

# ***AAC Authors . . . Writing Beginning Books for Young Readers***

Musselwhite, Wagner, Richardson, & Odom, 2008

## **Introduction**

Reading personally-written texts is one strategy that can support both reading and writing (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2007; Musselwhite & King-DeBaun, 1997). This workshop describes several projects in which students who are struggling writers (including students who use augmentative and alternative communication), create texts for younger students, then share those texts. This provides support in both reading and writing, and strengthens the reading - writing link.

## **Who Is This For?**

This strategy is designed for students (especially those who are older than age 8) who are emergent writers. It can be frustrating and embarrassing to read or write at a level that looks like that of a much younger child. How can we “make lemonade” out of this experience? One idea is to provide an authentic but simple and carefully-scaffolded writing task by asking older students to create big books for children in preschool or kindergarten. This has proven to be a highly motivating task for students who have previously felt unsuccessful. An added benefit is that this provides material at an appropriate reading level for beginning readers (remember: 'good' teachers' have more than 1500 books in their classroom libraries!)

Several projects are described, including:

- a group at an adult day activity center, using a range of high-tech AAC devices, writing a variety of stories for a kindergarten class
- an elementary class, using the computer, writing for preschoolers
- adults who use light and high tech systems (including eye gaze and alphabet flip boards), writing stories to be posted on the internet
- a community-based group (wide age range), using a combination of AAC devices and partner-supported strategies, writing for a Head Start classroom.

## **What Types of Texts Might Be Included?**

Both high tech and light tech books should be used. Light tech books include Big Books, shape books, tri-fold books, wheel books, etc. Excellent patterns can be found in the book titled *Making Big Books with Children* (Evans, Morgan, & Moore, 1989).

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A range of *text patterns* can be useful for both the student authors and the young people who will read those books. Samples include:

*ABC Books:* Alphabet books are great for brainstorming vocabulary, building vocabulary, AND focusing on the alphabet. **Tip:** Bring in sample ABC books, such as those sold in museums (ex: *An Alphabet Atlas* by Arthur Yorinks; *The Butterfly Alphabet* by Kjell B. Sandved). This will provide students with a model and show them that alphabet books are not just for little children.

*Starter-Line Books:* These are great for practicing vocabulary that is used in speaking as well as writing. Sample starters include: I am; I like; I went.; You are; It was.

*Use Poetic Structures:* Poems are quick and easy writing opportunities. First, show students simple poems that have been written by poets, using features such as: carrier phrase (*Bored*, by Shel Silverstein). Also, write your own, and show how they can be illustrated. Then support students in writing poems that can be easily illustrated. Sample poem formats that lend themselves into being made into books include: senses poems; color poems; add a word poems.

## High Tech Tricks

We all know that there are many 'bells and whistles' that can be added to a high tech story. The questions are:

- 1) Is the bang worth the buck, and
- 2) How can we use technology most effectively to support real learning

Several tips include:

a) Consider making an audio-recording of the synthesized speech on a student's AAC device. This offers significant motivation, personalization, and an authentic purpose for 'getting it just right.'

b) Use software to support sound files. One software that permits easy changing of pitch, speed, etc. is Audacity.

[www.audacity.sourceforge.net](http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net)

Read great tips on managing sound files at:

[www.aacintervention.com](http://www.aacintervention.com)

- October, 2005: Managing sound files through Audacity

- April, 2007: WAV\* AIFF\* Managing sound files



c) Use AAC devices effectively. For example: PRC devices ([www.prentrom.com](http://www.prentrom.com)) include pages / toolbars that activate all tools in programs such as Kurzweil (shown, at right) and Classroom Suite. Thus, the student can select tools needed to operate those programs directly from their communication devices. Tools that are not needed can be hidden if necessary.



This offers significant continuity. The student can either read materials in Kurzweil or can convert it to an MP3 file and have it read directly on their device. This allows repetition as the student needs. The read back feature is a great way for students to self-correct. Check the Dynavox website for recommendations of digital cameras and easy drop-and-drag of digital images into the Dynavox V software (Knowledge Base [www.dynavoxtech.com](http://www.dynavoxtech.com)).

The *tango!* ([www.blink-twice.com](http://www.blink-twice.com)) has a built-in camera that can be used to quickly take photos for book creation - no need to consider photo formats, or even to download the photos! Look for other device features that can similarly support book-writing and book-reading activities!

## Process, Not Product!

It is important to keep in mind that the purposes of these projects are:

- 1) To support AAC users in writing
- 2) To support AAC users in reading simple texts that they have written
- 3) To support AAC users in learning and using language on their communication devices

Thus, WHY and HOW books are written are equally important as WHAT is written. With regard to why we write, authoring books for younger children is ideal because:

- the older students have an **authentic purpose** for writing at a simpler linguistic level than expected for their age. Thus, if a 12-year-old is writing for a kindergarten class, use of simple, predictable sentences is appropriate.
- the older students are often **highly motivated** to write texts for younger students. This takes a task that would feel 'babyish' and turns it into a task that feels powerful.
- the older students can **practice linguistic collocations** (I can / I can't / can you / I like / you are / I went / will we) in writing, which will support use of the same collocations in speaking.
- the older students can **explore device language** in filling in 'slots' in their stories.
- the older students can also **use language to direct illustrations**, whether you are searching for photos on the internet, selecting BoardMaker™ symbols, or having a peer draw pictures to illustrate book pages.

Muselwhite (2002, Tip of the Month) has suggested a process for creating big books.

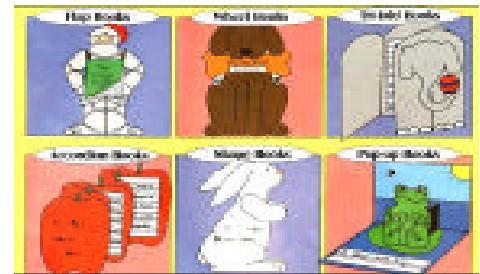
**1: Develop a Partnership.** Find a group of youngsters (preschool, kindergarten, first grade) who truly NEED more big books in their classroom. Ask the teacher to write a note to your students, requesting big books.



**2: Enlist Support of Your Students.** Share the letter, making a big deal of it. Emphasize how much the youngsters need the books, and how YOUR students can help.

**4: Brainstorm Book Ideas.** Do not rush this process! Help students discuss ideas. This is a great time to talk about the **audience**. Help your older students or adults think about interests and abilities of the younger students. Encourage voting.

**4: Consider Ready-Made Big Book Patterns.** Using patterns ensures that time is spent on the **language** of the books, not on the **mechanics** of book construction. A book that we use often is: *Making Big Books with Children*, (Evans, Morgan, & Moore, 1989, ISBN 1-55799-165, [www.evan-moor.com](http://www.evan-moor.com)). In addition to patterns, this book has a wide range of creative book-making ideas.



sample big book pattern types



*Making Mini-Books*  
A Klutz Book

Another book has fantastic ideas for mini-books. These are great for having each student make his or her own book. They make ideal presents and are perfect for sending through the mail to 'buddies' in another state, or even another country. Again, this provides an authentic purpose for writing.

**My bear likes \_\_\_\_\_.**  
**My bear can \_\_\_\_\_.**  
**My bear is \_\_\_\_\_.**  
**My bear has \_\_\_\_\_ fur.**



**5: One Pattern - Multiple Texts.** Have students use their devices to set up predictable text (remember, this is a great use of core words and linguistic collocations). You don't have to pick the one 'best' idea - students can create several texts for the same pattern. This means that more of your time is spent writing texts than physically creating books!

**6: Brainstorm Language for Each Story.** Remember - the overall goal is language and literacy!! It is ideal to brainstorm scores of words, then select the ones that you like. Use light or high tech options for putting vocabulary on display. Samples include:

**a. Brainstorm and Rehearse a WIDE Range of Vocabulary for Each Story.**

- Teachers, paras, therapists, and peers should model use of vocabulary on students' AAC devices (light or high tech)
- This supports some students in learning new vocabulary, while other students might get a chance to review vocabulary that they know, but for a different purpose
- This is very important to avoid over-prompting when you get to the writing stage!

**Help students  
look for  
PATTERNS!!**

**b. Set Up a Sentence Frame If Needed.**

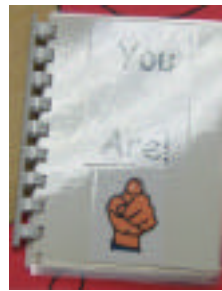
For beginning writers, it might be helpful to use sentence starters such as:

I can \_\_\_\_\_;

You are \_\_\_\_\_.

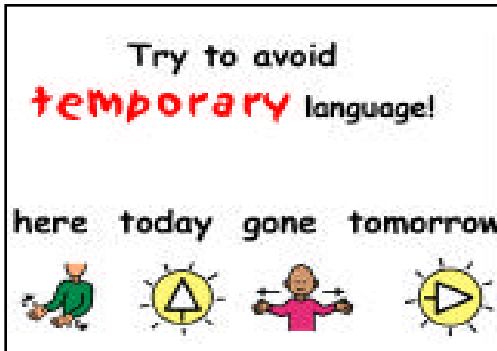
Thanksgiving is \_\_\_\_\_.

These are great to get going, but don't get 'stuck' on sentence frames. Students must be able to move on and be more generative!



You are awesome.

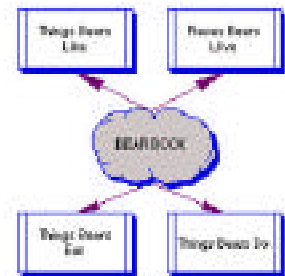
You are brown.



**c. Avoid 'Temporary' Language.**

Try to offer students core + content language. That is, don't just offer a set of words for a single story, with words being removed after the story is completed. Whether you are using light tech, high tech, or a combination, story creation is a great way to help individuals explore language that they will use for multiple purposes, across a range of settings!

**d. Make a Graphics Web.** This could be either light-tech (white board, paper and marker) or high-tech (e.g., *Inspiration* or *Kidspiration* software). It may be helpful for the partner to set up the categories, with the individuals who use AAC filling in the blanks. Categories can be added as needed. See: [www.inspiration.com](http://www.inspiration.com)



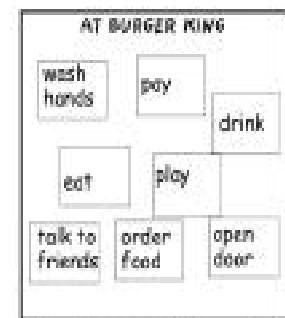
pretty

crazy

**e. Encourage Students to VOTE on Choices.**

- *Direct Selection Voting:* students can eye point or touch choices. Remember to write choices on Post-It's, even for emergent readers. It is a great way to see that print has meaning!
- *Voice Voting:* Narrow down choices, review choices, then let students use their AAC device to vote. This gives an authentic purpose for:
  - reviewing vocabulary that you know
  - finding vocabulary that a peer has found

**e. Use Storyboarding to Support Sequencing.** Storyboarding can help students see the pattern for their story, and can help them learn to sequence events. For more ideas, see the tip titled 'Going to Burger King' at: [www.learningmagicinc.com](http://www.learningmagicinc.com) - Caroline's Corner.



**7: Share Your Story!** Sharing stories is an essential part of this process! Sharing stories ensures that

- the writer has a very clear vision of the **audience**. This will help writers in future attempts.
- the writer has an authentic **purpose** for practicing the story text. However, do NOT require individuals to read word-by-word using AAC devices. This can be slow and awkward, and will reduce the impact and joy in the sharing! An AAC user might read a line, present the story starters ("I think . . . ; You are . . . "). An AAC user might also read a single word that occurs multiple times in a text.

Consider having AAC authors become 'Friday Readers' or at least videotape their productions!