

Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching
Nonfiction Writing K-3

LORI JAMISON ROG

© Hawker Brownlow Education



Contents

Introduction 5

- The Power of the Minilesson 6
- Stages on the Journey to Literacy 7
 - How to Use This Book 8

Chapter 1: Teaching Time, Writing Time, Sharing Time 11

- Teaching Time 12
 - Writing Time 13
 - Sharing Time 14
- Supporting Independence 15
- The Teacher's Role 18
 - Bumblebee Conferences 18
 - TAG Conferences 18
 - Polish to Publish Conferences 19

Chapter 2: Let's Get Started! Day 1 and Beyond 22

- Writing in Kindergarten 22
- Writing in Grade 1 24
- Writing in Grades 2, 3, and Beyond 25
- The Writing Process at Different Stages of Development 27
- The Publishing Journey 27
- What about Evaluation? 28
- Sample Assessment Rubric 29
- Process Minilessons in This Chapter:
 - Topic and Details 30
 - Bubble Gum or Book Writing 31
 - Sticky Dot Details 32
 - Adding on Details 33
 - Pushing in Details 34
 - The Strikethrough 35
 - Stretching the Paper 36
 - Pruning Your Writing 37
 - Editing Your Own Writing 38

Chapter 3: How-To Writing 39

- Writing Minilessons in This Chapter:
 - How to Do How-To Writing 42
 - Expert Bingo 43
 - Bossy Sentences 45
 - Step By Step 46
 - Picture It! 48
 - How Much or What Kind 49

What Do You Need?	50
Traffic Light Words	51
Book-End Beginnings and Endings	52

Chapter 4: All-About Writing 54

Writing Minilessons in This Chapter:

All About All-About Writing	59
Fact or Fiction?	61
Topic Brainstorm	62
Finger Facts	64
Are/Have/Can Booklets	65
No More Fuzzy Facts!	66
Telegram Notes	67
Sticky Facts	69
Start with a Grabber	70
All-in-All Endings	71
Just-Like Words	72
Super Sentences	74
Labeled Diagrams	75
Same and Different Charts	76

Chapter 5: I-Think Writing 78

Writing Minilessons in This Chapter:

What's I-Think Writing?	81
What's an Opinion?	82
Love It or Loathe It	83
Adding a "Because"	84
OREO Organizer	86
Convince Your Reader	88
GO-GO Beginnings	91
Wraparound Endings	92
Shouting Sentences	93
The Magic of Three	95

Chapter 6: Putting It All Together: The Multi-Genre Project 97

Writing Celebration (Author Party)	98
Ten Ideas for Other Writing Formats	99
Multi-Genre Project Organizer	100
Foldables and Pop-ups	102
Graphic Organizers and Templates	103

Resources 109

Children's Literature Cited 109

Introduction

Welcome to the wonderful world of nonfiction for kids in primary grades!

Wait a minute.... Isn't pretty much *everything* beginning writers write nonfiction? As they embark on their literacy journey, our children tend to write almost exclusively about what they can do, or have done, or "lik" to do. In spite of the emphasis on *reading* narrative fiction in the early years, imaginative or fictional *writing* doesn't usually emerge until Grade 2 or 3. Furthermore, current educational trends, from inquiry-based learning to Common Core Standards, are demanding that even our youngest writers be able to convey information and even attend to audience, purpose, and genre in writing.

Too often, we've assumed that children will simply learn to write by writing. As a result, we fall into the trap of *assigning* more than *teaching*. We tell students to *write a report on an animal* or *write a poem about spring*. But what does that teach them about being better writers? Instead of focusing on the *product*—the report or the poem or the story—we need to attend to what it is that good writers *do*.

An extensive body of research suggests that teaching writing *strategies* is the single most effective way to improve student writing (Graham et al., 2012). Writing strategies may be described as the deliberate actions a writer does to make a piece of writing as clear, powerful, and effective as possible. Strategies may take the form of planning or revising routines, such as gathering facts or inserting details. They may involve composition, such as crafting leads that hook a reader's attention, using similes to make comparisons, or choosing verbs that energize writing. And sometimes they represent a strategic approach to conventions, such as analyzing where to put the apostrophe in a contraction or integrating semantic and syntactic clues when deciding how to spell an unfamiliar word.

There's no question that lower-level transcribing skills (letter formation, letter-sound connections, directionality, and spacing) are also critically important in the early years, as young writers learn to use marks on the page to represent the ideas in their heads. As it happens, we primary teachers are already pretty good at teaching these skills. In a survey of 300 Grades 1 to 3 teachers across the United States, Steve Graham and Laura Cutler reported that teachers were more likely to provide daily instruction in spelling, grammar, and punctuation than in any other aspect of writing (Graham & Cutler, 2008). One of Graham and Cutler's key recommendations is that primary teachers strive for a better balance of basic

skills and writing strategies. Here's where this book can help. Each of the minilessons in this book focuses on teaching a specific strategy for planning, crafting, or revising student writing.

The Power of the Minilesson

The great thing about writing instruction is its simplicity. No special tools are needed, other than something to write with and something to write on. We show the students what writers do by modeling writing ourselves. And as we write, we think aloud; in other words, we articulate our reasoning as we decide what words to use or how to put those words together.

Interestingly, our shortest lessons may very well be our most effective ones. That's the philosophy behind the *minilesson*—a brief and intentional instructional routine that focuses on a specific learning goal or writing strategy. Here are seven things to remember in preparing and presenting effective minilessons:

- **One specific learning goal:** Target a writing strategy that focuses on what we want our writers to know or be able to do. It should be a strategy that students can transfer to other writing situations as well. Focus on only one goal at a time. A combination of your local curriculum standards/outcomes and your own ongoing assessments of your students will provide you with more lesson ideas than you'll ever have time to use!
- **A catchy title that students will be able to hang on to:** Make sure students know what it is they're learning, in language they'll be able to understand and apply. For example, in this book you'll find minilessons on "bossy sentences" (imperative sentence structures) and "bubblegum writing" (inventive spelling).
- **Brevity:** Remember that it's a minilesson, not a maxilesson! If necessary, set a timer for ten minutes and when the timer sounds, stop the lesson. You can always finish it another day.
- **Modeling:** The very best way to teach children what writers do is to show them. Model writing for the students, "thinking aloud" your own process of getting the words on the page (or screen). Sometimes you'll compose the text yourself, and sometimes you'll invite the students to collaborate in composing the text while you scribe, showing them what their words look like in print.
- **Guided practice:** Give the students a chance to try out the strategy in a safe and supportive setting, whether as a large-group "shared writing" experience, or in pairs or small groups.
- **Independent application:** Establish the expectation that students should incorporate what they learned in the minilesson into their own independent writing.
- **Repetition:** Don't expect that all your students will master a concept or strategy after one ten-minute minilesson. Repeating a lesson several times—with the whole class or with targeted small groups—will help to ensure that all your students develop the habits of highly effective writers.

As with every other course of learning, writing instruction should be guided by assessment of what our students know and can do. The learning goals we select and the lessons we teach will depend on the developmental stages and levels of

sophistication of our students. Although every writer is different, most children go through a set of broad, fairly consistent stages on the journey from emergent to independent literacy, stages which are paralleled in reading and writing.

Stages on the Journey to Literacy

Primary teachers have always been under a lot of pressure to make sure their students learn to read. And admirable as this focus is, it has sometimes meant that other subjects such as writing have fallen by the wayside. In fact, writing has been referred to as “the neglected R” (The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

But the good news is that when we focus on writing, our children also become better readers! At no stage of children’s cognitive development are reading and writing as interconnected as they are during the primary grades. A chart summarizing these stages of reading and writing development may be found on page 10.

In today’s world, many children entering school are already able to recite the alphabet or to recognize their own names. However, a surprising number of Kindergarteners arrive at school without many experiences in writing. They know that writing and pictures send a message, but they don’t yet connect letters and sounds. We consider them to be in the *emergent* stage of literacy. Emergent readers often pretend to “read” a story as they flip through the pages of a book. Similarly, emergent writers may draw or scribble something and say, “Here’s my writing.” At this stage, our main focus in writing instruction is getting students to use letters and sounds. We need to spend plenty of time modeling reading and writing, building oral language and vocabulary, and inviting students to participate in a range of literacy activities.

Our emergent writers will not be able to apply most of the minilessons in this book independently; however, almost every lesson may be adapted as a teacher-guided, shared, or interactive writing experience. Remember that our students can recognize and talk about elements of effective writing long before they can demonstrate those elements on their own.

When students begin to put letters together to form words, we consider them to be *early* writers. At this stage, they are also using their knowledge of letters and sounds to decode words as they read. For most students, this stage extends from mid-Kindergarten to the middle or end of Grade 1, and students’ early writing may range from representing entire words with a single letter to readable inventive spelling and some “book writing.” We may even see sentences with periods, although we’re just as likely to see periods at the end of every line or even after every word!

At this stage, a lot of instruction is dedicated to supporting inventive spelling and building a repertoire of conventionally spelled high-frequency words, but it’s also about writing several details that stick to a topic. We worry less about publishing and correctness and more about generating ideas and using interesting words. Almost all of the minilessons in this book are adaptable to early writers.

As students acquire facility with both inventive and conventional spelling, they don’t need to work as hard at writing individual words and they can pay more attention to the writer’s craft. They write longer pieces and experiment with vocabulary. We call this the *developing* literacy stage. Developing readers have the stamina to read longer texts and they often enjoy beginning chapter books. Usually appearing by the end of Grade 1 or early Grade 2, the developing stage

is an ideal time to introduce new genres and text forms, as well as elements of organization, word choice, and sentence variety. We also want students to start following a writing process that involves planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing. The minilessons in this book are ideal for the developing writer.

By the time students reach the *fluent* stage, they are set to be readers and writers for life. Although older fluent readers may still function below grade level, our second- and third-graders (and sometimes first-graders) are on their way to independence. Because they are “fluent,” they have more automaticity in the words they read and write. Fluent writers should be encouraged to experiment with crafting more complex sentences, organizing details, and using figurative language. Your fluent writers will be able to apply and extend any of the minilessons in this book.

At every stage of development, our children know that writing is something we do to send a message to someone else. Therefore, we teach them to think about such things as: *Will your reader understand what you’ve written? What details will your reader find interesting? What might your reader wonder? How can you grab your reader’s attention and make him or her want to read the rest of your writing?* Who would have thought that we could talk to five- and six-year-olds about audience and purpose? But that’s why we use different **text forms**: to serve different purposes and to inspire our readers to respond in different ways.

If we want to show our readers how to do something or make something, we use **procedural or “How-To” writing**. If we want to teach our readers about a topic, we use **informational or “All-About” writing**. And if we want to try to convince our readers about something that is important to us, we use **persuasive or “I-Think” writing**. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this book, you will find a collection of minilesson ideas for each of these text forms.

How to Use This Book

The minilesson is only one piece of the overall writing block—the teaching piece. Most of the class period is dedicated to students writing and sharing their writing. In Chapters 1 and 2 of this book, you’ll find many ideas for organizing and managing the writing block, which we’ll call the “Writing Workshop.” There are practical tips for establishing a Writing Workshop that supports student independence and growth. You’ll learn ways to transfer responsibility from teachers to students—even at the earliest stages of writing—in order to free up the teacher to offer support to individuals and small groups. There are suggestions for starting the school year in each grade and foundational minilessons to teach different aspects of the writing process, from inventive spelling to revision and editing.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on minilesson ideas for teaching the **three major nonfiction text forms: procedural, informational, and persuasive writing**. The first minilesson in each chapter introduces the unique structure and conventions of that text form. Then students are invited to write a “benchmark” piece that enables their teacher to assess what they know and can do in order to plan instruction. Other minilessons for each text form include topic generation, planning and prewriting, organizing details, and revising for writer’s craft. At the end of each chapter is a four-level rubric that may be used as an assessment tool and a guide for instruction.

Readers of my previous books, *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K-3* and *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Intermediate Writing, Grades 4-6*, will recognize a few parallels between this book and those. But here are some features that make this book unique:

- Each minilesson in this book begins with a learning goal based on a specific writing strategy.
- Most of the lessons focus on the development of ideas, the organization of details, and the craft of writing, rather than spelling and conventions.
- The lessons are structured around teacher modeling and instruction (I DO), some guided practice in large or small groups (WE DO), and independent application (YOU DO).
- The guided practice components of the lessons usually take the form of shared or interactive writing. In shared writing, the students collaboratively compose the text, while the teacher scribes. In interactive writing, the group composes the text together, but the students take turns doing the writing.
- Some lessons may take more than the requisite ten-minute timeframe. Feel free to end a minilesson midway or continue it another day.
- Most lessons include examples of what I would actually say to students; you'll find this "teacher talk" in italics embedded in the minilessons.
- Specific developmental stages for each lesson have not been identified, for a number of reasons. I believe that most of the lessons are not appropriate for emergent writers (i.e., writers who are not yet able to connect letters and sounds) to apply independently. That said, I am constantly surprised by what our youngest writers can understand and achieve. So I leave it to teachers to decide which minilessons to use for their students and how to adapt each minilesson to their students' needs and developmental levels.
- Sometimes, I'll suggest a model from a professional writer, in the form of a picture book read-aloud. However, we should never use writing time for the first reading of a text. Read any book first as readers, and then revisit it as writers to analyze and apply the techniques the writer has used.
- Each of the chapters focusing on text forms concludes with a four-level rubric that may be used for assessment or evaluation.

This book is intended to offer a smorgasboard of minilesson ideas that may be used as part of a balanced diet of writing instruction. Not every minilesson will be appropriate for every class, or even every student within a class. You are encouraged to pick and choose the lessons that address your goals for individuals and small groups. These lessons are not intended to be complete units of study, but rather a bank of ideas to add to your own teaching repertoire.

Most importantly, I encourage you to *adapt* rather than *adopt* these minilessons. Make them your own and use models that work for you. Gather student samples and literature links that you'll be able to use to reinforce the writing strategies you are teaching.

In any classroom anywhere, the students will be at many different places in their writing development. Only by careful observation and assessment of our students' writing can we provide the "just in time" instruction that will scaffold our students from their current level to increasingly higher levels of sophistication and understanding.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WRITERS AND READERS AT EACH STAGE OF LITERACY

	Writers at this stage...	Readers at this stage...
Emergent	<p>...know that “writing” can tell a story or communicate ideas</p> <p>...may use pictures, scribbles, or lines to convey a message</p> <p>...may copy letters or even words, but do not connect symbols and sounds</p> <p>...often place pictures and symbols randomly on the page</p> <p>...rely on pictures to “tell the story”</p> <p>...may write their own names in conventional print</p>	<p>...know that print tells a story or communicates ideas</p> <p>...may or may not distinguish “writing” from “pictures”</p> <p>...do not connect letters and sounds; are unable to decode words</p> <p>...may “role-play” reading</p> <p>...read from memory, patterns, and pictures</p> <p>...rely on picture clues</p> <p>...may be able to recognize their own names in print</p>
Early	<p>...use letters, words, and pictures to gather and convey ideas</p> <p>...use inventive spelling to write most words in speaking vocabulary</p> <p>...spell some high-frequency words conventionally</p> <p>...distinguish pictures from print; begin to apply directionality and spacing</p> <p>...begin to use sentences and punctuation</p> <p>...write about topics of personal interest and experience</p>	<p>...use letters, words, and pictures to get information from books</p> <p>...decode unfamiliar words by “sounding out”</p> <p>...read some high-frequency words automatically</p> <p>...distinguish pictures from print; begin to understand directionality and spacing</p> <p>...begin to understand sentences as groups of words with punctuation</p> <p>...prefer to read about topics relating to personal experience</p>
Developing	<p>...may use topics beyond their own personal experience</p> <p>...write longer pieces with many details</p> <p>...write in different text forms for different purposes and for different audiences</p> <p>...often write details in random order, although they have a concept of beginning, middle, and end</p> <p>...may show a stilted writer’s voice as they focus on conventions</p> <p>...tend to write many short, choppy (or long, run-on) sentences</p> <p>...demonstrate increasing mastery of spelling and conventions, with most grade-appropriate high-frequency words spelled correctly</p> <p>...use readable phonetic spelling</p>	<p>...read about imaginative and fictional as well as nonfiction topics</p> <p>...can cope with longer texts; begin to read chapter books</p> <p>...identify and appreciate different text forms</p> <p>...can monitor their own comprehension and begin to use strategies flexibly</p> <p>...start to focus more on text-level comprehension compared to word-level comprehension</p> <p>...begin to summarize</p> <p>...attend to interesting vocabulary</p> <p>...read many words automatically</p> <p>...begin to use punctuation and to read in phrases</p>
Fluent	<p>...write texts of increasing length and complexity</p> <p>...can use a variety of text forms for different purposes and audiences</p> <p>...plan and organize ideas for logical structure, with leads and conclusions</p> <p>...include rich details, elaboration, and description in their writing</p> <p>...consider word choice; begin to use “book language”</p> <p>...begin to show variety in sentence length and structure</p> <p>...spell many words conventionally; phonetic spelling is logical and readable</p> <p>...generally use capitals and basic punctuation correctly</p>	<p>...read texts of increasing length and complexity</p> <p>...can identify and navigate different types of text structures</p> <p>...can consider author’s purpose, message, and point of view when reading</p> <p>...begin to interpret figurative language and literary techniques</p> <p>...read with increasing fluency; can access more complex sentence structures</p> <p>...read many words automatically; use a range of cueing systems to solve unfamiliar words</p> <p>...use punctuation, paragraphing, and other text supports to aid comprehension</p>