



*M*aking  
Believe on  
*P*aper



Fiction Writing  
with Young Children

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## F O R E W O R D

Years ago, Nancy Martin—the late, pioneering, British researcher of student writing and learning—visited me and my husband for a summer weekend. At the time I was the director of a K–8 writing project at Boothbay Region Elementary and trying hard to follow in the mighty footsteps of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Susan Sowers—adopting the methods of writing workshop that emerged from their groundbreaking study at a New Hampshire elementary school. Nancy wanted to know all about it.

So we walked and talked our way down the road to the beach, then stretched out side by side on one of the flat slabs of rock revealed at low tide. I launched into a description of Boothbay’s writing workshops—how children had time to write every day, conferences with the teacher about their drafts, encouragement to experience writing as a multiphase process, and their own choices of topics and audiences. About the last I clarified, “We ask that they write about what they know and care about. Of course, that means no fiction.”

“No fiction?” Nancy asked. “Whyever not?”

“Well, we want the kids to learn how to revise—how to craft their writing until it’s focused *and* full of the specifics of real life. So the truth of an experience becomes a yardstick to measure their drafts against. Kids are dying to write fiction, but their stories are more like daydreams on paper. Everything in fiction makes sense to the kid who’s writing it, and we’re trying to teach them about revising for an audience.”

I can only quote Nancy directly one more time. “That’s *rubbish*,” she pronounced. And she spoke about the stories that children create not as whimsical inventions, but as a kind of fable in which they remake their lives and mingle in the stories they’ve read or had read to them.

Nancy argued that story writing is, in fact, the most powerful genre for children because it gives them the best opportunities to write fluently and at length. She pointed out that since fiction is about what’s *possible*, rather than what’s actual, it gives children access to the *hypothetical*: they can begin to see how to improvise on their own experiences. Finally, she concluded that story writing is essential, especially for primary students, because it’s the one mode that synthesizes children’s experiences, their preoccupations, and their emotions.

I was silent—lost for words. Only after Nancy sprang up to trawl the shoreline for sea glass did a response occur to me. It was a weak one, but it was the truth. I didn’t know how to teach fiction: how to invite, respond to, or help children craft make-believe stories. My Boothbay colleagues and I wanted our students’ writing to be good, and we hadn’t a clue about how to elicit good fiction. So in our writing workshops we continued to steer children toward memoirs and poems—while, as readers, the children continued to live hungrily and happily in the worlds of fiction. We taught them *not* to make believe on paper, even as their minds and hearts yearned, in Ted DeMille’s phrase, for “the mother genre.”

This was a dissatisfaction that gnawed at my seventh- and eighth-grade writers: they wanted to write what they loved to read. Eventually we found our way together into genre studies of fiction, in which kids and I read compelling short stories written for adolescents and teased out their features. Other middle- and intermediate-level teachers responded similarly to their students’ love of stories and desire to write them. But at the primary level, fiction is still, mostly, off the radar in writing workshop—which is the first reason this book is so important.

Ted DeMille has worked hard and smartly to help first and second graders express themselves through stories. *Making Believe on Paper* provides primary-grade educators with the opportunity to learn from an extraordinary classroom teacher about how *and why* to invite and invest in make believe, as Ted demonstrates how he both captures the energy of young writers and balances it with

scaffolds and strategies that provide children with the tools to craft their fictions.

As a researcher and critic, Ted studies children's literature that his students like and can learn from, and he identifies the features that make good storybooks work. He goes well beyond the standard prescriptions—e.g., a story has a beginning, middle, and end—to help young writers become aware of and have names for the subtleties of technique that lead to effective writing and illustrations.

Today I teach my seventh and eighth graders in the room adjacent to Ted's writing workshops at the Center for Teaching and Learning. His minilessons about fiction often stop me in my tracks as I'm passing through. I pause to watch, listen, and learn as, drawing on both the mentor texts of published storybooks and his own writing and sketches, Ted demonstrates to his kids such elements of fiction as story language, classic themes and archetypes, story problems and solutions, turns of events, details and dialogue that reveal, inclusion of main characters' reflections, inviting leads, sensory descriptions of setting, and narrative structure—from the introduction of the main character and his or her problem to the rising action, climax, and resolution of the story.

Similarly, Ted taps mentor texts, along with his own demonstrations of techniques of illustration, to teach his students about the important match between writing well and drawing well. They learn about such artistic fundamentals as filling the frame, balance, perspective, background, foreground, horizon line, and the meaning conveyed through details, most significantly in the facial expressions of the characters.

This reliance on mentor books by author-illustrators such as Kevin Henkes and Arnold Lobel leads to the creation of *innovated* texts. This isn't copying; rather, it's a guided observation and assimilation of some of the fundamentals of plot and character development—as Ted puts it, “a long-distance apprenticeship” that's based on “a proven-effective structure incorporating literary devices that are known to work.”

Ted's students thrive as apprentices. In Vygotsky's phrase (1978), they lean on folks who are “a head taller” than they are in the creation of their stories and illustrations, and then they go beyond the adult models and bring their own needs, voices, and perspectives to the scaffolds they've been shown.

Significantly, Ted reminds primary-level teachers that “child-

rendered fiction may look different from fiction written by an adult, but is just as valid.” He walks teachers through his process as a reader of the drafts of a handful of his students’ stories, and these close readings and sensitive analyses are among the highlights of the book. Detailed and revealing, they give teachers a new prism for how to look at and respond to young children’s fiction.

Finally, Ted’s responses in his conferences with his students are models for the profession. He offers gentle, specific guidance as he talks to children, writer-reader to writer-reader. He describes his confusions, makes observations, offers suggestions, and praises. His delight in his students’ efforts is palpable. Here is the adult voice we want in every child writer’s ear—a voice of warmth and genuine curiosity. When Ted reads a student’s story, he can’t wait to learn what happens next.

Tellingly, Ted compares the young child’s process of writing fiction to “leaving the safety of home to have an adventure.” But his students don’t travel alone. They’re accompanied by Kevin Henkes, Arnold Lobel, Joy Cowley, Dr. Seuss, Mo Willems, and other great authors and illustrators. And they’re both followed and led on their journeys by a teacher that Nancy Martin would have adored. Ted DeMille leaves a trail of bread crumbs that any primary teacher can trace into the fantastical forests of make-believe.

NANCIE ATWELL  
*Center for Teaching and Learning*  
*Edgecomb, Maine*

### **Reference**

Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

## Art

After storytelling has been introduced and children become comfortable with the routine, it makes sense to record some of these shared ideas on paper. Connecting the spoken word to pictorial documentation paves the way for writing.

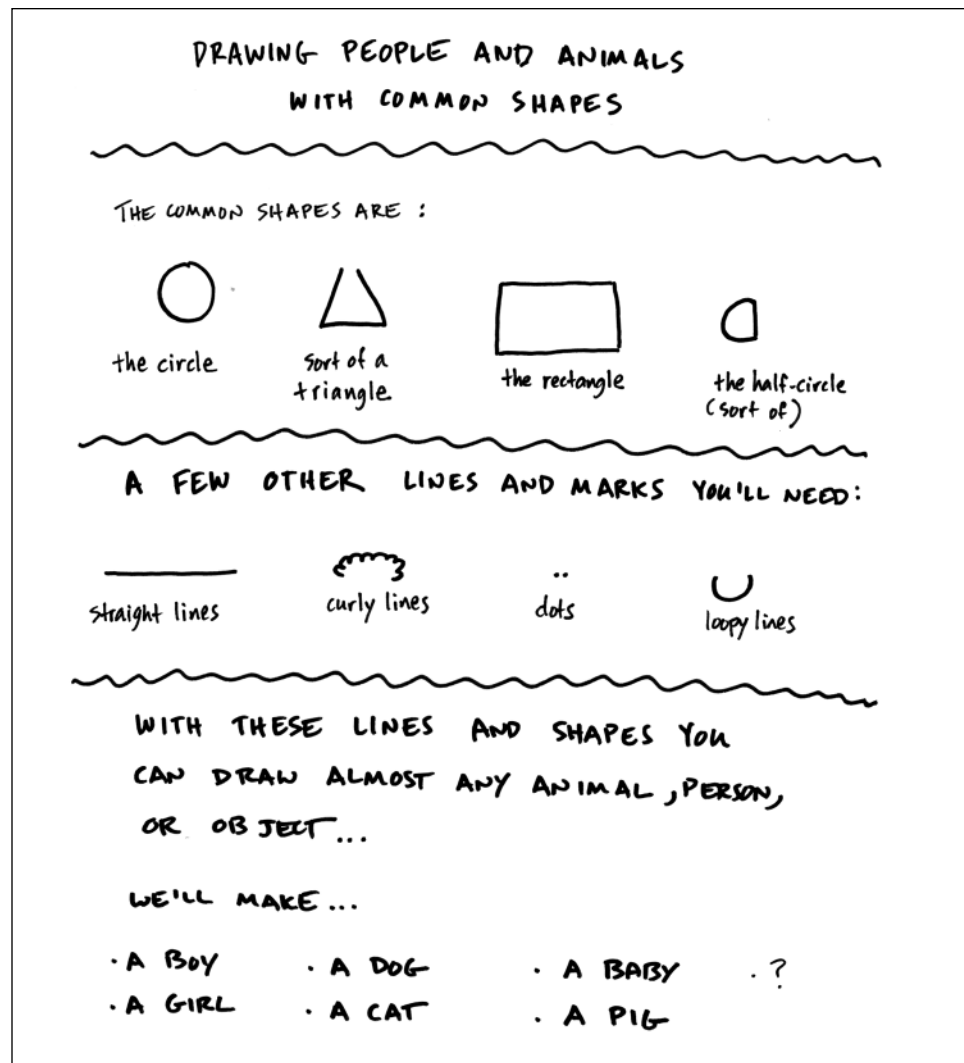
All children can tell stories when they come to school, and most can draw. Many first graders are most comfortable expressing their ideas on paper through drawing. Drawings continue to augment and support the work of young writers through second grade and into the upper primary grades. In my classroom, I want to be sure kids maximize what they can communicate with drawing and art.

Some children are veteran users of pencils, crayons, and markers from their early years at home, in preschool, and in kindergarten. They come to school with small-motor control well established and have a natural sense of some of the fundamentals of figure drawing, perspective, and composition. They may have an innate or early developed sense of which colors complement each other and how to use lines and shape to render an effective drawing.

I want to open the world of drawing to all my students. I don't subscribe to the theory that drawing is a skill that some people are born with, and the rest of us are out of luck. Everyone can learn and use basic drawing fundamentals to communicate better with pictures. I also don't believe that there is one way to draw anything, and I tell this to my students. But if some children in first and second grade are still struggling to draw stick figures, I help them out by showing them how to draw simple people and animals using common geometric shapes. I also introduce the entire class to some artistic fundamentals that give each person more choices when composing a picture.

I have developed a series of lessons over the years, lessons that I am constantly updating and revising as I learn more about my own artistic process through my own art experiences, books I've read, and artists whom I talk with regularly.

The first lesson I do is designed to help students get used to creating the basic shapes and lines they'll use when they draw people and animals:



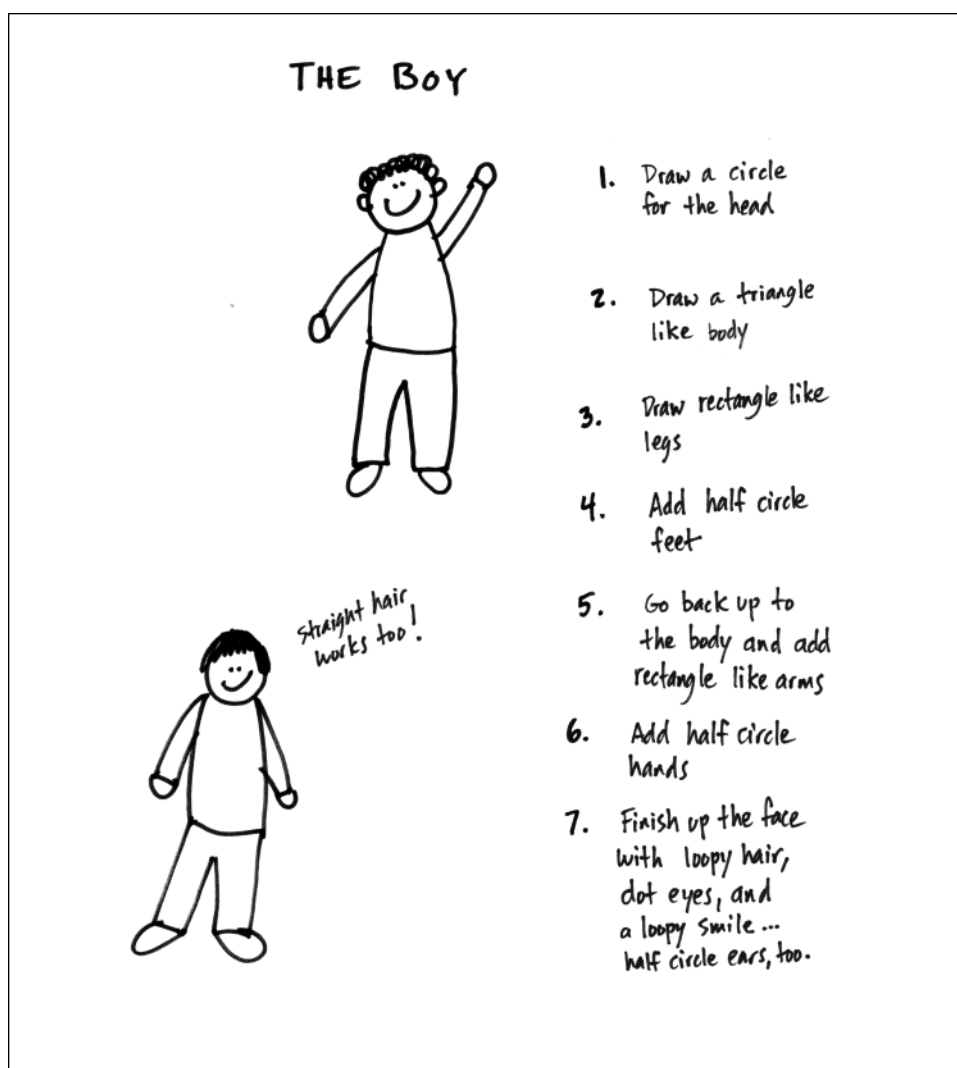
Common shapes for drawing people and animals

I introduce the shapes and lines at a group meeting and demonstrate drawing the lines on large chart paper mounted on a large wooden easel. Each child has a sketchbook with 8½-by-11-inch paper. The students draw each shape and line as I do. I keep an eye on their individual progress and make gentle comments and adjustments as necessary. We practice just drawing the lines and shapes to get a feel for each one and to establish control of the pencil while making each shape and line. It doesn't take very long, since most primary students are very familiar with these common shapes.

When we all seem comfortable, we move on. I reveal what human figures and animals we will draw. I focus on a few common

figures that I can draw well and that children need to know how to draw to communicate pictorially. I start by drawing two human figures, a boy and a girl. I tend to start all my drawings from the top. It is a comfortable point of reference for me, and I also use it when I'm introducing letter formation, so I encourage the class to start at the head and move to the feet.

The head is a circle or oval shape. The body is a triangular shape that emerges from the neck region. (The sharp point of the triangle is hidden behind the head.) The legs are also modified rectangles that meet in the middle to form pants. Next I add two rectangular arms that attach to each side of the body. The shoulder line will be longer than the armpit line, unless the arm is raised. I finish the outline of the body with half circles for the hands



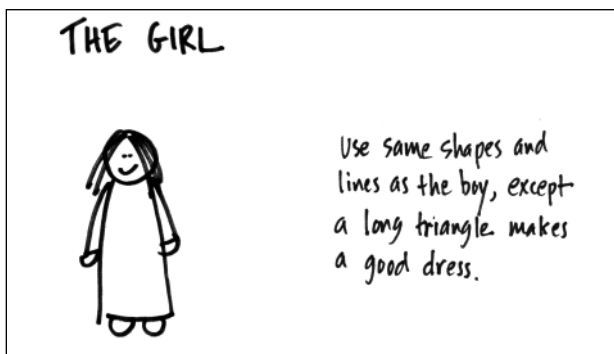
A boy

and feet. Next I add details: dots for the two eyes, a curved line for the mouth, and half circles for the two ears. For hair I use curly lines (for curly hair), straight lines (for “spaghetti hair”), or short, bristly lines (for a flattop). I then add any details to the clothing such as pictures, numbers, or words on the shirt and stripes or checks on the pants. I often incorporate a style of clothing or fashion accessory that one of the class members is wearing that day. Finally, I add color using twistable crayons, which have become a staple in my classroom. They offer the same color choices as colored pencils but cover more area faster. They rarely break and last forever, the two main advantages over regular crayons.

As I am drawing, the children are watching. I encourage comments and questions. I ask them what they notice about my drawing and what they remember about how I did it. I remind them that the lines and shapes that I used are all lines and shapes we’ve used and worked with before.

The next figure, a girl, uses the same basic shapes to form the body but lengthens the triangular shape to form a dress. At this point I often ask for suggestions about how I can make my figure look more realistic. The children offer details regarding hair length, dress color, jewelry, and other accessories they think will augment my drawing. Their own creative juices start flowing, and they are ready to begin their own drawings.

Invariably someone will mention that not all girls wear dresses all the time. I demonstrate how to draw a girl in pants using some of the same techniques I used to draw the boy but incorporating the other strategies the class gave me to make my figure look more feminine. Here’s what that looks like:



A girl



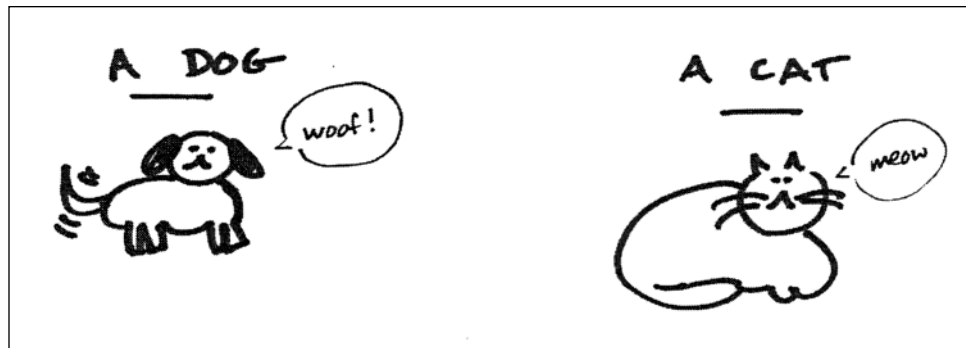
A curly-haired girl in pants

After this demonstration, the artists are chomping at the bit to draw some of these figures themselves. We head to the worktables after a few reminders:

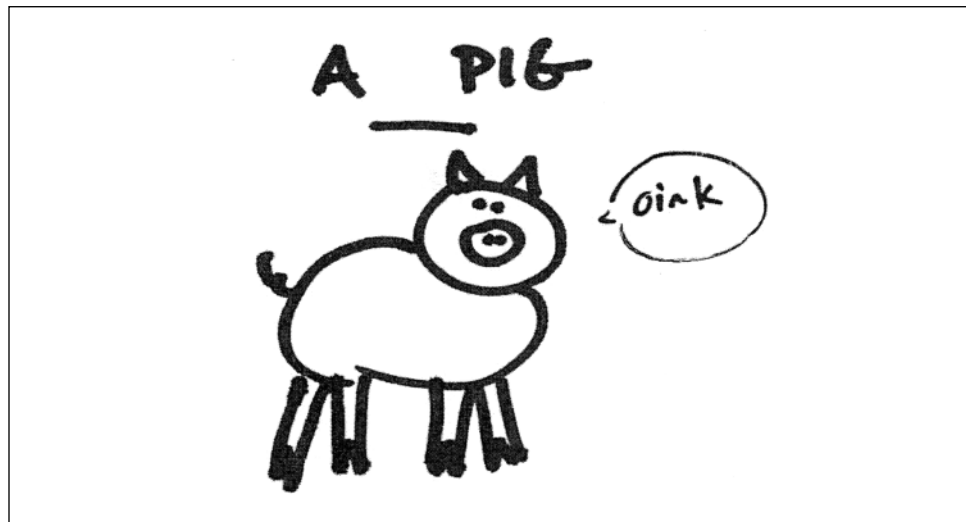
- Draw your figures in pencil first. If you make any mistakes, pencil lines are much easier to correct than crayon.
- Don't rush your shapes. You are in control of the pencil. You should work as slowly as you need to in order to stay in control of your lines. Too slow can be a problem as well. Find your own comfortable speed.
- Your drawing doesn't need to look just like mine. You may have other ways that you draw your figures that are a bit different. It is perfectly all right to use those strategies.
- Let me know if you need any help, and I'll come over and take a look at your work and talk about it with you.

The next part of the workshop looks very similar to an art class, but also like a typical writing workshop. Children go to their worktables, open their sketchbooks, get the materials they need from the storage shelves, and begin purposeful work. My first job as the most experienced artist and writer in the group has been to provide a craft minilesson designed to help them communicate more effectively on paper. They are now working with the concept I shared. My next job is to walk the room, determine what they have learned, and offer helpful comments as they are working. I help with subtle line adjustments, sizing suggestions for proportions, and comments about originality and details, and I respond to specific questions the artists have about anything we covered in the lesson. I reteach, remind, and redirect if necessary. I know I've been successful if the drawings the class renders have progressed from stick figures and if the children feel better about their work.

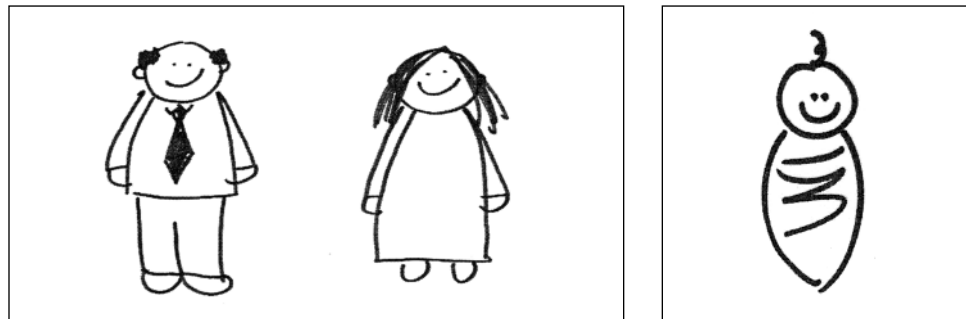
Subsequent lessons build around the figure drawings. People need companions, so we draw common pets, including the cat and the dog:



Farm animals come up pretty often, so we add the pig:



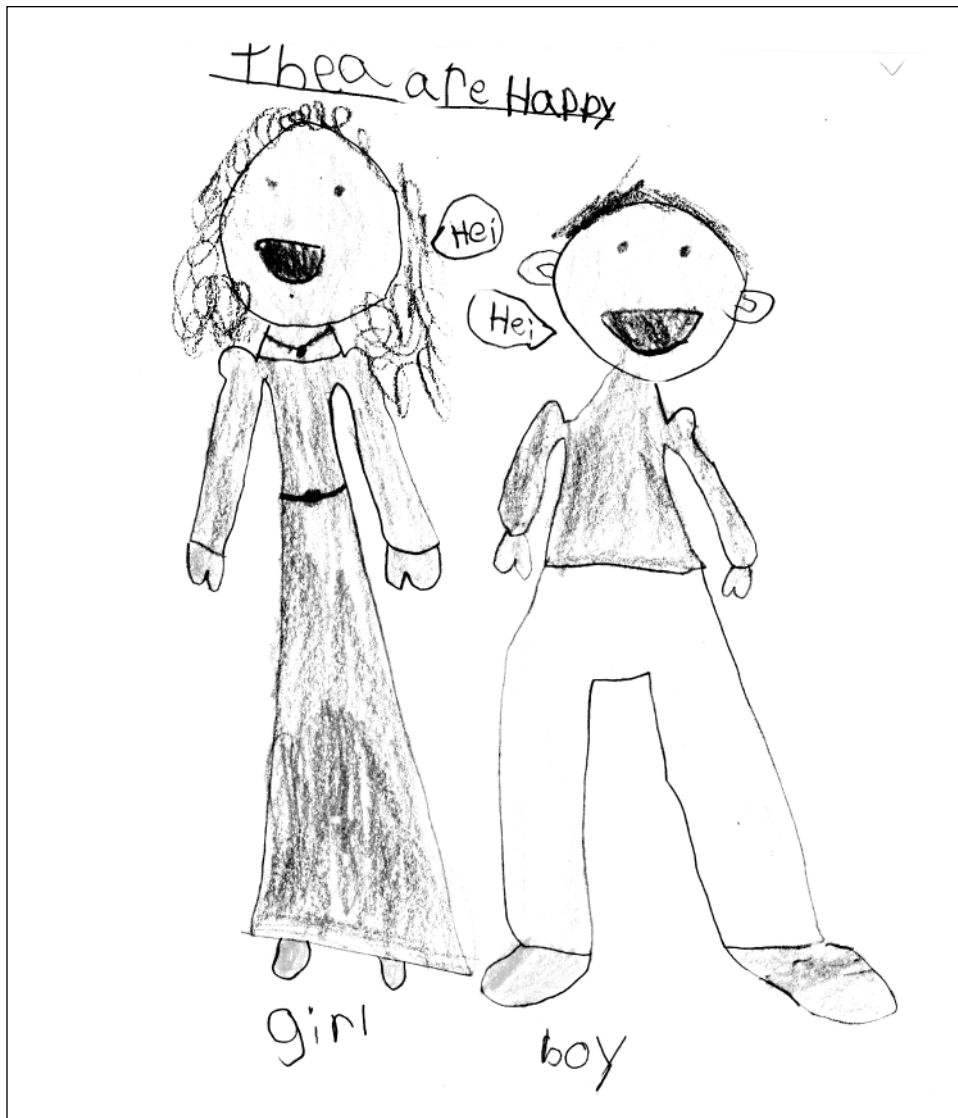
We also add other family members, including parents and babies:



Each figure uses the same or similar geometric shapes and common lines, dots, squiggles, and swirls. All are familiar to the children, and all lessons are introduced and implemented using a minilesson and guided practice. At the conclusion of the minilessons, students have mastered several figures. Each of these

drawings is safely and securely recorded in their sketchbooks. They have a reference for drawing figures as they create stories. The lines and the formats they've learned from the lessons can be reused to draw any number of additional animal figures they may need to augment the stories they are writing.

As one child figures out an effective way to draw a particular figure, he shares that figure with the class. Here are first grader Carissa's early-in-the-year drawings of a boy and a girl based on the minilessons:



Carissa's boy and girl



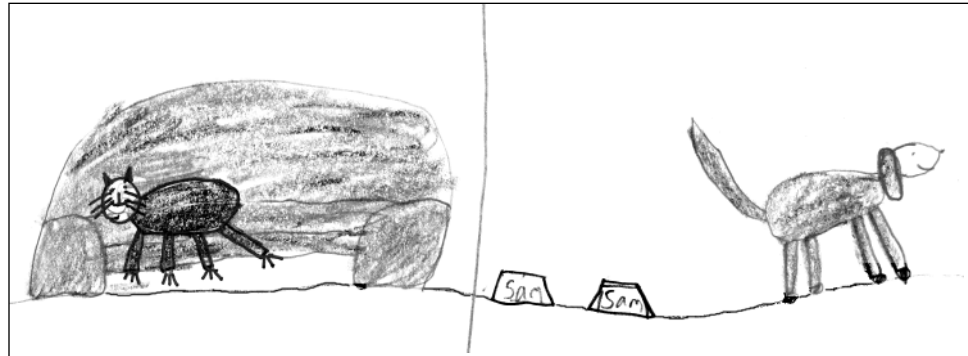
For a full-color version of this child's work, please see the website, [books.heinemann.com/demille](http://books.heinemann.com/demille)

You can see how she used some of the strategies I shared but also added features of her own, including necks, smiles, shoulders, a more fashionable and flattering dress on the girl, and longer, more realistic feet on both the figures. Her arms are more animated as well. Her figures include the geometric shapes but also reveal what she has learned from her own experiences with drawing.

This is also evident in second grader Teddy's rendering of a dog and a cat:



For a full-color version of this child's work, please see the website, [books.heinemann.com/demille](http://books.heinemann.com/demille)



Teddy's drawings of a cat and dog

He used some of the geometric shapes, including circles and ovals, but has simply and elegantly created unique animals, improving on my model. Teddy's animals have real personality and a real sense of place. He has placed the cat on the green, comfy couch and the dog by the food and water bowls.

Here is Teagan's pencil sketch of a pig from early in her second-grade year:



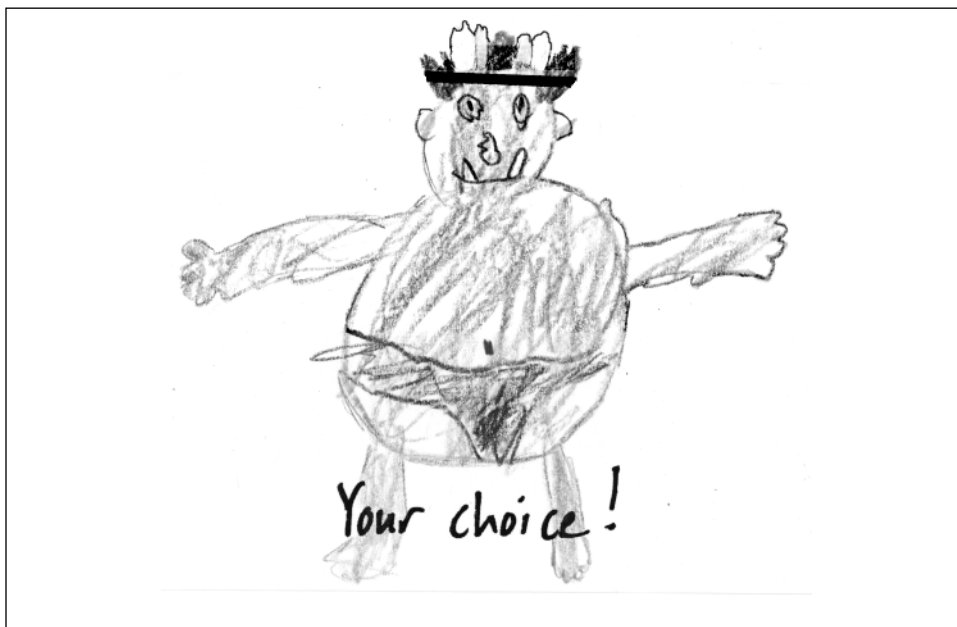
For a full-color version of this child's work, please see the website, [books.heinemann.com/demille](http://books.heinemann.com/demille)



Teagan's pig

There is a real perspective in this drawing, and Teagan has also provided a real sense of setting. This could be the beginning of a fiction story.

Children are also free to blend their own personally developed art techniques with the strategies I'm sharing. In addition to their own art strategies, they also draw, as they write, about what they know and love. Michael was happy to share his free-choice sumo wrestler technique with the class:



Michael's sumo wrestler

As the year rolls on, children begin to request specific animals and objects they would like to add to their personal drawing repertoires. We try to figure out the shapes, lines, and dots of these items together.

At the top of the next page are four vehicles Charlotte drew during one such session.

Over time every student becomes better at communicating through picture making. This goes a long way toward creating a community of artists, which in turn leads to creating a community of writers.

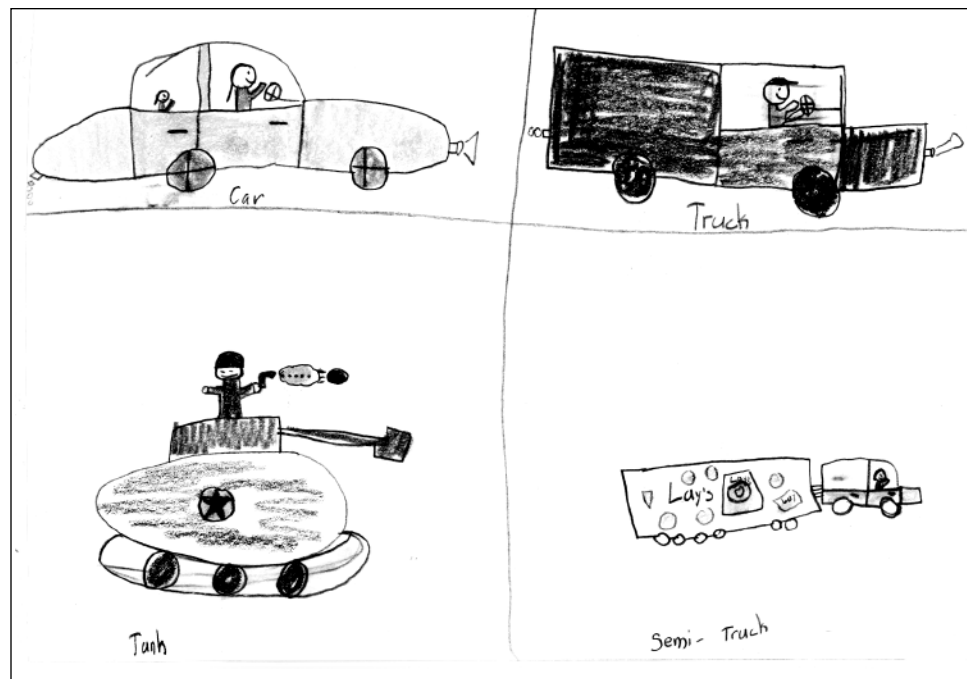
Once we as a group can draw figures confidently, we move to some other important art fundamentals that help children create more detailed and interesting pictures. Here are some of the mini-lessons I do each year:



For a full-color version of this child's work, please see the website, [books.heinemann.com/demille](http://books.heinemann.com/demille)



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of this child's work,  
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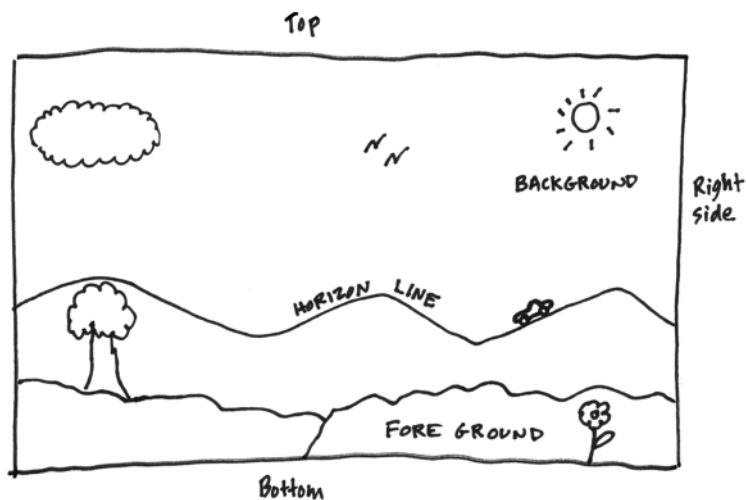


Charlotte's vehicle drawings

- *Picture frames.* I've noticed that children are better able to create pictures within a boundary. I demonstrate framing each time I do a drawing, and I encourage them to draw a frame for the picture they are trying to make and to work within that frame. This is especially effective when children are drawing pictures to go with print in a booklet or sketchbook. The size of the canvas defines what can be included in the picture and will inform the artist's choices. It also helps when revising pieces of writing in case a student wants to use her original drawings for a final copy.
- *Vocabulary.* I teach a basic artist's vocabulary (including *top*, *bottom*, *left*, *right*, *background*, *foreground*, and *horizon line*) so we'll all be on the same page when we talk about art. As I am demonstrating, I use these terms. I also use them when discussing a drawing with a student. I introduce these terms in a minilesson and present the students with a reminder sheet similar to this one:

## PARTS OF A PICTURE

- If you can, frame your picture before you start drawing
- Learn the "parts" of your picture...



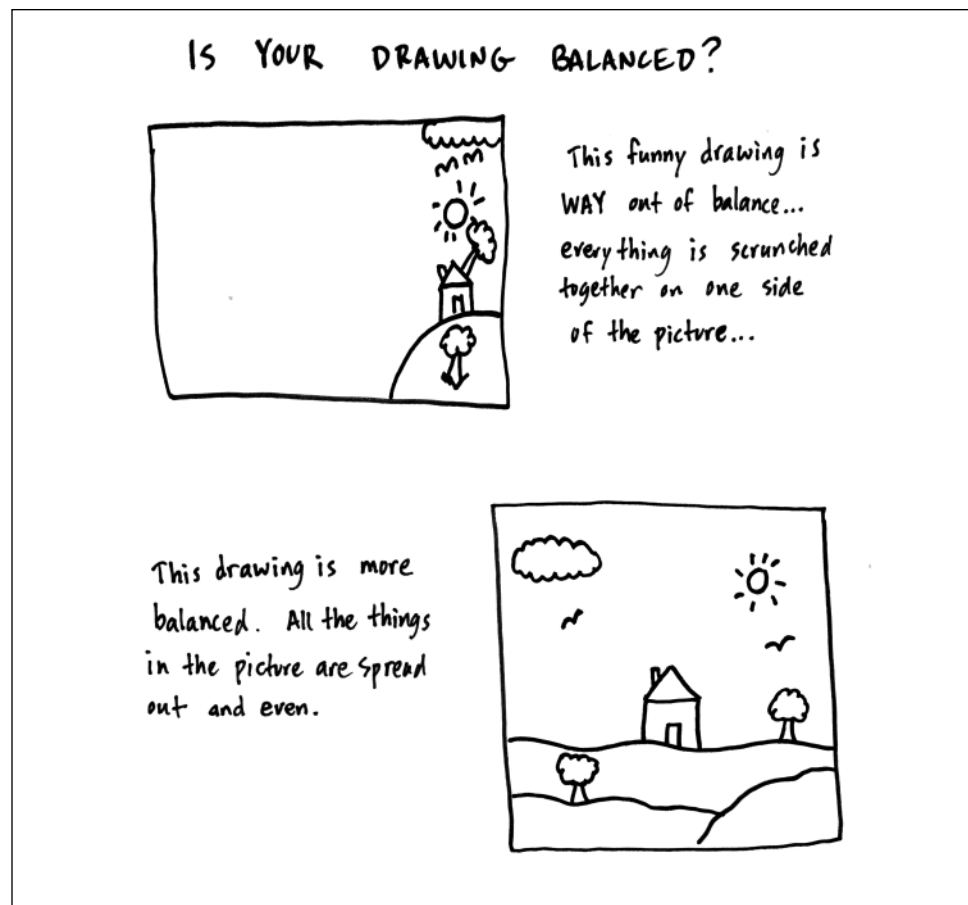
- There is a flower in the foreground.
- There is a car on the horizon line.
- The sun is in the background on the right side.
- A cloud is drifting from the left side over a tree.

### Artist's reminder sheet

- *Shapes and lines in nature.* Children have a tendency to draw flat, straight lines when representing nature, which is not always accurate. We spend a good bit of time observing the rolling hills and curving pathways of our Maine environment and reproducing the same shapes in our art. We take into consideration what setting we are trying to represent and get information about what that setting looks like. This research informs the way we proceed with our drawings. This initial discussion about setting sets the stage for fiction writing later on.
- *Perspective and balance.* I demonstrate how objects that appear in the foreground of a picture appear larger than

those in the background. I discuss and demonstrate balance. I draw a balanced picture and an unbalanced picture and ask the class which picture makes more sense and looks better. The students say that in the unbalanced picture there are too many things squished together on one side. In the balanced picture the objects are more evenly placed, and that looks better. Often the objects on the outside edges of a picture can be used to direct the audience's attention toward the action in the center of the frame.

- *Filling the frame and using color.* I am a big proponent of filling the entire frame and completing detailed illustrations with vibrant color. I demonstrate these techniques to the children and encourage them to follow through with carefully done, detailed, colorful drawings. To enable them to do this, we keep our picture frames reasonably sized and use twistable crayons that cover space quickly.



How to draw a balanced picture

As the year progresses and as it seems useful and necessary, I introduce other drawing concepts, such as using elements in the landscape to indicate mood (sun to indicate a hopeful story part, rain to indicate sadness) and facial features to reveal character.



Reading aloud, storytelling, and art instruction prepare children to write quality fictional stories. Each activity contributes to building deep overall understanding of story elements. Enjoying literature read aloud and developing the ability to talk about literature and understand its ingredients are essential to writing fiction. A personal understanding of how a story is told and regular practice with telling stories to an audience in a safe, friendly, yet challenging environment help kids develop the skills necessary to write fiction. Knowing how to draw detailed figures, animals, and landscapes can inspire and augment fiction writing. By looking at their own drawings, children can often generate ideas to represent in print far more effectively than when they start writing off the top of their heads. Illustrations are essential for the writing of quality fiction books.

And writing books is where we are headed next. The next two chapters focus on helping children emulate fine authors and create original fiction by following in the footsteps of Kevin Henkes and Arnold Lobel.



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