About Writing: A Letter to Stacie

Writing as a grandmother to her granddaughter, the author reflects on her wishes for the kind of writing classrooms she hopes her granddaughter will experience when she goes to school.

Janice Hartwick Dressel

Dear Stacie,

I know you won't read this letter for many years yet, but when you do, I want you to know I was thinking about you today. This week you'll celebrate eighteen months in our family and you've already been "reading" for over a year. You have an extraordinary love for books. With a house full of toys to play with, you'll often retrieve a book from a large pile of board books. It's never just any book and it's not always the same one, but it's clearly the one you want to read "right now." Then you'll crawl back to me, hand it to me, and plant yourself next to me or on my lap with an expectant attitude that says, "Read with me." Then, two weeks ago, I saw you using a pencil. Your Dad was sitting at the kitchen table making notes for himself when a neighbor came in and engaged him in conversation. While they were talking, you crawled into his lap, listened to the conversation for a bit, then took the pencil and began to write. I realized that you not only see yourself as a reader, but you already see yourself as a writer.

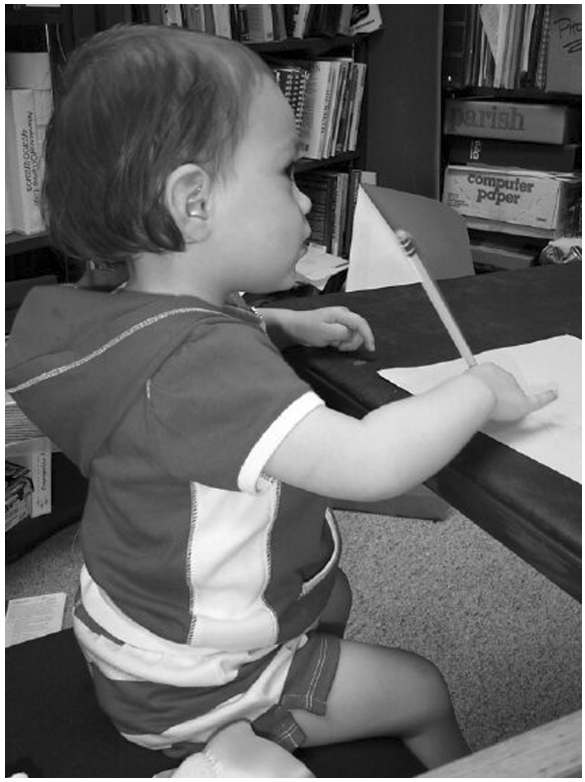
When I read that *Language Arts* wanted articles about writing, I began to think about my hopes and fears for you. I reflected on what you already know about writing and wondered what kinds of experiences you'll have in school. Will you find a caring, listening community in your classrooms? Will you have teachers and peers who recognize and acknowledge your ideas—even help you discover reasons to write what you find important? Will your teachers provide you with the time you need to prepare pieces worthy of your readers? Will they provide you with the resources and the instruction to help you achieve your purposes?

You already have the solid foundation a writer needs. You live in an atmosphere that promotes learning of all kinds. You live in a close-knit community. All of us love you unconditionally. And you know we love you. We support you in everything you do. Even when we have to suggest alternatives, we explain why, we ask for your input, and we try to find solutions that will meet your needs yet keep you safe. None of us offer you false praise. You don't need praise; you need

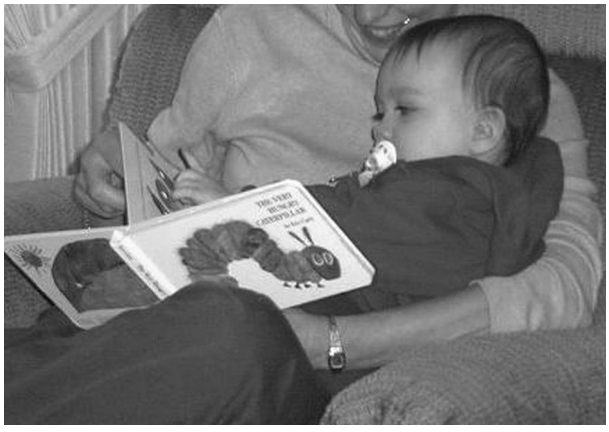
response. Living in this environment has led you to be confident, considerate, full of ideas, full of energy, and able to compromise. So, what do I wish for you during your school years?

I want you to be able to think for yourself. Many employers and politicians argue that businesses and government need workers who can read and write, but what they really seem to demand are writers whose writing is technically correct. They are critical of schools and teachers because they insist that education isn't meeting that need. No one will argue that our society needs readers who can comprehend and writers who can communicate effectively. But, it concerns me when reading and writing are perceived *only* in terms of preparing people for the workforce. Today, many people are more concerned about spelling and punctuation than with meaning. We need that, but we also need authors who can make us laugh and cry, authors who can challenge us to think critically about important issues. And, I think, we need citizens who can read and write poetry and citizens who are willing to challenge the status quo. I want you to be one of them.

I want you to have time to pursue things that are important to you—purposeful things—that have meaning for you. We provide time for you to pursue your interests even when we aren't sure why you are doing



what you're doing. I want you to have teachers who design classrooms in which you never run out of exciting things to do. Right now, I can't imagine you ever running out of ideas to write about. You certainly never run out of things to talk about—but then, you always have a real reason for doing what you do. I hope that your classrooms are filled with activities that stimulate you to be intensely interested in what you are doing and teachers who lead you to write about those interests. I'm not sure yet what reasons will be important for you, but there will be many.



Do you know that over a third of all fourth graders in the United States spend more than three hours a day watching television? So far, you don't watch much television. Sometimes you and Daddy watch cooking shows together while you drink your bottle.

Once in a while you watch *Dora the Explorer,* and your eyes alight with fascination. But most of your time is spent reading together with us, working with your toys, and talking to those around you. I don't think that's going to change much as you grow up. But I do think you are likely to use your computer and the Internet much more than school children ever have in the past. In fact, I'm pretty sure of that because several years ago I read that people in the United States spend twice as much time online and 25 times as much time with electronic media as they do reading books. One teacher, Mr. Baines, used his students' fascination with electronic media to help them improve all aspects of their writing—rhythm, syntax, vocabularies, and style. First, he had them write and design PowerPoint presentations that incorporated concrete images, both visual and auditory. When they were finished, students shared their presentations with their peers. Then, as a final step, the kids used the sensory images in their PowerPoint programs to help them revise their writing so that people who couldn't see the presentations would be able to "see" and "hear" the meaning from the words alone. How exciting that whole experience must have been for those students. While I want you to have benefits of reading, I also want you to have teachers who delight in what's new and who find ways to help you use what's new to improve your writing.

I want you to have knowledgeable people to talk to and to work with. Now, we read to you—or maybe it

would be better described as you reading to us. You choose the time, you choose the books, you choose the page, you point to the pictures, and we respond. Today you pointed to a cat, and I told you it was a cat, but a little cat so maybe it would be better to call it a kitty. On subsequent pages, you pointed to the cat and I repeated my explanation, each time in a little different way. Soon, when you pointed at the cat, you tentatively said, "Meow?" "Yes, indeed," I replied, and we continued to read, with you providing a "meow" for every cat and kitten that appeared. Sometimes, though, you insist that I take the lead. Yesterday, you were making marks with your crayons, but you wanted input. Just as I had seen you do earlier with your Dad, you handed me each new crayon and watched to see what I would do. Your Dad had drawn you pictures; I wrote you some words. I couldn't help but wonder what parts of our "minilessons" you found most helpful for achieving your goals and what parts you were saving up for later! A Russian researcher named Vygotsky wrote that whatever a child can do with an adult today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow. He called this time of cooperation, when teaching is most effective, the zone of proximal development. Seems to me you are always in this zone–I just need to recognize how to be there, too!

I want you to be part of communities where listening and respect are present. Right now, all of us talk with you. Not *to* you, with you. You expect us to reply to your jabbering, and we do even though we can't understand your words yet. You take turns, you tell us about exciting news, you ask questions, you engage in monologues and in dialogue. We answer you; we care about your opinions. If we don't understand you, we ask questions to be sure we've understood what you mean; we offer alternatives for you to think about. And, you in turn treat us that way. Your teachers will probably call this conferring, but conferring means just what I've been talking about. I want your teachers to respect you and your peers as capable, sensitive, and caring people. I want them to offer devoted attention to each of you, not just to those of you who write well. I want your teachers to model this respect for you in their daily actions so you never forget the value of any person. And I want your teachers to demand no less of you and of every student in your classroom.

Stacie, I have a dream for you—a dream that one day, you'll be able to go to school with children from different backgrounds and different abilities and that all of you will learn to write effectively, that you'll learn from each other to be competent in a variety of voices and dialects, that educational privileges and opportunities will be available to all of you. I have a dream that your schools won't be labeled good or bad, proficient or deficient, rich or poor, underperforming or excelling, but that teachers will be encouraged and supported to teach all of you to write better than you ever dreamed. I'm afraid for you, though. It scares me to death to think that pretty soon you'll have to take a test and somebody will decide how good a writer you are by looking at the scores from one piece of writing, written on one particular day, about an assigned topic, for an audience of unknown adults, with no input from anyone else. I'm afraid that your school—and others—will be labeled by the scores on those tests. And I'm afraid that you and your mom and dad will have to choose between a school like the one I want for you and one that is segregated by privilege, advantage, and money.

Instead of having teachers who spend your class time preparing you to take a test or teachers who focus primarily on skills and conventions, I want you to have teachers who help you recognize the incredible significance of the everyday happenings in your life. I want them to help you see those things and encourage you to write about them. Of course, only some of that writing will be really, really good, but I hope your teachers will never see individual pieces of writing as successes or failures. If they do, you may lose your ability to take risks, because taking risks and trying new

things isn't possible when each piece of writing is seen as an end product. I've already started keeping a collection of your writing. Maybe you'll be fortunate enough to have teachers who use portfolios, too. When you look over all the pieces you have written, you will be able to see how you developed over time, and by looking at writing you've already done, you'll find things you want to learn or to work on.

I want you always to be able to entertain alternatives. Using language effectively requires the ability to be tentative. Effective readers and writers don't insist on having exact or immediate answers to every question. Remember when I talked earlier about how you learned that both cats and kittens say, "meow"? You did learn that both cats and kittens say "meow," but you also learned that sometimes we call that animal a cat and sometimes we call it a kitten, and we aren't always very consistent. Somehow you were able to entertain both of those options without becoming confused or upset. I want you to delight in finding other ways to look at the world, to delight in words like "perhaps" and "maybe."

I hope, too, that you will have all the tools you need to write well and people to teach you how to use them. You will need pencils and pens and papers of all kinds. Like me, you will need things like scissors and tape so you can change things around without having to rewrite everything. And you'll need computers with appropriate programs to help you write without unnecessary effort. (I remember how your Dad hated to "copy over"!) Most of all, you'll need books to use as models and people to show you how to use them. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Authors before you have done marvelous things and you can learn from them. If, as I hope, you write in kindergarten and first grade, it is likely that you'll begin by writing stories about your own experiences. Many authors have written books from their experiences, and my hope is that your teachers will show you patterns you can use.

But, I want your teachers to help you write more than stories. Long before they went to kindergarten, your Dad and your aunt were able to argue effectively, to analyze and to use comparisons, contrast, metaphors, and concrete details when they wanted to convince me they should be able to do something or go somewhere that was important to them. When they began to write, they were able to draw on all these aspects of thinking in their writing and you will, too, because we already use them in our conversations with you. I want your teachers to build on what we are teaching you at home. I want them to teach you to use all of these, and more, to design a thoughtful biography, to craft a free verse poem, to put together a piece of creative nonfiction. Then, I want your teachers to help you use those forms to write about things you care about—maybe a poem about Juan and his brother struggling in school because they have to speak only English. Or maybe a piece of creative nonfiction for the school newspaper, comparing and contrasting how hard it is for them to learn in English with how effectively they could learn through Spanish, while learning English at the same time. That is something you will care about because Juan and Stevie are your friends. And if you care about what you are writing, you'll learn how to write using your chosen form effectively.

I hope you will always have what writers call an audience. We are your audience now. We listen to you. We care what you have to say. And you, in turn, value our input. We are always asking questions as

though, so that readers will be captured by your ideas, not offended by surface things you can learn to correct. I'm assuming, of course, that you'll only need to correct the final copy of the pieces you publish, and you'll only publish pieces that are important.

you work at things, trying to understand what you mean, what you want—and helping you see why we understand or sharing why we don't. I want you to have real audiences in school, too, because if you do, long before you choose any piece to publish, you will already know that *anything* you publish needs to be polished. Since you need to draft many more pieces than you will publish, I'd tell your teachers to think carefully about *why* they are meeting with you *before* they confer with you. I hope they will spend most of their time helping you learn to make important decisions about your pieces. Time is illusive and hard to find. But perceptive teachers find time tucked away, hiding in corners. Sometimes they will be able to help you quickly identify where you are stuck and send you off to talk with appropriate peers instead of spending their time with you. Sometimes, rather than meeting with you individually, they might choose to meet with small groups to talk about things like leads or dialogue or to brainstorm different formats. Only after you have done the very *best* you can and only after you've asked for the help of your friends, *only then* should you expect your teacher to help you correct things like spelling and punctuation. Those final touches are vital,

I've been teaching a long time, so I know that all classrooms won't function as effectively as I hope, but I am experienced enough to know that children will live up to teachers' expectations of them, even though sometimes it takes weeks, months, or years. Like you, most children can learn to talk about writing effectively, especially if teachers are willing to be effective models and to spend the time necessary to coach them until they succeed. I hope your teachers have high expectations; I hope your teachers are effective models; I hope your teachers are persistent in insisting that children help themselves and each other. But, most of all, I hope your teachers let you write for real reasons and real audiences. That way, you'll also have to live with real consequences. When you have to live with those, a lot of other things fall into place.

I want someone to help you realize that writing about the things you care about can help you make a difference in the world. Real reasons for writing. That's what it's all about. Because being committed to what they are writing about is what keeps writers going. It's like this letter—this letter is important to me. It's so important to me that I keep at it day after day after day. I hope your teachers don't bow to the demands of pressure groups—even parents who, understandably, become frightened—to protect your school from losing funding. I hope they aren't compelled to sacrifice what they know about best practice to teach all children to "color within the lines." I want writing to be a dynamic, living, breathing process of discovery for you, not just a linear series of rote steps through which you have to march. I want you to have assignments that permit you to use writing for reasons that are important to you, writing that will make a difference in your world. Maybe that means finding a pattern in a book you like and using it as a model to write me a story. Maybe it means sending Grandpa a letter with a riddle he can't solve. Maybe it means, someday, writing the State of the Union address. And maybe it means, sooner or later, writing a love poem to someone you don't even know yet.

So, those are my wishes for you, Stacie—that you always see yourself as a writer, that you have teachers who are willing and able to nurture your love for writing and help you do it well, and that you are able to use your writing to make a difference in your world.

All my love,

Grandma

Grandma

Author Biography

Janice Hartwick Dressel *is professor of English Education and Children's Literature in the Department of English Language and Literature at Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan. She is also the Grandma of Stacie and Stacie's new sister, Angie.*