



For Parents

Before any of my stories are published, I have editors who help me through a pyramid of revisions — one for story, one for line edits of my writing, and another for the appearance of writing, the spelling, punctuation and grammar.

These are three separate skills. After all, a story is a sequence of events, writing is a sequence of words, and words are a sequence of letters of the alphabet.

I've found that when young writers understand this, they take joy in their stories, are opening to fixing mistakes in writing, and are far less frustrated and discourage with spelling.

That's why the curriculum is broken into three sections, and each lesson has a specific teaching point to encourage, motivate and inspire our young writers.

If you watch the videos along with your young writer/s, you might enjoy discussing these points with them, outlined on the following pages.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Ben", with a stylized flourish above the name.

Section One

Before you write — how to daydream and structure a great story

Video 1

When you remember your favorite teachers, it's nearly certain it's how they made you feel good about yourself, not the exact points of what they taught you, that you remember. And, sadly, when you remember your least favorite teachers, you also recall the way they made you feel, but in a negative way.

In short, humans connect through the heart, which is how and why songs and stories impact us. And while we connect by telling stories, much more important is that we connect by listening to stories. Throughout the school year, you'll discover that you can strengthen your bonds with your story ninjas by giving each one your full attention when possible. So if the first reaction you show to a story ninja's piece of writing is a positive emotional response to the story itself, your story ninja will love delivering more stories to you. The title of a New York Times nonfiction bestseller says it so well: *Listening Is an Act of Love*.

Video 2

Having a clear grasp of your audience is important in all social interactions. If as a parent, you take time to share stories about where you've made mistakes, it's a nonthreatening way to deliver a lesson to your child without direct criticism, while still emphasizing your expectations of their behavior and the stories they tell.

Video 3

This is an approach to story writing your story ninjas may not have considered: choose the emotion first and then find a story to deliver that emotion. (It also emphasizes that we should always be concerned about how we make other people feel.)

Here's a chance, too, to share serious and important advice on safe Internet research in a fun way that can make your story ninjas giggle and groan at the same time.

Video 4

Daydreaming is a crucial part of the creative process, but, like any power, it needs to be used properly.

Video 5

As readers, we need context to understand a story. This, of course, is supplied as soon as we can picture the “who,” “what,” “where” and “when” at the beginning of every story or chapter.

As writers, the simple process of putting the “who,” “what,” “where” and “when” on paper makes it easier to picture it. That frees us up to daydream the important part of the story: what happens next.

Giving your story ninjas a chance to verbally share their ideas about the restaurant scene helps them create story without worrying yet about delivering the story to paper through writing.

Video 6

While we need the “who,” “what,” “when” and “where” for context, without a problem we don’t have a story. It’s that simple. Unfolding problems are stories, and stories are unfolding problems.

Also, because we generally have an emotional reaction to hearing about a problem, this strengthens our connection to the characters in the story.

Video 7

Story has an easily identified form. The beginning introduces a problem. The middle is where the problem gets worse. The story ends when the problem is solved.

I use this form to encourage reluctant writers to add to their stories. I simply ask them if they can make the problem worse, and they usually can. It’s also important to note that as we see a person in a story overcome obstacles, we learn about that person’s character, just like in real life. The other great value of stories is that when we see how someone else solves a problem, we can learn from it—just as we can learn from the mistakes we see when someone incorrectly tries to solve a problem.

Section Two

The best delivery system for your story — the amazing alphabet

Video 8

Sometimes all we need is a different perspective on something to realize how amazing it is. Rain, for example, is liquid sunshine. Really. Sunshine evaporates water and lifts it above us in the form of those cumulus clouds. Is perspective important? I liked how the Google answer translated the 1.1-million-pound weight of a single cloud into the equivalent of 100 elephants. The alphabet? It's an incredible super code!

Video 9

Showing so many delivery methods all pointing to one goal—the delivery of content—demonstrates that the delivery system and what it delivers are two different things. It also emphasizes the importance of purposeful writing to deliver good content. (In general, making story the primary focus for writing at every opportunity in the classroom keeps the story ninjas motivated to put words on paper.)

Video 10

Any excitement that we as adults show about how cool verbs are will make a great impression on our story ninjas.

Video 11

If motivation is a huge key to getting story ninjas to put words on paper, then having them understand the power of adjectives to mess with the reader should make it more fun for them. The more emotional your reaction is to their adjectives when you read their writing—giggle, groan, wince—the more adjectives they'll give you. I don't think it can be said too often: humans connect through the heart, and you remember your favorite teachers because of how they made you feel good about yourself.

Video 12

When kids learn to skate, they accept that they'll fall down. If they were afraid of being criticized for falling down, they'd probably not want to go on the

ice. So fear of mistakes tends to make them reluctant to write. A big motivator to get them to put words on paper, then, is to take away that fear.

Video 13

As adults, we recognize that mistakes young students make in their writing are natural, because they have so little experience with the writing process. Too often, however, when the mistakes get marked up by a teacher or parent, it leads students to believe they aren't good at writing. Showing them our own mistakes as adults should help give them confidence and let them be more at ease with the first draft. The earlier they understand that mistakes in the first draft are part of the writing process, the better!

Video 14

The less blame story ninjas put on themselves for spelling mistakes, the better! We need to emphasize, of course, the importance of spelling the dictionary way when someone else is going to read our writing. But if students believe they aren't allowed to have spelling errors in the first draft, they tend to stick to the vocabulary they know instead of reaching for great verbs and adjectives they've heard but don't know how to spell yet.

Section Three

The better your writing looks, the more your reader will enjoy the story

Video 15

If you love your story, then making the writing better through revision makes your story better. And making the appearance of your writing better through editing also supports the story. Which means that for story ninjas, writing and revising and editing are still all about STORY!

Video 16

Because I'm always focused on helping story ninjas get better at writing, I don't care much about their handwriting in their stories. While I know that legible handwriting is important, I prefer to have the two skills clearly separated. Use handwriting exercises to make handwriting better, and let them have fun with story by eliminating as much as possible the tediousness of "re-writing in good."

Video 17

In the long term, the goal we care about as parents and teachers is to ensure our children have the highest literacy skills possible. While it's important to share the need for literacy, in the short term that's not nearly as fun or as valuable as motivating our story ninjas to put words on paper because they get to mess with us. This fun now will make them better writers as they keep writing for us.

Video 18

If someone gave me a task that had no end in sight, I know I wouldn't enjoy it. Nor would I enjoy a task where, no matter what I did, the end results would never be satisfactory to the person asking me to do the task.

Unfortunately, that's the reality of revising and editing. No matter what, there's always more editing to do, and no matter what, there's always something else that can be fixed.

So with their writing, do we want our young story ninjas to grind over every piece of writing so that it's as close to perfect as possible? Or do we want them to leave the classroom at the end of the year with confidence in themselves,

having learned revision and editing skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives?

My answer is easy to predict.

I'm suggesting we reduce the frustration and make this a reachable goal by asking for a limited amount of changes. Have each story ninja go through a story three times and find ten things to change the first time, five the second time and three changes the last time. Or even fewer each time, if you like, such as five, three, then one. Even if you spot extra things that could be improved after the third time through, I suggest you let it go. Each finished story will not be perfect, but then, who really keeps third-grade stories for posterity? A year from now it's unlikely anyone will be reading the stories they write today. What will endure, however, is their attitude and what they learned about the process.

Video 19

We're back to motivation. If we can give our story ninjas a reason to care about punctuation, chances are they will do a better job with it. And who doesn't love the chance to "boss the teacher around"?

Video 20

If the booger video brought up your gag reflex, any apology I give you would be insincere! Because if you can get in the habit of asking your story ninjas to look for boogers in their writing, you'll be delivering a serious message in a playful way, especially to the boy story ninjas who probably love the analogy as much as you might not. Playfulness for young story ninjas is not a bad thing, right? (But if you think of a different analogy that can give the same motivational fun, please pass it on; I'd love to use it in the future.)

Video 21

Words matter. Words are cool. Writing might sometimes be work, but thinking through the meaning of words is a lot of fun.