

Playful WRITING

150 Open-Ended
Explorations in
Emergent Literacy

Rebecca Olien and
Laura Woodside

Supports
Common Core
Standards

Playful Writing

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Dedication

With love for my gang of playful writers—Zach, Ella, and Sam—who remind me every day to play!
And for Rob, my happily ever after.

—L.W.

To the teachers in my education classes who put playful learning into action: May the joy of
teaching remain with you throughout your careers.

—R.O.

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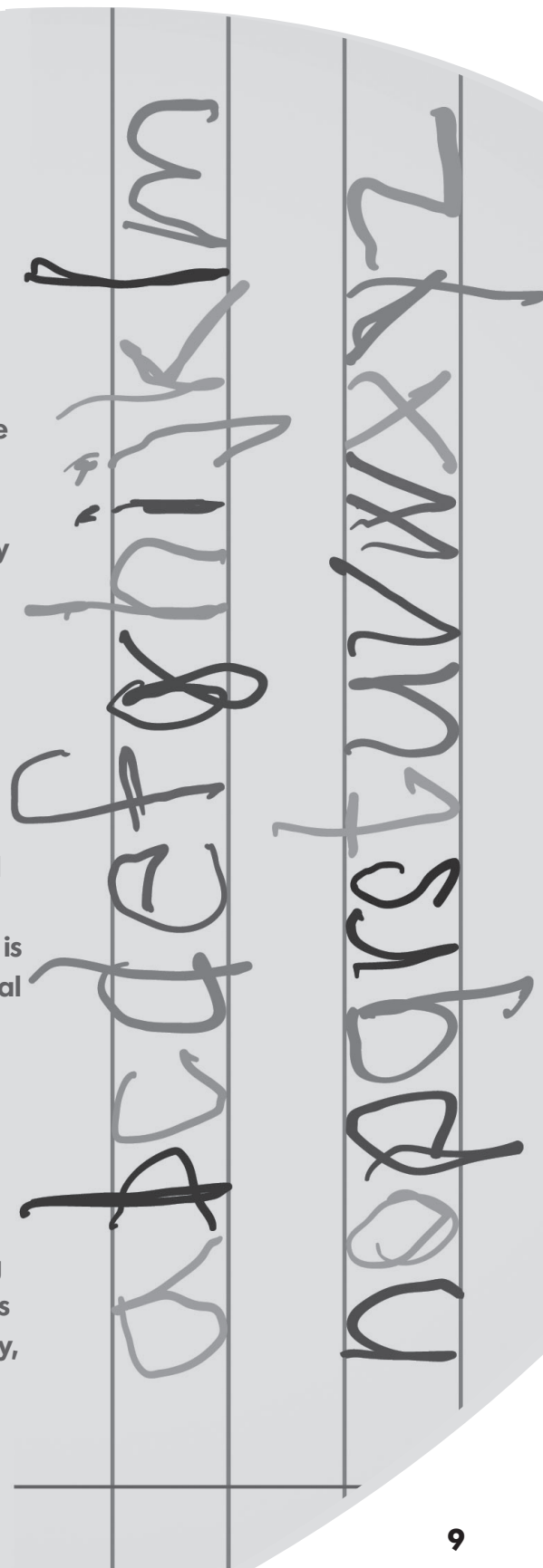
Introduction

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It is no secret that play is an essential part of children's healthy development. Play is not only necessary for a joyful childhood; it is also how children learn. Because play is fun and engaging, children eagerly practice problem solving, language, and social skills. With greater attention and involvement from families, teachers, and caregivers, children stretch their thinking and language abilities to engage fully in the play activity. By playing together, children learn social skills, explore language, and learn to communicate. Children will spend hours constructing props, building a snow creature, or setting up an obstacle course, all the while talking, planning, problem solving, and creating. Through pretend play, children try out roles and expand their use of language. Listen to children role-playing as superheroes or simply playing house—it is soon apparent how important language is in these games. Interestingly enough, the skills developed in play—exploration of language and roles, problem solving, communicating, and creating—are the same reasons both adults and children write!

What is writing for a young child? Any mark a child makes to represent something can be considered writing. Watching a child intentionally make a mark on a page is a magical moment. A young child will eagerly and matter-of-factly explain that the dot is a cookie or the squiggle is a flying bird. From these first intentional marks emerges a child's awareness of the language of symbols, which is the essence of writing.

Educators place much emphasis on the importance of reading to children at a young age. This receptive skill is necessary as a way to learn about language and story. Less emphasis has been placed on helping children to be the creators of story. Facilitating playful writing activities offers children literacy-rich experiences as vehicles for self-expression and healthy imagination. Through play, children explore how things work, revisit experiences, and make sense of their world. The more children are engaged with writing as a part of play, the more they will turn to writing as a natural way to explore and communicate ideas.



Becoming a writer is a cyclical, rather than a linear, process. Children develop writing proficiency at their own rates and in their own ways. As children gain the ability to express themselves with words and symbols, they begin to explore increasingly complex subjects. This means children who seem to be firmly in the early stage of narrative writing might switch to a combination of inventive spelling and drawing when testing out new words and concepts and exploring new experiences.

First Experiences

The first time a child intentionally makes a mark and names it, the act of writing has begun! Many first drawings are shapes, lines, and marks created as an extension of motion. As a child continues to explore, the scribbles begin to represent a growing range of ideas. The first chapter in this book offers early movement-to-paper experiences to help support these discoveries. As part of the cyclic nature of writing development, you will find children at more advanced levels of writing will also gain from returning to making these first free, expressive marks!

Early Writers

As children develop, they gain awareness of print and story through books, environmental print, and other literacy experiences. Drawings become more representational, depicting important people, places, things, and events in a child's life. Along with the development of representational drawings, early attempts at writing include linear symbol shapes to represent letters, loops and designs to look like print, and known letters inserted within made-up letter shapes and script designs. Early writers understand what print is and how it is used to tell stories and communicate words.

At this point, eager adults often choose to have children begin copying letters. Too much emphasis on routine copying can take away the joy of discovery and can hinder a child's progress. We do not insist that children tap their toes before learning to walk or recite the alphabet before talking; neither does it make sense for the youngest writers to copy endless letters. Instead, we advocate encouraging writing exploration through playful exchanges.

Through playful writing activities, children continue to explore making meaning from the marks they put on the page. They increasingly add letters and words, often including initial letters and invented spelling. Watching a child struggle to write can be difficult. Yet, in this natural desire to learn, children gain so much more than they do from routine exercises. As teachers, we often notice what letters and words children do not know. Instead, we need to recognize what they do know and encourage children to add more letters and words to their creations by asking questions that give them a reason to keep exploring and sharing their ideas.

Ready Writers

As children increase their ability to form words and put thoughts together on the page, the world of writing opens up to them. Drawing turns to illustration, and writing takes a more prominent role in expressing complex ideas, stories, and communication. Ready writers explore the magic of creating something to which others can read and respond. Playful writing is an important part of development, allowing children to test their new author voices in open-ended activities that engage and delight.

What Is Playful Writing?

Playful writing interweaves the experiences of play and writing, using play as a springboard to inspire young writers. Often, well-intentioned teachers provide early writers with too much freedom in topic choice and then wonder why their students flounder to get started or are unenthused about writing. When you teach writing through play, you will allow your young writers to experience topics in an open-ended, hands-on way, orally experiencing related language and the creative possibilities surrounding the topic.

Think about it this way—how would you would feel (right now, as an adult) if we handed you a blank paper and told you to write for the next 15 minutes and then to share your writing with a superior? Without providing you with any inspiration or direction, we certainly would not be setting the stage for your success. The same goes for children. Rather than handing a child a piece of paper and asking him to write, we first hand him a playful experience to ignite his imagination!

Play gives students a tangible experience that launches them into more detailed, inspired writing. By engaging them in a purposeful play activity before sitting down with a pencil, students have a focus for their writing and a bank of related words that they have just used naturally in play. They can build confidence in their writing skills without struggling to find a topic or purpose.

The Adult Role in Playful Writing

Adults facilitate writing play by setting up opportunities for children to integrate writing easily into their playful interactions. The activities in this book offer ideas for creating the right conditions to engage children with play that easily leads to writing discoveries. These activities are meant as catalysts for a multitude of other opportunities initiated by children themselves.

Although it is important that adults allow children to initiate as much writing on their own as possible, encouragement and questions presented in a careful manner will stretch children's abilities and initiate writing discoveries. By intentionally placing a mark, a child is identifying what is important to her and offers a caring adult just the spark necessary to begin a writing dialogue. As adults, we often have a hard time knowing when to step in and when to allow children to do things for themselves.

Lev Vygotsky, one of the most influential scholars in the field of early education, advocated the role of adults as encouragers to help “scaffold” children to the next level of development. Vygotsky asserted that children make gains when offered opportunities to complete tasks just beyond their current state of development. This range of development potential—what Vygotsky termed the *zone of proximal development*—spans a child’s current abilities and extends to what a child is able to accomplish with guidance or support. Learning in a social context is an effective way for children to gain this support. Through playful activities in a social setting, the teacher and more capable peers can provide a boost of help at just the right moment to help a child accomplish a task that might be too difficult to achieve independently.

Talking, designing, inventing, and testing ideas with other children is a part of the scaffolding process. At times, teachers merely act as a facilitator to ensure that children are engaged and interacting with the right mix of abilities to encourage development. At other times, teachers provide encouragement, specific instructions, or direct demonstrations, artfully matching the level of support to the needs of the learner. Asking questions about thinking and writing prompts children to stretch just a little further, supporting them to take the next steps into new writing territory. Each activity in this book includes Talk about It questions, as well as differentiated suggestions for early and ready writers. Teachers can scaffold support to meet every child’s instructional writing needs.

DICTATION

Dictation is often used to write down the words a child uses to describe his artwork. Although this helps a child understand the relationship between spoken and written words, dictation does not facilitate a child making his own writing discoveries. He is not as apt to struggle to find letters and words to express meaning. Writing can be a struggle, and this struggle is a part of learning.

Communicating to children that the marks they make are interesting and meaningful encourages them to keep experimenting. If you want to learn more about the child’s writing, ask questions about what is on the paper. Keep the questions genuine, showing your interest in understanding what the child is drawing and writing about. Be curious, and ask questions to make honest discoveries.



How to Use This Book

This book is intended for teachers, family members, caregivers, mentors, or any adults interested in working with children to promote writing in a playful, authentic way. The activities are appropriate for home, the care center, or school. *Playful Writing* activities integrate writing exploration, not only during language arts time, but also across the early education curriculum. The child-centered topics create conditions in which children are eager to write. Helping children to enjoy writing and think of themselves as writers at an early age is an important goal for any early education curriculum.

Although this book is meant to plant and share seeds of ideas for playful writing, we are also conscious of the need for teachers to ensure that the writing activities they choose are connected to standards—in most cases, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Each activity is meant as a sketch that allows you the flexibility to adapt it to your curriculum and the needs of your students. The chart provided in the appendix demonstrates how the activities of this book correlate with the CCSS writing standards. In addition to meeting the CCSS writing standards, every activity also meets speaking and listening standards, as students participate in a range of conversations and collaborations around writing, prompted by the Talk about It questions. We have woven valuable science process and content standards throughout the activities, as our activities frequently utilize science content to inspire writing. The *Playful Writing* approach runs parallel with the natural inquiry process recommended for early childhood science instruction.

Use this book as you would a recipe book to find just the right activity to match the experiences, interests, and topics most appealing to your child or students. It is not necessary to do the activities in the book sequentially. Activity and question directions are meant as starting points. When conducting the activities with children, you and the young writers will add your own special versions to fit the teachable moments you share.

The first chapter describes a collection of 24 activities to foster the discovery and exploration of communicating ideas, motions, sounds, and symbols on paper. The second chapter gives community-based dramatic play ideas that embed writing within real-world role-playing experiences. The remaining chapters present a wide collection of playful writing activities on subjects that appeal to young children. Each activity is structured with a list of materials and directions to initiate play and facilitate the write-draw connection part of the activity. Questions guide family members and teachers in using language that encourages children to express themselves through their pictures and words. Write/Draw activities are separated into two developmental levels. Early Writers activities jump-start children who are in the early discovery stage of writing and have minimal ability to form recognizable words and sentences. Ready Writer activities are designed for children with print knowledge that allows them to dive deeper into writing expression and exploration. Many activities end with a Write On! section designed to take writing to the next level or to explore the topic in a new way.

Taking time with children to play, pretend, and write is a magical experience. So, spread out the art supplies, make some creatures, explore nature, and write along with children to their hearts' content.

