

# Transforming Reluctant Writers Into Eager Writers:

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# 1. Summary of the Four Steps of Writing from the Inside Out

## 1. Wake the Muse.

- Get kids interested in the topic. Relate it to their lives in a meaningful way.

## 2. Surf the flow.

- Write without fear or worry. Let your writing flow out of you, saying “YES!” to all of your ideas.

## 3. Put Meat on those Bones.

- Look for places to paragraph.
- Find moments to hang out in.
- Make sure you prove your assertions.
- Use Four Square to check to see how many main ideas you have, your supporting details, and whether or not you have any elaborations. This will be a great time to show students that there is no magic in having three main ideas with three supporting details. This is all made up. A good story might have only one main idea and only one long elaboration.
- Help us see, hear, and feel it.
- Hook us with a good beginning, and signal that you are ending so we can have a soft landing.
- Take a closer look at words like “nice” and “stuff” so we know what you are talking about.

## 4. Picky Time.

- \_ Check all the details: capitals, spelling, periods.

Most of all, have fun and write about what is important to you. Trust what comes up and then go back and help the reader get as close to the experience as you can. Don't try to write “good” papers. Try to write “true” ones.

## 2. Waking the Muse

### A. Creating Safety

“How many experiments did Thomas Edison try before he invented the light bulb?” I ask my students. “Fifty,” someone says. “Fifty would be a lot, wouldn't it? How many times do you try to do something before you give up? Think of a number. Is it larger than ten? When I was a girl, my give-up number would have been about three. Maybe even two. I practiced giving up, and I was really good at it.

“Thomas Edison actually tried over four thousand experiments before he invented the light bulb. People would say to him, ‘So, Tom, how did you deal with all of that failure? How did you

handle all of those mistakes?’ ‘What mistakes,’ he would ask them. ‘I learned 3,999 ways how to NOT make a light bulb.’”

Students and adults love this story. It illustrates that it is not what happens to us that counts, but rather the story we tell ourselves about what happens to us that makes all the difference. If mistakes are horrible and to be avoided at all costs, than we will play it safe and boring. Our writing and our learning will be stilted. Trying to teach writing to discouraged writers is one of the most discouraging enterprises I have ever experienced.

This is why I teach perseverance.  
Without the life skill of perseverance, no one will accomplish anything. Children with learning challenges need to be able to keep at it without telling themselves the story that they are stupid. Perseverance takes courage, and we all get better at it the more we practice.

As with everything I teach, I try to use movement and humor. I use poetry, skits, and a dance I made up to the overture of the opera *Carmen* to involve all the students, have a great time, and learn how to never give up!

## a. Perseverance: A Poem

(Hold your hands, fingers curved over fingers.)  
Ahem. (Put fist to mouth and clear throat.)

Perseverance! (Point right index finger high in the air)  
means never giving up (Shake head vigorously back and forth),  
even when people laugh at you when you make a mistake  
(Laugh a mean laugh).

Perseverance! (Point finger again)  
means never giving up (Shake head vigorously back and forth),  
even when the problem seems very, very big (Lift hand up as if building a mountain)  
and you feel very, very small (Make a box with your hands that gets smaller and smaller).  
(Cry like a baby: wah, wah, wah).

Perseverance! (Point your finger again)  
means never giving up (Shake head vigorously back and forth),  
even when you don't know how to do something  
(Scratch head and say, "Huh?").

Perseverance! (Point your finger again)  
means never giving up (Shake head vigorously back and forth),  
even if you are horribly embarrassed  
(Put your arms over your head and say, "Don't look at me!").

Perseverance! (Point your finger again)  
means getting used to reaching goals  
(Jump out with your arms spread and say, "Ta da!").

Perseverance! (Point finger)  
means getting used to success  
(Shine your fingernails on your shirt).

Perseverance! (Point your finger)  
means building muscles for life as big as Arnold Schwarzenegger's!  
(Assume a body builder pose).

Perseverance is fun. Perseverance is cool.  
Perseverance will serve you well  
all your life, as well as in school.

Thank you, thank you, thank you (Bow).

## b. Perseverance Skit

*This skit was performed by a fourth grade class. Every member of the class had a part. We all held tissues to our eyes during the "Sigh. That's so sad. Tsk, tsk, tsk."*

Once there were a bunch of babies who wanted to learn how to walk. (Several students come up to the front and sit down in a line.) They all said "Goo!" (All the children say, "Goo!") All of the children tried to stand up and walk, but they fell down. They tried again, and again they fell down.

Then one of the babies said, "This is too hard! I give up!" The rest of the babies, though, said "This time for sure!" They kept trying to learn to walk until they all knew how to walk. Then they learned how to skip, hop, and jump. (Raise arms in the air.) They all went on to become successful, happy adults because they learned not to give up just because something was hard.

But the baby who gave up never learned how to walk or skip or run. He lived a miserable, sad, lonely life. (All of the children in the skit put tissues up to their eyes, sigh, and say, "That is so sad! Tsk, tsk, tsk.")

Then there were a bunch of kids who wanted to learn how to tie their shoes. Tying the laces together was very hard. They wished they had two or three more hands. They got so frustrated, they all threw a little temper tantrum. Then one kid said, "This is too hard. I give up!" But the rest of the children said, "This time for sure!" They kept trying until they could all tie their shoes. (Raise arms in air.) And they went on to become successful lawyers and argued their cases in the Supreme Court. All except the kid who had given up. He couldn't buy any shoes except Velcro shoes or slip on shoes, but lawyers who

argue cases in the Supreme Court aren't allowed to wear Velcro shoes, so the kid who gave up got used to giving up his dreams and led a miserable, small life. ("Sigh. That's so sad! Tsk, tsk, tsk.")

Then there was a group of kids who wanted to learn how to read. They wanted to learn how to read the pledge of our country. They started to read, but they all got stuck on the word "allegiance" so they guessed. (The students all pretend to read and say, "I pledge...spaghetti!")

"No, no, no!" The word begins with an "a." Try again!"

"I pledge...alligators!"

"No, no, no! That is all wrong, wrong, wrong! Try again!"

But one of the readers said, "This is too hard. I give up!" The rest of the readers, though, said, "This time for sure!" The rest of the readers kept trying until they could read the Pledge easily. (Students say, "I pledge allegiance to the flag...")

(Raise arms into the air.) The students who didn't give up learning how to read all went on to learn how to read well. They graduated from high school and went on to college if they wanted to and fulfilled their dreams. But the kid who gave up learning how to read started to hate school. She hung out with other kids who hated school and then started getting in trouble. She led a small, miserable life. ("Sigh. That is so sad!. Tsk, tsk, tsk.")

Then there was a group of kids who wanted to make friends. (Students get in a line. Each student will ask the "Friend Rejecter" if he wants to be a

friend. The Rejecter will say a snarly, "No!" to all who ask.)

So all the people who wanted to be friends were rejected. One child said, "This is too hard. I give up!" But the rest of the children said, "This time for sure!" They decided, if that one person didn't want to be friends, they didn't care. They would be best friends with each other. So they went on to live a happy life full of friendship and barbecues and laughter. The kid who gave up because of a little rejection decided to never take any more risks. He never made any friends and lived a small, miserable life. ("Sigh. That's so sad. Tsk, tsk, tsk.")

Then there were a bunch of kids who were afraid of things. The first kid was afraid of the bogey man. (Put on a mask and scare the first kid, who runs away screaming.) The next kid was afraid of spiders. The next kid was afraid of squeaky toys, and the next kid was afraid of snakes.

The kid who was afraid of snakes said, "This is too hard. I give up!" But the rest of the kids who were afraid said, "This time for sure!" One at a time they

came and faced their fears. The kid who was afraid of the bogey man just looked him straight in the face until the bogey man shriveled away into nothing.

The kid who was afraid of spiders got interested in spiders until he became a famous spider expert and traveled all over the world teaching everyone about the beauty of spiders. The kid who was afraid of squeaky toys took the toy and smashed it on the ground.

But the kid who was afraid of snakes stayed afraid of snakes. Everything started looking like a snake. He became afraid of other things. Ties in shoes scared him. Then T-shirts scared him. Then dust scared him until finally he was afraid of everything! He led a small, miserable life. ("Sigh. That's so sad. Tsk, tsk, tsk.")

(All kids kneel on floor and start pounding on the floor, making a drum roll sound. Then they rise to their feet and yell "Perseverance!") So the word we need to remember if we want to have power and happiness in our lives is, (drum roll) "Perseverance!"

Thank you. Thank you very much.

### **c. Perseverance Dance** (To the overture of *Carmen*)

Listen for music cues. They are pretty obvious after you listen a few times.

March in all four directions. Listen for music cues.

Surf in all four directions.

Climb the learning Mountain.

Stop, look back over shoulder, look afraid and say, "Ooh!"

Look forward with big open mouth.

Repeat.

Get determined and climb for eight beats.

Scan at the top of the mountain, looking at all you can do because you did not give up.

Muscle arms one side, muscle arms the other side, muscle arms overhead.

Start marching:

Chant: "We don't give up. We don't give up."

(With hand to heart and then up to one side with finger pointing) "We persevere. We persevere."

(Scrunch down to floor) "Even when it's scary and it's hard, we don't give up!" (Jump to your feet)

"We don't give up; we don't!" (Shaking arms to one side)

"We don't give up!" (shaking arms to the other side)

"We don't give up; we march!"

(Bigger marching now) Chant: "We don't give up. We don't give up."  
(With hand to heart and then up to one side with finger pointing) "We persevere. We persevere."  
(Scrunch down to floor) "Even when it's scary and it's hard, we don't give up!"  
(Jump to your feet)

"We don't give up; we don't!" (Shaking arms to one side)

"We don't give up!" (shaking arms to the other side)

"We don't give up; we march!"

March in four directions. Stay put in the last direction and wait and try to say, "We don't!" at the end of the overture. You will probably miss it; I always do. But I never give up!

## B. Teaching Students to Write Without Terror

Sometimes, when I taught writing at Oregon State University, a student would bring me a paper that was a complete mess. I would slog through his essay, a tangle of half-baked ideas, not having a clue about where to start "fixing" it. Reading these papers was like walking through a minefield full of broken ideas and shattered syntax.

I would bring these students into my office and ask them one simple question: "What did you want to write about that you didn't think you could write about?" Usually the answer was right near the surface. "Well, I wanted to write about my dad visiting the Oregon Vietnam Veterans' Memorial," I once heard from one of my students.

"Why didn't you think you could write about that?" I asked.

The student with the scrambled paper often didn't know. He had some vague idea that I wouldn't like what he wanted to write about, so he wrote about what he thought he was supposed to write about. The paper turned out to be painful to write and boring and confusing to read.

"I want you to throw this paper away and forget about it. Write a new paper about what you wanted to write about

in the first place. Don't worry about writing it 'right.' Concentrate on writing about what is true for you instead. Don't try to write a good paper. Write a paper that gets as close to your truth as possible. Write a paper that helps someone who doesn't know you understand what your father experienced."

The second paper was always much better than the first. The natural flow of ideas and the passionate voice of the writer were there when they hadn't been in the first paper. The writer's desire to communicate something important to the reader fixed almost all of the writing problems in the first paper.

One girl had a more difficult time. She kept rewriting her paper, and I kept asking her what she really wanted to write about, but felt she couldn't. She was honestly mystified.

"I can see that I'm blocked," she said, "But I have no idea what is blocking me."

After several weeks of struggling, she came to my office with a new draft. "I found out what was blocking me," she said, handing me her paper. As I started reading, I knew something momentous had happened. Instead of being drowned in a choppy sea of prose, I was

being carried by an irresistible current of words. She wrote about being sexually abused as a child. She had completely forgotten about her experience. Her body remembered, though, and wouldn't let her write freely until she was willing to go inside herself enough to know what was true instead of what was "good." When she quit trying to figure out how to play the writing game in my classroom and started listening to herself and trusting

what she heard, she found her paper, and it almost wrote itself.

This girl's story is the most dramatic example I have, but I see small incidents like this all the time. Most of us are blocked from our best writing by the idea in our heads that we need to write it "right" or "well." Our focus is outside of ourselves. We write to escape criticism and to avoid mistakes.

### 3. Surfing the Flow

#### A. When Writing is Hard for Me

##### **Purpose of this Lesson**

Everyone from time to time has trouble writing. Some students, however, are chronically disabled by their inability to get started, to get words on paper. There are lots of good reasons for this behavior. People are shamed of their mistakes. When we write, we cannot hide. We are exposed to the world, and all of our flaws show, flaws we might not have known we had. Writing is a vulnerable activity. This is why so much writing is boring and safe. No fun to write, no fun to read. This is why the majority of students do not like to write. This activity tackles this problem head-on. At the end of this lesson, students will have a paragraph describing how they feel when writing is hard, how they feel when writing is easy, poems to write when they have trouble getting started.

##### **The Lesson**

Write this sentence on the board: "When writing is hard, it feels like..." Write one or two examples from the list of suggestions below and then ask students to add to the list. Write at least four or five descriptions of what writing is like for them when it is hard. The students will generate a list of powerful images, often much richer than their

usual writing. Tell them this is imagery, which makes writing fun to write and to read.

When you finish this list, write the next sentence on the board: "When writing is easy, it feels like..." Write up one example, and then let the class generate a list.

Have the students write their own paragraph describing what it is like for them when writing is hard and what it is like for them when writing is easy.

They have many choices:

- Σ They can copy the list on the board.
- Σ They can change the list on the board to make it fit their experience.
- Σ They may generate a whole new list of descriptions.

They should finish the sentences "When writing is hard for me, it feels like..." and "When writing is easy for me, it feels like..."

When the students have finished this part of the lesson, have volunteers read their paragraphs. Delight in their expressive language. Ask students if they have ever felt the way the volunteer describes. Ask students if the volunteer has helped them imagine what it is like for him or her when writing is hard.

## Starting Poems

### Purpose

Starting poems give students something to write when they can't think of anything to write. Instead of sitting and staring at a blank sheet of paper, students copy the Starting Poem.

You can have a poster on the wall, or students can have their own starting poems somewhere where they can find it easily. Students copy the poem until they can write. If they copy the poem long enough, something will happen. For students who are especially stuck, you might have to let them turn in sheets full of the starting poem before they can write with flow. Students can write one word over and over as a Starting Poem. The point isn't what they write as much as that they write, filling up the page with words. They will take charge of the words at some point. From now on, they will never be stuck because they can always just write "This is easy. I am full of words" over and over until something happens.

### The Lesson

Explain what a "Starting Poem" is. "A 'Starting Poem' is what you can write whenever you get stuck writing. If you can't just start writing, copy the 'Starting Poem' posted in the classroom, or use your own 'Starting Poem.' Copy the poem until you are ready to write."

Have the students write their own Starting Poem. Share the results. Pick one to be posted for all students to use. Say it together with gusto.

### Optional:

Have a funeral for the "Beast" who you have just conquered. I had my dinosaur puppet die and have an expressive death and then turned him over on his back. I walked around the room singing Chopin's death march. The students

booed and hissed at the puppet, and I took him out of the room. "He is gone forever," I announced to their cheers. One girl had put together a mock casket for the "Beast Who Stops Children From Writing." To use the language of the children, it was "way fun."

### Examples

**When writing is hard for me, it feels like:**

Σ a two-headed monster is chasing me,  
and my feet are stuck in glue  
Σ I'm in a box that is bolted shut and is  
shrinking  
Σ surrounded by everything I hate  
Σ my game has been rained out  
Σ a captor is chasing me, and I can't  
run because I am in shock  
Σ a monster is eating all of my good  
thoughts  
Σ there is a right way to do it, and I am  
doing it wrong  
Σ a vicious dog is chasing me and will  
bite me with his sharp teeth

**When writing is easy for me, it feels like...**

Σ all the words I need are raining  
around me, and I can find them all  
Σ a sled dog is pulling me toward a  
great adventure  
Σ I am a bird flying free  
Σ like I have all the words I need  
Σ I am surrounded by everything I like

### Starting Poems Samples

Σ Smart, smart, smart,  
Σ Yum, yum, yum,....  
Σ It's easy, easy, easy. You will not  
strike me out.  
Σ Beast, be gone. I am strong. You  
cannot strike me dumb. Beast, be gone.  
I am not wrong. I flick at you with my  
thumb.  
Σ Beast, be gone. You are not strong.  
You are like a little bee.  
Beast, be gone. I am strong. I am a  
butterfly, and I am free.

## B. Ballad-Writing with Children

### Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to have a good time, to convince students that they can be songwriters, and to learn how to tell a story in song.

### Warm-up Activity

Have students sit in a circle. Start by saying your name and making a sound with a movement. Have each child say their name, make a sound, and do a movement. As each person says her name, the class repeats it, and then starts with the first person who said his name with a sound and a movement.

Next have students tell you about sounds they hear at school. Take each sound, put a movement with it, and turn it into a rhythm. Make it silly and fun. This part of the lesson shows children that music is all around them and that music can be simple, fun, and full of everyday noises.

### Ballad-Writing

Have students tell you some adventures they have had during the school year. Pick a tune that you know well and turn each story into a verse or part of the verse to a song. "Mary had a little lamb" is a great ballad model: four beats first line, three the next, then four, then three. They rhyming pattern is ABCB. (Don't worry about it! You will figure it out.) "The House of the Rising Sun" is another great ballad model, but any familiar song will do.

Here is an example that fifth graders wrote with me at an outdoor school. The song is sung to a round.

Kevin, Kevin  
tried to catch a newt  
and got water in his boot.  
Jorge sang in the shower.  
Mr. Kendell just got old.

Miss Sadie, Miss Sadie  
practicing in the shower and she forgot  
to get dressed.  
She came to breakfast looking like a  
mess.  
We love her anyway.

Dead squirrel, dead squirrel  
tried to swim backstroke clear across the  
pond.  
He got tired and so he drowned.  
It's so sad.  
Robert, Robert  
He's the guy over there with the droopy  
eyes.  
He stayed up all night to make us be  
good,  
so he didn't get to saw any wood.

Outdoor School, Outdoor School  
It's where we belong. It's really, really,  
cool.  
We should live here. Forget  
Washington.  
Now the sun will shine.

We added movements and drama to go along with the song. We cried bitter tears when we sang "it's so sad." We put halos over our heads when we sang "good." We had a great time, and all the children felt as if they were songwriters when we finished.

Note: I pointed out to children the process of writing the song. Someone would have an idea, another person would add to it or modify it, and we would shape it all together.

If you have never done this, I would advise you to pick a favorite song and rewrite the words to it by yourself. This will help you get used to making the written work. Be creative and have fun. Don't worry about writing a good song. Just write a song that is fun and that tells a story. At Outdoor School we had a chance to perform our ballads, which was very fun, but just the creation is worthwhile.

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