



NCBLA Educational Resources

## KNUCKLEHEAD BY JON SCIESZKA

In *Knucklehead*, Jon Scieszka shares stories of growing up with five brothers in Flint, Michigan in a classic 1950's ranch house. Yes, six male children and two parents live all together in one small house. Don't worry, the parents survive. One of the boys, after an avalanche of zany escapades, grows up to be the first Library of Congress National Ambassador for Young People's Literature—guess who?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Is *Knucklehead* an autobiography or a memoir? Have your students define and investigate the two genres. Then ask them to decide what genre *Knucklehead* is, explaining their decision, sharing excerpts from the book that support their decision. (It is a memoir.) If the book was written as a straightforward autobiography, how would it have been different? Would any characteristics of the book—its humor, its perspective, etc., been changed? Would that be a loss or a gain?
- Discuss how the size of a family influences personal growth. Are children growing up in families with one child, or two children, different than a child growing up with five siblings? What might be different? What would be the same? Does it make a difference in the story that Jon grew up with many brothers in a small house, as opposed to a big house with many bedrooms, bathrooms, a large kitchen and a family room? What did Jon have to learn growing up with many brothers in close quarters?
- Boys vs. Girls: How are some boys different from some girls? Or are they? How different would the story have been if Jon had grown up with five sisters? After reading a few chapters of Jon's book aloud, read a chapter aloud from *Little Women*. Chapter 8, "Jo Meets Apollyon" would be a great choice after giving the book a little introduction for students who are unfamiliar with it. Compare and contrast the situations, the time and place, and the characters. How are the sibling relationships in *Little Women* the same as the sibling relationships in *Knucklehead*? How are they different?
- After reading *Knucklehead* with your class, read Jack Gantos' *Writing Radar: Using Your Journal to Snoop Out and Craft Great Stories*. In *Writing Radar*, Jack Gantos shows how using a journal, a hand-drawn home and neighborhood map, and jotting down great family anecdotes that are both action and emotion packed, create great stories. *Knucklehead* is a perfect example of Jack Gantos' writing philosophy. Have your students identify sections of *Knucklehead* that illustrate Jack Gantos' suggestions for great storytelling and great writing.

- Have students write skits, or a Readers Theater script, inspired by *Knucklehead*. They can use the chapters in *Knucklehead* as the basis for their production, though they will need to create their own dialogue for the characters in some situations, as the book is written in a first-person voice and has limited character dialogue. Or inspired by *Knucklehead's* honest family humor, they can write a skit based on their own family's antics and adventures.

Here is a link on the NCBLA website that will help students write a Readers Theater script: <http://thencbla.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Readers-Theater-Education-Resource-Guide.pdf>

- Family interviews: Ask students to share some of the humorous and very human family stories in *Knucklehead* with their parents, guardians, and extended family members. Then have students interview those family members, asking them to share their funniest, or most embarrassing, or most adventuresome sibling interaction. Students should also ask other specific questions related to games kids used to play in that family member's neighborhood. What kinds of clothes did kids wear? Where did they hang out in the neighborhood? What kinds of things did they like to eat and snack on? What did they do in the summer when they got bored? Where did they swim?—in a public pool? a lake or pond? the ocean? Did they go somewhere to camp or on a family vacation? Your students should take lots of notes, then use those notes to write a great story.

## 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/>

## **ABOUT THE EDUCATION GUIDE CONTRIBUTOR**

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