



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## **Memoir: Magical Moments in Young Children's Lives**

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by Camille Pires

### **Introduction**

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Young children in their primary years begin their educational journey full of wonder and enthusiasm. This exuberance quickly dulls over the next two decades as many children go through the process of learning. Once confident and courageous about their ability, children as young as 2<sup>nd</sup> grade begin to feel defeated and stop taking chances. <sup>1</sup> Because of this, their writing skills do not grow at the same pace as their verbal ability, creative thinking, and imagination.

My unit will focus on building a curriculum where children's basic knowledge of reading and writing will become a spring board to more creative and descriptive writing about their own life story.

### **Rationale**

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One of the hardest subjects to teach, and typically one of the hardest subjects for young children to master, is the art of descriptive writing. Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers do an excellent job of teaching children the foundation of handwriting, phonics and basic sentence structure but by 2<sup>nd</sup> grade many children are stuck, too intimidated to take these fundamental skills to the next level because their writing ability has not kept in pace with their language skills. Though other writing genres, including fiction, expository writing, and poetry will be taught throughout the year, memoir offers a special opportunity to let children explore what they know best, their own life stories, in a thoughtful, reflective way which can improve their writing in general as they cross over to other writing genres.

My hope is that this unit, tailored to urban 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in the Bay Area community of Emeryville, California, will boost children's writing *fluency* and help them to develop more advanced sentence structure, punctuation and grammar, descriptive language, dialogue, and ultimately reflective analysis of special moments in their lives. This is a tall order as children come to us with varying ability and experience; however, the beauty of writing is that it is inherently self-differentiated. Students automatically write *right* where they are and we, as teachers, can push them forward from their own natural starting point.

## Memoir

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Memoir, opposed to autobiographical writing, takes a small moment in a person's life which transforms that person in a meaningful way <sup>2</sup> ; whereas autobiography typically looks at a person's life as a whole. Memoir "assumes the life and ignores most of it...it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph." <sup>3</sup> Memoir is ideal for younger writers because children can easily draw upon their own life experience; the challenge is to discover why that experience was important to them. Anyone working with younger writers has probably seen a lot of one-dimensional sketches where students write about an experience, simply state highlights of what they did, and end it with something like "and then I went home." As far as students are concerned their writing is finished. My hope is that teaching children the genre of memoir will push them to dig deeper, remember what was said, how they felt, and why it was important to them.

In the past, when I taught writing, I told students that interesting stories typically have a problem and a solution; now I plan to take it a step further and guide them to define why each of their personal vignettes transformed their life, why was it memorable or special, and/or what lessons did they learn?

### *Planning a Memoir* <sup>4</sup>

- Every text event has to have a purpose.
- The memoir needs to show attitudes before the event happened, so the reader understands the author's learning from it. Why was it significant?
- Every account needs to build toward, show or explain the significance of the author's learning. If it isn't doing one of those things, it shouldn't be included.

## Content Objectives

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All content objectives align with Common Core writing and language standards as listed in end notes.

1. Children will be asked to write a series of memoirs, enhancing them with sensory details, dialogue and other narrative components. Students will practice using flashback to create a sense of drama.
2. All writing pieces must show how the author's life was transformed.
3. During our regular writing block, students will work independently, peer edit and counsel, and have regular conferences with me.
4. Culminating activities will include:
  - Children will take one of their pieces of writing and organize it as a multi-page book, publishing it in a hardbound format including their own illustrations.
  - Children will rewrite one memoir as a graphic novel.

- Children will rewrite another memoir in the form of a letter where the child will write to a family member or friend about a moment when they may have made a mistake and what they learned from this mistake.

## Content Strategies

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### Read, Enjoy and Evaluate Published Memoirs

Students will discuss what a role model is and how role models are not one-dimensional. Many of my students know famous leaders, especially civil rights leaders, athletes and performers; however these figures were human and made mistakes. Digging deeper into the life of someone they admire might help them make connections to their own lives. Students will take a close look at excerpts from the autobiography of one of their own role models, Barack Obama's *Dreams from my Father*. We will also read other famous children's authors' memoirs (see appendix for suggestions) and discuss what makes the story a memoir; what were the magical moments, how were their lives transformed. We will also discuss devices or techniques that were used as discussed in mini-lessons.

### Mini-Lessons

Very targeted mini-lessons will be introduced prior to the children's uninterrupted writing time each day. Mini-lessons will address skills and strategies that build upon students' current writing ability and improve it over time. Some lessons might deal with writing mechanics and grammar, but the mini lessons that I will discuss in this curriculum unit address obstacles that are more pertinent to writing memoirs.

### Writer's Workshop

On-going, consistent writing blocks within the classroom are essential to give children time and space to develop their writing. This writing block has many names but one, coined by Lucy Calkins, refers to it as Writer's Workshop. <sup>5</sup> A dedicated writing time is abandoned by many teachers because of the inherent classroom management challenges they create: Children are expected to write independently for a significant period of time. Teachers have to relax their control while giving children the responsibility of managing their own time, staying on task, and continuing to move forward in the writing process. Meanwhile, the teacher counsels students one-on-one or works in small groups on a specific mini-lesson concept. This conference time is essential because no two children will ever have the same issues at the same time. Ideally, the teacher should address writing challenges as children personally struggle with them.

The structure of writer's workshop will include a daily mini-lesson that children may or may not choose to include in their writing that day. Following will be independent work time when children will brainstorm ideas, create outlines, write rough drafts, confer with me and their peers, and possibly publish their piece (not all stories will necessarily be published). After many weeks of practice, this independent writing time will be approximately 40 minutes at least three times per week. "Setting aside a predictable time for writing is important....when children know the parameters within which they are working, they can be more strategic, deliberate writers...But if writing workshop is always changing, always haphazard, children remain pawns, waiting for their teacher's agenda." <sup>6</sup> Consistency is critical.

The inherent beauty of writer's workshop is that all students will work at their own pace. Some students are very prolific and will produce volumes of stories where others will work diligently on one piece for a longer period of time. No one is left doing busy work while others finish. Over time all students' writing will blossom and they will naturally feed off each others' successes.

### *Establishing a Productive Writer's Workshop Environment*

It is important to discuss the process of establishing a successful writer's workshop, as it would be impossible to use this writing time without explicit instruction, modeling and practice.

My personal experience as a teacher is that creating an extended writing time (40 minutes to an hour) is by far the most challenging task for my young students and me. I must create an environment where children can be successful at writing and peer conferencing without my intervention. My goal is to use strategies suggested in a highly regarded book called *The Daily Five*. Children develop the 'muscle memory' needed to be able to stay on task during this independent time through a sequence of practiced behaviors for increasing amounts of time throughout the first part of the school year.

From the beginning of school year, students will slowly practice successful writer's workshop time through a *gradual release model*, such as the one suggested in *The Daily Five*.<sup>7</sup> Children will first brainstorm expectations, model them and then practice these behaviors for lengthened periods of time (starting with three minutes). After the class as a whole has been successful with smaller time increments, this block will increase slowly until the students are able to sustain this quiet, productive environment for 40 minutes uninterrupted. "The writing process requires a radically different pace than we are used to in our schools... If students are going to become deeply invested in their writing and if they are going to... let their ideas grow and gather momentum...they need the luxury of time." <sup>7</sup>

- Writer's Workshop Expectations:
- Write the whole time
- Stay in one spot
- Work quietly
- Choose what to write
- Get started quickly
- Underline words if unsure how to spell them and move on <sup>8</sup>

This is easier said than done, but once independent writing time has been established, I will increase students' responsibilities to include peer editing and peer counseling. These components will only be included after the class has achieved at least two months of success with the above mentioned writer's workshop expectations.

### **Seminar**

Many of my students' memoir pieces will be published and all students will share their writing (at various stages of the writing process) with their peers during a time I call "seminar," when the class and I provide constructive feedback to help each child's writing improve. I will use a known student feedback method called "three stars and a wish." The students will respond to a piece of writing by offering three stars (something they like) and a wish (something they *wish* the author could do to make it better). From my experience, seminar is as valuable to the person sharing as shaping writing strategies and story ideas for other children's current and future work. An additional benefit is that more sophisticated writers steer other classmates' writing forward through peer modeling (i.e. one child uses dialogue in their writing and then others follow).

## Comparing Portraits

Discussing voice in writing is very abstract, so I will use various images of Barack Obama to demonstrate voice in a visual way prior to showing how voice plays a role in writing. Students will compare and contrast different artists' renditions of Obama and how each of these portraits, though of the same person, looks very different, conjure different emotions, use different media and artistic techniques. The same can be said about voice in writing.

## Assessment

Various forms of assessment will be used to monitor and evaluate student progress (see appendix):

1. Self-assessment – Students answer questions about the piece including: topic sentence/hook; problem/solution; magical moment; and strong ending.
2. Peer editing check list – What did I like about my partner's story; what did I have questions or wonder about; what did I suggest needed to be changed?
3. Teacher assessment – Rubric assessing strong lead; descriptive details including dialogue; magical moment; strong voice; problem/solution; memorable ending.
4. As stated in the content objectives, students will be expected to publish at least three of their stories as a hardcover book with illustrations, a graphic novel and a *confessional* letter to friend or family member.

## Student Activities

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Writer's workshop, a 60 minute block of time, will begin with a 15-20 minute daily mini-lesson which will highlight each of the following topics. These mini lessons build on each other, but many of them can be used as a self-contained lesson, or repeated more than one time, if you see your students struggling in a specific area. Some of these mini-lessons will use published writing to help demonstrate the concept; however, more often, I will select authentic pieces from one of my students to help demonstrate how we might enhance his/her writing by modeling the concept covered that day.

### Mini Lessons

*What is a memoir?*

To kick start this unit, students will gain a clear understanding of what exactly memoir writing is. I will be using *Dreams from my Father*, by Barack Obama, periodically to demonstrate various aspects of the genre. I chose this book because I wanted to pick a person students know and admire, and also because the book was very descriptive. I will pose the question: What do you think memoir writing is? Students will brainstorm their ideas. Then, I will read two passages to them: one from Obama's book and then one from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

- It was well past midnight by the time I crawled through a fence that led to an alleyway. I found a dry spot, propped my luggage beneath me, and fell asleep, the sound of drums softly shaping my dreams. In the morning, I woke up to find a white hen pecking at the garbage near my feet. Across the street, a homeless man was washing himself at an open hydrant and didn't object when I joined him. There was

still no one home at the apartment, but Sadie answered his phone when I called him and told me to catch a cab to his place on the Upper East Side. <sup>9</sup>

- *There once was a little girl named Goldilocks. One day she took a walk in the forest. Goldilocks saw a house and went in. She found three bowls of porridge. One was cold. One was hot. One was just right.* <sup>10</sup>

Students will have to identify which is an example of memoir writing and why. I will then state that memoir writing is a memory of an event in your life, what you learned from it or how it changed you. It should be written in first person. Students will then be encouraged to write about a recent event in their life and attempt to discover the meaning of these moments.

### *Brainstorming special moments and digging deeper*

Students will be encouraged to write down events and why each event was meaningful to them. For example, if a child writes "I went to the water park with my family," they would then need to identify what about that experience was important to them: how did they feel before they went and after, why was the event special, what emotions did they experience, and how did the experience change them. Students will record their special moment in a story web (example below) remembering these reflective notations showing purpose, emotions felt and what people, places, or things are connected with this memory.



## *Turning an event into a memoir*

Taking another look at *Dreams from my Father*, I will read two pieces of prose: 1) an actual excerpt:

"Barry? Barry, is this you?" "Yes...Who's this?" "Yes, Barry...this is your Aunt Jane. In Nairobi. Can you hear me?" "I'm sorry –who did you say you were?" "Aunt Jane. Listen, Barry, your father is dead. He is killed in a car accident. Hello? Can you hear me? I say, your father is dead. Barry, please call your uncle in Boston and tell him. I can't talk now, okay, Barry. I will try to call you again..." That was all. The line cut off, and I sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss. <sup>11</sup>

Then I will read one that I wrote:

My Aunt Jane from Nairobi called me. She sounded upset. She told me that my father died in a car accident and I should call my uncle in Boston. Then she hung up and I sat down on the couch.

Students will then discuss which passage was more descriptive and why. How were they different? Which piece of writing showed that Barack Obama's life had been transformed? How did each piece make you feel?

### *Show not tell*

The concept of "show-not-tell" is by far one of the most challenging to teach young students, a lesson that could be taught over and over again. Most likely, students will want to write about something they did over the summer, a birthday party or a special holiday. The events will be listed chronologically, telling the reader what happened step by step. I will read this example of typical student writing that *tells*:

Last weekend I went to Waterworld. I went with my mom, my dad, and my big sister. We went on a really big slide. I was scared. We ate hot dogs. It was hot. Then, the park closed and we went home. I had a lot fun.

To combat the dilemma of *telling*, not showing I'll re-read the excerpt that we read in the previous lesson from Obama's book. This time, I will ask them to close their eyes while I read it to them and try to visualize what is happening. Afterward, they will quickly draw what they heard and write descriptive words to explain their thinking and feelings. Students will then share their writing with a table partner. Could they see the writing in their mind? Good writing creates images in our head. Then, after reviewing the story web I drew in an earlier mini-lesson, I will read a revised Waterworld story asking the students to close their eyes and again, try to visualize the action:

I stretched my neck up to look at the people climbing the stairs to the top of The Tornado. I'm not going up there, I thought, but my Dad said he'd go with me if I tried. Climbing into the inner tube, I sat behind my Dad. My arms were glued tightly around his waist as we flew down. Squeezing my eyes shut, in an attempt to keep the buckets of water from covering me, we seemed to speed up as we headed down the long, curvy canal. Finally reaching the bottom with a splash as big as a whale's tail smacking the water, I saw my mom and big sister by the railing, watching our descent, laughing and smiling at our adventure.

Again, I'll ask students to draw what they visualized during my reading and share their pictures with a table partner. Over time, before students' conference with me or their peers, these young authors will begin to



check their writing to make sure that it passes this visual test: Can I see the action in my head when I read my writing?

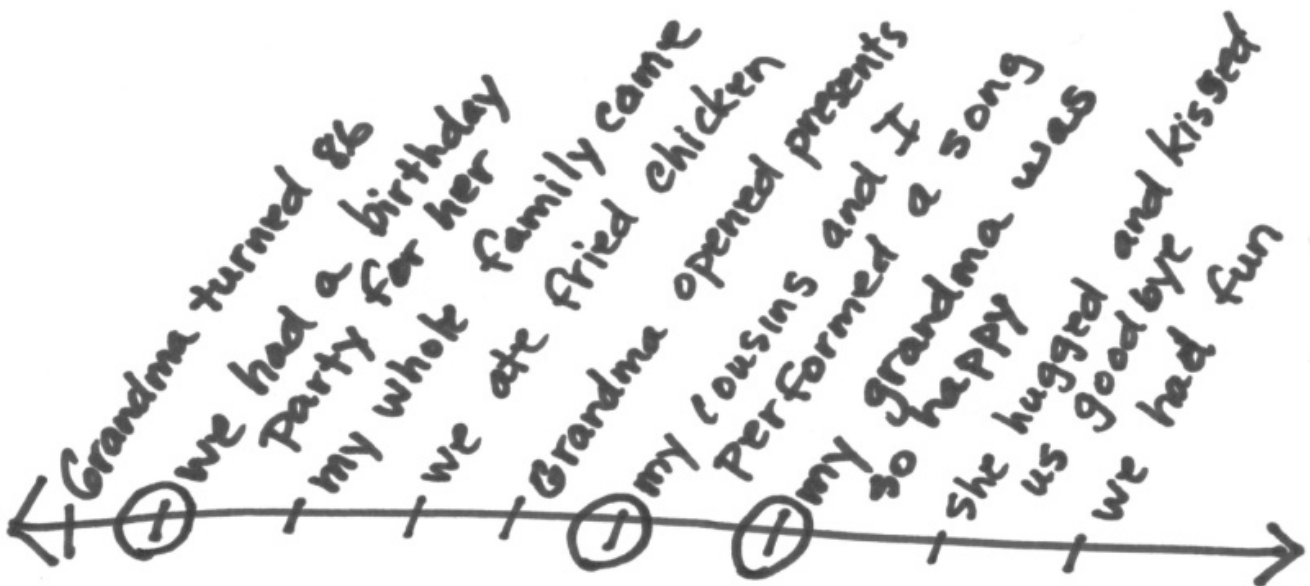
### Effective leads

Catchy or effective leads will determine if a reader will continue to read the story. However, writing effective leads is not natural for most young writers. For this particular mini-lesson I would take a piece of writing from one of my students and use it as a way to demonstrate different ways to catch the reader's attention. A sentence like "Last weekend I went to the park" can be transformed fairly easily:

- Start with a question: *Guess what I did at the park last weekend?*
- Start with a strong statement: *I was so wobbly I thought I was going to faint when I got off the tire swing!*
- Start with a quotation: *"Mom! I hollered. "Watch me jump off the swing!"*
- Start with vivid description: *I went down the slide so fast that my hair stuck to my face.*

### Sequencing and pacing

"Authors move through their stories using various devices such as dialogue, specific events, or transitional words and phrases like first, then, next, last, after lunch, weeks passed, the next day, tomorrow, and after a while." <sup>12</sup> Brainstorm a list of transitional words with students and keep them on an anchor chart in the classroom. Also, when students are writing it's important to think about what parts can you fast forward through and when you need to slow down. Let's say one of your students wrote about Grandma's birthday party. Not all events that happened should have equal weight. What are the small moments that make the story meaningful? Have students make a timeline of events that they want to write about. This will be their outline. Then, they should circle the two or three small moments where they want to slow down and add more descriptive elements.



### Writing memorable endings



Just as important as effective beginnings, the writing needs to hold the reader's attention and keep them wondering. "The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right...It's like the curtain line in a theatrical comedy...What usually works best is a quotation. Go back through your notes to find some remark that has a sense of finality, or that's funny, or adds an unexpected closing detail."

<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate this, I will take a piece of student writing about Grandma's birthday party with a less than memorable ending, "I had fun at Grandma's and then I went home." Different ideas suggested in *Trait-Based Mini-Lessons* <sup>14</sup> for memorable endings include:

- Re-state or summarize an important idea: *Grandma was so happy that her whole family was there to celebrate her special day.*
- End with something that was learned: *I realized that Grandma's whole family being at her party was the best present of all.*
- Use humor: *When I went to hug Grandma good bye I tripped on a chair and fell face first into a piece of birthday cake. I guess I get two pieces today!*
- Look into the future: *I hope that I can always celebrate Grandma's birthday with her.*
- Make a personal observation (something learned): *My family may be a little kooky but it's fun that we're always there for each other on special days.*

#### *How to use dialogue in memoir*

To demonstrate the use of dialogue in students' memoirs, I plan to introduce the genre of the graphic novel. This will be very exciting as many of them have already read graphic novels and might even think of them as a guilty pleasure, as opposed to legitimate reading. The graphic novel is a perfect way to show students to the idea of dialogue because it's typically formatted with speech/thought bubbles separate from narration. I will introduce the book, *Barack Obama, The Comic Book Biography*, and read sections of it to them showing them this format. Children will then pick an event and use an 8-frame graphic organizer (or white piece of paper folded into 4 sections—front and back) to organize their story into sections and including illustrations, narration and dialogue in each frame. My hope is that having to be very deliberate about dialogue in this format will transform students' use of dialogue in a more traditional format, as well. Also, I have found that once children know how to use dialogue in their writing, they tend to forget about weaving in the narrative component and their writing becomes straight dialogue. The graphic novel genre allows them to explore and organize both aspects of a piece in a graphic format.

#### *Voice*

What is voice? It's fairly abstract especially for young learners. Voice is an individual writer's style and uniqueness. If I were to read a Junie B. Jones passage (young children's chapter book series by Barbara Park), students would know exactly what author's writing we were listening to by Junie B. Jones's unique, young, quirky dialogue. Just as writing should have voice so do other forms of art. To demonstrate voice in visual art, I will show examples several different portraits of Barack Obama found on the internet. Though they are of the same subject, the voice of each is very different. Each evoke different feelings; some portraits seem powerful, some angry, and others are more sensitive. We will compare and contrast the similarities and differences.

Then we'll revisit the second mini-lesson, "Turning an event into a memoir?" and take another look at the two passages. After reading the two passages again, I will have students compare and contrast them. How are they alike? How are they different? Which one is more interesting? Which one showed change? Why? Hopefully the students will agree that the first passage demonstrates better voice.

Young authors will be challenged to their own stories listening for voice and commenting on voice in other classmates' writing during peer editing and seminar.

#### *Using flashback to show purpose in an event*

While reading *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Lucy Calkins I was inspired by the use of flashback to build a memorable moment and show how separate events are actually linked together. I will read another passage from Obama's memoir about the memory of his father at the time of his father's death:

At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963 when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told. They all had their favorites, each one seamless, burnished smooth from repeated use. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe. <sup>15</sup>

Students may have multiple stories that have a common thread; when combined through the use of flashback these events could show the transformation necessary for the piece of writing to be considered a memoir. I will find current student work where this technique can be used to model flashback; first working with a student one-on-one and then modeling the process whole class during a mini-lesson.

#### *True confessions: reflecting on a mistake*

Everyone makes mistakes. Students will take one of their memories where they did something they regret, but re-write it in the form of a letter to the person to whom they are apologizing. This format, modeled after an autobiography we read in our seminar, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, is a good set-up for younger students to reflect on an event in their life and how this event transformed them. I will read the following passage to them about when St. Augustine, 1700 years ago, confesses to God about stealing pears as a boy:

I already had plenty of what I stole, and of much better quality too, and I had no desire to enjoy it when I resolved to steal it. I simply wanted to enjoy the theft for its own sake, and the sin. Close to our vineyard there was a pear tree laden with fruit. This fruit was not enticing, either in appearance or in flavor. We nasty lads went there to shake down the fruit and carry it off at the dead of night...we derived pleasure from the deed simply because it was forbidden <sup>16</sup>

Students will not be expected to write to God; however, this example does show students the use of descriptive language, showing-not-telling, and how St. Augustine's life changed because of his mistake. Students will be expected to transform one of their pieces about a mistake they made (and what they learned from their mistake) including rising action, dialogue and descriptive details but in the form of a letter.

#### *Publishing a hard cover book*

The culminating activity for my students will be to publish one of their stories in a hardbound book (purchase the blank books from [www.barebooks.com](http://www.barebooks.com) for about \$2 each). Students will have to organize their story into 14 pages including illustrations on each. Once they have done this, they will then copy the story and illustrations into their own hard cover book.

## Conclusion

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My hope is that this unit will create a program which challenges teachers to become more explicit in teaching writing and managing children. The use of targeted mini-lessons introducing writing techniques and components will ultimately enhance children's own memoirs, creating deeper, more meaningful prose. Teachers will be able to evaluate children's writing informally on a day to day basis as well as with unit assessment strategies, while developing and fine tuning a richer writing environment where children embrace the process of writing. This content curriculum will ultimately guide children to explore their inner voices and value the many important and interesting stories of their lives.

## Notes

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### Citations

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4. Zinsser, William, *On Writing Well*, 135
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6. Ibid. 186-187
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13. Treetop Publishing Online. <http://www.barebooks.com>. Educational bare books to give students a creative canvas for them to publish their writing.

## Memoirs written for children

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Judy Blume, *The Pain and the Great One*

Beverly Clearly, *A Girl from Yamhill*

Barbara Cooney, *Miss Rumphius*

Tomie de Paola, *26 Fairmount Avenue; Here We All Are; On My Way*

Arthur Dorros, *Abuela*

Patricia Polacco, *My Rotten Readheaded Older Brother; Thunder Cake; Uncle Vova's Tree*

Allen Say, *Grandfather's Journey*

James Stevenson, *When I Was Nine*

Vera Williams, *A Chair for my Mother*

## CORE Standards - Grade 3

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Writing 3.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequence.

Writing 3.4: With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.

Writing 3.5: With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.

Language 3.1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 3.2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, work relationships and nuances in word meanings.

## Appendix

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Self-assessment worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Writer's Workshop Self-Assessment Checklist**

*(complete before conference with teacher)*

Story Title: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Topic sentence with hook

\_\_\_\_\_ Problem

\_\_\_\_\_ Solution

\_\_\_\_\_ Magical moment/What did I learn?

\_\_\_\_\_ Memorable ending

Peer editing check list worksheet



# Peer Editing Checklist

Writer: \_\_\_\_\_

Partner: \_\_\_\_\_

Story Title: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I gave the writer at least three "stars."

\_\_\_\_\_ I proof read the story for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

\_\_\_\_\_ I gave the writer at least one "wish."

*Teacher rubric worksheet*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Writing Assessment Rubric

	<b>Excellent!</b>	<b>Very Good!</b>	<b>Good Job!</b>	<b>Needs Work</b>
Strong lead	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Descriptive details	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Dialogue	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Strong voice	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Problem/solution	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Magical moment	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Memorable ending	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

Total score \_\_\_\_\_/28

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