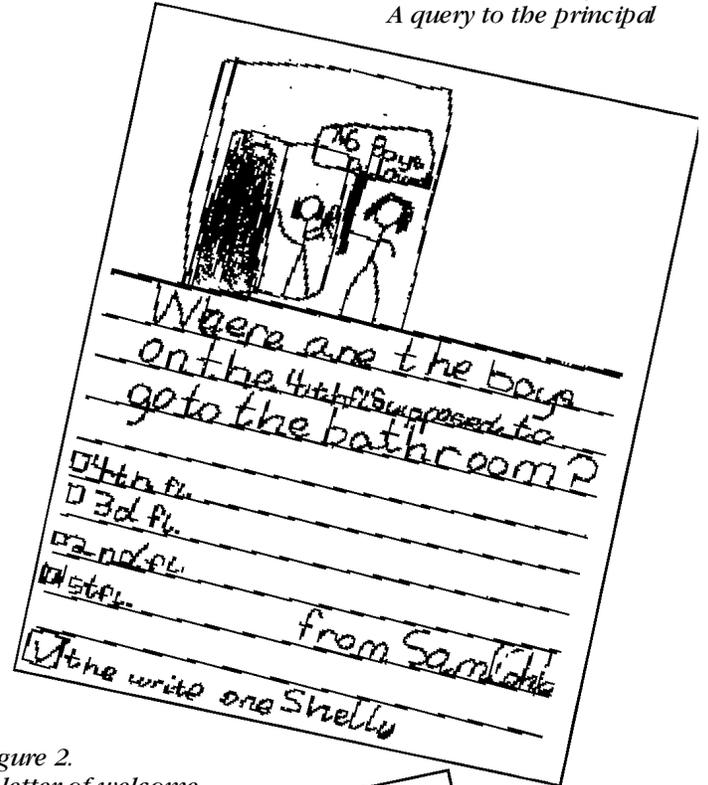
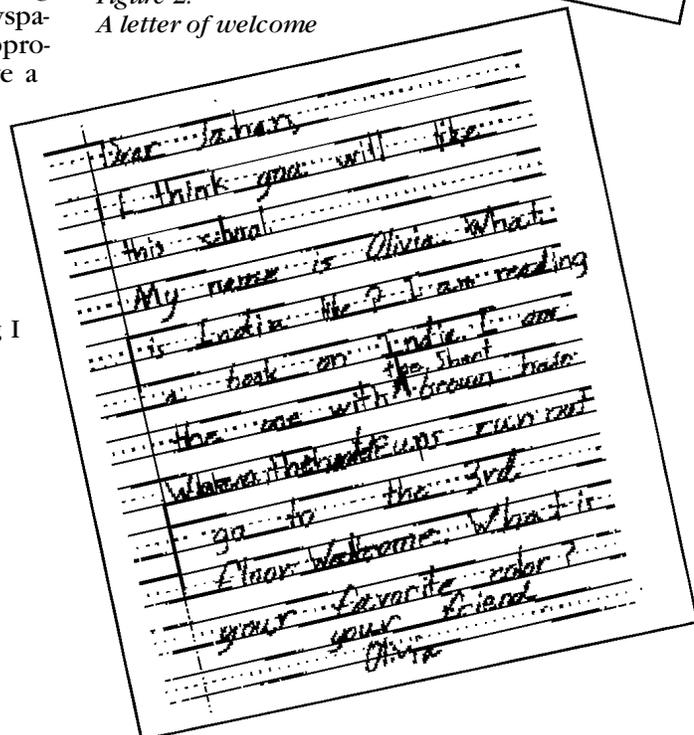


Figure 2.  
A letter of welcome



- speeches for school causes
- plant and animal care suggestions
- procedural writing for use of school equipment
- inventory of supplies
- fire drill procedures
- labeled map of the school
- good news announcements
- school calendars
- cafeteria schedules
- discipline codes
- assessment forms
- schedules for use of the auditorium and cafeteria
- custodial requests
- thank-you notes
- late passes
- school newspaper articles
- letters to families
- toasts for school events
- banners and congratulatory notes
- bulletin board announcements
- surveys about school issues
- classroom signs
- narrative reports
- visitors' guides
- instructions for substitutes
- homework assignments
- daily agendas
- pen-pal letters

How many of these genres can be introduced to students? All, I would imagine, in one form or another. Some have already been learned by children in their home settings.

For example, thank-you notes are perhaps one of the first genres parents ask their children to write. Some forms of writing are more unexpected. One afternoon a prospective family arrived at school with child in hand. I'm very used to the parents bringing a list of must-ask questions, but this time the child carried his own list. His questions included: Who are the second-grade teachers? Where and what time do we get the bus? What are the specialists? Do you have to bring your lunch? What Manhattan New School kids live around 96th and Columbus and/or 106th and Broadway? What time do you start and let out? Needless to say he was my kind of kid. We must never underestimate what children can do. Children can learn to write significant interview questions, as they can learn many of the genres listed above. Some would require very little instruction; others might deserve brief, whole-class genre studies.

Years ago, I attended a reading conference in Perth, Australia. Each participant received a letter of welcome, tucked into the registration material, from a local school child. It was a delightful way to learn about the city, the schools, and the life of a child. I could easily imagine asking students in our school to prepare welcome letters to be handed out to new parents, students, student teachers, and all visitors.

### Design Community-Service Assignments

According to the African concept of *ogbo*, people of different ages are assigned certain village responsibilities. I suggested a similar set of responsibilities for schoolchildren at different grade levels. It would also work very well to assign specific grade levels to the following writing tasks, all

carried out for the good of the whole community.

- Third-graders could be asked to write commentaries for the monthly menu posted in the cafeteria. Other students would refer to this explanation and critique when deciding whether or not to order school lunch.
- Fourth-graders could be asked to craft written instructions for physical education activities and exercises and games. These would be given to new students and to students who need additional support.
- Third-graders could be asked to prepare a written summary of all the events listed in the school calendar. Their notes could be given to all new families.
- Fifth-graders could be asked to serve as a get-well crew, responsible for sending cheerful notes to anyone who is absent for an extended period of time.
- Fifth-graders could be asked to serve as roving reporters, regularly crafting columns for the school newsletter.
- Fourth-graders could be asked to write for specific areas of the school. For example, Sharon Hill's fourth-grade class took it upon themselves to solve the school problem of children being disrespectful and sloppy in the restrooms. Their collaboratively written poem appears below.

#### Think Twice

Don't be in a rush  
 Always flush.  
 No spit balls  
 They mar the walls.  
 Don't flood the floor  
 Or you're out the door.  
 Writing on the wall?  
 You're not on the ball.  
 Wash your hands,  
 But no headstands.  
 Leaving a mess?  
 We're in distress.  
 Think Twice.  
 It's just not nice.

I added a few more verses to their beginning efforts—

No trash in the bowl,  
 Or you'll stuff up the hole.  
 Use the soap,  
 Sparingly we hope.  
 If you can't be neat,  
 Wipe the seat.  
 Peeking in the stall?  
 It's rude, that's all.

- Fourth-graders could also hang signs reminding people to use soft voices in the halls. They could create posters reminding students to clean up after themselves in the school cafeteria. They could hang warnings about the dangers of play fighting turning into real fighting.

### Expect That Artwork Will Be Accompanied by Text

There is very little white space on the walls of our school. Every inch seems decorated with student work. Just as museum pieces are accompanied by titles, placards with background information, and brochures describing the work and the artist, so too children's work in a school de-

serves to be treated in the same elegant fashion. (I can even imagine asking older students to periodically prepare a walking tour of the school on tape to be given to visitors who want to tour the hallways on their own.) Perhaps less ambitious, but nonetheless valuable, would be to require that every piece of art in the hallway have a title (or at least an "untitled" notation), a description of the medium used, and background on the student/artist. Other writing possibilities would be procedural notes so that other students can learn the techniques used, reflections by the artist on his work, and blank paper to encourage written response by viewers.

### Weave Writing into Student Government

Our school's student council (one representative from every class) meets with me every two weeks. Our mission is to acknowledge the people and events worthy of celebration and to attend to the problems that need to be solved. Following the half-hour gathering, representatives share their notes with their individual classes. Not only does this structure allow for quick sharing of information with the entire student body, it also enables students to take on leadership roles in the school. In addition, this structure leads to all kinds of writing tasks. In the upper-grade classes in which students vote for their class representative, some children even prepare promotional materials encouraging their friends to vote for them.

Most of the writing, however, takes place at our meetings or in response to our meetings. First, all students take notes on the discussions. Even the kindergarten children find a way to record key points. Then too, children's conversations about the good things happening in the school and the problems yet to be solved inevitably lead to some real-world writing. They write thank-you notes, congratulatory banners, and good news announcements. They've also written many letters to the custodian requesting repairs, reminder signs for hallway decorum, and posters for a neighborhood "curb your dog," campaign. Likewise, our students use their literacies to improve the quality of life at school. Dominique and Jhordan sent the note in Figure 3 to our custodian James. Note their "c.c." to me. The younger children at the student council were fascinated by this device and in fact began adding a "c.c." to their writing and sending carbon copies to their parents and teachers.

Figure 3.  
A request to the custodian

Dear James  
 We need higher stall because people  
 climb and look at people using  
 the bathroom. May also stand  
 on the toilets and look over  
 Your Friends  
 P.S. People also climb on the stalls  
 and look at the people who  
 we also need stalls as  
 high as the files.  
 C.C. Shelly  
 3/27/98

Figure 4. A pen-pal letter

Dear Pappal  
 My name is Cinna Anthony and  
 I live in New York. I always love  
 New York because it is always busy  
 and I love the politics and noise  
 of the city. I miss North Carolina  
 with the love and the beautiful  
 butterflies and the smell of  
 green grass. You know how  
 the food is so good. Can you  
 have food cooking on the  
 stove? I miss home like  
 Carolina?  
 Yours Pappal  
 Cinna

### Create Classroom Newsletters

When children know that there is a predictable, formal vehicle for publishing their writing, they often write toward that publication. In several classes, parents assume the responsibility of putting together a biweekly or monthly class newsletter. They include all the information parents need to know, including updates on curriculum, a calendar and description of upcoming trips, book recommendations, and supplies needed. In addition, most leave ample space for student writing and artwork. Parents are eager to tuck in students' poems and short stories, but the newsletter format invites children to try their hand at more newsy genres. Children in fact can take over for the parents. Youngsters can be asked to write their own accounts of what is happening in their class and school as well as their own lists of supplies needed, calendar dates, and curriculum happenings.

### Encourage Keeping in Touch with Friends

I always encourage students to keep in touch with friends who have moved. The possibilities of using electronic mail have made keeping in touch even more popular. Children write to former classmates as well as to children they have never met.

One teacher's students write pen-pal letters to children from her former teaching assignment in Brooklyn, and the teachers arrange for the children to meet. Another teacher

requires all his fourth-graders to select someone in their lives that they can write to on a regular basis. Monthly letter writing is built into their writing workshop schedule. (See Figure 4.)

No doubt, if teachers have abundant time to meet and reflect on their teaching, they will devise many more ways for students to engage in real-world writing. But it will be much more likely that teachers will be able to turn their ideas into practice if they are thoroughly supported by a principal who deeply understands how to establish writing as a way of life in the whole school community. □

# When You Sit Down with Young Writers

**D**URING MY eight years as principal at the Manhattan New School, I conferred with hundreds of children about their writing as I stopped in to visit their classrooms, conduct demonstration lessons, or cover classes for absent or unusually busy teachers. I'm convinced more than ever that responding to student writing is an art not a science. Even though I know our students fairly well, and I'm aware of any courses of study taking place, I tread lightly, knowing there may be information about that young writer and the context of his current work that I am unaware of.

I have found it incredibly helpful, therefore, to carry a simple framework in my head whenever I approach young writers. I have a few conference guidelines in mind, no matter what the age of the students.

- First, I want to find out how the students feel about being asked to write.
- Second, I want to know if students take risks as writers.
- Third, I want to find out if students understand what writing is for.
- Fourth and finally, and the one I only think about when the first three conditions are in place, I want to find out if students have strategies for improving the work at hand.

An explanation of each guideline follows.

## Finding Out How Young Writers Feel About Being Asked To Write

I want to know if students feel confident about being asked to write. If they are reluctant, I want to know why. If they use the pages from their writer's notebook to do math homework or make paper airplanes, I want to know why. If their writer's notebooks are ragged, empty, or constantly misplaced, I want to know why. If writing is the only school subject they aren't interested in, I want to know why. That's always where my conference with a new student begins. I can get at the above kinds of

information by asking such questions as the ones below. All of them are based on the children's having notebooks entirely devoted to their writing.

- Why do you think your teacher has asked you to keep a writer's notebook?
- Do you find it easier to write in your notebook at home or at school? Why?
- What is the best thing about keeping a writer's notebook? What is the most difficult thing?
- Do you ever have trouble writing? If so, what do you do to get going?
- Do you ever think you will write during the summer vacation? When you graduate? When you are an adult?
- How would you feel about school if writing were not on the daily agenda?

## Finding Out if Students Take Risks as Writers

Of course there are all kinds of ways to take risks. With very young children, we frequently need to encourage them to take risks as spellers. Older students take risks with choice of topics, experimentation with new genres, and with their willingness to share their work with wider audiences. I can figure out if children are taking risks by asking such questions as the following:

- Have you done something in this piece of writing that you have never done before?
- If I looked through your writing folder would I find fairly similar writing (in topic, genre, writing techniques)?
- Have you been thinking about trying something new or different in your writing, but are not ready to go ahead just yet?
- Have you ever heard or read some topic or technique in another student's writing or in some professionally written material that you think would be too difficult to try?
- If a teacher says that a student "plays it safe" in writing, what do you think the teacher means?
- What happens if you misspell many

words in your writing? How does that make you feel?

- What happens if your classmates don't understand your writing? How does that make you feel?
- How does it take courage to be a writer?
- Where do you think it is easier to take risks—on the playground, in the cafeteria, in the writing workshop? Can you explain your thinking?

In addition, I can find out if students take risks by skimming through their portfolios or notebooks with the writers at my side. For example, if I discover that a writer only does one kind of writing, I'd want to know if the student is afraid to try something new or lacks the background to try a new genre. It's my hope that students attempt many forms of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. There need to be lots of ways to shine as a writer in any school year, in any writing workshop. The student who struggles with nonfiction may be a fine poet. The student who can't write personally may be a fine journalist. (Of course, a student may be sticking to one kind of writing because he or she has found an area of expertise or an area of interest. Poets improve their craft when they write many poems, not when they produce one or two poems a year.)

Within each of these broad genre areas, we put our trust in brevity: short people, short genres. We privilege short forms of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

We've also discovered that there is life beyond the personal narrative. Of course, our students still do narrative writing, but when they do write about personal things, we don't cross the line. Taking risks as writers does not mean students have to write about risky things. In the eight years our school has been in existence, we have never had to hide a piece of writing on open school night. We don't ever play therapist. We never ask children who have only been on the planet fewer than 10 years to spill their guts onto the writing tablet, or share their innermost thoughts, fears, or nightmares. That's

not to say that in our safe, supportive classrooms children never bring up heartfelt issues and traumatic moments. Of course they do, and teachers handle these issues professionally, privately, and confidentially. But it is to say that we never ask young children to add details, think about their lead, and make sure their dialogue is authentic when their piece really demands seeking parental or professional intervention.

There are many topics that will move an audience. We delight in pieces that sound like real children wrote them. We're not interested in pushing children to write in such sophisticated or precocious ways that readers can't believe children did the writing. Yes, we want our children to write in powerful ways, but at the elementary level that does not require complicated genres, layered meanings, surprising symbolism, or heart-wrenching topics. Childhood is short enough.

Enjoy 7-year-old Haden's narrative entitled, "The Dress Up Disaster." (See below.) We consider it a powerful piece of personal narrative writing.

### Finding Out if Students Understand How To Put Their Writing to Good Use

I worry when students have never put their writing to real-world uses. I

often ask students the following types of questions, all variations on the same theme:

- Who might you give this to?
- Where might you send this?
- Who would benefit from reading this?
- How can you go public with this?
- How can this piece improve the quality of our lives at school or your life at home?
- Where in the real world does this piece of writing belong?

### Finding Out if Students Know How To Improve Their Writing

My fourth and final guideline, and the one I only think about when the first three conditions are in place, involves finding out if students have strategies for improving the work at hand. In other words, if students don't feel good about being asked to write, if they don't take risks, or put their writing to real-world uses, it's highly unlikely that I'll fret whether they know how to lift the quality of their work. When the first three conditions are in place, I feel fine about talking to young children about issues of crafting, revising, and editing their work.

I can imagine, however, an occasion when helping an older student write a memorable piece might be

the only way to make him feel better about being asked to write. There are older students who, like many adults, appear unhappy when asked to write because they have set very high standards for themselves. Their work is never quite good enough. For the most part, however, my belief in making students feel good about being asked to write has more to do with helping young students discover that writing is important, self-satisfying work. I want our students to believe that it is worth carving out time, in school and at home, to take their writing seriously. I hope many will eventually write with gusto and joy. When children seem bored with writing, or annoyed at having been asked, I don't try to improve the quality of work they do not care about. First, I would help them discover how to make writing count in their lives.

When I do feel comfortable helping a child revise a piece of writing they care about, there are many teaching paths I might take. Any of the following questions might direct my conference:

- What questions might your classmates have if they hear this piece?
- What do you want your readers to think about (feel, realize) when they hear your writing?
- What kind of additional material might you need to do the best job possible?
- How can you describe the shape of your writing (the architecture of the piece)? Does it feel well-balanced and complete?
- What lessons are you learning from the literature you are reading? Are there specific techniques that your favorite writers use that you might consider trying on this piece?
- How can I help you make this the best piece ever?

It should be noted that these frameworks not only inform the conferences I have with children but they can also serve as guidelines when I launch writing classes, design mini-lessons, or carve out courses of study. □

