

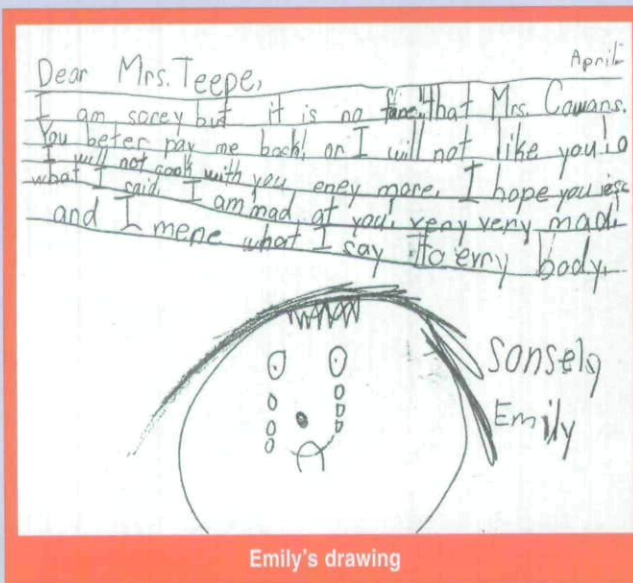
# Scribbles, Labels, and Stories

## The Role of Drawing in the Development of Writing

Marcia Baghban

The first-graders are in an uproar about a perceived injustice. This morning Mrs. Teepee, a well-intentioned teacher's aide, made carrot muffins with two first grade classes. She had enough large muffin-pan liners for only one class. The second class had to use small liners, so the muffins they baked and got to eat were smaller. At lunchtime, the children in the second class are outraged and complaining. They frown, put their hands on their hips, and kick their heels on the floor. They share their opinions with one another in loud voices. When the buzzing, stomping, and complaining do not stop, their teacher suggests that the children write to Mrs. Teepee about how they feel.

Used to their roles as daily composers, the children eagerly find paper and writing implements. They have easy access to writing materials, and their teacher provides ongoing, positive feedback. Some, like Emily, draw faces; hers shows falling tears to express sadness at having a smaller muffin to eat. Others, like Justin, express anger. He grips the crayon hard, holds his body rigid, and mutters "dead meat" over and over as he draws.



Emily's drawing

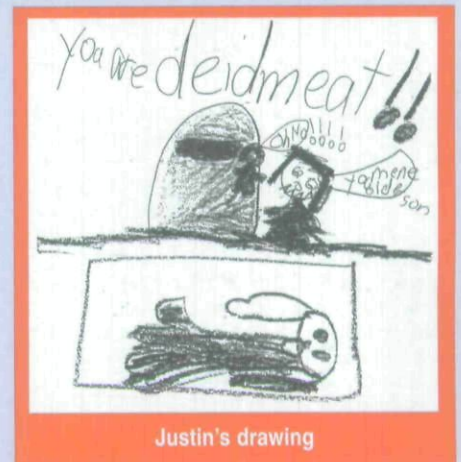
The children's words come from their own imaginations, the class word wall, picture dictionaries, and one another. When they finish, the children gather to take turns sharing their letters. They volunteer one after another, holding up their papers and talking about their work.

The other children ask questions about what they see and hear. Under the teacher's guidance, the children compare and contrast their drawings and writings with one another.

Emily explains that as she was writing she felt angry. When she had finished writing, though, she felt "more sad than mad," so she added the tears to her drawing. Justin says that he has heard "You are dead meat" on cartoon shows, and he and his brothers shout it at one another all the time. He emphasizes that when he was drawing he was really furious and wanted to say "bad words." The teacher asks him why he thinks he is not so angry now, and he answers that he always likes to talk about his drawings. After each child has a turn, the teacher collects the letters and agrees to give them to Mrs. Teepee.

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These children's experiences support Vygotsky's ([1930–35] 1978) observation that children's early drawings capitalize on narration, that is, their talk surrounds and supplements drawing events. Often, children's first texts emerge as labels, captions, and short stories that they use to clarify, complete, or accompany drawings; early on, drawing is more dominant than writing. The children's letters to Mrs. Teepee ranged from drawings with a few labels to a page of writing with no drawings. Each child depended on the process he or she could handle at the time.



Justin's drawing

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### CHILDREN DRAW PICTURES AND WRITE

to organize ideas and construct meaning from their experiences. They read their pictures and writing in order to understand their experiences (Powell & Davidson 2005). To create or to comprehend depends on an understanding of both the visual and verbal characteristics of each process. In the 1980s and 1990s, research on children's writing development flourished (Whitmore et al. 2005), but the necessary role of drawing at particular junctures in the development of writing was overlooked or underemphasized. Drawing provides people and objects that need labels, motivating children to learn the vocabulary with which to write; it also serves as a prompt for story writing when the writer is blocked or lacks sufficient writing skills. A partnership in the development of drawing and writing is clear (see Short, Kauffmann, & Kahn 2000; Sidelnick & Svoboda 2000; Powell & Davidson 2005).

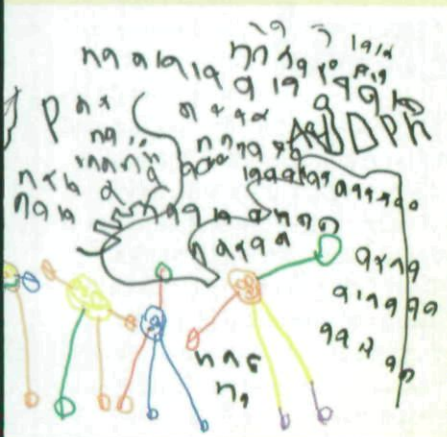
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### Scribbles

Children's earliest productions are *scribbles*, a term appropriate to both drawing and writing. Because scribbles have been found in Neolithic cave dwellings (Marshack 1972), Gibson and Levin call scribbling "a fundamental graphic act" (1975, 235). Rhoda Kellogg (1979) collected two million pieces of children's art from 30 countries. She argues that children have an innate desire to mark smooth surfaces.

When using their fine motor skills to rub a crayon on paper or to make lines in sand or across a frosted window, toddlers learn that they can leave marks on these surfaces through their actions. Toddlers are pleased with their abilities and motivated to continue exploring scribbling. When



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researchers gave paper and writing tools to children 15 months to 18 months old, the children laughed and babbled as they saw the marks they made on paper. When they received tools that did not make marks, the children stopped talking and scribbling (Gibson & Yonas 1978).

A child's comprehension of the relationship between motor activity and the use of a specific object (in this case, a writing tool) represents considerable cognitive awareness (Gardner 1980). While initially children may pay more attention to the activity of making marks, they will eventually stop and examine the product of their actions. Awareness that they can produce something is critical to children's development of a

**Awareness that they can produce something is critical to children's development of a sense of self.**

sense of self. When adults show appreciation for a child's products, they affirm both the activity and the child's personhood.

From about age one to two-and-a-half years, children go through a random scribbling stage in which scribbles are primarily a result of the pleasurable physical action of the hand pushing and pulling a crayon or other writing implement across various surfaces. Eventually, children determine appropriate surfaces for scribbling and understand that the marks are meaningful. In the next stage, controlled scribbling, children appear to have visual and physical control over where they make their marks. With more time and scribbling experience, they become aware that marks on a page can stand for objects or people, but

they are often unsure of what their own marks represent. For example, children may scribble for a time, appearing to have an intent in mind, but after looking at the scribble may ask an adult, "What did I draw?" or "What did I write?"

A fourth scribbling stage follows in which children continue to ask the names of the marks they are making and then, eventually, name the products themselves. For example, a child might say, "I made a flower." However, to an adult the scribble may not look like a flower. This naming scribbling stage is important in children's development of abstract thought because it indicates a shift from a focus on physical control to a clear understanding that the marks made on paper are symbols for real things.

While experimenting with scribbling, children between the ages of two-and-a-half and three years are beginning to separate drawing and writing (Brown 1977; Harste, Burke, & Woodward 1984).

When asked to draw a picture or write a letter, by age four most children produce the appropriate product, but it may be some time before they name their product "drawing" or "writing." However, adults can distinguish the difference in their products even though children are not drawing or writing in a standard sense (Burrows 1994).

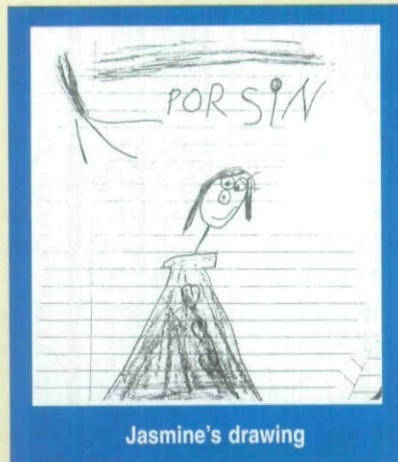


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## Labels

Once children realize that drawing and writing are distinct processes, they start to draw and write on the same page. At this stage they begin to understand that drawing and writing are related—they are both used to

**Drawing promotes the first writing, and this writing becomes the first reading material that children themselves author.**



Jasmine's drawing

communicate ideas and feelings. By age three, Baghban's daughter drew a picture of "grandma" and wrote a label for it (Baghban 1984). Grinnell and Burris (1983) note that Phillip, a child they were studying, also combined both writing and drawing on the same sheet of paper at about three-and-a-half years of age. Other researchers note that

children who have extensive experience with graphic materials such as markers, chalk, pens, paintbrushes, crayons, and so on, often include letters in their drawings and paintings (Kellogg 1979; Zepeda-de-Kane 1980).

What do children choose to draw? Children first draw people and objects meaningful to them. Initially they may not necessarily specify which house, tree, flower, or person they are drawing (Gardner 1980). Jasmine's drawing (age six) is an example of a generic person simply labeled as such. However, Baghban (1984) finds that children's first pictures of people are of themselves and family members, and Durkin (1966) and Stine (1980) affirm that children's first written words are typically the names

of familiar people (see also Millard & Marsh 2001; Haney, Bissonnette, & Behnken 2003).

Younger children tend to find it easier to draw than to write. The frequent pre-dominance of drawing in development is



Katie's drawing

important because drawing promotes the first writing, and this writing becomes the first reading material that children themselves author. Moreover, practice with labels and captions—at first with adult help—gives children the vocabulary for their written stories. Moving beyond a simple label, Katie (age 6) provides an example of a captioned picture that is actually the beginning of a story. After climbing on rocks during a hike and tumbling several times, she writes in her journal, "Dear journal, I had a tough day," and puts the experience in a scene.

## Stories

When children want to express more with their writing than labels and captions for drawings, the act of drawing itself provides a useful scaffold to story writing. Drawing helps children organize their ideas for expression in story writing in several ways.

Drawing can spark revision before a story begins. Andrea's teacher suggests that the six-year-old first draw her Halloween story so she can think about what she will write (Calkins 1986). Phillip, just past four-and-a-half years, turns an *L* around and over to make a *7*, then turns it over again to make an *E*. He then turns the *E* around to make a *W*, which he says becomes both "a window" and "the letter *window* starts with" (Grinnell & Burris 1983). Kurt (age six) draws a treasure chest under the ocean and a diver looking for a treasure chest. He adds a shark and

gives the diver a spear. As he augments and revises his story, he discovers new directions and dimensions that he will use when he writes (Palmer & Coon 1984). For all these children, their revisions in drawing help their writing.

Drawing may serve as a rehearsal for text (Temple, Nathan, & Burris 1982; Zalusky 1982). When Calkins asks five-year-old Chris what he will write, he responds, "How should I know? I haven't drawn it yet" (Calkins 1986, 50). Calkins then notes that Chris's version of rehearsal is not the same as an adult's. He begins in the present, and the drawing prompts his story. When he gets involved in the mechanics of writing and forgets his story, he studies his picture and then continues to write. After he writes, he embellishes his drawing and organizes his thoughts. Temple, Nathan, and Burris (1982) and Dyson (1982) document this movement between drawing and writing in the children they studied. Calkins calls the switching from drawing to writing "a move from the relief and stability of one medium to the challenge of another" (1986, 56).

Children may continue to confuse the terms for drawing and writing until seven years. Throne observes that Ronald (age six) expressed this confusion about the link between drawing and writing by asking, "What am I going to write a picture of?" (1988, 13). Dyson says Damon (age

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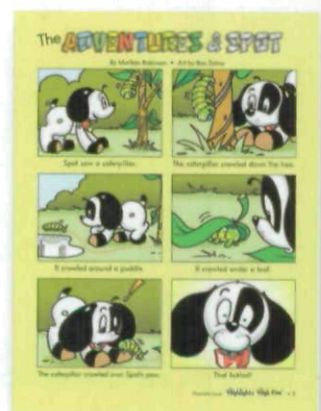
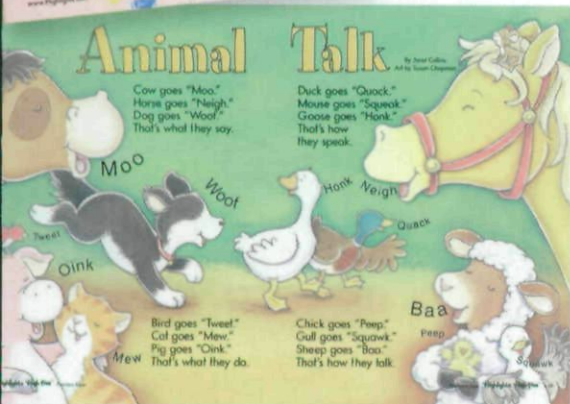
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six) explains that although his parents write, he “just write[s] houses and stuff” (1982, 373). In the 22 interviews of children in a multicultural kindergarten in a southwestern city, Dyson (1982) finds that children’s writing frequently mixes with drawing in a nonthematic way. Vygotsky ([1934] 1962) claims that for children to write, language must become an object of reflection, and he later states ([1930–35] 1978) that the close association of writing and drawing represents an important developmental transition from drawing things to “drawing” language without any graphic illustration to provide context.

For young children, print information is mixed with other communicative systems, such as mathematics, art, music, movement, and drama, as ways to think about the world (Harste, Burke, & Woodward 1984; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn 2000). With developing competence, children can make decisions about the forms they use within one field in relation to other forms already developed or to be developed (Vygotsky [1930–35] 1978). In the opening story of Mrs. Teepee and the first-graders, Emily relied more on her writing ability, adding her weeping face for emphasis, while Justin relied more on his drawing ability and simply labeled the tombstone to carry his exclamation.

Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1984) use the term *negotiation* to describe children’s free movement across communication systems. They state that negotiation may be central to an understanding of how children discover

the sign function of language itself: “Border skirmishes’ between art and writing, which arise as a result of negotiation, may in fact be a key to both our and the child’s understanding and growth in literacy” (p. 65).

**When a teacher invites children to write and some children draw, it is important that the teacher treat the drawings as writings until the children tell the teacher that they are not.**

### Precautions

The story of Emily and Justin’s classroom demonstrates strategies that can help children use drawing to scaffold early writing efforts. The children had easy access to a variety of drawing and writing materials in every classroom area. The teacher encouraged writing and drawing every day and gave supportive feedback without overpowering them. By celebrating the children’s artistry and authorship and allowing them time to talk about their pieces, the teacher demon-

strated that she valued their work. She also pointed out the art and print in their environment and read picture books to them every day because such books clearly show not only that most stories have a beginning, middle, and end, but also that both pictures and words can tell stories.

Until about age seven, young children may perceive the difference between drawing and writing but still draw when asked to write and speak in ambiguous ways about whether their drawing is writing or whether *any* product is writing. Thus, when a teacher invites children to write and some children draw, it is important that the teacher treat the drawings as writings until the children tell the teacher that they are not. Likewise, when a teacher invites children to draw, the children’s products should be treated as drawings until the children say otherwise, even if the products have more text than picture.

For both teachers and parents, looking to see what children are doing and listening to hear what children *say* they are doing, while giving neutral feedback such as “That’s interesting” or “Tell me more about this part,” provide the best opportunities for children themselves to figure out the processes.

### Conclusion

Open-ended opportunities to write and draw in relaxed contexts, without adults stating “the right way” to do either, enable children not only to sort pictures from print but also to gain expertise in each context. By achieving such expertise, children understand that the freedom they find in drawing provides a flexible bridge to the control they need to continue developing their writing abilities.



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## Some Stages of Writing Development

Drawing/Writing Stage	Approximate Age Range*	Likely Actions
Observation of writing and drawing by others	3 mos.–1 year	Develops the idea that writing tools can mark surfaces.
Random scribbling	1–2 ½ years	Uses writing tools to mark paper, self, shoes, walls, windows.
Localized scribbling	18 mos.–3 years	Distinguishes the appropriate surfaces for making marks. Makes no pattern when scribbling on paper; understands that people make marks meaningfully.
Controlled scribbling	18 mos.–3 years	Scribbles in controlled patterns, most often large congested circles or small separate circles.
Named scribbling	3–4 years	Asks “What did I write?” “What did I draw?” and starts to name products.
Drawing and writing understood as separate processes	3–4 years	Can produce a specific letter or object on request.
Production of own name	4–6 years	Writes a version of his or her name. From this, begins to understand the alphabet.
Linear expansions	4–6 years	Makes wavy lines in either direction to fill in forms, writes grocery lists, tells stories; begins to include letters with the lines.
Labeling or captioning drawings	4–6 years	Writes and draws on the same page.
Prephonetic spelling	4–6 years	Writes with no correspondence to sounds; includes letters and numbers equally.
Phonetic spelling	4–7 years	Writes according to how words sound; uses sounding out to choose consonants, occasionally attempts vowels.
Drawing as inspiration or help for longer stories	6–7 years	Writes, stops to draw on separate paper, returns to the story.
Writing long stories	8 years on	Writes stories, rarely illustrated, with more conventional spellings; becomes a visual speller through reading.

\*These age ranges are general guidelines only. Stages may overlap and a child may enter a stage earlier or later than others based on factors such as individual variation, time spent with a proficient language user, contact with books and reading interactions that provide examples of print and pictures, and availability of other reading and writing materials.

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## Characteristics of Emergent Writers

The following list is adapted from *Dancing with the Pen: The Learner as a Writer* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1992) and describes some of the characteristics of emergent writers. . . . It would not be appropriate to expect all students to exhibit all of these characteristics. While some prekindergarten or kindergarten students might not yet exhibit all of the characteristics listed, others may be ready to go beyond them.

### Attitudes toward writing

- Is eager to play at writing
- Has confidence that personal experience is expressed with meaning in own writing
- Is encouraged by own success to write again
- Expects writing to be enjoyable
- Finds writing rewarding
- Expects own writing to belong to self

### Understandings about writing

- Print holds meaning
- Stories can be written down
- Speech can be written down
- Writing can be read over and over again
- Begins to understand that thoughts can be written down
- Is responsible for own topics and learning

From D.M. Matteson & D.K. Freeman, *Assessing and Teaching Beginning Writers: Every Picture Tells a Story*. As adapted from *Dancing with the Pen* and reproduced by permission of the publisher, Learning Media Limited, Wellington, New Zealand. Copyright © Crown, 1992. Available from NAEYC.

- Is developing an understanding of how books and stories work
- Is learning to write by watching the teacher's models and from own knowledge of familiar texts
- Expects the teacher to help in developing text
- Begins to realize that words are always spelled the same

### Behaviors as writers

- Orients a page to start writing
- Develops some knowledge of directionality, spaces between words, upper and lower case letters
- Uses own experiences for writing
- Is beginning to locate references, such as students' names
- Centers topics largely in own world
- Draws pictures and scribbles to generate and express ideas
- Explains orally about own pictures
- Is able to make corrections when text is read back by the teacher
- Asks questions about others' stories
- Adds on to own story
- Experiments with letter shapes to arrive at consistency of letter form
- Uses pictures as a basis for writing
- Is prepared to attempt the spelling of unknown words by taking risks
- Shows some knowledge of alphabet through production of letter forms to represent message; develops sound-letter relationships

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