SEE, SAY, WRITE

A Writing Routine for the Preschool Classroom

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Mrs. Thompson looks around her classroom during center time. The class has just finished a unit on life processes and planted grass as a final project. She sees four students huddled around a small cup with soil inside.

Will My grass will grow this tall!
Joseph Mine, too! I am giving mine water and sunlight so it gets as tall as me!
Juliet I can’t wait to tell my dad how to plant grass. We can plant more at home!
Madelyn I want to plant more seeds!

As Mrs. Thompson sees the excitement in her students over this project, she wonders how she can extend the activity and build on students’ excitement to support and expand their language and literacy skills at the same time.

Shared classroom experiences, such as field trips, class visitors, read-alouds, and class projects like the one just described, provide great opportunities to solidify and reinforce children’s content knowledge. However, early childhood teachers can also use these experiences to enhance students’ language and literacy skills. When children talk and write about these shared experiences, it simultaneously strengthens children’s content area knowledge, language, and early literacy skills. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) uses students’ life experiences to provide a meaningful entry into literacy (Dorr, 2006; Labbo, Eakle, & Montero, 2002; Stauffer, 1970). See, Say, Write is an adaptable classroom writing routine, based on LEA methodology, that teachers can use across a range of activities in the preschool classroom.

Writing Enhances Other Language and Literacy Skills

Children’s early writing is part of a constellation of preschool language and literacy skills that lays a foundation for children’s later reading success (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Pertaining to writing specifically, research indicates that children’s early writing skills are predictive of decoding ability in the primary grades (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Not only are these skills related to later reading, they are also interconnected with other foundational skills during preschool, such as print knowledge and phonological awareness (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008; Puranik & Lonigan, 2012). Indeed, young children’s engagement in writing activities has the power to accelerate preschool literacy learning in general (Aram & Biron, 2004; Both-de Vries & Bus, 2010; Diamond & Baroody, 2013). As children write, they are naturally forming and revising their hypotheses about the way written language works (Bissex, 1980).

Children’s writing proficiency develops over time and parallels children’s early reading development (Bissex, 1980; Ehri, 1997; Schickedanz, 1990). It is a process that begins at the age of 18 months—or even earlier—when children begin making marks when given the required tools and a writing surface (Tolchinsky, 2006). Given the varying levels of literate home environments in which preschoolers live, it is no surprise that the levels of writing ability vary within a typical classroom. Although these children are not yet writing with conventional spelling, the process of writing has begun.

Children’s marks progress from writing with scribbles and writing with letter-like forms and seemingly

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random letters to using invented spelling, starting with beginning and salient sounds, then representing beginning and ending sounds in words (see Early Writing Framework in Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013; Clay, 1975; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). At first, children’s writing reflects their knowledge of how print works (Cabell, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2009). For example, they may begin to write letters from left to right or top to bottom, or they may write part of their name without knowing the sounds that correspond to the letters (e.g., Joseph begins with the /j/ sound). Although the letters or letter-like shapes they make may not correspond to the sounds, children are demonstrating an understanding of how print works; this random marking of letters can be seen in Figure 1.

Later on, children’s writing reflects their knowledge of how print and sound work together (i.e., phonological awareness). Their unfolding written representations showcase their development toward the alphabetic principle, or understanding the connection between speech and sound, a critical achievement in literacy acquisition (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Children begin to represent the salient sounds in words in their writing. For example, in Figure 2, the child represents the word water with the letter W. Children then begin to represent words using beginning and ending sounds (e.g., WR or WDR for water). At this point, writing becomes a powerful activity that simultaneously draws on multiple literacy skills: Children must identify sounds within words (phonological awareness), match those sounds to letters (alphabet knowledge), and make decisions about how to form and arrange those letters on the page (print knowledge).

In addition to literacy skills, children’s language skills can receive a boost from writing activities. Children use writing to produce messages and convey meaning at an early age (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975). Although Rowe (2008) suggests that the meaning of a child’s writing is often created after the marks are made, students as young as 2 years old are able to connect meaning to their marks. While some teachers may see scribbling and random marks as meaningless, these are actually the beginning of the writing process and a way for students to practice conveying their messages.

Teachers can encourage children to hone their developing narrative skills through asking them open-ended questions and extending their messages. Narrative skills include the ability to understand and tell stories using sophisticated language skills. These skills enable children to better understand stories read aloud to them; later in development, children need this narrative ability to comprehend written language as they read stories on their own. By providing opportunities for students to have rich conversations around shared experiences, teachers offer an opportunity to activate and build prior knowledge, empower children to believe that their ideas are worth writing about, and help to facilitate language growth (Cabell & Justice, 2013). These opportunities can be situated within a writing experience.

Writing can serve as the vehicle that allows children to practice and refine their language and literacy skills. One way to combine language and literacy instruction through writing is using the See, Say, Write routine to integrate writing into the preschool curriculum.

**See, Say, Write**
The purpose of this early writing routine is to provide a meaningful opportunity for preschool children to talk about their experiences and apply their language and literacy skills to produce a written message that reflects their experiences. Additionally, this routine can serve as an informal assessment for children’s content knowledge and a window into their level of literacy. This routine can be used before or after science, social studies,
math, art, music, or shared book reading activities and in large-group or small-group instruction.

Before or after a classroom activity, the teacher provides students with a visual stimulus (See). This can be photographs of the experience itself, books or objects used in the experience, or an artifact from the activity. After displaying the picture or object, the teacher uses open-ended comments and questions to begin a conversation about the picture (Say). Open-ended comments and questions elicit more than a one-word answer from children (e.g., “Tell me about this picture,” or “What is happening in this picture?”). The teacher extends children’s words and ideas about the picture and may continue to ask questions to encourage back-and-forth exchanges (e.g., “What happened before? What happened after?”). After the conversation, the teacher encourages children to write about the experience (Write). This writing can take place in large or small groups using a chalkboard, a dry erase board, or chart paper, or children can write independently at their desks. The teacher should choose the writing experience that most closely aligns with children’s needs.

See, Say, Write in Action
To get a better understanding of the See, Say, Write experience, we return to Mrs. Thompson’s class a day later. During the planting activity, Mrs. Thompson photographed the children as they added the soil, seeds, and water to their planting cups.

Today, Mrs. Thompson displays a picture of the grass that the children planted (see Figure 3). She asks children to tell her about the picture.

Mrs. Thompson: Tell me what you see in this picture.

Anderson: We made our grass.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, we were trying to grow grass. What did we do first?

Madelyn: We put our dirt in it.

Mrs. Thompson: Yes, we put the soil in the cup. Then what did we do?

Juliet: We put seeds.

Mrs. Thompson: Good thinking, Juliet. Then we added the seeds.

Notice how Mrs. Thompson extends the children’s words by adding and clarifying their statements (e.g., from “We made our grass” to “We were trying to grow grass”). Mrs. Thompson then leads the students through the writing process.

Mrs. Thompson: These are great ideas. Let’s decide what to write.

Macie: Put soil in the cup.

Mrs. Thompson: Good, Macie. Let’s think about the word put. P is at the beginning of put.

Mrs. Thompson chooses to have Macie help with the beginning letter of put because she is currently using letters and letter-like forms in her daily writing (Cabell et al., 2013). This is an appropriate scaffold for Macie’s learning. Mrs. Thompson writes the rest of the word.

Mrs. Thompson: What do you hear at the beginning of the word soil?

Mrs. Thompson asks Anderson to assist with this part of the word because he is currently writing with salient and
beginning sounds (Cabell et al., 2013). She knows that he will be successful but that this task will also help him grow in his early writing skills. Mrs. Thompson writes the rest of the sentence for the class (see Figure 4).

The following week, the See, Say, Write routine is repeated. The class looks at the plants and discusses their growth so far. Then, the children write about the plants independently. As children are writing, Mrs. Thompson walks around the classroom and supports children at their developmental level. She supports some children by encouraging them to add letter forms to their scribbles and prompts others to add letters to words to match the sounds they hear.

The invented spelling that children use as they produce their messages allows the teacher to assess their knowledge of letters and sounds; for example, some children spell plant with scribbles, some with the letter P, and some as PT or PLAT. Further, she can assess the students’ content knowledge about the topic. The message written by Macie (see Figure 1) demonstrates her understanding of directionality and that she is using some letters and letter-like forms. When asked what her writing says, she responds, “Give the plant water.” When Macie is asked to explain her writing, she must use the oral language skills modeled during the Say portion of the lesson to explain her knowledge of the process. In this case, her response demonstrates her understanding of the content. In future lessons, Mrs. Thompson can work with Macie during whole-group, small-group, and individual writing experiences to assist her in writing beginning sounds.

Madelyn’s writing (see Figure 2) demonstrates a different set of knowledge. As seen in her representation of the word put as P and water as W, she has a clear understanding of beginning sounds; however, she does not yet mark the ending sound. When asked what her writing says, Madelyn responds, “Put water in.” Mrs. Thompson will focus her attention on having Madelyn consistently represent ending sounds in words. This routine can be used to integrate writing into any classroom activity. Topics in all content areas, such as the following, could be addressed:

- Write a retelling of a storybook during reading.
- Describe an illustration from a storybook.
- Write a retelling of a field trip.
- Write to explain graphed information during a math lesson.
- Write about an activity with magnets during science.
- Write about a picture painted during art.
- Write about community helpers after a visit from a firefighter.

Through experiences and talk, the teacher can provide high-quality opportunities to build oral language skills in young children. Asking children to write about those experiences and conversations affords them the opportunity to apply the print and sound skills that they know. Although spelling may be far from conventional at this stage, children can use writing as a vehicle to use and enhance their language and literacy skills.

REFERENCES
Both-de Vries, A.C., & Bus, A.G. (2010). The proper name as starting point for basic reading skills. Reading and Writing, 23(2), 173–187.


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TAKE ACTION!

1. Choose an experience your students will have this week.
2. Take a few pictures during the experience. Pictures that include children are very motivating.
3. Show one picture to the children. Ask open-ended questions and extend what children say to facilitate conversation.
4. Ask children to assist you in writing a message, or choose to have them write independently.
5. Provide support to help the children produce their message.
6. Consider allowing time for children to share their work with their peers.

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