

The Youngest Writers

Marcia S. Freeman

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The Emergent Writer's Natural Mode

An emergent writer's first and natural writing mode is personal and informational. It is expository writing.

This is my house.

I love my mom. I love my granpa. I love my teacher. I love my teddy bear.

I have a dog and he acts like a puppy.

This is my rabbit. She eats carrots. And she likes me.

We need to cherish and nurture this natural mode.

The Expository Genre

Expository writing is about information or ideas. It is communicating feelings, explaining, giving directions, expressing opinions, and persuading. It is the genre of literature response, reading comprehension questions, and academic test questions. It is the genre of the work-a-day world. Almost everything almost everyone writes is expository.

The most concrete form of expository writing is informational writing, based on facts and feelings. We can see why it is the easiest and best place to begin writing instruction: primary school children naturally tell what they know and what they feel.

Help children find personal topics

Model how to list personal expertise topics for your students. List things you know about, places you have been, things you can do. Include a few science/social studies topics your students have studied in class, but mainly list out-of-school knowledge and activities: fishing, making toast, biking, jumping rope, dogs, grandmother, whales, singing, drawing pigs, dancing, coloring books, fire engines, museum, park, TV programs, shopping, ...

Give your students each a long strip of card stock (a list should look and feel like a list) and help them write a list of their personal expertise. Emergent writers can construct one with pictures — pasted or drawn. Provide time for students to listen to each other's lists. Interview those who are having difficulty making one. Ask them about their games, their chores, their after-school activities. Help them find the things about which they have personal knowledge and experience.

Elaboration comes from knowing your subject

We want young writers to elaborate on their ideas. First- and second-graders should be able to write several paragraphs of related information on a topic; third-graders, more. Elaboration in writing is directly proportional to the writer's depth of knowledge about a topic. Writing about what they know best will help youngsters achieve elaboration.

Use personal writing as the vehicle for skill building

When children write about themselves, they are engaged and emotionally connected to their subject. There are no knowledge barriers. They can place almost their entire attention on the writing itself. They can learn to apply writing skills associated with informational writing such as *question or exclamation hooks, descriptive details, comparisons, specificity, and endings that tell how they feel about the topic.*

Support young writers' natural mode with your read-aloud program

Develop your students' ear for the expository genre. Read books on a theme; first an informational book on the topic, then a story. For instance, you might read an article or science Big Book about eggs hatching, and follow that with "*Are You My Mother*" by P. D. Eastman, the appealing classic story of a hatchling who came out of his shell while his mother was off the nest, and who asks everyone and everything, "*Are you my mother?*"

Read aloud children's picture books that are not stories — not organized chronologically. Some examples are:

- Big Rigs*, Harston, Hope. NY: Dutton, 1993
- Come Out, Muskrats*, Arnosky, Jim. NY: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books, 1989
- Cows*, Brady, Peter. Minnesota: Capstone Press, 1996
- Dogs*, Gibbons, Gail. NY: Holiday House, 1996
- I am an Artist*, Collins, Pat Lowery. Connecticut: Millbrook Press, 1992
- Let's Talk About Being Afraid*, Kreiner, Anna. NY: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 1996
- Me on the Map*, Sweeny, Joan. NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996
- My Hands*, Alike. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1990
- Push and Pull*, Freeman, Marcia. NY: Newbridge Educational Publishing, 1997
- The Tortilla Factory*, Paulsen, Gary. NY: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1995
- Urban Roosts*, Bash, Barbara. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1990

Read non-fiction Big Books, articles from Junior National Geographic, Ranger Rick and Ladybug magazine, directions to games, advertisements, invitations, letters to be sent home, book reviews, and the About-the-Author information from the fiction books you read to your class.

Check out the new primary reading series appearing on the market. They are non-fiction and photo-illustrated, focused on science and social studies concepts, and consist of emergent, developing, and fluent levels.

When you read informational books, not only do children develop an ear for the expository genre, but they learn facts about nature, science, history, social studies, cooking, art, music, books, sports, etc. Your reading aloud does double-duty.

Use expository writing vocabulary

Refer to emergent writers' informational writing as *your writing, your piece, your picture/writing, or your manuscript*. Do not call their writing *a story*, as in, *Bring your story to*

Author's Chair; Let me hear your story; What is your story about? — unless you know it is a story.

When children share their piece in Author's chair encourage them to say: *This is what I know about dogs; This is what I saw at the zoo; This is what I know about manatees; This is an information piece; This is expository writing.*

Next issue: A Precursor to Paragraphing: how to help young writers build an effective two to three paragraph personal informational piece, using concrete sorting, and including an introductory hook and a satisfying ending.