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Early Literacy

Teachers notice things the reader is attending to, they catch the child in action. They notice which foothold in print is being used and support it.

—Marie Clay

For primary-grade teachers, it is never too early to engage in interactive writing. A child's journey to become literate begins the moment he or she is born (National Research Council, 1999). As parents and caregivers interact with them, infants and toddlers begin to learn the importance of communication. Young children acquire oral language through quality interactions with caregivers and, as a result, begin to attach words to their everyday actions and emotions. It is this foundation of oral language that paves the way for children's writing and reading.

To notice the things that young writers and readers are attending to, we have to understand what to look for in their literacy behavior. This chapter provides an overview of how children emerge into literacy (Clay, 1966). The chapter will also discuss some of the foundational aspects of literacy learning and how we can use these understandings to inform and differentiate our instruction during interactive writing and beyond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Children Engage with
Their Environments

Change Over Time
in Children's Writing

The Roots of
Interactive Writing

Moving Forward

What Children Do

When young children begin to attend to print, they:

- seek out written language in the environment.
- connect what they say, hear, and see.
- have favorite books.
- crave rereadings in order to make compelling connections.

Children Engage with Their Environments

The concept of emergent literacy springs from the fact that at an early age children see and seek out written language. Through repeated exposure they begin to notice the print on their favorite cereal box, the bright colored sign of a local fast food restaurant, and the opening graphic of a beloved children's show. These are all examples of environmental print, and it's everywhere, helping children begin to understand that the symbols in their environment are meaningful. Children naturally—and with adults' help—will often make connections between the symbols they see in their everyday world and their names. Comments like, “Hey! That’s like my name!” let us know that children are beginning to attend to print.



Children Connect What They Say, Hear, and See

As children see familiar symbols, they begin to connect language and print, or what they say and hear, to what they see. When they explore board books and picture books, they quickly develop favorites, bringing them to adults over and over again to be read just “one more time.” While this may seem redundant to the one who has to read the book ten times, for young children, the familiarity of the text allows them to make compelling connections between what they say, hear, and see. Through their engagement with books, children are also acquiring new vocabulary and developing an awareness of literary language, grammar, and structure.

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The idea that children emerge into literacy was first coined by Clay (1966) in her dissertation and was later made commonplace by Teale and Sulzby (1986). The concept of emergent literacy, that children are becoming literate from birth, stood in stark contrast to earlier theories that identified time lines for learning. For example, in 1931, Morphett and Washburne recommended that children wait to read until 6.6 years of age. Waiting until children are a certain age or are deemed ready to read is not an option in an emergent literacy paradigm as children learn about language and literacy through ongoing, immersive experiences, one of which is using writing to express themselves. In fact, as Teale and Sulzby noted in their book, *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*:

“The child develops as a writer/reader. The notion of reading preceding writing, or vice versa, is a misconception. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities (as aspects of language—both oral and written) develop concurrently and interrelatedly, rather than sequentially.” Teale & Sulzby, p. xviii.

Children Mimic Writing Behavior

Because children are keen observers and often mimic what they see, immersive experiences are a child's first teacher. A parent jotting down a few items on a sticky note before a trip to the grocery store, an older brother or sister doing homework at the kitchen table, or a preschool teacher making a list of needed classroom supplies does not go unnoticed by the young child. Children are naturally curious and seek to make sense of their environments, and in doing so, often emulate the behaviors seen at home or in school. The examples shown on pages 14–15 are typical of emergent writing as it changes over time and becomes more conventional.

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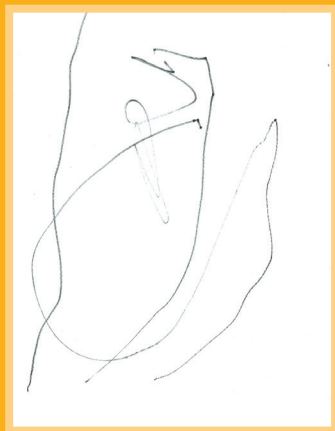
Think It Through

Jot down all the behaviors shared between reading and writing and think about how they inform one another. This *Think It Through* gives us an opportunity to explore all the connections between writing and reading. You might want to flag the list you make as it will help you as you plan interactive writing lessons.

As teachers, we learned about all these connections early in our careers, but the challenge is creating instructional opportunities that illuminate these links for students. Because writing and reading are reciprocal processes, interactive writing provides a medium for children to express their ideas and learn about the writing process. But it also creates a text that teaches students about foundational literacy concepts and provides opportunities for reading.

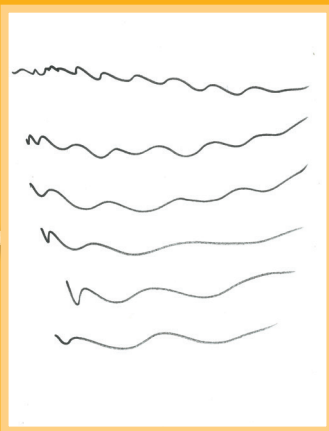
As we move forward into the next section, I build on *Think It Through* by highlighting some of the shared behaviors and by previewing the ways in which we can bolster students' literacy learning by teaching for these in both contexts.

Change Over Time in Children's Writing



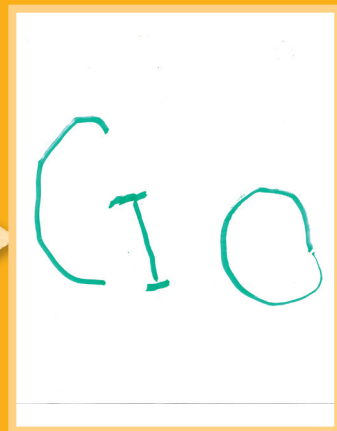
random scribble

Children's early scribbles give us insight into their developing understanding that print carries a message. When asked to read their scribbles, young children usually give a very thorough account of their intended messages.



organized scribble

These scribbles, while random at first, soon resemble a line of text and are sometimes organized on the page from left to right and from top to bottom.



random letter

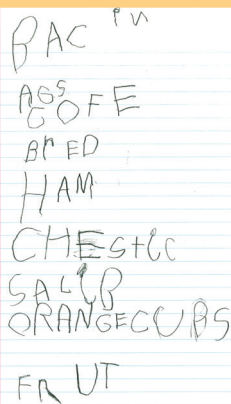
Children eventually abandon their scribbles for strings of letters. Sometimes the string is just one or two letters and sometimes the letters run the entire length of the page. The letters are random and may be a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters. Children often include marks on the page that resemble letter-like forms.



I LK mi Dog

**letter/sound
representation**

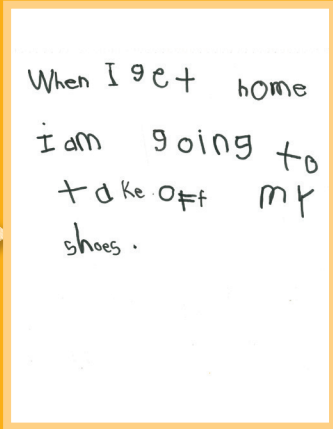
As children learn about the alphabet, they begin to make connections between spoken language and the letters that represent the sounds they hear. While incorrect by conventional standards, children begin to express their ideas by spelling each word as it sounds.



BAC^{PN}
ASS
COFE
APED
HAM
CHESTCC
SALP
ORANGECCUBS
FR UT

invented spelling

Children using invented spelling are guided by their phonemic awareness. Invented spelling is more sophisticated than simple letter/sound representation because the recording of sounds in words occurs in a left-to-right sequence and will include some vowel sounds. This example shows a young child's grocery list.



When I get home
I am going to
take off my
shoes.

conventional form

Children have learned to balance how words sound and how this may differ from what words look like. They recognize that the English language is irregular.

Children Discover That Writing and Reading Relate

Often referred to as reciprocal, the writing and reading processes are similar in many ways. When children connect these pools of knowledge—or as DeFord (1994) says “dig the ditch”—their literacy processing system becomes the benefactor. Clay (2001) uses a car analogy to explain the importance of reciprocity. When driving, we use rearview and sideview mirrors. These mirrors, as any driver knows, are instrumental in the decisions made behind the wheel. Whether changing lanes or backing out of the driveway, these mirrors provide varying perspectives. Their individual fields of vision may be limited, but when used in tandem they allow a driver greater clarity. The same is true for writing and reading.

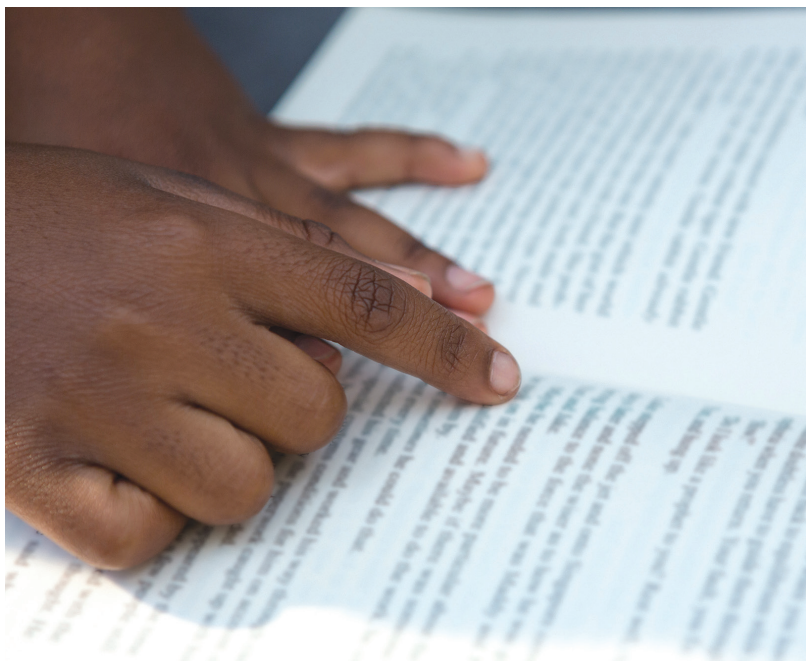


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When Writing and Reading— Children Acquire the Basic Concepts of Print

The most obvious behaviors shared by the two processes of writing and reading are the basic concepts of print, including the directional rules that govern the English language. The way print is read is the same way it is written. Directional movement across a line of text and across a word is a shared behavior, as is the top-to-bottom progression of words written or read on a page. Text appears left to right and, as stated earlier, the consistency of the way print moves is a developing understanding for young children.

Additionally, writing solidifies the concrete ways in which the stream of speech is broken up by words on a page. At first, young children's writing shows no word boundaries, even when moving from left to right.



Through both reading and writing, young children learn to understand that print moves from left to right.

A photograph of a child's handwriting on a white background. The text 'My mom like to play' is written in a cursive, connected script. There are no spaces or punctuation between the words, illustrating a lack of phonological awareness and word boundaries.

There are no word boundaries, yet look at all this child knows about conventional writing!

Children's writing may reflect the directional movement of print, but they still might not understand or demonstrate a phonological awareness of words within a sentence and how this connects to the white space in text. Therefore, a child's written message could just be one long string of letters. Within the string, the child may have some sound and letter links, but there is no use of spacing to separate the individual words in the message. As children write and read, these basics concepts of print unfold and are reinforced through both activities.

When Writing and Reading— Children Apply the Alphabetic Principle

Writing also reinforces the alphabetic principle, specifically letter/sound relationships. When writing, children say a word they intend to write slowly, hearing each articulated sound or individual phoneme and then connecting it to the appropriate letter(s) or grapheme(s). Inversely, in reading, children first encounter the letter(s) and must then articulate the appropriate sound(s). While these processes are different, using one in service of the other supports literacy development and allows children to apply their developing alphabetic understandings in continuous text.

When Writing and Reading— Children Increase Word Recognition

In addition to strengthening alphabetic understandings, children's word recognition also becomes stronger when attended to in both areas. Just because a child can read the word *the* does not mean she can write it, too. In fact, many Grade 2 students, when asked to spell the word *they*, write "thay" instead. In Adams's (1990) seminal book *Beginning to Read*, she states, "the writing of a word inherently forces attention to its full sequence of letters" (p. 397). Although Adams recognizes some limitations, she also reveals that reading, "since it requires children to look at words in print, should be a superlative means of learning the spellings of words" (p. 396). Simply put, writing strengthens the visual perception of words and assists children in their reading. Likewise, the reading of words helps develop a visual memory for words that children use in their writing.

Simply put, writing strengthens the visual perception of words and assists children in their reading.

When Writing and Reading— Children Monitor a Message for Meaning

Another key understanding that is developed through writing and reading is the necessity for and importance of monitoring a message for meaning, whether it's composed or read. Although we find and use different sources of information when writing and reading, it is meaning that pulls everything together. When something does not make sense, writers and readers stop and take some type of action to get back on track. The process of rereading during writing helps a writer monitor the message they seek to convey, readjusting when necessary. This is the same strategic action children need to take when they encounter a disconnect in their reading. Going back and gathering up the message by rereading allows a child to think about the story and better integrate meaning and the visual information on the page. Interactive writing provides the perfect vehicle to demonstrate how to reread as a way to check for understanding. Ultimately, the interactive writing experience teaches so much more than writing; it teaches children about reading, too!

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The Roots of Interactive Writing

In order to maximize the potential of interactive writing, it is important to understand its evolution. The practice of interactive writing has a long history, beginning with language experience. While the term “language experience” first appeared early in the 1900s, it was not until the late 1960s that the definition for the term became commonly understood and accepted in educational circles (Vilseck, 1968). Language experience was equated with an approach that purposefully elicited language from children about their everyday experiences. The language experiences were captured in writing by the teacher and represented not only children’s lived experiences, but the language patterns they used to describe them.



From Language Experience to Shared Writing

To extend the language experience approach, educators intentionally began to negotiate the created text with students. Known as *Shared Writing* (McKenzie, 1985), the teacher built upon the students’ language and experiences to create a more supportive text for emergent and early readers. While language experience sought to capture everything children had to say, shared writing was more focused on leading them to alternatives that would better support their reading of the text. This was not done as a means of ignoring what students wanted to compose, but rather as a way to extend their language and make it more closely resemble a text they could read independently.

In shared writing, the teacher is an active participant in the negotiation of the text (McKenzie, 1985), guiding the students in their language use and providing alternative structures that more closely resemble those that children will encounter when reading. The teacher is no longer trying to capture every utterance and instead helps craft the text so the end product is similar to the texts that students are reading. This includes attention to commonly used high-frequency words and letter/sound relationships in addition to composition. In shared writing, the creation of the text is seen as an opportunity to support children's developing understandings about writing and reading. During this writing activity, the teacher is not only a participant, but also serves as the scribe recording the efforts of the students as they collaborate on the text.

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From Shared Writing to Interactive Writing


Interactive writing is the evolution of language experience and shared writing. Interactive writing capitalizes on the children's ideas and creates readable texts but is more intentional in using the activity as a means of teaching a range of skills and concepts. First coined by a research group at The Ohio State University, the term interactive writing (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994) captured their advancement of McKenzie's (1985) work. The main difference between shared and interactive writing involves the "sharing of the pen" (McCarrier et al., 2000).

Interactive writing capitalizes on the children's ideas...but is more intentional in using the activity as a means of teaching a range of skills and concepts.

As the teacher and children negotiate a text, the pen is now strategically relinquished to students. For example, a child may come up to the chart on which the text is being written and contribute the first letter to a word that begins the same as his name. The teacher may then take control of the pen and finish writing the word. In turn, another child may be asked to write a particular high-frequency word because the teacher knows it is a word on which the child has been working.



Think It Through



Like language experience and shared writing, interactive writing highlights the writing process and the importance of writing to communicate a message—but it also incorporates an interactive component. The interactive component is directly linked to the informed decisions that a teacher makes. These decisions are primed by the teacher’s knowledge about the power of using writing to teach reading and by his or her knowledge of the students’ strengths and needs. This combined information allows teachers to plan purposefully for interactive writing and also allows them to make in-the-moment teaching decisions while working on text with children.

The interactive component is directly linked to informed decisions that a teacher makes.

Using What We Know to Inform Teaching Decisions

Writing and reading share many commonalities, and helping young children make connections between the two is critical for accelerated gains. As Marie Clay (2015) wrote, “A better understanding about reciprocity could lead to more effective teaching interactions in both activities, and the idea has the pleasant ring of a small ‘two for one’ bargain allowing the busy teacher some economy in teaching time” (p. 11). Having an in-depth knowledge of young children’s writing and reading behaviors can assist with our teaching decisions.

For example, students in a small guided reading group may have difficulty solving unknown words. Perhaps they are trying to sound out words letter by letter which, given the irregular nature of the English language, is not always productive. Noticing this, the teacher quickly records what she observes in reading. After they are finished with the text, the teacher asks the students a question about the main character, and together they generate a statement in response to the reading.



Helping children make these connections can provide students with new alternatives when they are problem-solving while reading—and this is the main focus of this book.

As the teacher and students engage in interactive writing to record the statement, the teacher uses the information from her observations about the children's unproductive word-solving. While they write, the teacher uses examples to show students how to hear and record larger more efficient units of information and how when reading they should take the same action. Helping children make these connections can provide students with new alternatives when they are problem-solving while reading—and this is the main focus of this book.

Moving Forward

As with any instructional practice, before getting started it is sometimes helpful to have a visual. In the next chapter, we will go through an example of how to incorporate interactive writing into your day, and we'll also share some variations to address how the practice can be tailored specifically for your students.