

# STUMBLING INTO THE LIGHT OF NEW MEANINGS

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## Remembering Donald Murray

By Bruce Ballenger

Perhaps it was his lonely, sickly childhood, or the reserve of his Boston-Scottish parents, or possibly it was something that happened later, maybe the terror of tumbling towards a battlefield under a white silk parachute while dodging



*Donald Murray*

German bullets, or the nagging grief when his daughter Lee died. I don't know. But the day that Donald Murray handed me one of his manuscripts and asked for my response, I was struck dumb—partly because I felt incapable of critiquing the work of a master writer—but mostly because he was serious. He wanted to know what I thought, and yet, I could also read past the eagerness in eyes and see that he was a little afraid of what I would say. It was this vulnerability that always impressed me most about Don, and sometimes made me wonder what happened that made him that way. “I don't want to be different,

or the same,” he wrote once. “I want to be what I am becoming to be. I want to be taught by my work who I am. And I want my students not to see me as an authority or mentor, but simply as learner, explorer.” Beside Don Murray's many contributions to the field of composition studies, there was also what he taught us about the humanity of good teaching. We work quietly beside our students doing what we are asking them to do—to learn and to continually refashion ourselves with that knowledge.

I used to say that I hated writing but loved having written. I said this to Don once he quickly became serious. “Writing is hard, but if you find it so unpleasant,” he said, “do something else. No one asked you to be a writer.” Then I began to learn from him why this made him so impatient. This instruction began when he handed me a copy of a talk he was to give in October, 1983, to the conference on Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing. Handing me the piece, Don said, “This will probably blow those sentence-combiners’ minds.” The talk was titled “Writing Badly to Write Well: Searching for the Instructive Line.” It is no exaggeration to say that this was an essay that changed my life as a writer and a teacher, and led me to those moments that Don immortalized in all of his work: when we write, we should welcome those “productive accidents” when language leads us to what we didn’t know we knew. Don admired a beautifully crafted sentence. He was also a poet, after all. But he helped many of us to see that it is in the unwieldy sentence—the one that staggers and falls and then gets back up again like an aimless and happy drunk—that might lead us out of the back alleys of thought and into the light of new meanings.

When Donald Murray died my world suddenly went a little darker. But he taught me that if I follow the words, as I’m doing here, I’ll always find my way.

# GENRE LIST

Here is a list of some possible writing genres:

Acceptance speech	Elegy	Love letter	announcement
Ad copy	Email	Lullaby	Radio spot
Address to jury	Encyclopedia article	Magazine article	Rap
Advice column	Epilogue	Manifesto	Recipe
Allegory	Epitaph	Manual	Recipe poem
Apology	Essay	Map	Recommendation
Autobiography	Eulogy	Memorandum	Restaurant review
Billboard	Experiment	Memorial plaque	Resume
Biography	Expose	Menu	Riddle
Birth announcement	Fable	Minutes	Rock opera
Blueprint	Family history	Monologue	Sales letter
Book review	Fashion show monologue	Movie review	Schedule
Brochure	Flyer	Myth	Screenplay
Bumper sticker	Foreword	Nature guide	Sermon
Business letter	Fortune cookie insert	News story	Sign
Bylaws	Found poem	Newsletter	Slogan
Campaign speech	Graduation speech	Nomination speech	Song lyric
Campaign ad	Graffiti	Nonsense rhyme	Spell
Cartoon	Greeting card	Nursery rhyme	Sports story
Chant poem	Haiku	Obituary	Storyboard
Chat room log	Headline	Oracle	Survey
Cheer	Horoscope	Packaging copy	Tall tale
Children's story	Infomercial	Parable	Test
Classified ad	Instructions	Petition	Thank-you note
Comic strip	Insult poem	Play	Theatre review
Consumer report	Interview	Poem	Toast
Daydream	Invitation	Police report	To-do list
Death certificate	Jingle	Post card	Tour guide speech
Debate	Joke	PowerPoint presentation	Translation
Dialogue	Journal entry	Prayer	Treaty
Diary	Keynote address	Precis	T-shirt design
Diatribes	Law	Prediction	TV spot
Dictionary entry	Letter of complaint	Preface	Want ad
Directions	Letter of request	Prologue	Warrant
Dream analysis	Letter to the editor	Profile	Wedding vows
Editorial	Limerick	Public service	

# 10 WAYS TO RE-ENTER A DRAFT

- Cross out “THE END” and write some unanswered questions. Turn one into a new lead.
- Insert a snapshot.
- Insert dialogue or replace boring dialogue with snapshots.
- Break story into chapters.
- Chunk story into illustratable sections.
- Write the story as a poem. Write the poem as a story.
- Find a better lead.
- Cut anything.
- Read the paper aloud and listen to your voice. Where do you speed up? Where do you slow down? Mark places you’d like to change.
- Write a new title.
- Add a scene(snapshot, thoughtshot, dialogue)

## THINGS I DON'T HAVE TO DO TODAY

- I don't need to read every draft of a student piece.
- I don't need to correct every grammatical error my students make.
- I don't need to pick topics for my students to write about.
- *I don't need to be the expert who fixes my students' work!!!*

## THINGS TO DO TODAY

- I will build a class of good critics, give them guidelines and model, model, model.
- I will give students the editing pen and proofreading symbols. I will show them patterns of errors and places to focus. I will remember who needs more editing practice.
- I will create a class culture of questioning. I will encourage and inspire students to dig potatoes daily. I will find tools to have *them* keep track of their work.
- If I have 120 students, I will have 120 teacher's aides. I will train students to assess and reflect on their own work daily and take charge of their learning.

## "GRADEBOOK PRISON BLUES"

by Barry Lane

(sung to "Folsom Prison Blues;" apologies to Johnny Cash)

I see the teacher coming  
She's comin' round the bend  
And I ain't seen the sunshine  
Since I don't know when  
Cause I'm stuck in grade book prison and  
Time keeps draggin' on.  
When i see that grade-book coming  
I turn my head a moan.

When I was just a young boy  
My Mama said to me,  
Always be a good boy  
Don't ever get a "C"  
But I got a "D" in reading  
Just to make her cry.  
Now I see that grade book comin'  
I hang my head and sigh.

(instrumental)

I see those smart kids sitting  
In that fancy AP class  
They're probably reading Shakespeare  
And they know that they will pass  
but me I'm stuck in resource  
Doing S-----R-----A  
And I answer pointless questions  
To pass the time away

(instrumental)

Some day I'll write a novel 'bout the year  
I leave this school  
Or maybe epic poetry  
Bout why I'm not real cool  
But I'm here in Basic English  
Doing 5 paragraph themes.  
And when I see that grade book coming  
It smothers all my dreams.

## YOUNG PEOPLE WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

### Aaron Gordon

Gordon was in second grade when his Miami school bus suddenly slammed on its brakes and its riders were thrown to the floor. There were no injuries but 7 year-old Gordon decided that all school buses should have seat belts. He created a petition and 6000 people signed it. He then traveled to Washington to co-write legislation with his congressman.

### Craig Kielburger

In 1996, at the age of 12, Kielburger organized his friends and classmates in Thornhill, Ontario to form a organization called Free The Children, an international network of children aimed at eradicating child slave labor around the world. Most people in his country did not know that there were child slaves in the world today.

### Melissa Poe

When she was in fourth grade, Poe started a club called Kids for a Clean Environment, which now counts 300,000 members worldwide. The magazine she founded, Kids FACE Illustrated, now reaches more than two million young readers.

### **Julia Butterfly Hill**

In December 1997 when she was 24 years old, Hill climbed into an enormous redwood tree she nicknamed Luna. She lived on a tiny platform near the top of the tree, constructed with help from her friends in the environmental group Earth First! which champions environmental activism and the philosophy of Deep Ecology (“think globally and act locally”). Two years later, on December, 18, 1999, the timber company agreed never to cut the redwood tree named Luna.

### **Anisa Kintz**

When eight year-old Kintz moved from her home in California to Conway South Carolina she wondered why kids with darker skin sat on one side of the cafeteria and kids with lighter skin on the other. She founded a group called Calling All Colors, the first organization run by children to fight racism.

### **Jody Williams**

As a high school student Williams learned about the millions of landmines in the ground around the world and how they hurt innocent people. Years later she founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. In 1997 she won the Nobel Prize.



## **SNAPSHOTS FROM A 5TH GRADE CLASS**

As you read these snapshots from Julie Sherman's 5th grade from Lightfoot Elementary school in Virginia to your class, notice the power of close observation.

*Her soft hands touched the silver spoon as it pushed its way through the cookie dough. She wiped her hands delicately on the beige apron, then she looked outside the quiet falling white snow as she took a sip of hot chocolate out of her purple cow mug. The smell of chocolate chip cookies filled the room. Her face had a tired relaxed expression. The only sound was the wood crackling on the fire and the golden dog snoring on the maroon rug.*

—Sarah Ridgeway

*Me and my four friends are standing behind 4 desks attached together enjoying our cheese pizza covered with tomato sauce. I am drinking my Dr. Pepper from a white styrofoam cup. My silver plated necklace is glimmering from the light above. Other kids are sitting at their wood and metal desks enjoying their different varieties of pizza. The smell of pizza makes me even more hungry.*

—Gary Hibbard

*The girl sits on the rough leather seat of the boat. As she leans her head over the side of the boat, cool crisp water sprays her face. As the boat slows down she can see all around her. The sky is beautiful, dark magenta. Bright orange and dark pink colors the sky. From across the water, comes a family of ducks swimming toward the boat. The father duck has a beautiful green neck and blue wings. The mother duck is brown and the baby ducklings are bright yellow. From one area of the small mossy island a crane is washing his white feathers. Not far away another brown duck is building a nest in the moss. Little minnows are swimming about very quickly through the water. The smells of the animals and grassland is fresh in my nose and you can hear the ducks quacking softly.*

—Carla Kayajanian

*As the man sweeps the floor vigorously he looks in great amazement at the three thousand stag heads and skulls of old times ago. The man feels as if he is surrounded by wicked prison wire just taunting him to try and break out. The man looks ahead to see a massive mounted stag head. It has ten wickedly sharp antlers on its head and regretful eyes of cold marble, but still he keeps on sweeping.*

—Tristan Whitekiller

## SIX FAVORITE MINI-LESSONS

### 1

#### Follow my lead

Read your students' leads from books in your classroom library. Talk about how strong leads pull in both the reader and the writer. Ask the students to take ten minutes to practice writing leads that make the reader want to read more and the writer want to write more. Have them pick their favorite lead and put it on a piece of paper and throw it in a hat. Have each student choose a lead from the hat and write the rest of the story. Share the results.

### 2

#### Rewrite the ending to a fable and create a new moral

Read my book *The Tortoise and the Hare Continued* to your class. Then read any Aesop's fable and ask your students, "What happened the next day? What's the new moral?" Share your students' new endings and morals and celebrate their "out of the box" thinking.

### 3

#### Lemon lineup

Each student brings a lemon to class and describes the lemon in great detail in one short paragraph. Collect the lemons and have the students swap paragraphs with one another. The lemons are lined up on a table and each student must pick his or her lemon out from the description in his or her hand.

## 4

### Postcards details

Form groups of four and hand each group an artist's postcard, telling each group not to look at each other's postcards. Ask them to describe the postcard in great detail. When each group is done, the teacher collects the postcards and the descriptions are swapped between groups. Students draw postcards using the descriptions. When they are done, place the original postcard in front of their drawings. Discuss the power of words to create images in a reader's mind.

## 5

### One thing you saw today

Ask your students to write down one thing they saw today between the time they got up and the time they are sitting here now. Ask your students to call out what they wrote and copy it on the board. When you have finished, ask your students to close their eyes and listen. Read them the poem they have created.

## 6

### Alien nation

On the board, make a list of household items and activities people do. Now ask your students, "What would it be like to be an alien from another planet? What names would they create for a television? A light box? A baby sweater? An earthlet wrapper? I like to use the picture book *Earthlets* by Jeanne Wiliss as a literature model. Next ask your students to pretend they are an alien visiting earth for the first time. Ask them to write dispatches to their home planets.

## QUOTES TO INSPIRE WRITING

"I see but one rule:  
to be clear."

—*Stendhal*

"My writing is full of lives I might have  
led. A writer imagines what could have  
happened, not what really happened."

—*Joyce Carol Oates*

"If you wish to be a  
writer, write."

—*Epicetetus*

"Don't say the old lady  
screamed—bring her on  
and let her scream."

—*Mark Twain*

"Writing is my  
vacation from living."

—*Eugene O'Neil*

"The poet thinks with his poem."

—*William Carlos Williams*

"Don't put anything in a story that  
does not reveal character or  
advance the action."

—*Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*

"If you want to draw  
a bird, you must  
become a bird."

—*Hokusai*

"A good poem is about all  
the things you think about  
in the privacy of yourself."

—*Charles Simic*

"The point of a notebook is  
to jumpstart the mind."

—*John Gregory Dunne*

"Get black on white."

—*Guy de Maupassant*

"The author must keep his mouth shut when his work starts to speak."

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*

"Don't get it right.  
Get it written."

—*James Thurber*

"The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader."

—*Robert Frost*

"Style is a matter of vision, not technique."

—*Marcel Proust*

"Don't put anything in a story that does not reveal character or advance the action."

—*Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*

"Teach yourself to work in uncertainty."

—*Bernard Malamud*

"No artist needs criticism. He only needs appreciation. If he needs criticism he is not an artist."

—*Gertrude Stein*

"When I write something I think of the mind as a harp I've got to learn how to play. If my writing is good, I'll have masterfully plucked the strings of your brain. . ."

—*Maja Wilson*

"A good poem is about all the things you think about in the privacy of yourself."

—*Charles Simic*

"I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers."

—*Vladimir Nabokov*

## **JOIN THE RESISTANCE**

In recent years, American public schools have fallen increasingly under the influence of powerful private for-profit educational corporations. The epidemic of testing, brought on by the No Child Left Behind law and its obsession with accountability, has drained money and resources from educational programs and handed it over to testing companies, private for-profit school corporations and their textbook affiliates. If you think this is not healthy for public education, there are many organizations you can support to stem the tide of money's influence on education. Here are just 3 important websites where you can get more information and join the fight to keep our public schools public.

### **Fairtest.org**

A nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to preventing the misuse of standardized tests. Here you can find out how your state test compares to others in the country and world.

### **susanohanian.org**

Winner of The George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language. This website is loaded with important news articles, editorials, and political cartoons regarding the No Child Behind law gleaned from both mainstream and alternative media. Susan advocates for restoring local control to public schools.

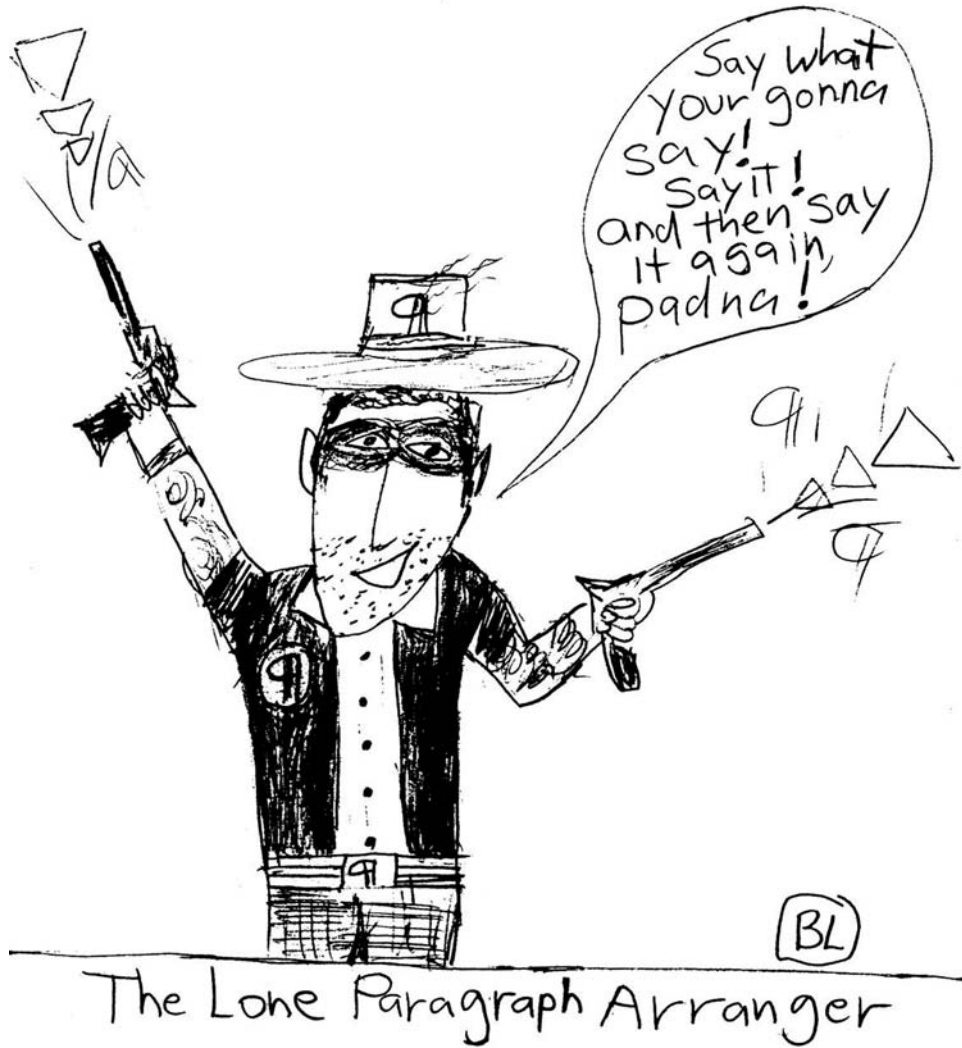
### **<http://www.educatorroundtable.org/>**

The purpose of this website is to improve education-related legislation by amplifying the informed perspectives of professional educators; local, state, and national board associations; university policy and education departments; local PTA's and other organizations committed to high quality public schools. Here you can join the 30,000 who have already signed the petition to dismantle the No Child Left Behind law.

*Note: Some of the 3 websites above have been blocked from many school districts across the country citing internet obscenity laws. This is a clear violation of the freedom of speech guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. If you find this is true in your school district, contact the American Civil Liberties Union and they can tell you what to do to restore freedom of speech to your town. How can we promote democratic ideals to our children if our educational systems do the opposite? [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)*

# LAUGHS FOR STAFF MEETINGS

(Reproducible Cartoons)











What went wrong with writing process?

## THE ASSIGNMENT GIVING CLASSROOM



## THE WRITING CLASSROOM



## A YEAR OF WRITING

Here is a quick overview of what a year in writing workshop might look like:

### **AUGUST**—Get it going

- This is the time to get the routines going. Get students doing regular writing on topics of choice.
- Encourage head scratching and pimple time.
- Create lists and lists of stuff to write about.
- Encourage exploratory writing in the notebook.
- Get Sharing rituals going.

### **SEPTEMBER**—Establish writing routines

- Establish writing time, conferring time, sharing time.
- Mini-lesson time:
  - Present genre experiments to your students including Wacky We-search.
  - Prod students with ideas of what to write about.
  - Publish at least one small piece of writing as a motivation.

### **OCTOBER**—Kick it up a notch

- Introduce genre, lessons on craft revision.
- Encourage students to set writing goals.
- Start looking in your writer's notebook for stuff to write about.

**NOVEMBER**—Celebrate and give thanks

- Thanksgiving is a great time to create a mini-literary festival.
- Sponsor a Day of Sharing.
- Students finish one piece to read at the festival.
- Invite parents or make it just a classroom event.
- This solidifies your students' sense of audience.

**DECEMBER**—Wind down

- Move your best work this term from your folder to your portfolio.
- Write a letter of reflection about your work so far and a projection of what you want to do.

**JANUARY**—A new dawn

- Here's a great time to shift gears. Ask students to look at their December reflections and decide where they want to head in the spring.
- If you want to introduce research writing, now is a good time.
- January can serve as an interlude between the fall writing workshop and the spring one.

**FEBRUARY**—Non-fiction writing workshop—test essays

- Here is a good time to play with research and essay writing.
- Most state testing is in March so here is a chance to complete some lessons on crafting a prompt response.
- Have students finish a piece of writing by the end of the month.
- This is also a good time for introducing wacky We-search.

**MARCH**—Literary festival month

- March is a tough month. In some states there is a week's vacation. In New England, it's a long battle to the end of winter. To make it worse, testing breaks up the class's rhythm.
- I suggest creating some kind of small literary celebration to offset the March Madness and the doldrums

**APRIL**—Pause for poetry

- April is National Poetry Month and a great chance to explore a new genre as a group study.
- If you are exploring non-fiction writing, suggest writing poems about subjects you have researched, as well as poetry about all subjects.
- Make April a poetry oasis.

**MAY**—Portfolio reflection

- By May students should have a wealth of material to review.
- Take the time to have your students reflect on their writing.
- Have them pull a few pieces for their portfolio and write a letter of reflection about why they are their strongest samples.
- Also have your students reflect on what they have learned.

**JUNE**—Where are you going? Where have you been?

- June is a great time to reflect on the year's achievement as a writer.
- Have students choose their favorite piece of writing and read it to the class.
- Ask them to write a year-end assessment.

## **FAKE WRITING DAY**

*(Read to students before test day)*

For reasons beyond your control you are sometimes asked to write about things you don't care about. This more often than not occurs on state tests which tell the world how well you write. If this seems dumb to you, perhaps one day when you grow up you will join a State Department of Education and set them straight. Until then you need a few tricks to survive this strange world. If you see the test day as fake writing day you won't be shocked or bored with the prompts they give you. Rather, like skilled magicians you will learn to fake out the audience by pretending to have an opinion when you don't, or reinventing totally boring writing prompts with your imagination.

### **Here are some tips for surviving Fake Writing day**

#### **1. They don't usually care if it's true or not.**

In other words, they want you to write about a new piece of playground equipment you would like to see. You don't really care about this prompt, but what if you could invent a 200 foot dragon powered turbo swing with special hyper-pumping wings installed on either side. Let your imagination go wild. The worst that can happen to you is , after you pass the test with flying colors, they may ask you to speak with the school counselor for an evaluation.

#### **2. Specific reasons and examples are the oxygen of any opinions.**

Practice making any opinion breathe by listing examples. Here are a few tough opinions to warm up with. *Why I Love Homework! The joy of little sisters and brothers. Summer should be shorter.*

#### **3. The first and the last sentence is the most important on any test.**

If you don't believe me ask your teacher to read you some average test samples. They will all begin. "In this paper I will tell you... Booooooring. Write 5 leads before you start your essay and pick the one that makes you want to write most, or better yet, leave the first page blank and go back to write your beginning after you know about the end. Look at your ending and make sure it ties up with the beginning somehow. If it doesn't add more or cut back to a place that does.



4. **Loosen up.**

If you are not having a good time your writing will sound as exciting as rain hitting a tin roof. You have to find ways to release your voice as a writer. Here are a few suggestions. Wear funny clothes on test day. Tell jokes the hour before the test. Have a party with plenty of good snacks on test day. Imagine you are not writing your test to the state department of education but to a close friend. Skip lines so you can go back and add extra thoughts. Don't be afraid to stop and stare. You don't have to write fast to succeed. You need to breathe deep and think clearly.

5. **Don't Fake it. Be Honest.**

If you don't feel like faking it try honesty. Write about why you think it's a dumb test or what you think would be a better prompt but back up your opinion with details and passion. Remember the test should be about evaluating your ability to express your ideas, not to make you write lies to get a good score. Caution: Honesty will not work on all State tests. Consult your teachers or the state department of education. You may have to be both honest and sneaky at the same time. Example: If the prompt is write about a special person in your life. You write about the person who designed the writing test and tell them what you think about this special person. This way your writing is seen as “on task” but you still get to say what you want.

*From Reviser's Toolbox, Discover Writing Press, 1998, page 148*

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