



Writing Detective Stories

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Writing Detective Stories

Children like to feel the mastery that comes
from making an extensive statement.

Marie Clay

You've heard the story before.

A monster comes down to earth, and climbs down the ladder of the spaceship, and speeds away in a supercharged car, and races off to a haunted house, and sees a witch, and destroys her with a laser gun, and then, And Then, AND THEN. . . .

"And then" stories are clearly a necessary beginning for young writers, but too often "creative writing" stagnates at this level. Teachers become frustrated when they must respond to stories that seem to obey no rule but the rule of sequence. Students cease to value their productions. Story writing becomes an interlude of unstructured activity between periods of serious work, a sort of scribal recess.

Because "and then" stories are difficult to evaluate, they are difficult to revise. To revise, a writer must be able to move back from the text and test what he or she has written against some internalized standard. If the standard does not exist, the writer is swimming in a cloudy pool indeed. If anything can follow anything, it is impossible for the writer to detect a wrong turn. There are no wrong turns.

Donald Graves (1979), noting the difficulty of revising fictional pieces, has suggested that in the second and third grades there can be a profitable shift to autobiographical writing. When students make this shift, Graves points out, revision is possible. The student has a standard of truthfulness. Is this really what happened? Is this really the way I felt? Is this the way it looked, felt, tasted. . . ? What have I left out? The writer can shuttle between the memory of the event and the written account of the event.

A total shift to autobiographical writing is probably too severe a remedy though. Children are attracted to fiction because in stories they can attain a mastery and power not possible in a world of inflexible bedtimes. They seek this power in their reading and should be given a chance to seek it in their writing.

A solution to this apparent dilemma is to introduce students to the constraints of fiction writing. A starting point can be the difference between story and plot:

A plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis on causality. "The king died and then the queen died," is a story. "The king died, and the queen died of grief," is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. (Forster 1927, p. 86)

The detective story unit described below can help students make the shift from mere chronology to causality, from story to plot, from "and then" to "because."

The Unit

The detective story unit is built on the belief that students possess an intuitive awareness, a grammar, of the rules that govern detective story writing. This awareness comes from listening to and reading stories as well as from watching television. But in order to use these rules in their writing, students must gain a conscious critical awareness of them, what Frank D'Angelo calls "form consciousness."

The unit was taught during the last eight weeks of the third grade. During that period students worked on their stories an average of two days a week. By the end of the unit each student produced a story (average length 2000 words) that was published in book form. This level of elaboration was possible only because students went through a number of preliminary steps.

Reading Detective Stories

The teacher began by reading mystery stories to the class, choosing three by William Pene Du Bois, *Three Policemen*, *The Alligator Case*, and *The Horse in the Camel Suit*. Each story deals with a different crime and different types of criminals. The teacher points out the use of description, the types of clues, the different ways in which detection is made, and the different ways the stories begin—all elements that students must deal with in their own mysteries. Class discussions of these stories are carried out during the first two weeks of the unit. Throughout the unit students are encouraged to read stories from a class library of mysteries that included the *Encyclopedia Brown* stories, *The Boxcar Children*, *Two-Minute Mysteries*, and others.

During the initial period of reading, the teacher emphasizes three constraints working in detective stories. These constraints prevent the writer from short-circuiting the problem-solving that makes a detective story appealing. The constraints are:

The criminal should be as smart as the detective. Part of the delight of the detective story is the contest between equals or, at least, near-equals. We take little delight in the story where the criminal makes stupid mistakes that lead to easy detection. Professional criminals do not leave their wallets on the scene of the crime.

Not all clues lead to the criminal.

The clues must lead logically to a solution. The detective cannot simply bump into the criminal. The criminal does not break down and confess on the basis of flimsy evidence. To deal with these constraints, the student must grapple with the logic of plot. The convenience of coincidence will not do.

Deciding On a Crime

The class next must discuss what a crime is (is lying a crime?) and make a list of crimes that might be chosen for the stories. Most students choose robbery, but it is also possible to discuss lesser known crimes such as kidnapping, assault, forgery, and hit-and-run driving. Students then must make a tentative choice of crime.

Character Descriptions

The real writing begins with character descriptions of both detective and criminal. The class generates a number of lists to explore the possibilities of description:

1. A list of body parts that can be included in a description.
2. A list of adjectives that can be used to describe each body part.
3. A list of comparisons that might be used to describe each body part.
4. A list of personality traits that a character might have—patience, shyness, bad temper, etc.
5. A list of personal habits—chewing on pencils, biting fingernails, spitting, etc.

These and later lists are posted in the room. Students then write a description of a classmate using the types of descriptive words in the lists. Or, as an alternative that focuses on visual description, the teacher can hand out evocative portraits such as those that appear in *National Geographic*. Students write descriptions, read them to the class, then show the photograph. Classmates comment on particularly effective language choices.

The next step is the preliminary description of the detective and criminal. Students make their own lists for their characters, write, and share descriptions with the entire class. Again, the focus of the class response is on effective language, although other issues do arise. One student wrote, "His eyes were as blue as our new practice reader." The class then discussed the audience for the stories. Would anyone outside Bernice Ray School know how blue that was?

Setting Descriptions

Children work on describing the scene of the crime in the same way they worked on character descriptions. They begin by making lists of details of their own room, and then they write a description of their room. Finally, they make a second list of the imagined details of the scene of the crime and write that description.

Description of Crime—Discovery of Clues

At this stage it is necessary to discuss what kinds of things might be clues. The class generates yet another list of possible clues—fingerprints, torn clothing, blood

type, hair, and so on. The student also writes a description of the crime if there is to be someone to witness it in his or her story.

Working Out the Solution

As students start to work out their mysteries, they first meet with the teacher to outline a tentative plan. The teacher places one possible plot structure on the board:

Description of crime → Description of Detective →
Discovery of Clues → Solution → Explanation (how the detective figured it out)

As the student example quoted later will indicate, though, students are not held to this pattern.

After the general pattern is worked out, students pair up with a peer who acts as editor. The class also meets as a whole once a week to discuss and critique stories that are in progress. In these sessions students are asked to apply the constraints mentioned earlier and to particularly examine the plausibility of a sequence of actions. One writer for example had her detective take a scrap of clothing to the store on the label, and the clerk immediately remembered the buyer.

But, asked a student, does a clerk always remember every customer? Wouldn't there have to be something special about either the shirt or the customer? The student solved the problem by making the criminal more eccentric—named him "Squirrel Man" and dressed him in a squirrel-skin coat. Now, at least, it is plausible for a clerk to remember him.

Publication

When students finish revising and editing, each copies his or her mystery into a book made of $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ inch paper folded over to form half-size pages. These pages are then sewn with dental floss or heavy thread into a cover of cardboard covered with contact paper.

A Sample Detective Story

What follows is a representative detective story. It is shorter than the class average and the description more extensive than other stories. We have chosen a representative example both to give a realistic picture of what students can produce and to illustrate the difficulties that often remain even after the extensive preparation.

"The Roller Rink Robbery"

Chapter 1

Troy Connaly was Robstown's only boy detective. He has a way of walking on the balls of his feet and he is large for his age which is eleven. He has large clever hands which seem as big as a miniature giants to his friends and clients. He also has eyes like shiny emrelds. They have helped him in three cases. Once when he and a friend were chasing an emreld thief around in an old house the thief saw Troy's eyes and thinking they were emrelds tried to steal them. Troy managed to stay on top of him while his friend called the police.

He has roundish chin which reminds one of a baseball. Troy is a loyal fan of the Dallas Cowboys and has a cowboy tatoo on his left arm (not permanent) and his shorts

have COWBOYS on them. He has strong sturdy legs which pump his bicycle wheels miles in the spring summer and fall. He has a pointy nose which sneezes alot. He has a thin neck. He has a nervous habit of stepping on his own feet. Since he went into the detective business he has carried himself straight brisk. He is very polite and prompt. Troy has a habit of sticking his tounge out when in pain. He also has a habit of making a face like that of a fish when surprised. He has another habit of asking, "mom what's for dinner?" He owns a snake called Russell who is bright orange and is sleepy looking.

(picture of Russell)

Troy is a pashint boy once on his paper route when he was collecting one lady took 45 minutes. Troy is also quarrelsome. When he forst started he quarrelled with clients. Troy is also very kind once he saw a boy who was lost and helped him home.

Chapter 2

It was a dark night at Roger's roller skating rink and it was packed. Suddenly there was a Ka-boom and in the right hand corner of the rink a pinball machine blew up. The machine was right next to the place where you payed a woman. At the sound of the exploding machine she fainted dead away. All of a suddent the alarm went off, someone yelled robrey and the lights went out. With about 120 people in the rink and the nearist exit The robber raced through the doors before they could be closed.

Troy had been just about to lace on his skates when the machine blew up. He had raced on the rink and had bumped into someone. The person had been carrying a paper sack and as Troy fell he ripped a hole in the bag. Troy thought he heard rusling and grabed at the air. He came up with 4 bills.

Chapter 3

Outside Troy saw that the bills were a 10 a 5 and two more 5's. At home he put the money under a microscope. He had decided to see if the bills held any clues, if they didn't he would turn them over to the police, and if they . . . well he would see.

(pictures of the bills)

Troy took the bills out of the scope and put them in his safe. Then he painted the safe green which was the same color as the walls. After he had done this it looked like there was no safe at all. It fit so smoothly into the wall.

Troy phoned the police department, can I please hav a list of serial numbers of all the bills stolen from the rink 45 minutes ago?" After a pause he said, "OK" and started writing down numbers until he had all of them. The nexst day Troy went back to the rink for clues. He was about to give up when he noticed a piece of paper.

Chapter 4

The paper was laying on its front but when he turned it over his eyes nearly popped out of his head. This was what it said:

The Tiger Gang

Jon Jacobs-----	President
Ollie Moore-----	Vise President
Jill Watson -----	Business Manager
Tom Flint -----	Member
Billy White-----	Member
John Jefferson -----	Spy
Andrew Logan -----	Guard
Aliceson Smut-----	Guard
Jack Tabi -----	Inventor
Jeff Shmitz-----	Spy

Troy turned and ran as fast as he could to his bike, hopped on, and went to Jon Jacobs house and rang the doorbell. Jon answered it. "Hi Troy," he said. He was tall and thin with a merry face and nature. He had small hands and feet and he was only four feet three which is small for eleven. "How do you know my name?" Troy asked. "I saw

your picture in the paper," replied Jon. "Oh," said Troy. "I was wondering if you were at the roller-skating rink yesterday?," he asked. "Nope," I didn't go skating yesterday," said Jon. "Well, thanks anyways," said Troy and went on to Ollie Moore's house. But Ollie had the same alibi and so did the rest of the gang except Billy White. At his house when he opened the door Troy asked the same question he had asked the rest of the gang, "Yes I mean no," Bill said. "Thanks said Troy and departed.

Back at home Troy pondered if he should check out Billy or go on looking for new clues. He decided on the latter.

Chapter 5

Back at the rink Troy searched the cashier's booth with permission from the manager for thirty minutes. He had found nothing but 25 minutes later he had found what might be two valuable clues. One of them was a pair of keys that read BUZZ JOHNSON INC another clue was a piece of cloth about this size (picture). It was black with a tan lining. It was smooth and cool and had mud spots on it. Troy decided to go to BUZZ JOHNSON INC. But when he got there he found that it was a bar with a sarcastic name. So then he went to the phone book and got all the names and addresses of all the clothes stores in the area. He made a list and off he went to check them out.

There were five stores. At the third one he went to the clerk who said let me check our sales lists. After a few seconds he returned with a list, "Here it is. A Mr. Bill Bobson. His address is 22 Park Street." "Thanks" said Troy and he raced out of the store jumped on his bike and raced to the home of Mr. Bill Bobson on Park Street. Mr. Bobson answered the door. "Come in," he said. "Did you go to the roller skating rink yesterday?" said Troy. "Yes," said Mr. Bobson. "I thought you looked familiar," said Troy and turning around picked some bills off the mantle piece and whipped out the list of numbers and compared them. "As you can see," he said, "you must be the robber because this list of numbers matches those of the bills." But the next thing Troy knew Mr. Bobson was sitting on him grinning, "I confess," he said, "I stole the money but there's nothing you can do now.

Troy had been silent but all this time he had worked his hand free and now he brought it up in a stunning uppercut. Mr. Bobson rolled over backwards unconscious. Troy called the police and the case was ended.

The End

There are, to be sure, still problems. Gangs usually do not print up such incriminating rosters. Criminals don't usually leave stolen money on the mantelpiece. Police don't usually possess serial numbers for all stolen money. The description at the beginning is excessive and in the case of Jon Jacobs, inconsistent.

But the achievement is considerable. Excessive description is such a novel problem as to be almost a virtue. Writers all through the grades underestimate the amount of detail that a reader needs. As young writers mature, they must be encouraged to select more carefully than this writer, but selection implies excess. The bush must be overgrown before it can be pruned. The writer also makes use of a number of details contained in the opening description. Troy's patience is significant when it comes to looking for clues. His strength comes into play when he hits Bobson with the stunning uppercut. Even the bike riding is mentioned later.

The plot itself is deceptively complex. Troy can only solve the crime with a combination of two clues, neither of which, independently, would have been adequate to solve the crime. Two major clues lead him astray. In effect, the story holds together. It is contained. The writer has come a long way from "and then."

There are two possible objections that might be made about this procedure. The first is that by imposing the model of the mystery story, the teacher is unduly

restrictive. The issue, though, is not whether the teacher should introduce some writing constraints, but the kind of constraints. If the constraints are arbitrary, alien to the reading experiences of students, they will make for unpleasant and unsuccessful writing experiences. The five-paragraph theme, an artificial creation of writing textbooks is a prime example. But if the constraints seem reasonable, if they clarify the way appealing fiction works, they can be liberating.

There is also no reason why this procedure must be restricted to the writing of detective stories. It can easily be adapted to deal with escape stories, quest stories, animal stories, sports stories, even science fiction stories. Each has a basic structure that can be made explicit (Groff 1969).

It could also be argued that this unit betrays the American Obsession—how can we do it faster?—that, like aggressive little league parents, we are asking too much, too soon. After all, these students will probably be in school for nine or ten more years. Why the focus on revision, on craft, so early? Even the noted British educator, Frank Whitehead (1966) has argued that revision can be postponed until the junior high years. What's the rush?

Howard Gardner, in his book *Artful Scribbles*, provides a provocative answer. He attempts to explain why, given the universal delight young children derive from drawing, so few adolescents return to drawing. Why does this impulse seem to disappear? He writes:

The development of drawing may involve a critical period. Not, to be sure, that drawing is impossible if one fails to reach certain milestones before puberty. But perhaps in the sense that eventual achievement becomes extremely unlikely if the child does not, by the onset of puberty possess some of these drawing skills. For the truth is, at least within our society, that unless one's drawings can be viewed by oneself, and by others as reasonably competent, they are likely to be found distressingly wanting; the youth in turn is likely to cease graphic activity altogether and resort to less challenging means of communication. (1980, p. 262)

It is at least possible that in writing, as well as in drawing, there are critical periods, during the late elementary years, when the student must attain a sense of craft, not to satisfy the teacher, but to keep pace with his or her developing critical perception. If the disparity becomes too great, if the written product falls far short of the student's sense of what writing should be, the product will be viewed as "distressingly wanting." At this point, students may conclude that "they are not writers" and avoid writing just as they avoid drawing. The race has been lost.

Gardner is suggesting that there may be less time than we think.

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