

Organization: The Internal Structure of Writing

enticing leads
strong transitions
easy-to-follow sequencing
powerhouse conclusions

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INTRODUCTION

As I sit down to write this paper, I find my thoughts wandering. I get up to change the laundry, switch the channel of the television, and rearrange a few plants. I clean the kitchen counter, move a stack of books around, and call my mom. I have done my research, I know what I want to say; so why do I find anything and everything else to do while these words are waiting to be written? I know what's behind this avoidance. For me, it all has to do with organization. Where do I start? What comes next? What's the logical sequence to convey my journey of discovery? It's ironic then, that I've chosen to research the analytic writing trait that I find most elusive, organization.

This is my 30th year in education. I am still searching for the most effective teaching methods. I am still a kid-watcher, observing, recording, and thinking about what kids do, and how they learn. Currently a literacy specialist at Paradise Professional Development School, I work with primary students and teachers. We have 65% ELL students and are considered at-risk due to the high number of students on free and reduced school lunch. Two years ago, with our reading assessments in place, we decided to fine tune our approach to teaching and assessing writing by gathering school wide writing samples from a common prompt, and then evaluating them using the analytic writing traits.

My staff came together on an inservice day with writing samples in hand and worked to find the pieces that would typify our writers. We waded through 936 papers, looking for voice, organization, ideas, and evidence of conventions. After scoring all the papers with a rubric, we assembled a writing assessment book, unique to Paradise P.D.S. that contained these typical writing samples from each grade level. They are our current guide to measuring our students' growth in the field of writing.

Delving deeper into the analytic traits, I became more aware of the specific qualities of good writing. After reading over 900 student writing samples, some generalizations could be made about our kids' writing. First, and foremost, although many of our students had well written papers, there were also many papers that would not pass the state writing test. Word choice and ideas were limited by both language and lack of experiences. Conventions, or the lack thereof, were dictated by grade level and the individual writing development of the students.

But the glaring revelation for me was the obvious lack of organization in many of the pieces. So began my journey to find ways to help my students stay focused in their writing, to build bridges with words that would link thoughts together in logical ways. I wanted them to write beginnings that built anticipation in their readers, and endings that made the reader linger over what they just read.

What would the experts tell me about organization in children's writing? What could I learn from the children themselves?

RESEARCH

If we adults listen and watch closely, our children will invite us to share *their* worlds and *their* ways of living in the world. And then, when children become our teachers, showing us what they see and delight in and wonder about and reach toward, then, and only then, will we be able to extend what they know and enrich their ways of knowing. (Calkins, 1994, p. 98)

I knew my inquiry must begin with the children, so I first reread writing samples from our original writing prompt. I looked specifically for samples that lacked organization. I studied those papers for commonalities and found some that just needed stronger beginnings and endings, some that just needed main ideas more fully developed with details, and some that needed smoother transitions. But it was the writing samples that did not stay on topic that were the most unsettling. It's hard to sequence things that don't go together. How could I help kids who showed almost no organization in their writing? I knew I should take Donald Graves' advice (1994) and "look through our children's writing to find examples that are teachable and within what Vygotsky calls the child's 'zone of proximal development'." (p. 208) But, it's hard to know where to start when there doesn't appear to be anything there to build on.

Organization

"Organization is the internal structure of writing - like the framework of a building or the skeleton of an animal. It holds things together, and gives the whole piece form and shape." (Spandel, 1997, p. 12) When we write with organization, readers understand our

message. We capture their attention and create anticipation in our lead sentences. We deliver our main ideas in a logical sequence and support them with details that both clarify and extend our words. We carefully craft our writing to build to the most important point, with smooth connections from one idea or event to the next. In our conclusion we leave the reader with something to consider, something to savor.

When organization is lacking in writing, the reader is confused. Questions go unanswered. Following are two examples of unedited student writing, showing a lack of organization. They are typical of many of the student samples that inspired me to find ways to help these young writers.

My favorite day is going swimmning. One day I went swimmning.
with my gramother. Then I omost drand. Then my cosin cam
home from school.

1st grader

It's cool because you get to run and shoot the ball in the hoop
I play it at school on the basketball court When I Play it at lunch
how to I play it shoot the basketball into the hoop and you have to jump
to shoot it And my name is Robert what is basketball it is a sport When
you have to shoot the ball in the hoop and get more points.

4th grader

Revision

Reading these pieces, I found it very difficult to find the teachable points as Graves advised. What does being drowned have to do with a favorite day? And the cousin? Where did he come from? Some of the writing was so confusing, I believed rewriting would be the best solution. With the papers that just needed the beginning or the ending worked on, I could see revision as a viable solution. But I wondered how effective revision would be with a paper that made no sense.

I also had my own biases regarding revision. I have found that students often resist revision. The difficulties of writing for emergent writers are many, as they're still working on motor skills, spacing, balance, and letter orientation (Spandel, 1997). Furthermore, they

often don't understand the need for revision, asking "Why would we do over something we just finished?" With these common perceptions of revision, one could argue that it is not the most effective strategy to help young children improve their writing. Graves (1994), explained the word "revise" as the ability to resee, to look at a work, or the text again. This would require that the child be able to reflect on his work, and possibly see other options. This is not developmentally appropriate for some writers, and many of our young writers would simply rewrite their original work.

Both Calkins (1994) and Graves (1994) suggested that the ability to revise follows a developmental sequence. There is an order in which children are able to show changes in their work, beginning with simply adding on at the end. Next they are able to identify where an insertion would go in the piece, followed by actually being able to add that insertion. Finding the focus of their own writing was next in this continuum of development. Children often include unnecessary details that take away from the main idea of the piece and cannot delete them if they can't distinguish them as frivolous. The last revision skill that was developed was the ability to regard information as flexible. If this concept of words and thoughts being flexible is not developed, trying to revise a piece of writing after it is completed is just too late.

Revision is supposed to be a natural part of the writing process, but its success seems to be dependent on whether the type of revision is developmentally appropriate for the child. Revision must be seen as an opportunity to improve writing, but if a child is not able to reflect on his own writing and see a need for improvement, the concept of revision is ineffective.

I believe that revision is a powerful part of writing. I will look for that zone of proximal development where instruction is most effective and let the children guide me in their need for understanding and using revision. But the children who show no evidence of organization in their writing need more. They need intervention, not remediation. The work needs to be done before they write.

Prewriting

"Albert Einstein was once asked, 'If you had one hour to save the world, how would you spend that hour?' He replied, 'I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and

then five minutes solving it' "(Powell, 1999). Who could argue with Einstein? Perhaps we should be putting more time at the beginning of the writing process, defining the proverbial problem.

Prewriting is the "defining the problem" stage. It is the "getting ready to write" step of the writing process. The research clearly validates the importance of prewriting, yet at the same time questions whether or not it's happening in our classrooms. "Prewriting has probably been the most neglected step in the writing process; however, it is as crucial to writers as a warm-up is to athletes. Some believe that at least 70% of writing time should be spent in prewriting" (Tompkins, 2001, p. 61). During the prewriting stage, students choose a topic, consider purpose, audience, and form, and organize ideas for writing. Graves (1994) called what writers do to prepare for writing "rehearsal activities", which take many forms, including drawing, clustering, talking, reading, and role-playing. All of these rehearsal activities could help children explore their thoughts before writing, but I thought that clustering would best help my students get a visual picture of their writing. Through clustering, a type of graphic organizer, students could organize their ideas for writing in a nonlinear fashion. Graphic organizers naturally precede writing by providing visual representation of students' constructions and organizations of knowledge (Ruddell, 1997). The graphic organizers I had the most information about were Thinking Maps.

Thinking Maps

I had recently had the opportunity to attend a training on *Thinking Maps* (Hyerle, 1995) and was very impressed with how these maps could help students process information. Our school was beginning to use these maps as visual tools to increase comprehension. Would *Thinking Maps* help our students organize their thoughts before writing, as well? Would these maps help them connect ideas and clarify thoughts?

Thinking Maps and other types of graphic organizers offer a bird's-eye view of patterns and relationships. Isn't this what writing is all about? Presenting information so that the reader can see the connections, can infer what's coming next? If students could see how their thoughts were connected in a visual tool, perhaps when they wrote, their words would make more sense. I've often heard people comment that they were visual learners. Eric Jensen (1996), a noted authority in the field of brain research as it relates to education,

advised that we (educators) take advantage of this enormous capacity to learn visually. He wrote, "Over 90% of all information that comes to our brain is visual. The retina accounts for 40% of all nerve fibers connected to the brain. Our eyes can register 36,000 visual messages per hour." (Jensen, 1996, p.55) It would seem that we're all visual learners.

Frank Smith (1995) explained in Between Hope and Havoc that there is one essential activity that the brain performs continuously and effortlessly, that is seeking and finding patterns. He wrote, "The brain is a brilliant, versatile, and incomparable recognizer of patterns in every aspect of life and living, in the actual and the fantastic, in fact and fiction." (p. 11) These patterns also refer to the brain's ability to recognize distinctive sequences of events and networks of relationships.

Putting these two elements of brain-based learning together can be very powerful. The modality of vision has great impact on learning and the brain learns by making connections. Perhaps linking thought to visual structures could help our students illuminate the patterns and connections they want to portray in their writing.

In Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge, David Hyerle (1996) explained that *Thinking Maps* combine the flexibility of brainstorm "webs" and the structure of task-specific graphic organizers with a clearly defined, common thinking process language. Brainstorm webs are used for open-ended networking and associative thinking and allow us to quickly record information, linking one item to another. Graphic organizers create a logical and spatial arrangement of information, allowing students to see patterns that connect. These graphic organizers are often used for isolated content tasks, designed to go specifically with those tasks.

The thinking-process maps differ from the other two, in that they are based on fundamental patterns of thinking, allowing a thought process to dictate their use, not a specific task. The eight thought processes are: defining in context, describing, compare and contrast, classifying, part-whole, sequencing, cause and effect, and seeing analogies. There is a specific map for each thought process. Although *Thinking Maps* are very consistent in their visual representation of thought processes, they are flexible in their application across all disciplines and grade levels.

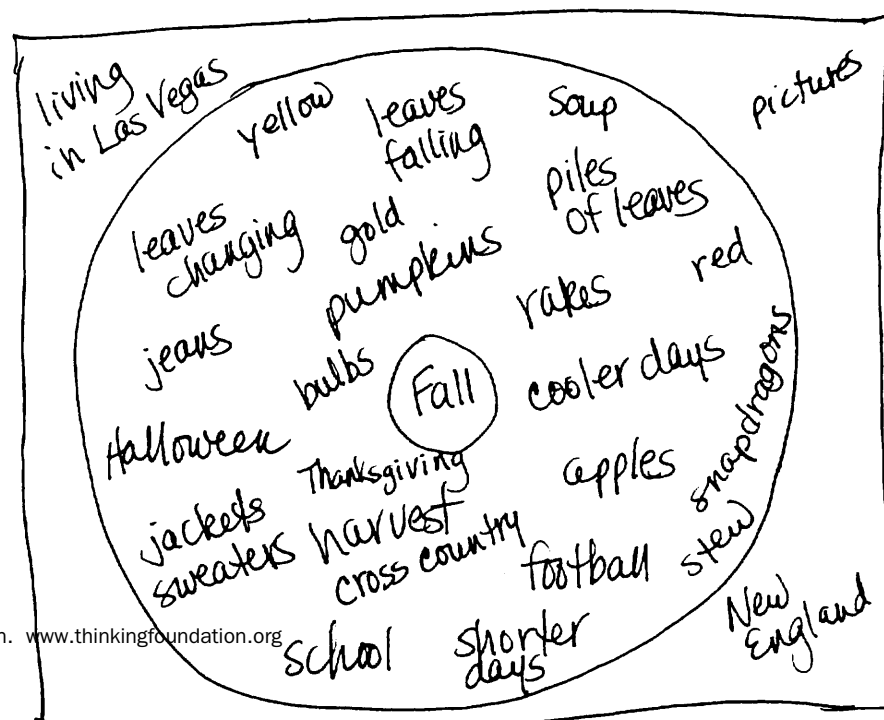
Research has found that graphic organizers are most effective when students have in-depth instruction and training in their use and when students construct graphic organizers

themselves (Bromley et al., 1995). Only after *Thinking Maps* have been systematically taught to the students, are they expected to use them when and where they find them appropriate. At Paradise, we were just beginning to explore the use of *Thinking Maps* in the classroom. Teachers were busy teaching the maps and exploring ways to help kids use them to process information. Once each map was introduced to the students, and the thought process linked to the visual map, the teachers applied them throughout their curriculum. Positive outcomes of the use of *Thinking Maps* included increased retention of content knowledge when reading and a deeper understanding of concepts.

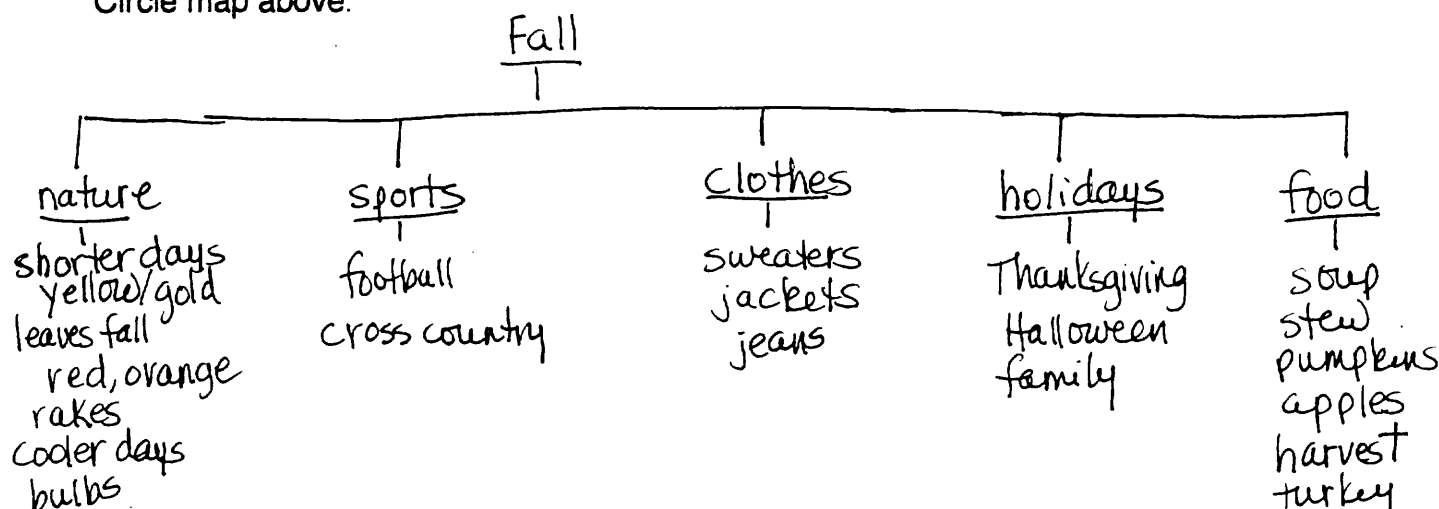
Now that the students were starting to use these maps to process information that they had read, it was time to explore the uses for writing. I attended more training on *Thinking Maps* and began to see the potential for using them to help children apply the eight thought processes in their writing. I learned how to use multiple maps to explore ideas, expand word choice, and connect and sequence information. I was anxious to see if *Thinking Maps* would fulfill my quest to find ways to help children improve their writing.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

I began experimenting. My students were very successful with the Circle Map (below), which allowed them to quickly record their ideas in a context. Depending on their depth of knowledge about the subject, the detail of their circle maps varied. Square frames were drawn around the maps to identify the frame of reference for the information contained in the map. A circle map on fall could look like this:



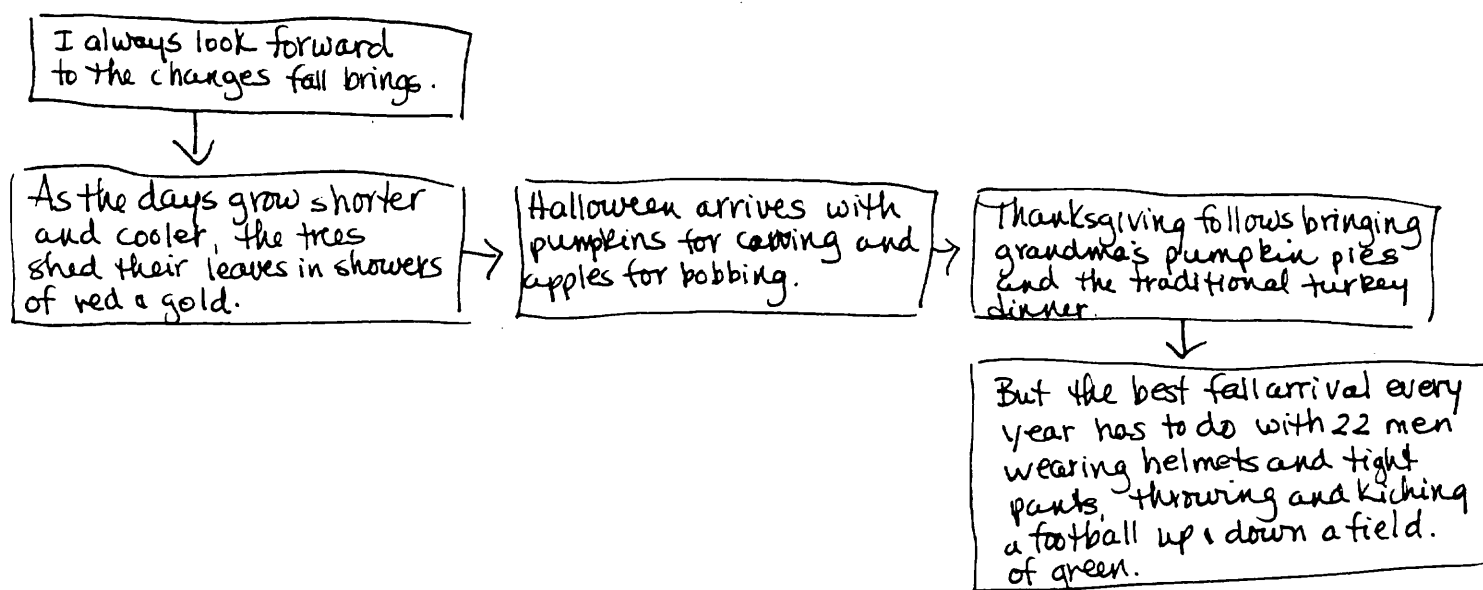
Although the students were able to gather lots of information on their circle maps, the circle map alone wasn't very effective in organizing writing. The ideas were there, but nothing was really deeply connected. The obvious next step was to put the ideas in categories. We used the Tree Map to do this, as it enabled students to classify, matching things that went together. The heading of these connected items could be put on the map before or after the classifications were made. This was a wonderful opportunity to teach main idea and supporting details, the basic structure of a paragraph. When the kids wrote from their tree maps, they stayed on the topic. They caught on rather quickly about paragraphs, starting new paragraphs when they moved to a new branch of the map. Following is an example of a Tree Map used to categorize the ideas generated in the fall Circle map above.



As I stated before, we are in the beginning stages of using *Thinking Maps* to improve writing and are learning as we go. The Tree Map enabled our writers to organize their writing, but it was not easy for them to do. Working with a third grade ELL class, I found that I had to model this process many times. Perhaps the difficulty was due to a lack of vocabulary coupled with the task of classification. It was apparent that much work needed to be done on sorting pictures and words into categories. The students had been doing lots of word study, sorting words according to phonetic and structural elements. To effectively go from a Circle Map to a Tree Map, they needed to understand the concept of semantic word sorts.

With help, the organized categories were in place on the Tree Map, and the students began to explore logical sequencing. The Flow Map was the next addition to this

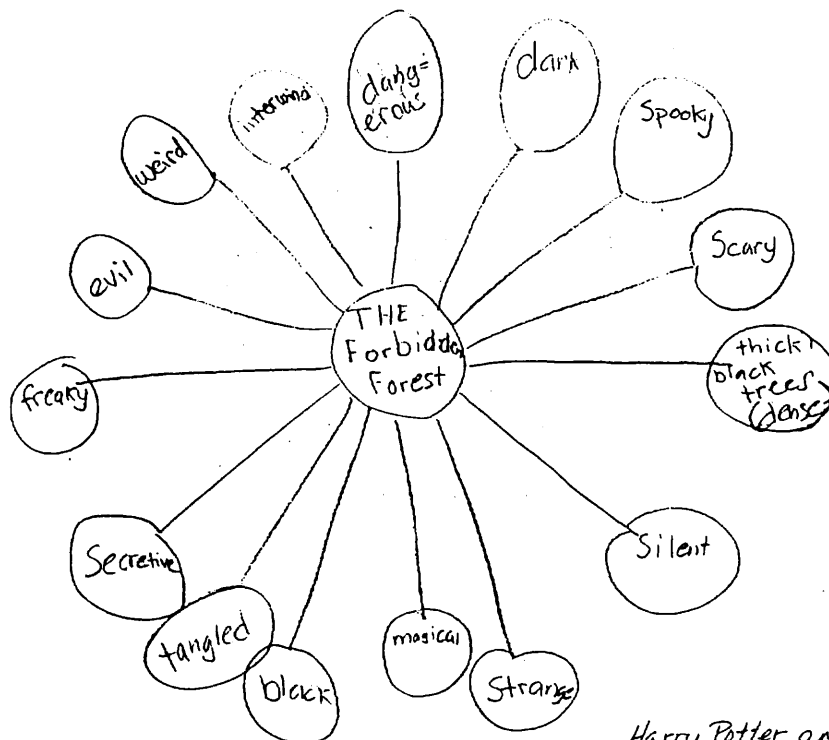
writing process. The Flow Map is based on the use of flowcharts, used to show sequence, order, time lines, cycles, actions, steps, and directions. After the creation of a Tree Map, the students transfer their information in a logical sequence using the Flow Map. This map can be configured to show students to start with an opening, sequence their ideas, and then close with a summation. This, by far, was the most difficult to convey to my students. We are still in the stage of constructing descriptive pieces together, as much work needs to be done to help them understand the logistics of sequencing. Following is an example of what the Flow Map might look like using both the Circle Map and Tree Map to brainstorm and classify ideas:



There are other *Thinking Maps* that lend themselves beautifully to writing. The Multi-Flow map is based on cause and effect and would organize any persuasive essay or piece to explain "why". The Double Bubble illustrates the same comparing and contrasting skills as the Venn Diagram and could organize writing for students by listing commonalities, then individual differences.

The Bubble Map has proven very effective in developing vocabulary. I read aloud the chapter, "The Forbidden Forest" in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, encouraging the students to listen for and record words that described the forest. After the reading, we discussed the forest and together added more words to the Bubble Map. The students

created construction paper replicas of the forest, and then wrote descriptive pieces using both their artwork and their Bubble Maps. Following is a student sample of this Bubble Map and additional examples of the descriptive language used in their pieces:



*Harry Potter and the
Sorcerer's Stone*

"For a moment, all of the trees seemed secretive.
It seemed like the trees were holding some kind of evil spell!"
by Ramses

"When the children entered the Forbidden Forest,
they got frightened at first by the tangled, black trees."
by Carla

"The Forbidden Forest was very odd, not like any other forest.
It was very dark when the clouds covered the moon. It was pitch black."
by Cassi

"Looking up you will see spooky trees going over you.
... and an evil plant wrapping around your foot."
author unknown

"You will not want to go in that scary Forbidden Forest. Strange things are going on."
by Brandon

"It is very strange because the trees move everywhere.
They get tangled into cursive, which is freaky. The trees tell secrets."
by Karina

"In the forbidden forest, the sky is gray and the trees are thick. . .the forest is too silent."
by Kevin

"It was a freaky night in the thick, black trees."
by Aaron

Making the Bubble Map before writing provided the students with the descriptive language they needed to create visual images in their writing.

AND NOW . . .

I was recently skimming through a book, entitled, Visual Arts: A Way of Knowing, when a chart on artistic development caught my eye. It described how artists go through phases when they learn new techniques. At first they experience “natural expression” where they rely on their own prior knowledge and experiences to guide them, as they have had little formal instruction. Their work might be considered primitive. They progress to “creative expression” only after learning about the elements of art and principles of design. They are able to develop and apply those skills and techniques in original art. They begin to reflect on their own work and compare it to others. Finally, with much practice, they enter into the “artistic expression” phase, able to make aesthetic judgments about their art. They use historical and cultural contexts as they focus on mastery and personal style. They become much more free to invent original approaches to their art and understand the power of artistic expression (Gee, 2000).

I couldn't help but compare this artistic development to writing development, as I believe we all go through the same stages. At first we write what we know in the best way we can. With instruction and plenty of practice, we begin to see beyond our words, to the audience. This gives our work purpose. We gain confidence and become more flexible and sensitive as we read the words of others, as we began to read like writers, and then write like readers. Finally we become much more individualistic and imaginative in our writing as we truly master our craft and use a variety of approaches and genres. We understand that our written images can have powerful and lasting social importance. We see that our writing is integrated into and influenced by life.

Writing is a process. I trust the developmental aspect of learning to write. But I also believe in providing the scaffolding to support our young writers, to help them grow from natural, to creative, to artistic expression. This is just the beginning of the application of Thinking Maps at Paradise. I am excited to have found a tool that can be used in the prewriting stage of the writing process to help kids organize their writing. It is an added bonus that these visual tools will also probably increase ideas, word choice and sentence

fluency.

I do have some concerns that hopefully will be addressed this year. I worry that perhaps our students' writing will become too structured, too dependent on a formula for writing. Will their individual voices disappear in the structure? I would never want to sacrifice one trait for another.

I console myself with the knowledge that at Paradise much time is devoted to independent writing through Writer's Workshop and journal writing. I don't think that Thinking Maps need to be used for every piece of writing the children do. But for those who are struggling to convey even the simplest message, *Thinking Maps* might be the answer to help the children think about and organize their ideas before they commit them to paper.

And again, I will continue to teach using a variety of methods to help students learn about the writing trait of organization. Prewriting activities will include sharing models of good literature and identifying organization in that context. It will include role-playing and discussion, visualization and drawing. It will include the necessary scaffolding to allow students to find their individual styles of expression.

I will continue to teach children the value of revision during and after writing. I will conference with young writers and use their writing to identify teaching points. But now, I have new visual tools in the form of *Thinking Maps* to include in the students' writing toolboxes and am excited to see how these tools might shape their craft.

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ORGANIZATION

WHAT TO LOOK (& LISTEN) FOR ...

- Pictures and/or text balanced on the page
- Coordination between text and picture (they go together)
- Multiple pictures that show sequence
- Grouping of details, ideas
- Text that shows sequence: *First ... then ... after ... next ... later ... last ...*
- Text that shows connections: *Because ... so ... when ... however ...*
- Sense of beginning: *One day ... Last week ... When I was little ...*
- Sense of ending: *So finally ... That's all ... At last ... The end*
- Cause and effect structure in text (or picture series)
- Problem-solving structure in text (or picture series)
- Chronological structure in text (or picture series)
- Surprises that work
- Sticking with one main topic or idea

To reinforce ORGANIZATION,

YOU COULD SAY ...

- I can see how these ideas/pictures go together.
- You knew just how to begin (or end).
- This happened because this happened—that's a good way to organize ideas.
- You organized your story by time ... first this, then this
- I wanted to know what would happen next!
- What a surprise ending!
- You solved a problem—that's a good way to organize ideas.
- [When reading aloud] This story has the title _____. What do you suppose it's about?
- So far this author has told us _____. What do you predict will happen next? How do you predict this will end?
- Let me read just the beginning of this writer's story/essay. Is this a good way for the writer to begin? Why?
- Can you tell me back this story/essay in a few sentences?

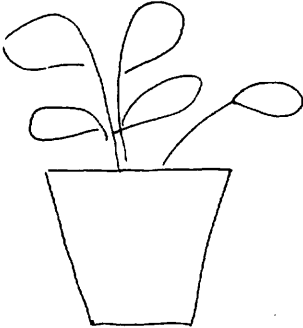
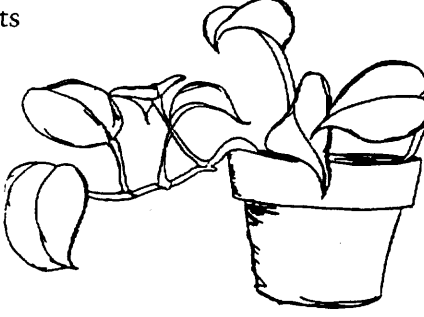

**NEVADA STATE WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
ANALYTIC SCORING GUIDE***

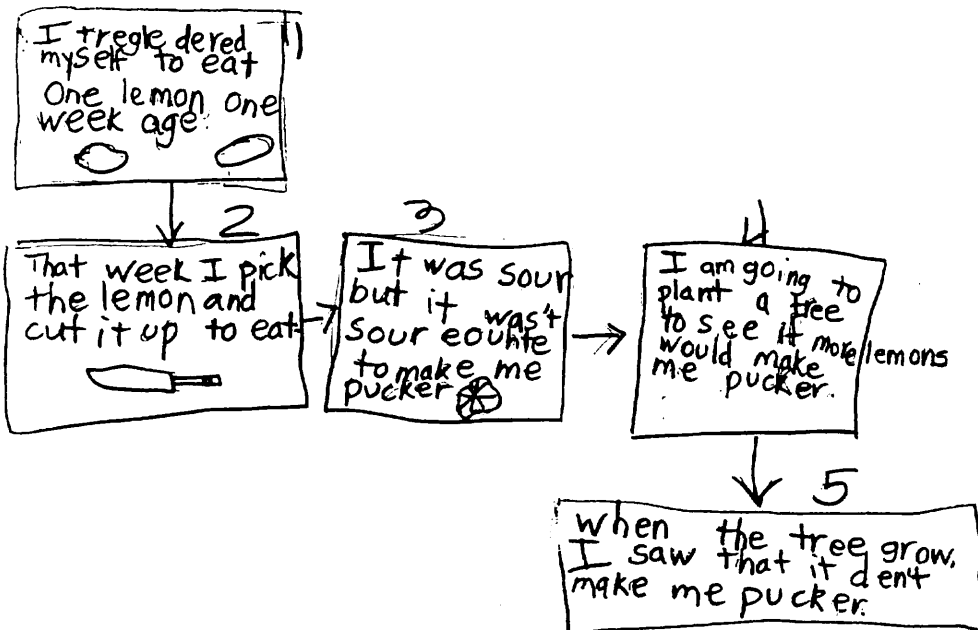
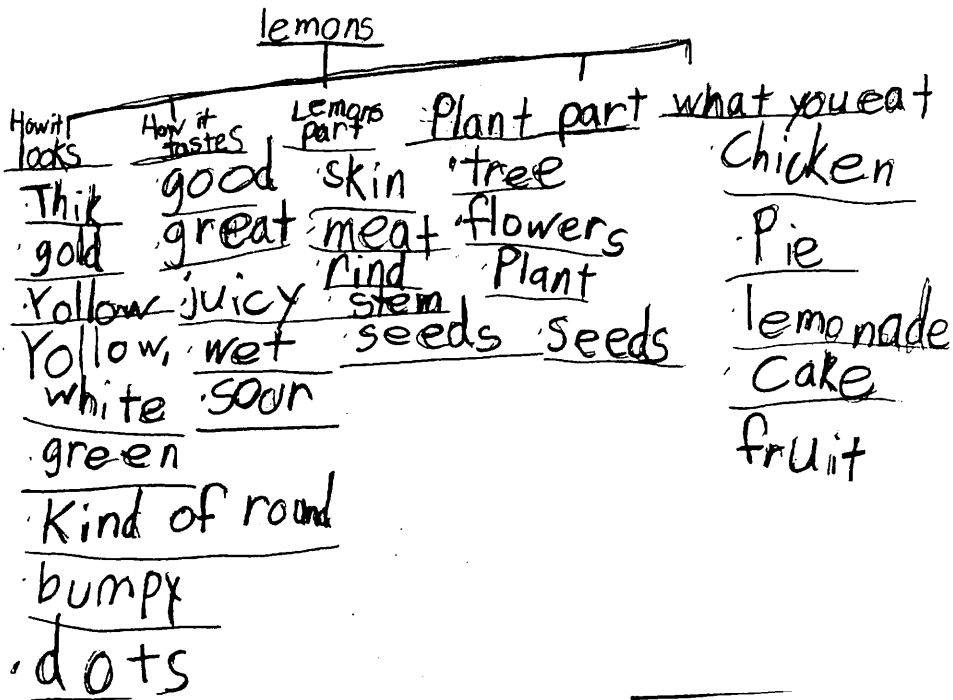
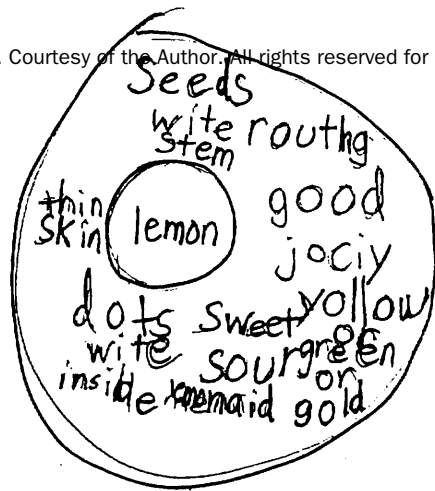
ORGANIZATION

- 5:** The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or thesis. The order, structure, or presentation is compelling and moves the reader through the text.
- An inviting introduction draws the reader in and a satisfying conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of resolution.
 - Details seem to fit where they're placed; sequencing is logical and effective.
 - Transitions are smooth and weave the separate threads of meaning into one cohesive whole.
 - Progression of ideas is very well controlled; the writer delivers needed information at just the right moment, then moves on.
 - Organization flows so smoothly the reader hardly thinks about it.
- 3:** The organizational structure is strong enough to move the reader from point to point without undue confusion.
- The paper has a recognizable introduction and conclusion. The introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation; the conclusion may not leave the reader with a satisfying sense of resolution.
 - Sequencing is usually logical. It may sometimes be too obvious or otherwise ineffective.
 - Transitions often work well; at times though, connections between ideas are fuzzy or call for inferences.
 - Progression of ideas is fairly well controlled, although the writer sometimes spurts ahead too quickly or spends too much time on the obvious.
 - Despite a few problems, the organization does not seriously get in the way of the main point or storyline.
- 1:** The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a random, haphazard fashion – or else there is no identifiable internal structure at all. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:
- The writer has not yet drafted a real lead or conclusion.
 - Sequencing and details, if they are present, need work.
 - Transitions are not yet clearly defined; connections between ideas seem confusing or incomplete.
 - Progression of ideas feels awkward, with lots of time spent on minor details or with big, hard-to-follow leaps from point to point.
 - Lack of organization makes it hard for the reader to get a grip on the main point or storyline.

*The Nevada State Department of Education gratefully acknowledges Vicki Spandel and the teachers of Beaverton, Oregon School District who developed the original trait scoring guide in 1984 and the contributions of more than 5,000 Oregon teachers and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory for the revisions since 1984.

A Learning Continuum of Artistic Development

Artistic Phases	Characteristics	Drawing Examples
Natural Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimal formal instruction • students use prior knowledge and experiences 	
Creative Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitated learning about the elements of art and principles of design • students develop and apply art skills and techniques in original works • students begin to reflect on their own expressions and the artwork of others 	
Artistic Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students become aware of historical and cultural contexts and learn about making aesthetic judgments • students focus on mastery and personal style and on audience • students work to develop a high degree of artistic competence • students express and invent original approaches to making art • students understand the power of artistic expression 	



Lemons

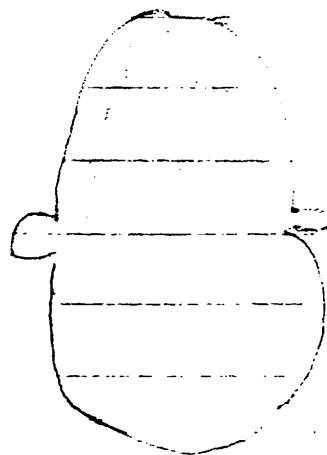
I treble dared myself to eat one lemon, one week ago.

That week I pick the lemon and cut it up to eat.

It was sour but it wasn't sour enough to make me pucker.

I'm going to plant a tree to see if more lemons would make me pucker.

When the tree grows, I saw that more lemons don't make me pucker.



Descriptive writing by a 3rd grade
ELL student. First with no

Thinking Foundation. Courtesy of the Author. All rights reserved for academic use only.

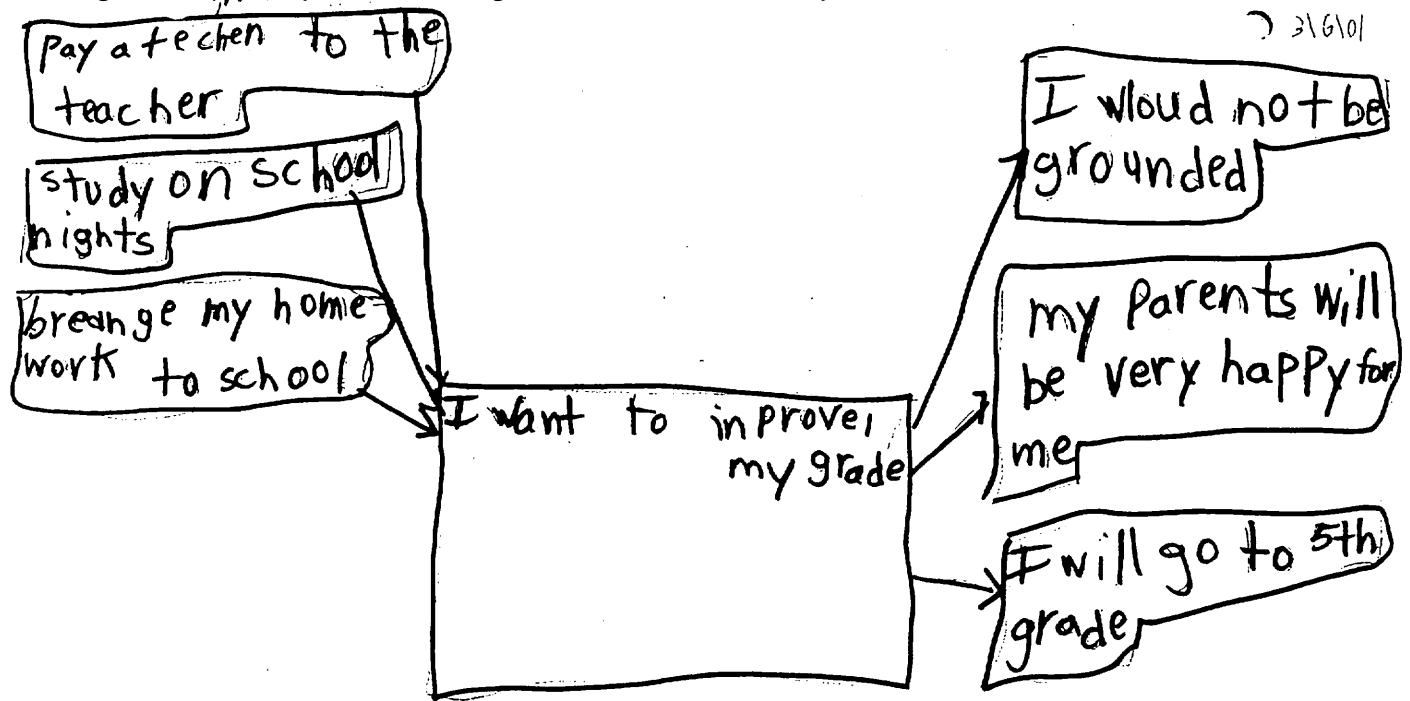
instruction, then after using Thinking
Maps.

He is relly Fuzzy.
He has black eyes.
He is brown.
He is tall.

Threre was a teddy bear in Mrs. Kun
class. he sat ina chiar in the middle of
the room.

He is very frey, and brown.
He has black eyes and a brown nose.
He does not have a tail.
He pas are lite brown.
He can move his arm and leg.

He feel is relley frey and soft.
The ~~teddy~~ Bear
makes me feel happy. Bec-
se I have two bears at home.



Tyler
I want to improve my grade.
To do this I will pay attention to
the teacher, study on school
nights and bring my homework
to school. When I reach my goal I
would not be grounded, my par-
ents will be very happy for
me, I will go to 5th grade.