

## **WRITING & GRAMMAR: Teaching Children to Solve Problems Rather Than Learn Rules**

*This paper was presented by Rodney Martin at the IFTE / ALEA / AATE National Conference, Melbourne, Australia on 7 July 2003. Rodney Martin is an ex-primary teacher, administrator and curriculum writer who, for the last 26 years, has worked commercially as an editor and author of children's literature and literacy materials.*

### **RESPONDING TO WRITING**

How would you respond to the following page 1 of a manuscript? Would you read page 2? Would you publish it? If so, what are its strengths? If not, what are its flaws? If you choose wrongly, you could miss out on a world-best-seller, or lose a lot of money if it is a failure.

#### **"NOTHING VERY SPECIAL"**

Bert was a plain fresh bun. Early on Monday morning when he was made, the baker put in flour, milk, eggs, butter, sugar, yeast and a pinch of salt, but nothing very special.

Bert was put into the oven with the other buns. After they had cooked and then cooled the baker cut them in half and squeezed cream inside and sprinkled icing sugar on top of everyone.....everyone except Bert, who was just a plain fresh bun made of nothing very special.

Just before the bakery opened the baker put his buns in the window....one batch of big, creamy buns and Bert. By the end of the day all the buns had been sold.....

...except one. Nobody wanted a plain fresh bun made of nothing very special, so that night, when all was dark and quiet, Bert turned himself into something EXTRA special.

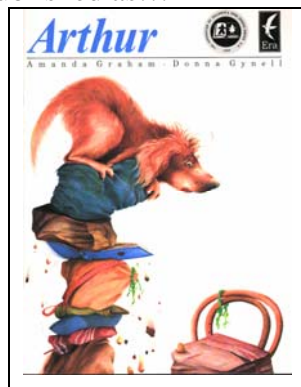
On Tuesday morning the baker made a batch of fine fruity buns.

© Amanda Graham 1983

"Nothing Very Special" was published as a children's picture book and was:

- The most popular children's book in Australia in 1984
- Short listed for the Australian Picture Book of the Year 1985
- Winner of the UK 'Children's Award' 1985
- Translated into 12 languages other than English

The book remains a top backlist seller, but the text was not published as "Nothing Very Special". It was published as...



This is what the editor said to the author about the original manuscript:

“I like the theme, the text structure and the repetitive style. I suggest that you change the bun to some kind of pet in a pet shop.”

Notice, the opening comment is positive and all comments deal only with structural and stylistic elements of the text. Can you see any parallel here between the roles of the editor and the classroom teacher?

### **Editing Fiction**

The editor, wading through a pile of fiction manuscripts, is looking for strengths and weaknesses based around five pillars of storytelling.

1. Characters (who, what – do they come alive and engage the reader?)
2. Setting (where, when – is it relevant and interesting?)
3. Plot (what happens – is it logical and do you want to keep turning the page?)
4. Style (how it sounds – is it a good use of the language?)
5. Theme (why the text exists – the underlying meaning – does it have one?)

In reading the manuscript “Nothing Very Special”, the editor recognised strengths in the author’s theme, structure and style. However, the bun as a character presented problems of logic in the plot:

- Buns become stale after a few days and so are less likely to be bought; and
- The reason for a bun to be bought is to be eaten – dubious ending and no sequels!
- Furthermore, emotive potential was lacking – personification applied to a pet would have more potential than to a bun in engaging the reader emotionally.

Changing the character from a bun to a pet meant that the setting needed to be changed from a bakery to a pet shop. The narrative then worked. Here is the opening text to ‘Arthur’. The author’s original voice is still very evident.

#### **ARTHUR**

*Written by Amanda Graham and illustrated by Donna Gynell*

Arthur was a very ordinary dog. He lived in Mrs Humber’s Pet Shop with many other animals, but Arthur was the only dog. All the other dogs had been sold because dogs were very popular – all the dogs except Arthur. He was just an ordinary brown dog, who dearly wanted a home, with a pair of old slippers to chew.

On Monday morning Mrs Humber put some rabbits in the window.

By the end of the day the window was empty, except for Arthur. Nobody wanted an ordinary brown dog. Everybody wanted rabbits.

So that night, when all was quiet, Arthur practised being a rabbit.

He practised eating carrots and poking out his front teeth and making his ears stand up straight.

Her practised very hard until he was sure he could be a rabbit.

The next morning Mrs Humber put some snakes in the window.

© Amanda Graham & Donna Gynell 1984

## **EDITORIAL FUNCTIONS**

### **What Do Teachers and Editors Have in Common?**

Both teachers and editors are charged with the responsibility of assisting writers to improve their work to a point where it is ready for presentation (publication) to its intended audience. It is proposed that an understanding of the editorial roles in the publishing industry has practical relevance to teachers. Naturally there will be differences in the positions of editors and teachers because of the relative maturity of their clients, the available resources and the number of clients being managed at any time. However, the principles involved with respect to the writing process are the same. In a professional environment, editing is invariably conducted at four different levels and often by different people – the commissioning or senior editor, the structural editor, the copyeditor and the proof reader. In the classroom, the editorial function is too often limited to proofreading.

### **Commissioning/Senior Editor**

The commissioning or senior editor in a publishing house is responsible for soliciting manuscripts from authors (usually by preparing a brief for the work required) and making publishing recommendations with respect to unsolicited manuscripts. It is possible, indeed not uncommon, for an editor to reject a manuscript that is subsequently adopted by another publisher and becomes a best-selling title. Equally, it is not uncommon for an editor to accept and publish a manuscript only to find that it fails miserably in the marketplace. So it is necessary for commissioning editors to have a clear view of their audience (market) and of the nature of works that will appeal to that audience. It is this understanding that provides the basis for a writing brief or for the assessment of solicited and unsolicited manuscripts. For both fiction and nonfiction, the editor must make a general judgment regarding the likely success of the work in engaging the reader by evoking some form of emotional response.

### **Structural Editor**

The structural editor improves the text in terms of its communication of topic, theme, text type/format, organisation/structure and style. This requires a view of the text as a whole and whether it achieves the writer's objective.

In fiction, the editor focuses on the quality of the characters, setting, plot, writing style and theme of the work in terms of its intended audience and purpose. By focusing on these five elements, the editor is able to identify strengths and weaknesses in a manuscript and, if necessary, make recommendations to the author for improvement.

The editorial assessment of nonfiction is based on the integrity and intrinsic interest of the information offered in a text, the clarity and logic of its structure and expression, and the relevance of its style and format to the intended purpose and audience.

### **Copyeditor**

The copyeditor focuses on the author's grammar, punctuation and style to ensure that the text has clarity. This involves identifying, for example, instances of inaccurate or inappropriate usage, clumsy grammar, redundancies, ambiguities, contradictions, omissions and any other factor that restricts the author's effective communication with the audience.

## **Proofreader**

The proofreader focuses on details such as accuracy in spelling, punctuation, usage and capitalisation. This is a final attempt to identify and correct errors prior to the publication of a work.

## **Editing in the Classroom**

Seasoned, professional authors find it very difficult and impractical to edit their own writing. Authors need a critical ‘audience’ to provide advice before the work reaches the market. Yet many professional writers also work as editors – it is just too difficult to see all the flaws in your own work.

So when we ask children to “edit their writing”, we are asking them to do something that the professionals do not do. It is recommended though, that children be given the opportunity often to act as editors for other children. The act of editing makes a writer more observant about the nuances of conventions, style and meaning in text.

When editors counsel authors on their work, they usually acknowledge those aspects that they see as strengths, prior to entering discussion on weaknesses. Likewise, in the classroom, initial discussion of what works in a text, gives the child confidence to address what does not work.

When children are asked to edit their writing, they invariably operate at the proofreading level –identifying spelling errors and omissions in punctuation and capitals. No amount of proofreading will improve a text that is structurally flawed. This would have resulted in ‘Nothing Very Special’ being published in a tidier format but resplendent with its fundamental flaws.

It is important that children become accustomed to working at the higher structural levels of thinking about text. This might be achieved by encouraging children to:

- Undergo significant pre-writing activities involving brainstorming sessions, research and discussion of audience and purpose;
- Share and discuss big book text models of particular text types or genres and identify the elements of their framework (structure) and style (devices used to engage the audience);
- Become familiar with patterns of narrative and non-narrative text types through shared reading;
- Storyboard their intended texts by planning the contents page (nonfiction) or diagramming the order of events in a plot (fiction).

## **How Do Authors Solve Problems?**

Authors have a range of resources they use to solve problems. These resources include editors and readers (friends, colleagues, etc). They also use a range of reference works. The enormity of the English language and its constant change means that no one can know it all. References play a significant role in the writing and editing process. The most common references are the

- dictionary
- thesaurus, and
- style guide (also called Writer’s Guide or Style Manual)

The dictionary and thesaurus are familiar in the classroom. The style guide is of vital importance to authors and editors, but is virtually unknown in classrooms. Why?

Traditionally, style guides were written for professionals. The classroom equivalent was the grammar textbook – but this was a syllabus presented as a systematic course of study, not a comprehensive reference that explained language in context. It was used to teach rules and conventions in isolation, rather than teach the skills of finding information and solving problems associated with engaging an audience.

### **The Most Important Writing Skill**

If we teach children rules of punctuation, capitalisation, spelling and grammar, then within their lifetime many of these ‘rules’ will change.

- Is it OK to actually split an infinitive? (I just did and it is now common practice.)
- Is a preposition an acceptable word to end a sentence with? (Sometime, to avoid this results in clumsy language.)
- Is it e-mail or email? E.g. or eg?
- The word *nice* used to mean ‘precise’. During the 1960s-70s, there was a reading series named ‘The Gay Way’. I can recall a radio jingle advertising a laxative for children: “Boys and girls come out to play, happy and gay the Laxette way.” The word *gay* has significantly changed in its usage over the last 30 years or less to the point where its earlier meanings are largely unknown by today’s children.

It is easier to teach someone how to use a dictionary, than to teach the spelling and meaning of every word in the dictionary. It is easier to teach someone how to use a style guide than to teach all the writing conventions and text types.

*Teach children how to find answers and how to solve problems in writing, and their skills are relevant regardless of change and remain with them for life.*

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

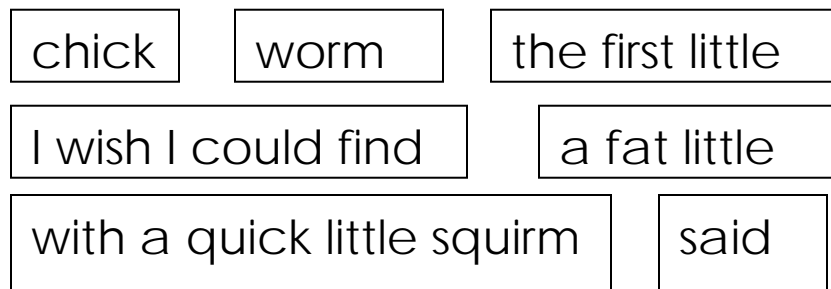
English is flexible in its application. Children can learn just how flexible it is if they manipulate words, phrases and clauses to make meaning. Lesson plans to explore language can be adjusted:

- To suit various pupil or group ability levels
- To focus on specific aspects of the language (grammar, word knowledge, style)
- To explore conventions within the context of fiction or nonfiction literature

Here is a lesson plan that demonstrates the above proposition.

### *Exploring Sentence Structure*

Manipulate the letter and word tiles below to create and write a sentence that makes the most sense to you. Use all the tiles. Do not 'break' a tile to separate words within that tile. Use capitals and punctuation wherever you wish.



There are numerous possibilities, including:

"I wish I could find a fat little chick," said the first little worm with a quick little squirm.

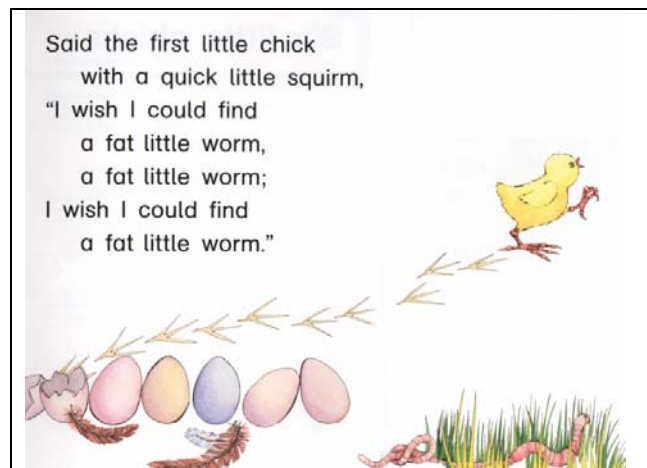
"I wish I could find a fat little worm," said the first little chick with a quick little squirm.

The first little chick said with a quick little squirm, "I wish I could find a fat little worm."

The first little chick with a quick little squirm said, "I wish I could find a fat little worm."

With a quick little squirm, the first little chick said, "I wish I could find a fat little worm."

The words actually come from a children's book called 'Six Little Chicks' and none of the above alternatives matches the published text. The text can be introduced as a shared reading lesson so it can be enjoyed and discussed.





There are two kinds of sea-dragon.  
This is a weedy sea-dragon.



4

This is a leafy sea-dragon.



5

Sea-dragons live in reefs and sea weed.



12

Pollution is killing reefs and sea weed.



13

We must help the sea-dragons to live.



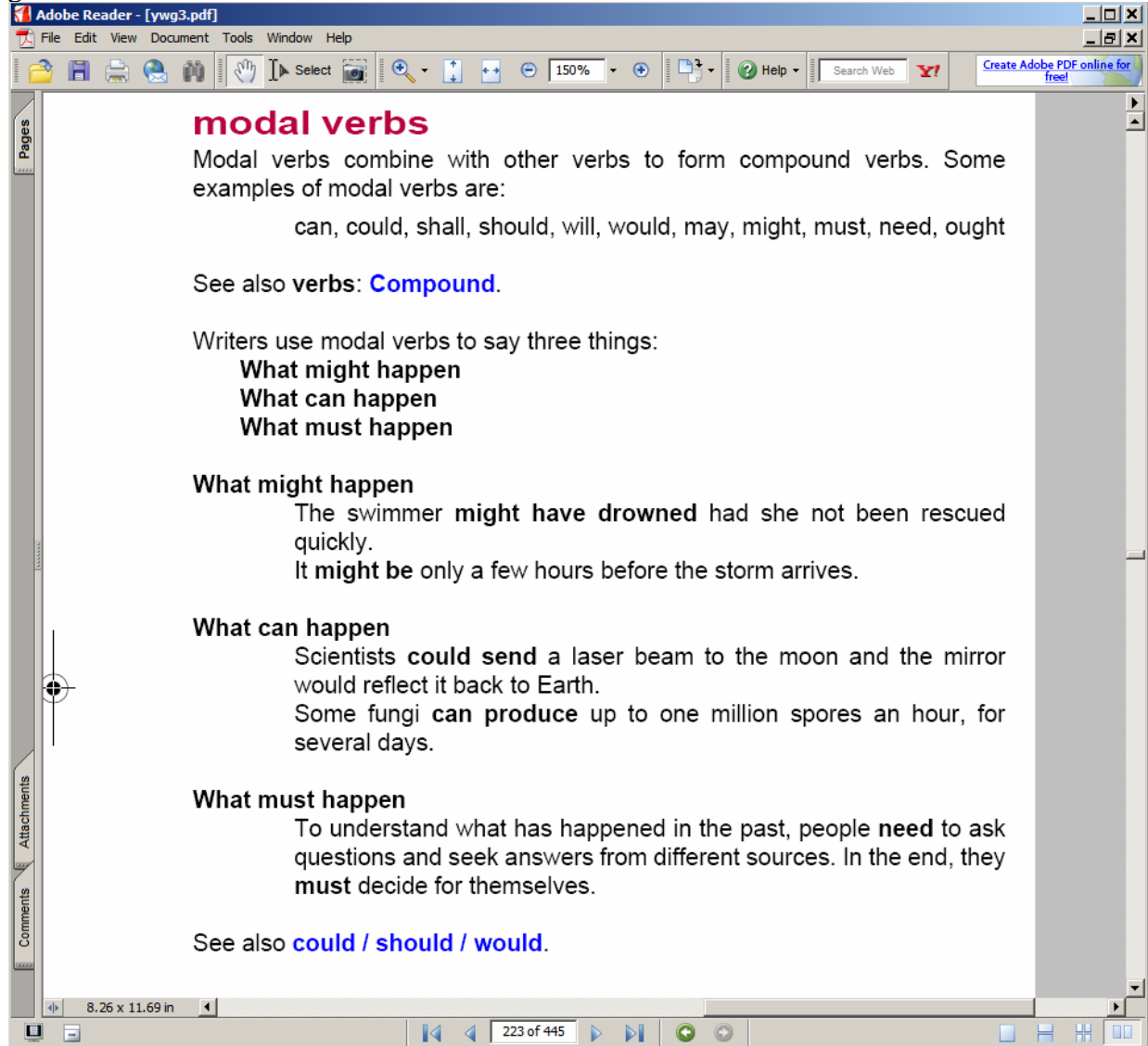
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### *Grammar in Context*

The text shifts from third person (*This [it] is a leafy sea-dragon.*) to first person on the last page (*We must help the sea-dragons to live.*) Why did the author do this? Moving to the first person enables the writer to sharply re-position the audience and speak directly or inclusively to the audience. It forces the audience to engage with the text in a different way.)

There is an important word – *must* – introduced on the last page. How does this word change the way this text ‘talks’ to us? *Must* is a modal verb. Let’s look it up in a style guide.

The image is a screenshot of the Adobe Reader application window. The title bar reads "Adobe Reader - [ywg3.pdf]". The menu bar includes "File", "Edit", "View", "Document", "Tools", "Window", and "Help". The toolbar contains various icons for file operations and navigation. The main content area displays a PDF page with the following text:

**modal verbs**

Modal verbs combine with other verbs to form compound verbs. Some examples of modal verbs are:

can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must, need, ought

See also verbs: [Compound](#).

Writers use modal verbs to say three things:

- What might happen**
- What can happen**
- What must happen**

**What might happen**  
The swimmer **might have drowned** had she not been rescued quickly.  
It **might be** only a few hours before the storm arrives.

**What can happen**  
Scientists **could send** a laser beam to the moon and the mirror would reflect it back to Earth.  
Some fungi **can produce** up to one million spores an hour, for several days.

**What must happen**  
To understand what has happened in the past, people **need** to ask questions and seek answers from different sources. In the end, they **must** decide for themselves.

See also [could / should / would](#).

The status bar at the bottom shows the page dimensions as "8.26 x 11.69 in" and the current page as "223 of 445".

The word *must* gives the reader a sense of urgency – that an action is compulsory.

## Text Structure

Here are three blank cards.

Use two or three words only on each of the cards to describe what the author was doing to the reader in each of the three page spreads above.

Giving background information

Describing the problem

Calling for action

What is the author trying to do to the reader? (Present an argument to persuade the reader to think or act in a particular way.) Let's find out about argument text in a style guide.

**argument**

*Argument* is persuasive text. In an argument, a writer tries to persuade an audience to accept a point of view. The writer gives an opinion on a topic, then presents reasons to explain or support the opinion. An argument text is also called an *exposition*.

There are three main parts in an argument:

- *Introduction*  
Explain the topic or issue and state a position. You may give some background information. To get the audience's attention, use a dramatic exclamation or question, or a funny situation — anything that will make the audience stop and read or listen.
- *Argument*  
Present reasons and evidence to support the argument. Also try to convince the audience by appealing to their feelings. Statements are used in arguments. Ideas in the argument are often linked through words like *therefore*, *so*, *because*, *unless* and *finally*.
- *Conclusion*  
Sum up the argument and perhaps suggest actions to the audience. Questions are often used in the conclusion to make the audience feel they need to give an answer. Commands are also used to tell the audience what to do.

See also [exclamations](#); [question mark \(?\)](#); [sentences](#): [Commands](#).

The following topics describe three kinds of argument:

- [Advertisements](#)
- [Letter to the editor](#)
- [Discussion](#)
  - [Debate](#)
  - [Interviews](#)

**Advertisements**

By restricting the children to two or three words per card, you force them to focus on main ideas rather than retell the detail of the text.

By restricting them to three cards, you are setting them up to discover the three main elements in the text structure of an argument – introduction, argument, and conclusion – as described in the Writer’s Guide.

The children, in groups, might re-arrange the cards to see whether the text would still make sense. They would discover that the structural elements in another order do not work as well. The order of the elements of a text is important in many text types.

This ‘storyboarding’ activity is also useful when children are planning their own nonfiction writing projects. It helps them to understand the importance and practicality of planning writing before undertaking a first draft.

Storyboarding can also be used with fiction. In editorial terms, it promotes thinking at the structural level rather than the proofreading level – which brings us back to the editorial functions described earlier and their relevance to the role of the classroom teacher.

The practical examples presented in this paper include techniques at the word, sentence and whole text level. They are all conducted within the context of text models that are readily available in classrooms. They also involve the use of references to solve problems.

### **References**

- Arthur* by Amanda Graham & Donna Gynell, Era Publications, 1984.  
*Six Little Chicks* adapted by Rodney Martin & Deborah Baldassi, WINGS, 2002.  
*Leafy Sea-Dragons* by Robyn Opie & David Muirhead, WINGS, 2002.  
*MARTIN’S Young Writers Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* by Rodney Martin, Era Publications, 2002.