

CHAPTER 1: The Target Skill

If children write often, they will gain mechanical fluency, and that is a significant primary-grade goal. But writing every day does not necessarily engender composing fluency, facility with *real writing skills* like organizing, composing, elaborating, and using conventions. For students to achieve composing fluency, they must learn and practice the content of writing—the body of knowledge that defines the craft.

That body of knowledge consists of specific techniques from three general categories:

- organization (example: clumping related facts in an informational piece)
- composing and literary devices (example: using strong verbs and comparisons)
- writing conventions (example: starting a sentence with a capital letter)

I call these techniques and conventions **Target Skills**. They are the skills you must teach in daily writing workshop to ensure advances in the quality of your students' writing. You do this through modeling and direct instruction.

Kindergarten students can be introduced to writing craft as soon as they enter school. They are able to *talk* the Target Skill even though they may not be able to put it in writing. For example, you can show them the difference between strong-verb writing and static writing, *The boy is climbing a tree* versus *There is a boy*. They can talk about their drawings or photographs by telling what is *happening* rather than telling *what is*.

In **grades two through four**, Target Skills are introduced, practiced, and assessed over the course of several weeks. You should present the skills as they relate to the specific genre your students may do during a two- to three-week period. Over a school year, you would revisit some skills several times as the writing form (connected to thematic units, projects, and literature study) changes.

For example, in a second-grade class, you might introduce *using comparisons* as a Target Skill during the first weeks of school when you are focusing on descriptive writing to develop some fluency while you establish writing workshop procedures. You might then revisit *using comparisons* as a Target Skill for a science informational piece later in the year.

The Picture-Prompted Writing Model

A picture-prompted writing model is a handy way to introduce the Target Skill concept in all grades. In the model you use a photograph or a Shared Reading Text cover to trigger discussion and subsequent writing. Visual perception is a dominant learning mode in humans and is becoming even more so in the age of TV and computer icons and symbols. Photographs help students who might be inclined to say, “I don’t know what to write about.”

A photograph is a concrete aid: Children can hold it, feel it, and talk about it. Show them how to choose pictures that match their personal experiences and interests.

Modeling the Picture-Prompted Target Skill Process for the First Time (grades K–4)

The process you will model consists of selecting a picture, talking about it, and writing about it. The process takes two blocks of time: one for the selection and talking and one for the writing. Early-stage emergent writers can do this all orally, as a whole-class sharing activity and again with partners.

For your model, you will need a large collection of colorful pictures. The collection should include children engaged in play, work, sports, eating, etc.; insects, birds, reptiles, mammals, fish, etc.; rural and urban scenes; and so on. Ask parents, friends, neighbors, and relatives to collect color pictures for your class. *National Geographic* magazines are a wonderful source, and you can often find them at garage sales or used bookstores. Laminate the pictures or place them in plastic covers.

Commercial photo cards are also an excellent resource for picture-prompted writing. They are laminated and students can write on them with washable pens. Children often use the discussion questions and other text on the back to help spell words associated with the picture.

- Emergent writers might use the starting letters of words to label things they see in the photos. They can tell what is happening rather than saying what things are. They can talk about where things are as they study the concepts of up/down, over/under, near/far, in/out, etc.
- ESOL students might work with English-speaking students and write the names of things they identify directly on the cards.

The modeling process for picture-prompted Target Skill writing has four steps. In kindergarten and first grade the sequence may take several days. In second, third, and fourth grades, you might do steps 1, 2, and 4 on one day and steps 2, 3, and 4 on a subsequent day.

Step 1: Model Picture Selection

Gather your class at the easel or meeting place. Display an assortment of pictures. Tell the children you are going to select a picture to talk and write about. Think aloud as you make your selection. *Maybe I will write about this picture. It looks just like my dog: same color, same floppy ears.* Or *I could do this one: I love fire engines. There is a firehouse on the way to school and I always slow down to see the engines.* Or *This picture makes me feel happy. It reminds me of my brother, and how we often go fishing together in a rowboat.*

Place groups of pictures on tables around the room and invite the children to browse, just as if they were in a library looking for a book. Invite them to select a picture. Suggest that they look for a picture about **something they know**, or **something they can do**, or a **place where they might have been**—a topic related to their

personal background and experience. If two students want the same picture, settle the issue quickly with a coin toss.

Gather your young writers again and give them five minutes to talk about their pictures in partnerships or small groups.

Laminated Picture Collection

Write several key words, nouns and verbs that relate to the pictures on the back of the mounted pictures before you laminate them. Young writers can then use the words for spelling help when they write about them.

When you introduce your students to the cards tell them the words on the back are *content words*. Your class editing standards in grade two and above should require that young writers be responsible for the correct spelling of content words when they write on a topic.



Back of card

rowboat
lifting
shore
rock
pebbles

Step 2: Model Talking About the Picture to Introduce the Target Skill

A. Kindergarten and First-Grade Model

Gather your students to the meeting place. Have them sit in a circle facing you. Ask them to sit on their pictures. Place your photo on the easel. Tell them, “We are going to talk about our pictures and later we are going to write about them.”

Show your students the difference between “Dinky Writing” and “Good Writing.” (*Dinky* is akin to *Stinky* and the children are amused by that; subsequently, they remember it.) Illustrate “Dinky Writing” by talking about your picture, saying such things as: *There is a boy. It is sunny. There is a wagon.* Tell the children to give a *thumbs-down* for “Dinky Writing.” Illustrate *thumbs-down*. (The signal is silent but it employs movement.)

Tell them that readers like to learn about what is going on. Now talk about the photo, saying such things as: *The boy is pulling a wagon. The sun is shining down on his head. The boy in the back of the wagon is pushing.* Ask your students to give a *thumbs-up* for good writing. (The emphasis is on verbs.)

Invite each child, in turn, to tell **what is happening** in his or her picture. Help students along by modeling again between some of their responses. Have listeners give *thumbs-up* for good writing (even though it is only good *talking* at this stage).

Send children back to their tables or desks and invite them to write about their pictures as you continue writing workshop. Praise and encourage. Remind them to tell **what is happening** but do not say anything if they do not. Note the children who try to tell what is happening, orally or in drawing/written form. Conduct a sharing session either through Author’s Chair or by having every young writer “read” his or her work to another young writer before putting it away.

Shared Writing

In the following day’s writing workshop, gather your students to the meeting place. Place a piece of chart paper on the easel or use a whiteboard and markers. Display a Shared Reading Text cover or a large picture. Draw a little bull’s-eye target in the right-hand corner of the paper or board. Tell your young writers, “That target reminds us to tell our readers **what is happening** when we write about our picture.”

Now, ask your students to compose a description of a picture using the Target Skill. Write the sentences offered by students. (Devise a record-keeping system that ensures every student gets a turn at supplying sentences in your shared writing sessions. You might consider a rotating system wherein selected students get to contribute each day.) I add children’s initials in the margin opposite the contributions they make to a class piece. Later they point out their contributions to each other. “Look, that’s what I said.”

Again, in the continuation of the writing workshop, invite students to write about their pictures using the Target Skill, *what is happening*, and to share their work with another writer. Praise and encourage. The resulting independent writing will run the gamut of drawings, scribbles, random letters, single consonant strings, letter strings with a letter-to-word correspondence, decipherable writing of transitional spelling—that is, the typical range of emergent to developing writing that a class of primary students demonstrates.

B. Mid-First Grade through Fourth Grade

When all students have selected a picture, ask them to place their pictures on their desks and come to the meeting place. On the class easel, place or draw a picture of an archery target labeled **TARGET** with an arrow drawn in the bull’s-eye.

Ask a child who you know is articulate to be your partner. Tell the children that you and your partner are going to model a “knee-to-knee” writer’s conference about the pictures.

Teacher: Writers try very hard to help you, their reader, see what they see, know what they know. They make sure they tell what the people or animals are doing, what is happening, what colors, numbers, shapes, and sizes you would want to know about. Today, I would like you to tell what is happening in your picture when you describe your picture to your partner. That will be what you **aim** for when you talk and write about your picture. That will be your **TARGET**. Point to the target picture. Watch Jennifer and me as we try to hit the **TARGET**.

(Sit across from Jennifer, knee-to-knee, and begin.)

Teacher: The target is to tell what is happening in the picture. I will try to do that. Jennifer, I picked this picture because I love dogs. I have one just like this. The two children are pulling on the dog’s collar, trying to slow him down. He’s so big, he is pulling

them. He's tan, like the color of a football. (Pause.) Did I hit the target? What did you hear me say was happening?

Jennifer: I heard you say the dog is *pulling* the kids.

Another student: And you said the kids are *pulling* on the collar.

Teacher: Good job hearing if I hit the target. Now it is Jennifer's turn.

Jennifer: My picture is a little girl *pushing* her sister in a swing. Did I hit the target?

Teacher: Yes, you did. And, you can tell anything else you like about your picture.

Jennifer: She looks like she likes it.

Teacher: How did you know that?

Jennifer: She is *smiling*.

Teacher: Thank you for conferencing with me. Boys and girls, you are all going to conference with your partners now. Will you try to hit the **TARGET**, telling *what is happening* in the picture? Remember, you can say anything about picture, but do try to tell your partner what is happening in the picture. Aim for the target.

Write: *What is happening?* next to the target on the easel or board.

Begin student knee-to-knee prewriting conferences. You may gather some young writers who you know cannot do peer conferencing on their own to work with you in a group. Encourage them to tell the group what is happening in their pictures. Invite the members of the group to give a silent, thumbs-up signal when they think they hear the writer hit the target—when they hear *what is happening* in the picture. Model your picture description again, using a different verb phrase than you did in your first model.

Sharing

When the children have finished conferencing (five minutes is usually sufficient), use the sharing technique of asking young writers to compliment their partners: *Who heard their partners hit the target? Please tell us your partners' names and what they said was happening?* Listen to several children's examples. Sharing in this fashion is critical for the development of your classroom writing community.

- Young writers will have to pay close attention as their partners read—this fosters listening skills.

- Young writers will be broadcasting examples of their partners' good ideas—this contributes to the pool of writing knowledge.
- Two students are rewarded at the same time; the writer and the listener—this uses time efficiently.
- Peers will be giving compliments for achievement—this builds respect and a sense of community.
- You will not be the sole source of compliments—this fosters independence.

Step 3: Model Writing to the Target Skill

At the start of the next day's writing workshop gather your students to the easel where you have placed your picture and paper. Draw a little archery target in the upper right-hand corner. Tell your young writers, "This stands for the **Target Skill**. Who remembers yesterday's target? That's right, it was: ***What is happening?***" Write an H under the target. Say, "H stands for happening."

Under your picture, write a sentence that tells what is happening. *The kids are fishing.* Add more related information to model elaboration. *The kids are fishing. They have already caught three fish. They brought a big bucket with them. I think they will put the fish in it.*

Read the text back as you write. End with a conspicuous period and make a clucking sound with your tongue. If someone asks why you did that, tell the class you do that to remember to put a period. Have children read the paragraph with you and ask them if you hit the target.

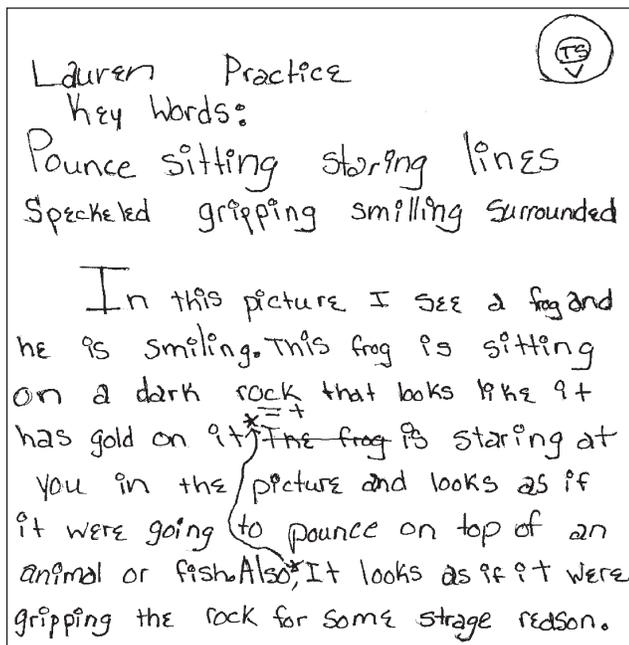
Kindergarten Modeled Writing

In kindergarten, some of your modeled writing will be adult writing. Other times, be sure to model for each level of your emergent writers: writing with strings of random letters, strings of the letters of your name, starting consonants with a letter-to-word correspondence and finger spaces, starting and end consonants with a word correspondence, using transitional spelling with dashes for the unidentified missing letters. Seeing these models empowers children to write, even though they cannot do it in an adult fashion. If all your modeling is in adult writing, children will say, "I can't do that," and they will give up.

Step 4: Students Try It Out

Begin the writing component of your workshop by telling your young writers to write anything they want about their picture, but to aim for the target—“Remember what you told your partner about the picture yesterday.” Some children will ask if they can have a knee-to-knee conference to talk about the picture again. Good idea. Some children will ask if they should draw a target and put an H in the corner of the paper. Those who ask should do it. When other writers see that, many of them will copy the idea.

Close the writing workshop with an Author’s Chair or peer sharing before students put their writing away.



Grade 4 Target Skill Writing.

Model the Picture-Prompted Writing Process Again and Again

As with all your models, you should repeat this one from time to time, focusing on a different Target Skill each time. Always do each exercise both orally and in writing. Start with a simple descriptive skill and move on to include the skills detailed in the rest of this book—the writing-craft techniques utilized by writers of creative nonfiction.

Display the current week’s Target Skill(s) on a bulletin board reserved for writing, in a reserved space on your blackboard/whiteboard, and in writing centers.

Teachers who set up centers for independent work introduce a Target Skill on Monday and establish it as the target the children will use during the week in a writing center. They post Target Skills in the center. Even as early as the first and second grade, students often remember Target Skills from previous weeks and carry them forward to their new writing.