

CHAPTER 1

# The Reading-Writing Connection

Nobody but a reader ever became a writer.

—RICHARD PECK

The primary reason for exposing children to quality literature is for its aesthetic value; a secondary benefit is its influence on student writing. Long before writers can create their own text, they can learn what good writing is all about by hearing and loving the work of others (Spandel & Stiggins, 1997). By reading literature often and widely, students more readily learn to write.

Teachers and researchers (Calkins, 1994; Eckhoff, 1983; Harste, Shorte, & Burke, 1988; Lancia, 1997; Tierney & Pearson, 1983) have given increased attention to the connections between reading and writing and to the value of quality children's literature. Reading and writing are similar processes of composing meaning; practice with one contributes to the success of the other. In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Lucy Calkins (1994) states that reading-writing connections begin when teachers and caregivers help children fall in love with a single poem, book, or essay. When a book means something to a child, teachers can ask, "What did the author do to make us laugh?"; "What does the author tend to do?"; "How did the author create that effect?"; and "Can I borrow any of these techniques in my own writing?" Fletcher and Portalupi (1998) state that "literature may be the most crucial (influence) of all. The writing you get out of your students can only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds and sustains it. The writing classroom is built on the foundation of literature" (p. 10). Serafini and Giorgis (2003, p. 11) quote an old saying, "Be careful what you read, for that is how you will write," emphasizing that the books teachers read aloud provide powerful models for the types of writing students do. Donovan and Smolkin (2002) found that student writing paralleled what students knew about both narrative (fiction) and expository (nonfiction) text. If students knew and understood the characteristics of the genre, they were able to use those attributes in their own writing.

2. Spandel and Stiggins (1997) urge teachers to be readers to teach themselves the definition of quality writing. By reading widely and often, we teachers continuously discover examples that we can share with students as we work to teach them about good writing.

While enjoying a story, students hear the language of good writers, are exposed to rich vocabulary, and develop literary awareness, or a "sense of story." They learn the structure and language of books. And they acquire literacy skills that can be transferred to their own writing. For example, having students copy a meaningful passage from a favorite book and look up words from the passage using the classroom library can teach students to look up words to use in their own writing. Having students become aware of the different parts of a book will help them to compose and construct student books that contain different parts, such as dedication pages and illustrations. By leading student discussions about books and stories that focus on characters and plot, teachers will familiarize students with these necessary elements of writing.

## Authors as Mentors

Using authors as mentors, students learn a variety of writing styles and elements of craft. When Cynthia Rylant was asked how to teach writing to children, she answered, "Read to them. Take their breath away. Teach your children to be moved and you will be preparing them to move others" (Calkins, 1994, p. 251). As a child, Judy Blume loved the Betsy books by Maud Hart Lovelace. She liked to daydream about each book and make up her own stories about Betsy (Cullinan & Weiss, 1980). Newbery Medal-winning author Sid Fleischman read stories by Jack London and John Steinbeck, and without realizing it at the time, he chose them as his models (Olswanger, 2002). Author and illustrator Ashley Bryan was fascinated by alphabet and counting books as a young child and discovered he could not only read these books but also create books like these on his own (Cullinan & Weiss, 1980). Author Lois Duncan claims that books were such an important part of her life that from early childhood on, she knew that someday she was going to write them herself (Cullinan & Weiss, 1980).

Share this information with students. Let them know that most authors had mentors and were influenced by the writing of others. Encourage students to investigate and experiment with styles and formats used in books by their favorite authors.

### Audience as Focal Point

3.

Even the youngest children realize that books are written for them to read or hear. They are the audience. But many students believe that the teacher is the only audience for their writings. This is understandable, because it is the teacher who usually reads and assesses a writing assignment. The writer needs to know who the audience is to convince the reader to continue reading. Mem Fox (1993) says, "Whenever I write, whether I'm writing a picture book, an entry in my journal, a course handbook for students, or notes to the milkman, there's always someone on the other side" (p. 9).

Consideration of the audience's identity helps the writer to focus on many elements of his or her writing. Writing to different audiences requires attention to appropriate content and tone, depending on the age or experience of the reader. The writer must consider questions the reader might have, then put them in order according to what the reader needs to know first, next, and so on. But most of all, to acquire a sense of audience, the writer must decide what to include, what to leave out (what the reader already knows), and how to present ideas.

It is important for teachers to point out to students the use of audience in literature. As you read stories, directions, bulletins, manuals, or letters to students, ask them to identify the intended audience. Guide them by asking what words in the text helped them make their decision.

In *Once Upon a Golden Apple* (Little & DeVries, 1991), familiar nursery rhyme and fairy tale characters interact with each other in new settings and contexts. After sharing this book with the class, ask students if the story would make sense or be enjoyable if they had never heard of the traditional rhymes and tales referred to in this book. Explain that the author assumed that the audience was familiar with the stories and characters.

After reading *The Berry Hook* (Gibbons, 2002), ask students to identify the intended audience (children). Have them explain how they reached this conclusion (illustrations show children; in the recipe section it says, "Always have an adult help you when you bake or cook."). You might also point out that the presentation of oven temperatures in both Fahrenheit and Celsius indicates that the author has written for an international audience.

Or share a school bulletin with the class. Have them identify the audience in a passage like this: "Please wait until your class is called on the intercom and then have them line up and walk to the multipurpose room for the assembly."

4.  
Students should immediately know that classroom teachers are the intended audience.

Once students discover the reading-writing connection and the importance of audience to the text, they will begin to write with an audience in mind. Advertisements and "wanted posters" are written in a different style than invitations or a request for a raise in allowance. Journals, anecdotes, and reflections usually have a more informal tone than reports, summaries, or book reviews. The writer's concept of audience can have a strong influence on the style, mood, and format of the piece.

Here are some suggestions for writing activities intended for a specific audience:

- Write a letter to your parents asking for a raise in your allowance or a later bedtime.
- Write a letter to the school board asking for better school lunches.
- Write a thank-you note to school volunteers.
- Write an article for the school or PTA newsletter explaining and describing activities the class has been engaged in or completed during science, social studies, or language arts.
- Write a letter to the principal asking for longer recess time.
- Write a letter to next year's class, explaining what the students should expect of grade 4 and Mr. or Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ (the teacher).
- Give directions to a younger child on how to make popcorn or a peanut butter sandwich.
- Give directions to a friend to your home from the school.
- Give directions to a new student to the gym, library, or cafeteria from your classroom.

### Notebooks as Sources of Information and Inspiration

In *A Writer's Notebook* (1996), Ralph Fletcher says that a writer's notebook is a place to record things that make you angry or sad or amazed, to write down what you noticed and don't want to forget. He urges, "Write it down in your notebook before it slips your mind" (p. 13).

5.

I Helen Lester (1997) describes her "fizzle box" (p. 25) as a place where she stores names, funny words, and wise lessons. Nancie Atwell (1987) defines *territories* as a running list of possibilities for writing. This list can include topics already written about or what a writer might like to write about, genres that a writer has written or would like to try, and potential audiences. Territories are personal and specific, but when shared they may trigger a memory or ring a bell for someone else to add to their own list.

Eve Bunting (1995) writes in a notebook. She says she has written in waiting rooms and in her car during traffic jams. When she gets an idea and doesn't have her notebook, she writes on whatever she can find. She once wrote on the back of a play program and on the motion sickness bag on an airplane. I also keep a notebook handy. If I have an idea in the middle of the night, I turn on the light and write it down so I won't forget about it the next morning. Many writers collect articles from newspapers and magazines that appear odd, interesting, or unusual to them. A bit of news can often spark an idea for writing. Just cut it out and paste it in your notebook.

All writers need a place to keep ideas, thoughts, reactions, and words. As discussed previously, this place can vary in format. There might be lists of names, places, anecdotes, or interesting and unusual words. Phrases and short descriptions of people and events may be included to trigger a memory for future use. One caution, however, is to refrain from calling this place a "journal." Unfortunately, journals have recently received an almost negative connotation. "Do we have to write in our journals?" is often heard in classrooms. We have become overly focused on journal writing, especially with primary-grade students (Routman, 1996). Too often journals are brief and lifeless and, perhaps, overdone in some classrooms. Nevertheless, they can be a place for responses to literature and subject area content, especially mathematics and science, or may be used as a diary, providing a personal record. Personal journals promote fluency in both reading and writing, encourage risk taking, and provide opportunity for reflection. But I recommend that the writer's notebook, box, or collection be kept separate. Writers need a place to record their reactions to the world around them. And it should be readily accessible whenever they are writing.

## Genres as Models for Different Styles of Writing

The use of a variety of good books in the classroom can have a profound effect on student writing styles. Saturation with literature directly influences writing

6.  
by providing important models and a lively interaction between reading and writing (Lancia, 1997).

Reading matters in a writing workshop; when we let the work of other authors affect us in significant ways, we can expect our texts in turn to influence other participants (Calkins, 1994). Most children, either consciously or unconsciously, make use of literary models when they write. As they become familiar with story elements, terminology, and style, students begin to include them in their own writing. A kindergarten student once wrote and illustrated an alphabet book and gave it to me as a gift. He knew that I collected alphabet books so he used that genre, knowing it would be special to me. When I retired, a first-grade student gave me a picture she had drawn. It was patterned after the cover of a book from the Henry and Mudge series by Cynthia Rylant (see Figure 1). In class we had read nearly every book in this series during the course of the year. It was important to her, and she knew it was important to me.

Immersion in literature is one of the best ways to encourage students to write in a particular genre (Routman, 1994). But, students must hear and examine many books before they can be expected to participate in a class book or write one by themselves. As different genres and topics are introduced as read-alouds, they may also appear in student work. A child familiar with folk tales may develop a story in which a character tries unsuccessfully twice to solve a problem and succeeds on the third try. A child who knows many poems and rhymes might experiment with rhyming patterns. Favorite characters, words, and phrases may also appear in student writing. Students who have experience with realistic fiction and fantasy know how to begin and end a story, use plot and character development, and resolve the conflict. Students who have been exposed to nonfiction are able to organize text and illustration to impart information clearly. Students who read "how-to" books and recipes are able to give explicit and sequential directions. Those who read newspapers and magazine articles will be better equipped to compose factual and concise reports.

## Reading as a Way to Acquire Vocabulary and Awareness of Style for Writing

Literature is a natural way to explore new vocabulary. One of the areas investigated by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) was vocabulary instruction. The Panel's report

states that most vocabulary is learned through reading or listening to others read. Several studies indicated that story readings helped teach children meanings of unfamiliar words and that read-aloud events helped children learn new words (pp. 4-21). Using new words in writing moves those words into the student's personal vocabulary. After I read Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies* (1909) to a group of first graders, the word *soporific* came up in student conversation and writing. So did *bodacious* after *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea* (Johnston, 1992) and *affronted* after *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (Potter, 1907).

Author's style and story format also have a direct effect on student writing. A child who reads and has been read to will often begin a story with "Once upon a time" and end it with "The end" or "They lived happily ever after." Kindergartners and first graders put an illustration with text on each page; second and third graders begin writing stories with chapters. Alliteration appeared in fourth graders' writing after I read *Four Famished Foxes and Fosdyke* (Edwards, 1995) to the class.

### Picture Books as Part of the Writing Curriculum

Because there is such a difference between what fourth- and fifth-grade students read and what they write, it is sometimes more difficult for them to make the reading-writing connection. Their writing is usually one to three pages of narrative or report, yet most are reading book-length novels. This connection is easier to make if students spend some of their time reading, studying, and listening to picture books, alphabet books, and poems (Calkins, 1994). The length of most picture books is similar to what these students are writing, and the time it takes to read them makes them an effective addition to the writing curriculum. Most can be read in five to ten minutes. Usually, only one copy of the book is needed.

Although novels can be excellent examples of good writing, using several picture books is a more efficient way to illustrate writing techniques and style. Many have an ageless quality about them. Teachers, students, and parents need to be reminded that picture books are not only for the very young.

### Conclusion

The reading-writing connection is a strong one. Suitable reading material, when used creatively, can enhance the writing curriculum. Students who are exposed to many genres and styles of good literature are very likely to transfer these rich experiences to their own writing. Picture books can be used to acquaint children with a sense of audience, new vocabulary, and various literary devices. Reading aloud should be a daily activity in classrooms, not only for the enjoyment of hearing a good book, but to enrich the writing program. Using literature as an example or catalyst for a shared writing experience can provide students with ideas for class and individual books. In the next chapter, I will explore different writing experiences—shared, guided, and independent—for K-5 students.