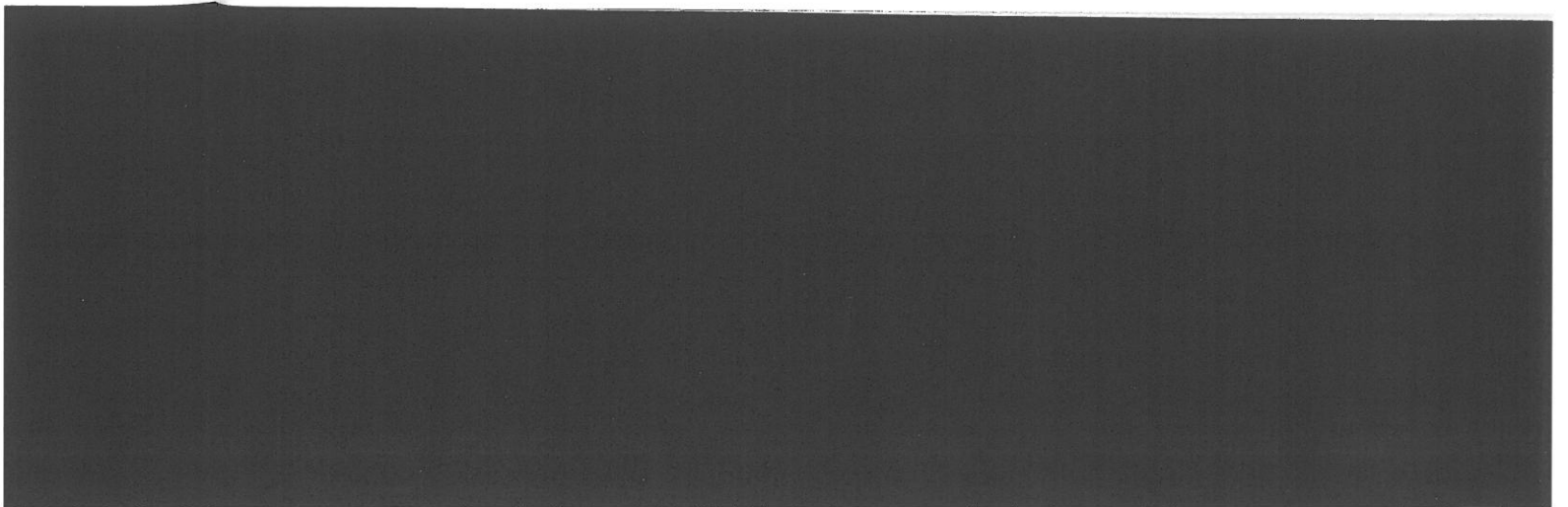


***PART TWO***  

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***STRESS BUSTERS***



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Some children—a lucky handful—enter first grade already set to start writing. Give these children a sheet of paper and, almost without hesitating, they will scribble sentences on the page. They will very likely use nonsensical letter combinations. They may write “SWSUM” in the belief that it means “I like school.”

But no matter. If teachers applaud these early efforts, children who come to first grade with that ability will easily develop their writing skills. In the beginning, these children may seem oblivious to standard spelling. But so long as they believe they are writing, they will go on doing it, and the more they go on, the more they will notice and learn. After several weeks of such composition, these lucky few children will begin to consider proper spelling. When they say a word like *school*, they will hear distinct sounds. They will try to coordinate the sounds with letters and will end up with, maybe, *skl*. That’s an improvement! Day by day, children of that sort will develop the ability to hear more sounds and to link the sounds to appropriate letters. They will memorize a certain number of spellings. In a delightfully short period of time they will write dozens and dozens of words correctly and automatically. They will concentrate on composing interesting stories and find it quite easy to record their thoughts on paper. Writing will be a breeze.

There are other children in first grade, however, for whom writing is not a breeze. Imagine such a child at the start of the school year. The teacher hands out sheets of blank paper and instructs the children to draw something that will help them remember their first week of first grade. She tells the children to add words to the page if they feel like doing so. Our first-grader draws a picture of his school building. Now he wants to write about his drawing. He wants to write the word *school*. He considers the first sound:

S-s-s-school. What letter makes that sound? He knows the answer—the letter s. But how do you form an s? Is this right?

How about this?

By the time the child gets an s on paper, he has forgotten the word he wanted to spell. So much effort and all he's got to show is a single letter! Considering the difficulty, it's not surprising that many children end up chewing pencils rather than writing with them.

A little instruction and practice may help this child; but then again, it may not. Many children continue to dread writing throughout their school years. Each passing day and each writing class or workshop makes these children more and more anxious. One child cannot think of a thing worth writing. Another has a zillion ideas but cannot focus on a single thought, and since you can only write one thought at a time, this child writes nothing at all. A third child gets so nervous he can't sit still long enough to write his name. A fourth writes only words he already knows how to spell. He writes the same story over and over: "I like to play." Then there is the child who only wants to write masterpieces. He starts lots of stories, but they all seem like failures and he refuses to finish any of them. These children all suffer from writer's block, except in a child's version, which is infinitely more painful and harmful than the adult version. At some time or another, virtually all children fall victim to such anxieties. Even the very best students suffer from these writer's worries on occasion.

What causes such discomfort with writing? In general, for first-, second-, and third-graders it's fairly easy to place the blame. The anxiety arises from the terrors of spelling and handwriting and the "but I have nothing to write" syndrome.

How to help your child overcome these difficulties? First, tackle the spelling question. Assure your child that when he is getting his ideas down on paper, correct spelling doesn't matter. Even

with such encouragement, there are some children who will outright refuse to write unless they get help with spelling. When a child demands that I supply the correct letters, I comply. Sometimes I will dictate the letters. Other times I'll write words on a sheet of paper for the child to copy.

Second, tell your child not to worry about his handwriting. Tell him to ignore sloppy letters and reversed *d*'s. I usually promise to help children form correct letters after they have finished writing—if they want to do that. Occasionally a child completely forgets how to make an *f* or *w*. When that happens, I show him or her how to form the letters. Children get upset by such lapses in memory and often will refuse to keep writing unless they get immediate help.

It's a little harder to take on the "but I have nothing to write" problem. When children say this, they don't really mean they have nothing to write. They mean that they can't think of anything they feel comfortable writing. They are frightened by the idea of producing a whole story from beginning to end. They need less daunting writing projects. They need, in short, "Stress Busters."

A "Stress Buster" is a writing game or activity that is quick to complete and demands only a wee bit of writing from the participants. I try to make "Stress Busters" as silly and playful as possible. I ask children to make up menus for a restaurant that caters exclusively to monsters. I challenge them to engage in races with words, contests with words, and even a physical exercise with words. These games are popular with all children—those who write without hesitation as well as those who shy away from pencil and paper.

Of course, children still need encouragement to get through these activities. But encouragement is easy to give. Praise your child's efforts. Shrug off his errors. If you believe he is trying hard and treat him with the respect such effort deserves, your child will respond by producing the best work he possibly can.

"Stress Busters" are geared for first-, second-, and third-graders. Browse through this section, find a game that looks like it will be fun, and give it a try. If the game works—if it gets your child writing and smiling simultaneously—then you made a good choice. If not, try another game.

# HALTING STORIES

GRADES

first and second

**C**hildren and adults talk and listen at rates of about 250 words per minute. No one can write so rapidly. Adults may get twenty-five words per minute onto paper. Children are slower.

Even you, an experienced adult, cannot write unless you slow down your thinking. How does this work? When you write, you have a whole sentence in mind. You keep it in mind while you record words on paper—one word at a time. This can prove frustrating. You think of a wonderful sentence, start writing, get bogged down somewhere in the middle due to the necessity of spelling some horribly difficult word like *encyclopedia*, and by the time you have found your way back to the sentence, which was supposed to have a glorious ending, you are hopelessly lost.

This happens to all writers regardless of age, but children get bogged down more often than adults. Young writers launch themselves bravely into a sentence. They write the first couple of words. They push onward to word number three. But already they are faltering. By word number four, they have forgotten the sentence entirely. They are lost. They find it nearly impossible to think of a sentence and write it down in a single, stretched-out, slow-motion thought. With help, children can increase their ability to think in this specialized manner. That is the purpose of HALTING STORIES.

To start the game, ask your child to tell you a story—any story. He can recite Cinderella's saga, describe his day at school, or invent a tale on the spot. Children usually like to do that. But there is a hitch. Your child begins to talk, but before he has said more than a few words, you call out, "STOP!"



*Halting Stories*

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The child stops immediately. He doesn't say a word—until you shout, "GO!" Then he returns to the story. He must begin *exactly* where he left off. He continues the narrative, but before long you shout, "STOP!" again—and, soon enough, "GO!" That is the method of HALTING STORIES. You shouldn't wait long between each stop and go. A few seconds will do. Your child wins the game if he can finish his story without losing his place in spite of your interruptions.

You can play this game whenever you have five minutes to spare. Play as you walk to the park or while waiting on a supermarket line. If your fellow shoppers look perplexed as you shout, "STOP" and then, "GO," you can explain that today some serious learning is going on alongside the cauliflower and broccoli.

If your child wants you to take a turn telling a halting tale, go ahead and try. You will see ("STOP! . . . GO!") how hard it is to ("STOP! . . . GO!") stop and start your ("STOP! . . . GO!") stories.

# SILENCE IS GOLDEN

GRADES

first, second, and third

MATERIALS

paper  
pencil

Sara's sentence writing ability lasted for two words, maybe three. Then she got distracted. She would look up from her paper and offer to tell me how her weekend had gone. She was suddenly curious about the history of computers. Anything at all would have interested Sara if it could plausibly interrupt the grim task of writing a complete sentence.

Sara's problem was nervousness, not to say panic. How to get around this nervousness of hers? There was no point in chastising her. That would only make things worse. Pleading with her was also of no use. I had to find a way to help her relax—and still write. To distract her from her own nervousness while getting her to do the very thing that was making her nervous.

This is what I did. The next time she came to see me, I refused to greet her with words. Instead, I handed her this note.

We are going to play a silent game today. No talking allowed.

Sara was puzzled. I explained—out loud—that for the next fifteen minutes neither of us could talk. Instead, we would commence a written conversation. No talking permitted. Well, *some* talking would be tolerable. If I wrote a word that Sara couldn't read, she could point to it and I would read it for her. Likewise, if she wrote a word I couldn't read, I would point and she could say it aloud. Any other talking was strictly forbidden.

If Sara blurted out words, I would rack up one point for each blurted word. If I talked, then Sara would get points. In case of a tie, Sara would be the winner.

"You mean all I have to do is not talk for fifteen minutes and I win?" Sara asked.

"That's all. Of course, we will be conversing the entire time. We will be writing our conversation, though. I'll write to you and you'll answer me. You can ask me any questions you want. You can change the subject of the conversation, but you must keep writing. I'll keep track of the time. Do you get the idea?" I asked.

*Silence Is Golden*

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"Got it," she answered.

"In that case, let the game begin."

Sara nodded her consent. I took out a piece of paper and wrote a question for her to answer.

What's the best thing about summer?

Sara took her pencil and responded:

It's fun. I don't hav school.

I couldn't help smiling. Sara had written six words without so much as an interrupting peep. A major achievement! The game went on. Mostly I asked questions and Sara answered.

What's the best thing about winter?

I like snow

What do you do in the snow?

sledding and I throesnowballs.

A few times, Sara looked ready to utter some crucial thought, but on each occasion she managed to control herself. In doing so, she won the game. This made her very happy. When I pointed out how many words she had written in just fifteen minutes, she was both happy and proud.

"Can we play this game again sometime?" she asked.

I wrote a note and handed it to her.

You can count  
on it.



# MONSTER CAFE

# W

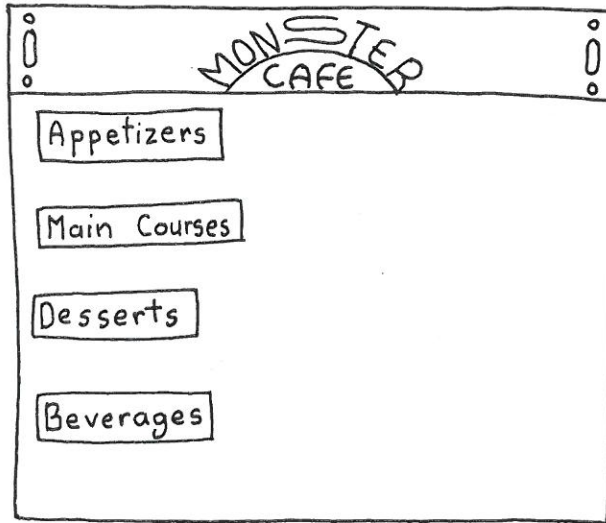
hat do monsters like to eat?

Worms smothered in butterscotch sauce? Broiled mosquitoes with lizard livers? Old rags dipped in mud? Where can a hungry ogre or zombie get such delicacies? McDonald's? Wendy's? Of course not. Monsters must patronize special restaurants—MONSTER CAFES.

Matt, a second-grader who appreciated a good monster story, had no trouble imagining a restaurant catering exclusively to creepy creatures. He understood instantly the fun and challenge to be had in designing a menu for such an establishment. And although Matt hated most writing assignments, he was unreservedly enthusiastic about writing a menu for a MONSTER CAFE.

To begin our work, we took a sheet of paper and Matt drew a MONSTER CAFE logo on top.

We decided the cafe should offer two appetizers, two main courses, two desserts, and two beverages. I wrote appropriate section heads on the menu.



"Now for the hard part," I said. "We have to think of the right foods. Let's start with an appetizer."

It only took Matt a few moments to make an appalling suggestion: slimy guts with chocolate cockroaches. No discriminating

## GRADES

first, second, and third

## MATERIALS

paper

pencil

optional: crayons or colored markers

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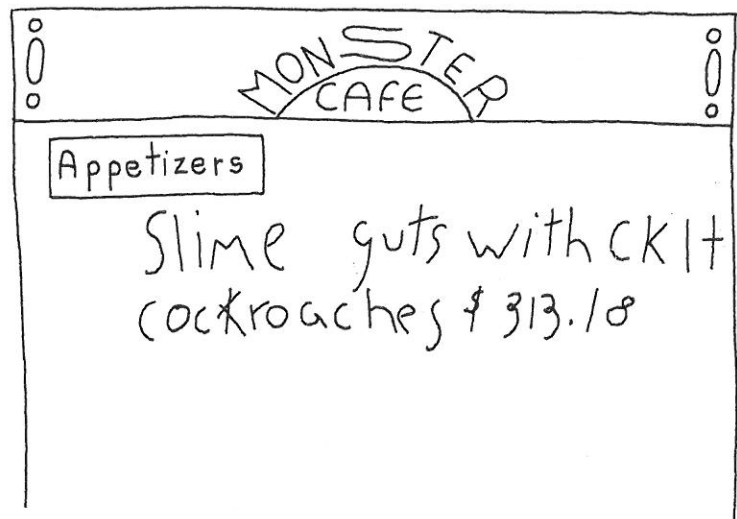
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fiend could resist such delights. I suggested we charge \$13.18 for this specialty of the house. Matt felt \$313.18 was more appropriate. Ours was an establishment for wealthy monsters, he declared. Then he proudly wrote the first entry:



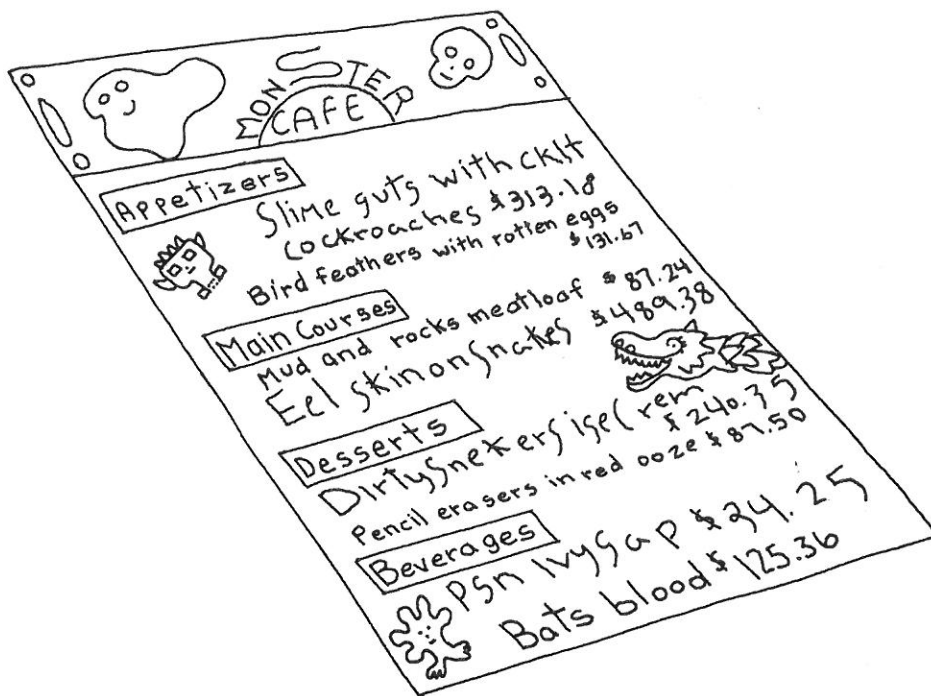
He asked for help spelling *cockroaches*. I obliged. He tackled *chocolate* on his own, with interesting results. Matt's unique spelling didn't disturb me. On the contrary, I was pleased that he attempted such a difficult word.

Next Matt suggested a thoroughly vile beverage: poison ivy sap. A monster could purchase this thirst-quencher for a mere \$346.25. Item by item, we filled in the menu. We didn't finish in one sitting. Instead, we spent a few minutes of several tutoring sessions planning our cuisine. I wrote some entries, but in general Matt did the honors. After listing all the food, Matt decorated the menu with ghoulish designs.

The day we finished, Matt ran to the door as soon as his father arrived to pick him up and take him home from our tutoring session. As his dad walked through the door, Matt shoved the completed menu into his hands.

"Read this!" he demanded.

\$13.18 for appropriate. declared.



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Matt's father and I had talked about spelling, so I knew he wouldn't be disturbed to see *cklt* instead of *chocolate* or *blud* in place of *blood*. He asked for a translation or two, then gave Matt the perfect response, "This is totally disgusting!"

Later that night, Matt's mother called with good news. Matt, who had never volunteered to write so much as his initials before, had spent an hour jotting grotesque goodies for Monster Cafe II.

Does your own child delight in the revolting? Then try composing a monster menu. Of course, your child might not be attracted to the repulsive. Your child might prefer making menus for an ice cream parlor that caters to circus clowns, a diner open exclusively to children, a fast-food joint frequented by aliens from outer space, or a Royal Cafe that serves only kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Royal food must be pure and refined; that menu won't include a single pickled worm. Tastes vary. The repulsive path is best for some children, but not for all.

# A RACE OF WORDS

## GRADES

first and second

## MATERIALS

paper  
pencil

**H**annah couldn't wait to start first grade. She desperately wanted to read and write. She was positive that after a week or two, she would be reading fluently and writing prolifically. It didn't happen. Weeks and weeks went by, and a frustrated Hannah made no headway whatsoever.

By February, her slow progress worried her parents and teacher. Hannah herself was miserable. Every night she told her mom how stupid she felt. Her mother protested, but Hannah could prove she was stupid. All her friends were reading and writing. Her best friend, Alice, had finished writing a story and it was *six* pages long. Clearly, if Alice was smart (and everyone agreed she was), then Hannah was an idiot (no matter what her loving parents said).

In March, Hannah gave up. She didn't want to try anymore. It was too painful. When her teacher assigned written work, Hannah handed in a crumpled, smeared sheet on which she had written one or two words. A month later, her parents sent Hannah to me for tutoring.

By that time, Hannah had taught herself dozens of clever ways to *avoid* putting pencil to paper. My first task, therefore, was to reignite her excitement and enthusiasm for writing. Competition, I've found, can make for effective kindling. Reluctant writers will often scrawl a few words, if doing so means they win a game. The particular game I chose for Hannah was A RACE OF WORDS.

To begin, I told her to look around my workroom. The room was filled with furniture, books, odds and ends. For the next ten minutes, Hannah's job was to write the names of everything she could see in the room. She had to write fast, because she wanted to list as many objects as possible. She wrote for five minutes, while I sat quietly. After five minutes, though, I began a list of my own. We both wrote for the next five minutes. When time was up, we scored our lists. I got one point for every item I recorded. Hannah got one point for every item on her list that was also on mine. But she got *three* points for anything she noted that I had failed to include. I did not get this three-point advantage.

Spelling didn't matter. Speed and thoroughness were everything. From the first, Hannah approved of this contest. True, she had to write, but only one word at a time. Best of all, with her time

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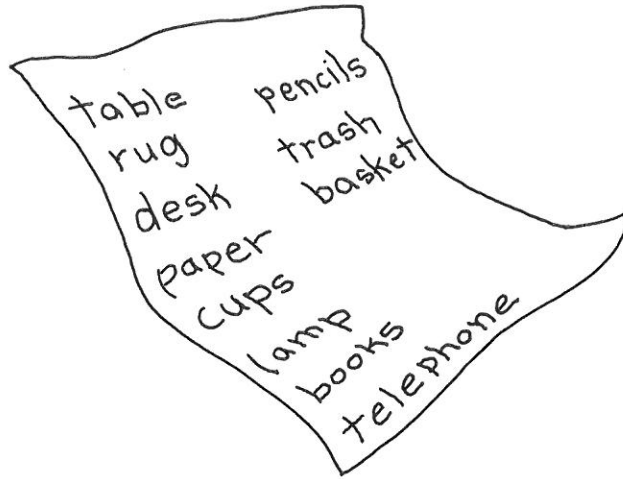
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and point advantage, Hannah felt she had a chance to win. Secretly I was rooting for Hannah. If she won the first game, she would probably want to play again and again. So I wrote slowly and paused between words.

When time ran out, I had ten words on my list for a total of ten points.



Hannah read me her list, since some of the words were hard for me to decipher.



Even Hannah was baffled by *dzc*. "Could it be *desk*?" I guessed. That was it. Hannah had written just seven words, but she had three words that did not appear on my own list and which therefore counted for three points each. These words were *rsr* (eraser), *flr* (floor), and *rshr* (rocking chair). All in all, she accumulated thirteen points.

What if Hannah couldn't remember the meaning of *dzc* and I couldn't figure it out for her? We would have crossed the word off her list and then given her thirty seconds to add a new word.

Just as I hoped, Hannah's enthusiasm for A RACE OF WORDS increased after her victory. During the following weeks we raced often. We listed animals, TV shows, colors, desserts, sports, girls' names, boys' names, fruits, things that use electricity, and things that most everyone hates. Sometimes I rigged our races in Hannah's favor, but not always.

In a few weeks, Hannah's attitude toward writing changed—a little. She didn't dread pencils. She didn't cringe at the sight of paper. Instead, she was eager to write, at least at game time. The game gave Hannah confidence. And soon enough there was a spillover: Hannah agreed to try more substantial writing tasks. We still had a long way to go, but A RACE OF WORDS gave Hannah a fresh start.

# WORD BY WORD

## GRADES

first, second, and third

## MATERIALS

paper  
pencil  
one playing die

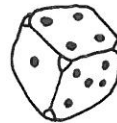
If I were allowed to use only a single activity to help a reluctant child overcome qualms about writing, I would pick WORD BY WORD. Children like this game, whether or not they like to write.

The first step in WORD BY WORD is to choose a title for the story you are about to write. The title should indicate something about the upcoming plot. Here are some sample titles, but you can certainly make up your own.

*Hunting for Dinosaurs*  
*Halloween in a Haunted House*  
*The Day I Scared a Monster*  
*Lost in the Woods*  
*The Magic Spell*  
*The Mad Scientist Strikes Again*

Once you select a title, you and your child start writing the story—together. You write a little and then your child adds a bit. Exactly how many words will you each contribute? To determine that you must roll a playing die. Let's say you throw a four. That means you write the first four words of the story. Not three words, not five, but exactly four, as required by the roll of the die.

This morning I went



Now, hand the die to your child and let him roll. Let's say he gets a one. That means he supplies one, and only one, word to the story.

This morning I went for



Word by Word

Your turn again: roll and write. Add a few words, and then pass the die to your child.

This morning I went for a  
walk in the park.

Keep rolling and writing until the story ends.

Sometime during the game your child may moan, "I threw a two, but I have more to say." When that happens, be sympathetic but firm. Don't allow him to write more words than the die dictates. This is the Tom Sawyer method of pedagogy. Remember Tom painting his fence? Tom bragged about the delights of painting while refusing to let his friends help with the job. As a result, his friends insisted on painting and cheerfully completed all of his hard work. According to this principle, you should forbid any extra words while playing WORD BY WORD. You'll see—soon writing may be irresistibly appealing.

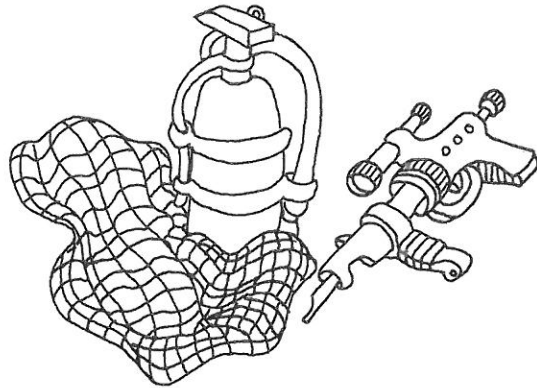
What happens if your child runs out of ideas? Talk together about the plot. Make suggestions and ponder possibilities. This is a collaborative effort, after all.

At some point—often before the story reaches a natural conclusion—a child will run out of energy for writing. When I see a youngster getting fatigued, I suggest that we each take just three more turns. Even tired writers are willing to do that much. This does pose a creative challenge, however. You must invent an ending within your word limits. Sometimes at the end of a story, I bend the rules and let the child dictate a few sentences to finish our saga. There are times, though, when a story is too good to end abruptly. In that case, tuck it away in a safe place. In a day, or a week, pull it out again, grab pencils, roll the die, and go on with the tale.



# MAKE A LIST

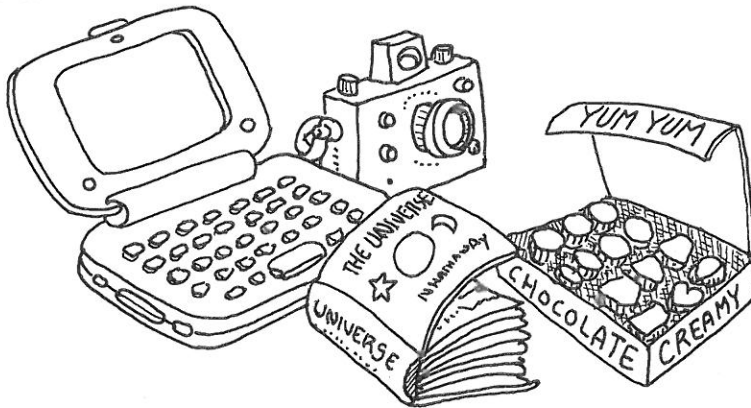
Imagine you must fight a gigantic fire-breathing dragon. You can take ten weapons with you. What will you select? A fire extinguisher? A laser gun? A net made of flame-resistant rope?



**GRADES**  
first and second

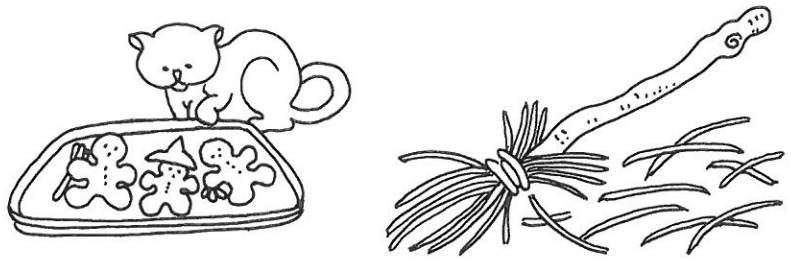
**MATERIALS**  
paper  
pencil

Imagine taking a rocket trip through the galaxy. You will be alone in space for an entire year. After the essential equipment is loaded on the ship, what extra ten items will you pack? A book? A lap-top computer? A space camera? A gigantic box of cream-filled chocolates?



You have just met a witch. You ask her to teach you how to cast a magic spell. What five things will you do for her in exchange? Clean her cave for a month? Bake her gingerbread cookies? Care for her cat? Re-twig her broom?

*Make a List*



Writing lists like these was Noah's favorite way to start a tutoring session. Lists were, for a time, the only writing he could bear.

Noah, a second-grader, was supposed to write in school, of course. His teacher set aside forty-five minutes a day for writing. During this time, the kids in Noah's class all worked on stories. Some wrote true stories. Some wrote imaginary adventures. In general, everyone had something to write—except Noah. By January, all the other kids in his class had written between three and four lengthy tales. Noah had lots of first lines for lots of stories. But after an opening paragraph, he gave up. As a result, he hadn't come close to finishing even one story.

This was very odd, and Noah's teacher knew it. Noah was one of the best and most enthusiastic readers in her class. Such readers are, as a rule, good or at least willing writers. It seems, however, that Noah didn't care about this rule. His problem was a lack of confidence. He didn't feel he could produce stories that he would feel proud of having written. The standards he set for himself were impossibly high. He wanted to write stories as polished as those of his favorite authors—E. B. White and A. A. Milne. Every time he started a story, he gave up.

To break this pattern, Noah needed some unqualified successes as a writer. Clearly, if I asked him to write something as intimidating as a story, he would balk, just as he did in his regular classroom. But writing lists was a different matter.

The first list had to be special. It had to trigger Noah's imagination. What list did I pick? "Five Ways to Make a Teacher Mad." If the child feels relaxed enough, I know—from numerous experiences—that this list can get wonderfully wacky. I suspected, though, that Noah would need encouragement before he could feel

free to share any sensationally shocking ideas. With this in mind, I offered him a few suggestions intended to startle him.

"I can think of some strange ways to make a teacher mad," I said. "You could dump live frogs in her soup at lunch or spray her hair with skunk stink juice. That would make *me* mad. I wonder if you can think of anything along those lines?"



Noah was astonished. Such ideas coming from an adult! When he got over his amazement, he assured me that he could match my level of skullduggery. His ideas were impressive.

put gum in her hair  
trip her  
put mushy rotten tomato on her chair  
Put mud in her coffee  
Put a snake in her hat

It took Noah about fifteen minutes to finish his list. In those minutes, he had written more words than he had composed in months of school. Why did Noah write so much on this one day? The list structure was easy for him to control. He only had to think of one idea at a time. There were no characters, no plot, no events to organize. A list is a modest thing to write. It eliminates the psychological weight of creating a story. Also, the assignment appealed to him. It gave him a safe way to express some of his pent-up frustration about school and teachers.

Noah had done an excellent job, and I told him so. "You made me laugh," I said. "It takes writing talent to make a reader laugh. I also like how you describe things. You didn't just say a tomato, you called it a mushy, rotten tomato. Those two words made it unpleasantly real. That's what good writing is about. I'm impressed."

Noah didn't say anything, but his smile proved that my words mattered. Writers—young and old—thrive on compliments.

Week by week, list by list, Noah's confidence grew. Maybe he was a capable writer, after all. Maybe he could attempt writing a story. He decided to try—in school. What a transformation! Now during writing time, Noah produced story after story after story.

Perhaps your child will find MAKE A LIST appealing. If you think so, scan the following list of lists. Select a promising one and start writing. It's probably best if you write the first few items. As your child catches on, he can take over. Of course, you could take turns until the list is full. You could both write five items separately and secretly before sharing your ideas. There are dozens of variations when it comes to writing lists. Try different methods until you find the perfect system for you and your child.

### **A List of Lists**

- 5 totally new flavors of ice cream
- 6 gifts you would give a friendly giant
- 5 ways to stop a ghost from moving into your house
- 5 places you would go if you could be invisible for three hours
- 3 wishes you would make if you found a wishing well (You can't wish for more wishes, though.)
- 6 things you can do with a book—aside from reading it
- 7 ways to make a friend jealous
- 5 reasons why your birthday should be celebrated three times a year