



WRITING RADAR: USING YOUR JOURNAL TO SNOOP OUT AND CRAFT GREAT STORIES

BY JACK GANTOS

Writing Radar is a book that you can give to an individual student to read for inspiration and pragmatic advice on writing; it is also a book that can be read and used with an entire class. Jack Gantos uses both humorous and poignant stories to boost student storytelling confidence and illustrate storytelling elements.

In some schools the curriculum emphasis is on expository writing, expository writing being linked to nonfiction and essay writing. Consequently, it can be challenging to convince parents and school administrators of the need for students of all ages to learn and study “creative writing.” In truth, great nonfiction writing is also superb creative writing. All good stories, whether fiction or nonfiction, introduce characters that intrigue; contain strong beginnings, middles, and endings; contain details that allow readers to visualize time and place; answer questions, and pose new questions, inviting students to ponder and wonder. Nonfiction writers David McCullough, Jon Meacham, Russell Freedman, Stephen Ambrose, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, and Tanya Lee Stone prove the point that great nonfiction writers are also great creative writers.

The storytelling techniques and elements discussed in *Writing Radar* will help your students become better writers, and better storytellers, of both fact and fiction. You can read it with your class chapter by chapter, enjoying the anecdotes and stories, discussing how each story illustrates a writing challenge or skill.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. The initial chapters in *Writing Radar* share student writing insecurities and fears, especially the fear of the blank, white page. Read these chapters with you students. Discuss the many reasons why adults and kids fear writing, fears that may include: making mistakes; failing; finding out you are not talented, or talented enough; fears of making others angry or disappointed; and fears of self-revelation. Your students may have other fears as well. Then tape or pin two sets of large, blank white sheets of paper to the wall or boards in your classroom. On one set of papers have each student write a short sentence or phrase sharing something they fear, or a situation they fear. On the other set of papers, have students write a phrase or sentence that shares something they hope will happen to them someday. Read both lists out loud to your class and conduct a class discussion comparing and contrasting your students' hopes and fears.
2. In *Writing Radar*, Jack Gantos shows how kids can keep journals, then use their journal notes and ideas as story catalysts. Some kids may actually cringe when using the word *journal*. Perhaps instead of a journal, they keep a notebook or a sketchbook. Jack Gantos even uses post-it notes to write down ideas. Have each student take a minute and think about what works for them. Are they comfortable writing in a notebook or journal? Do they like lined paper? Perhaps a sketchbook with blank white pages would work best for some students? Maybe they like legal pads of paper? And what kind of writing utensil works best for them? Some kids never do their best work in class surrounded by others, but write best at home where they can find some privacy. Encourage your kids to think about what tools and situations work best for each of them. Encourage them to find their own best writing comfort zone.
3. Mr. Gantos encourages students to make a visual map of their home and their neighborhood—a terrific idea. You may want to take it a step further, especially for those students who are drawn more to nonfiction than fiction, and ask your students to research the history of their street, their neighborhood, and/or their city or town, making historic maps of their street and neighborhood. Are there places on the street where the tar has worn away to reveal old bricks below? What was the land in their neighborhood originally? Farm? Forest? Landfill? They can research their neighborhood history online and in their neighborhood or town library. They can even interview older neighborhood residents to discover their street and town history.

WRITING EXERCISE: CELEBRATING NOUNS AND VERBS

In *Writing Radar*, Jack Gantos suggests that students create words lists to help them get action and emotion ideas going that will lead them to great storytelling. The following “mind opening” exercise will teach them the innate power of nouns and verbs, as well as get their storytelling muscles stimulated.

Goals: *To get students to have a more playful attitude toward language and to help them understand the power of writing with nouns and active verbs.*

1. Draw a line down the middle of your white board, so that you can list two columns of words.
2. In Column 1, pick a place/setting from List 1 (below), and have your students make a list of all the nouns—things, people, animals, vegetation, etc.—associated with that place or setting.
3. In Column 2, pick an occupation from List 2, and have your students list action words/verbs associated with that occupation.
4. Ask your students to mix and match the nouns and verbs from the columns to create sentences. *An example of this writing exercise follows on the next page.*

LIST 1: Possible Place and Setting Choices

Your backyard	Fenway Park
Circus	Gym
Zoo	A giant's castle
Your Grandparent's or Aunt's house	Riding stable
A rain forest	Band concert in the park
Fire Station	An airplane
Your bedroom	The Fleet Center
Your street	A rock and roll concert
A hotel room with room service	Your classroom
A dragon's cave	The beauty shop
A playground	An elf's den
The beach	Thanksgiving dinner in a dining room
The forest or woods or a campsite	A boat or ship
Boston	A country fair
The library	A sport recreation spot in the mountains
Your kitchen	A farm
The grocery store	Your house of worship
A movie theater	The pet store
Your favorite restaurant	

LIST 2: Possible Occupations

Doctor	Scientist	Toy store owner
Chef/Cook	Housekeeper	Veterinarian
Carpenter	Nurse	High-wire circus performer
Artist	Fireman	Cowboy
Teacher	Grocer	Construction worker
Policeman	Beautician/Hairstylist	Farmer
Business person	Plumber	Potter

WRITING EXERCISE EXAMPLE

SETTING: Nouns Associated with a PARK	OCCUPATION: Action Verbs Associated with COOK/CHEF
Cloud	Slice
Grass	Broil
Trees	Whip
Grandfather	Scoop
Dandelions	Stir
Stream	Fry
Ducks	Chop

SENTENCE SAMPLES

The *clouds sliced* the sky with white.

Grandfather scooped the sleeping child up in his arms.

The *dandelions*, like bright yellow yolks, *fried* in the sun.

Your students can expand on these sentences, or write poetry, or a full prose paragraph. Do this activity once as a class activity, then have students brainstorm words and write sentences by themselves to share with the class.

WRITING EXERCISE: INSPIRATIONS FOR STORY WRITING

Professional writers write out of passion and concern; they choose what they write about. Kids very seldom get to choose their writing topic, so offer them at least limited choices as to their topic.

Ask students to write a story related to any of the following topics. The story can be fiction or nonfiction. The best stories are a combination of both. For example: the student who chooses to write a nonfiction account of a family camping trip should feel free to exaggerate and embellish a little, as well as to imbue the trip with emotion and/or humor. The student writing a fictional story should remember that great fiction is grounded in real experience, even the most outlandish fantasy. The list below is offered as a springboard for story ideas; your students may come up with even better ideas.

POSSIBLE TOPIC LIST

The most embarrassing thing that ever happened.	The scariest thing that ever happened.
The time someone was lost.	The championship game that was lost.
The best family holiday.	Discovering a treasure in the attic.
The worst family holiday.	A family health emergency.
The funniest family holiday.	The day parents or guardians were unfair.
The biggest mistake you ever made.	Secret places.
The best party.	Storms! Tornadoes! Floods!
The worst party.	The time the electricity went off for hours, or days.
The funniest party.	Trying out for the team, the dance, the play, the band.
The best family vacation.	Traveling alone.
The worst family vacation.	Taking the wrong turn on the road.
The family vacation that never happened.	Your big sister's/brother's first prom date.
How we got a pet.	Your little sister/brother goes to the hospital.
How we lost our pet.	Your crazy uncle comes for a visit.
How our pet was named.	Visit to your grandparents in the summer.
An animal in school.	Your first trip to the big city/national park/ocean or lake/country or farm.
Summer camp adventure.	
Solving summer camp boredom.	
Moving: new kid in school.	

General Thoughts:

- Your students can approach their chosen topic from either a fiction or nonfiction perspective, but encourage them to write in third person, unless there is a very good reason for them writing in first person. An example of story situations that may be better in the first person are: story about a jealous sibling relationship told by the jealous person or the story of a first day at new school. In both those situations the emotional range of the main character, if written in the first person, will be more interesting with a sharper internal perspective.
- Recommend that your students write their first rough draft, and even their second draft, in their own handwriting, not on a computer. Once a piece of writing is typed into a computer it takes on the appearance of being “finished” and/or polished and kids are less eager to rewrite when a draft looks polished.
- Suggested length: 3-5 pages.
- Problems getting started? Have them bring in a family photo or special object from home that relates to one of the topic ideas. They can use it as an inspiration point. Some kids are really visual, so some may be helped by creating a storyboard and drawing their story first. Some kids are overwhelmed by general topic ideas, so give them something small to concentrate on. For example: the idea of *summer camp* may be overwhelming, so have your student think about the small things, like how hot the tent/cabin was? Did they keep turning their pillow to find the cool side? Could they hear everyone else breathing in the tent? Did they see the moon out their cabin window? What sounds did they hear camping they would not hear back home?
- It is very hard to write an interesting story or essay about pleasing or happy experiences, because, in general, pleasant experiences have no innate drama, conflict, or tension, and may be boring. If you are “guiding” the kids to a writing topic, keep that in mind. One of the most underappreciated children’s book authors is Beverly Cleary, who took average, everyday occurrences and made them interesting. She did that by telling the truth about her characters, and how those characters reacted to life’s events. Your kids can do that, too, if they commit to telling the truth about people and their behaviors. For the “adult pleasers” in your class, creating multi-dimensional characters and truthful situations that reveal darker emotions may be difficult. The most interesting characters in fact or fiction are the most imperfect characters. Kids who strive for perfection have a hard time understanding this.
- Encourage your students to work independently. There are always kids who want to work with a friend or partner, and in some situations teamwork is beneficial, but not in creative writing. With the exception of television situation comedy writing, great writing is most often best when an individual works alone.
- Author Jane Yolen said—great writers write, rewrite, and can tell more than one story. Make sure your students know that they will be writing, rewriting, and critiquing, working on several story drafts before they complete their final draft.
- An anecdote is not a story. Stories, and essays, have distinctive beginnings, middles, and endings. Have your students review information about beginnings, middles, and endings in *Writing Radar* before they begin writing. Does their beginning capture the reader’s attention, introducing time and place? Does the middle establish the major problem or challenge of the main character? Does the middle move the plot forward and deepen the reader’s understanding of the characters and situations? Does it add conflict and tension, building to a climax? Does the ending present a believable resolution that is emotionally satiating?

- Have students review Chapter 19 in *Writing Radar* assessing their story draft in relationship to structure; physical action; point of view; description; and interior life of characters. Have them look to see if they have included all the story structures and elements mentioned in *Writing Radar* before they write the final draft of their story.

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES FROM THE NCBLA ON STUDENT WRITING

Set the Stage for Great Writing:

<http://thencbla.org/education/teacher-handbook/set-the-stage-for-great-writing/>

Create a Language-Rich Environment for Your Students:

<http://thencbla.org/education/teacher-handbook/create-a-language-rich-environment-for-your-students/>

Motivate Your Students to Write:

<http://thencbla.org/education/teacher-handbook/motivate-your-students-to-write/>

HANDOUTS TO PRINT AND SHARE WITH PARENTS AND GUARDIANS SO THEY CAN HELP THEIR KIDS BECOME BETTER WRITERS

Creating a Home Atmosphere that Supports Great Writing:

<http://thencbla.org/education/parent-handbook/creating-a-home-atmosphere-that-supports-great-writing/>

Helping Your Teens and Tweens Edit Their Writing:

<http://thencbla.org/education/parent-handbook/helping-your-teens-and-tweens-edit-their-writing/>

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