

HOW WRITERS GROW

A GUIDE FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

CYNTHIA CARBONE WARD

FOREWORD BY SHERIDAN BLAU

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Foreword

Miraculous Writing and the Legacy of Tradition

As every accomplished writer knows, a good book, a good essay, a good poem is a miracle or feels like a miracle to the writer who produces it. That's because it seems to come from some place of inspiration and eloquence and wisdom to which the writer would not claim access by any act of mere will. Yet the act of writing itself brings one to such places as if by some gift of grace that feels to the writer beyond his or her conscious control. That's why writers in ancient times began their poems with invocations to a muse and why writers in all times have spoken seriously or half seriously or (now) metaphorically of being visited by the muse. Moreover, while all good writing comes as a miracle, what seems to distinguish real writers from mere dabblers in writing is that real writers experience miracles with considerable frequency. And that, of course, is what much of the discipline of writing is about. It's about putting in your seat time, having access to strategies for helping yourself through the difficulties of the composing process, and persisting in the hard, challenging work that will make you available for the miracle when it strikes.

Cynthia Carbone Ward, no doubt, thinks of her book as a miraculous birth, though she knows better than any of us how hard and long she worked at it and how much it is the product of many years of thoughtful and sometimes frustrating teaching, quite aside from a lifetime of apprenticeship as a writer (with considerable success as the author of prize-winning short stories and memoirs). Cynthia also knows from her own experience as a writer and a teacher how much intellectual and emotional and literary nourishment is required to nurture a writer or to cultivate the ground in which student writers will grow and develop. And that is the knowledge she shares in detail

in this book, not just in the broad strokes of a giver of advice, but in the detailed plans and step-by-step descriptions of a good coach or of an experienced practitioner talking to other practitioners about the real daily work of teaching and of writing. And what she offers to all of us who are teachers and her colleagues she offers without a note of condescension or superiority, but as a colleague talking to colleagues she respects and from whom she is as willing to learn as to teach.

But as much as this book emerges from a miracle of composition, a lifetime of work at becoming a writer, and many years of reflective teaching practice in the classroom, which is to say, the personal and professional history of its author, it also emerges from a particular current of cultural history in the fields of literacy education and professional development for teachers, along with a parallel history in the field of educational publishing. That cultural history is inscribed in the careers of two key figures in education and educational publishing—James Gray, founder of the Bay Area Writing Project and the National Writing Project, and Robert Boynton, founder of Boynton/Cook Publishers, which in 1987 became a part of Heinemann publishing, the publishers of this volume.

In the summer of 1974 Jim Gray founded the Bay Area Writing Project (out of which grew the National Writing Project, now with 189 sites at colleges and universities in every state of the union) on two revolutionary principles: first, that the best teacher of teachers is another teacher; and second, that teachers of writing must be writers themselves. From these principles there emerged a new model of professional development for teachers, including a new model for inservice workshops in which an experienced and successful teacher (identified as a writing project teacher-consultant) presented to colleagues a hands-on demonstration of an exemplary teaching practice, requiring that the audience of teacher-participants actually produce and share some writing. Another unique feature of these workshops was that the presenter didn't merely demonstrate a successful practice, but framed that practice in a rationale or theory that explained its provenance, its purpose, and its place in the teacher's plan or curriculum for teaching writing over the course of an academic term or year.

These founding principles also gave rise to a substantial body of writing by teachers of writing from the Bay Area Writing Project and from the rapidly

growing network of affiliated writing project sites sprouting across the nation. Not surprisingly, much of the writing of these writing teachers was about the teaching of writing and much of it took the form of the presentations these teachers were giving for colleagues, including step-by-step accounts of successful teaching practices and a rationale or theory accounting for the principles behind the practices and the place of each practice in a larger curriculum for teaching writing. Within a few years after the founding of the writing project, articles and monographs by writing project teachers began to appear in print available for the teaching profession at large in such publications as *California English*, the NCTE's *English Journal*, and beginning in 1979, in a series of "Curriculum Publications" published at first by the Bay Area Writing Project and later by the National Writing Project.

At almost exactly the same time that the writing project was developing its principles and practices under Jim Gray's leadership, Bob Boynton was deciding to retire from his position as an English teacher and head of the upper-school at the Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia and to establish his own publishing house (with a financial partner) to be called Boynton/Cook Publishing. Bob was, like Jim, a legendary teacher himself and an especially gifted teacher of writing and, like Jim, he also believed in the expertise of successful classroom teachers and in the importance of having that expertise shared beyond the walls of their own classrooms. He too was a writing teacher who wrote for his colleagues and for publication.

As a publisher and an educator Bob Boynton saw a great gap in the professional literature available for teachers and knew that what teachers needed were books written by outstanding veteran teachers who were reflective practitioners and willing writers. And he quickly realized that the Bay Area Writing Project and the burgeoning writing project movement nationally was a hothouse for nurturing the kind of authors he was looking for. With Jim Gray as his philosophical partner (and eventually his close personal friend), Bob quickly turned Boynton/Cook publishers into the world's leading publisher of books for teachers of the English language arts and most especially for teachers of writing—books written largely by classroom teachers themselves. Hence, beginning in the decade of the eighties, Boynton/Cook (and then, after 1987, Heinemann-Boynton/Cook) published such books as *Teaching Writing: Essays from the Bay Area Writing Project*, edited by Gerald Camp

(1982); and books by a number of other teachers affiliated with National Writing Project sites and related projects like the University of New Hampshire Summer Writing Program, including groundbreaking books by teacher-writers who were soon to become superstars in the growing constellation of expert classroom teachers who were reshaping the teaching of writing in classrooms throughout the English-speaking world—most notably, teachers like Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Tom Romano. By the next decade, thanks to the influence of these seminal writers and the enabling work of Jim Gray and Bob Boynton, the paradigm of professional authority and professional authorship in literacy education had shifted and classroom practice in the teaching of writing and reading and literature was being continuously revitalized and transformed by a stream of books from Heinemann-Boynton/Cook by such classroom-based writers as Linda Rief, Maureen Barbieri, Kathleen Andrasick (Rowlands), Fran Claggett, Jeff Wilhelm, Regie Routman, Joni Chancer and Gina Rester-Zodrow, Carol Jago, Jim Burke, and Harry Noden—most of them writing project teachers and virtually all of them closely connected to some writing project site or parallel program.

Every book participates in a genre and a tradition, and the authors I have named and the model of professionalism and educational publishing developed by Jim Gray and Bob Boynton define the genre and tradition in which Cynthia Carbone Ward's *How Writers Grow* now takes its place. Cynthia was a gifted writer before she came to the writing project, but what the writing project gave her—aside from additional professional knowledge—was a new sense of opportunity and of professional responsibility to use her talent as a writer to write about her teaching and to share her teaching expertise with colleagues nationally through the publication of a book grounded in her own teaching experience.

Teachers who take up Cynthia's book will find it rich with ideas for the teaching of writing in classrooms, and wise in the attitudes toward writing and learning that it helps teachers to cultivate in themselves and in their students. They will also find in it an inspirational teacher they will want to emulate in her passion for teaching, her compassion for her students, and in her insistence that her students accomplish more as artists and intellectuals than they ever imagined they were capable of. Readers will also find here a writer worthy of their emulation, though they may not be able to (nor

should they want to) imitate her uniquely graceful voice. It is a voice that is conversational yet precise, straightforward yet melodic, as if in song. And the song it sings is one that will lift all teachers to celebrate the opportunity they share to help students grow into writers who will be ready for miracles.

Sheridan Blau

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Introduction

I would rather be known for the things that I am good at, but the truth is, I am becoming famous for my inability to swim. It's a limitation that is impossible to deny or conceal at a middle school where the curriculum includes beach trips, surfing, and P.E. classes in the pool. One spring afternoon at the shallow end it became clear to me that it was my duty to at least get wet. For months I had been telling kids to push themselves, accept new challenges, and do what seemed most difficult. Being fearful and fifty didn't seem like a good enough excuse for not trying.

I immersed myself tentatively, a large terrestrial mammal in an alien element. And the wonder wasn't in the cold refreshing slap of it, or the shimmer of sun on aquamarine, but the circle of students that gathered around, instructing, encouraging, and supporting me. "Lean back and float," they urged, and they showed me how. "Put your face in the water! Hold onto the wall and keep kicking!" Isn't it funny how something that is so easy and natural to one person can seem impossibly difficult to someone else? It's a good thing for a teacher to remember.

But these were gracious instructors and benevolent graders. They believed I could achieve this, which gave me a feeling that I might. Even when I thought I had accomplished very little, they gave me credit for my effort and assured me that I had done well. What I wanted most was to propel myself across the pool and make them proud of me, but they were pleased just knowing I had tried hard.

And so, although I never actually learned to float, I left the pool feeling absolutely buoyant. I knew the scary startle of letting go and being new and that old sinking sense of simply not getting it, but I was lifted by the faith implied by others' encouragement, and by my own renewed belief in dogged effort. I saw in that moment that teaching and learning are not opposites at

all, but two faces of the same fluid process, and depending on the play of light on the water, we glimpse one or the other in any given moment. I remembered in fact why I am a teacher.

Back in the language arts classroom, I've tried to hold onto my swimming pool epiphanies, and generally they seem to apply. Learning to write requires that we first splash around in the medium and overcome our fears. It requires practice and positive reinforcement rather than the intimidation of constant criticism. Teaching writing takes great patience, a singular sense of purpose, and maybe more than anything an outrageous sort of faith in one's students. Occasionally mine will surprise me with their interpretations or lead me to new insights, but often they will flail about while I feel hopelessly submerged or uncertain how to reach them. I don't think this is unusual for a writing teacher. I am sure that most of us wish now and then for something tangible to hold onto, even if it's just a few words of encouragement and advice, or some reassurance, perhaps, that we're not alone.

My intent with this book is to provide just that. It's the guide I wish I'd had when I first started teaching writing . . . and for all the times throughout the years when I felt overwhelmed by the enormity and ambiguity of that task. In *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, Ted Kooser repeatedly mentions two fundamental tips about poetry, but they apply to writing in general: one, it should be accessible, and two, it should be written with an imaginary reader in mind. Following Kooser's advice, I've tried to make this a clear and usable book, and I imagined as my reader an earnest new teacher—or an experienced one—who needs a little boost, especially one who values the true and time-consuming craft of writing in an authentic, in-the-bones way, despite the continual interference of external pressures.

Indeed those external pressures are very real to us all, but we must not lose sight of our priorities. Conscientious teachers at all levels struggle daily with conflicting demands and expectations, particularly in the current political climate with its emphasis on standardized testing. In its recent report, *The Neglected R: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, The National Commission on Writing advocates nothing less than “a cultural sea change” in the emphasis and approach to writing in America's schools. The following

passage from the report mirrors my own belief in the transcendent importance of writing:

Above all, as students and young adults begin a lifeline of learning, they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful. Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning. Writing competence builds confidence, which readily turns into creativity and fun, precisely what is most frequently absent from the policy discussions about today's schools. As a nation, we can barely begin to imagine how powerful K–16 education might be if writing were put in its proper focus.

Unfortunately, writing is *not* given proper focus. It is a complex and labor-intensive skill that too often gets short-changed in the chaos. You already know the end result: students are not learning to write well.

As for me, I am not an academic and I have no groundbreaking new theories to offer. I am simply a teacher who believes fervently that it's time to slow down, rethink, and invest the time and effort it takes to really teach writing. Toward that end I have gathered tools and tips that have worked well for me over the years, woven these together with anecdotal narrative and student examples, and offer it to my fellow teachers of writing in a spirit of friendship and support. I even believe that better test scores will follow, but that isn't the primary goal. (Sometimes you have to tune out the noise and focus on what matters, even if the noise sounds authoritative; that takes a little courage, but good teachers have courage to spare.)

I picture this as an airy book with plenty of room for you to wander, interpret, and improvise. I will refer you to other sources for more in-depth discussion of particular theories and topics, but in this book I try to focus on the quick hands-on quintessence. I have included my own creations and adaptations as well as a few sturdy ideas that have been around for a while, and I don't claim to have invented the latter, but maybe they'll be new to you. Those who are well versed in the literature often assume that everybody knows this stuff, but I haven't found that to be so. In any case, I thought it would be nice to have these activities and prompts conveniently compiled in one handy little manual.

Of course, it is possible to construct such a manual only because others before me explored the waters so much more deeply. Many dedicated and inspiring teachers, researchers, and theorists have contributed to my understanding and practice, and I am profoundly grateful to them all. However, I'd like to mention a few who particularly inspired me, starting in 1992, when I abandoned a career in public administration and enrolled at the University of California at Irvine to earn a teaching credential. There were several factors involved in my decision to teach, but the most salient was the death of my beloved brother Eddie, which left me with a different awareness of life's brevity and an urgent desire to do something meaningful in his memory. I didn't know what to expect from a teacher education program, but since I fancied myself a bit of a writer I particularly looked forward to the language arts methods class taught by Carol Booth Olsen, who surely has no idea what an important influence she was. It was in her class that I first heard writing discussed as a *process*, and she was an exemplary teacher herself. She made the invisible steps tangible, led us into writing of our own, and showed us ways to do this with our students. It was exhilarating to look at something I thought I already understood and see it in a whole new way.

In my first year in the classroom I discovered Nancie Atwell, whose classic book *In the Middle* was a revelation and a bible, albeit a daunting one, and while I never could replicate what she managed to achieve, I drew heavily upon her ideas about writing workshops, reading, and working with middle school kids in general. I thought then Nancie Atwell walked on water, but I have been even more impressed by her later reflections in which she admits to having gone from being a "creationist" to an "evolutionist" in her classroom: learning, adjusting, and "always beginning." I love that spirit, especially in someone who is already so exceptional.

That was only the beginning. Before long I came upon Peter Elbow's lucid thoughts about free-writing and evaluation. I read articles by James Moffett, who rendered knowable the inner workings of the essay; Donald Graves, whose insights revealed how writers develop; and George Hillocks, who advocated the teaching of writing as a reflective process. I also discovered the existence of the National Writing Project and specifically the South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP), its Santa Barbara manifestation. Here was a network of passionate professionals—experienced teachers who generously

shared ideas, supported each other, and who themselves (sometimes timidly) loved to write. Project fellows present teaching ideas to their colleagues through demonstration lessons that model actual classroom practices. This is followed by reflection and discussion that encourages the development of theory. The SCWriP director, Sheridan Blau, is especially well known for his enlightening work on how readers make meaning from text. But even beyond his outstanding scholarship, Sheridan is known for the behavior he models as a teacher—his enthusiasm is legendary, and he has a beautiful way of seeing (and thereby eliciting) the best in everyone. Throughout his long career he has managed somehow to sustain an ongoing sense of surprise and wonder, often asserting that he learns more from his work as a teacher than his students could ever learn from him, and that tells you something right there.

I have long been an avid reader of books about writing, and authors such as Anne Lamott, Natalie Goldberg, Patricia Hampl, and Georgia Heard are mentors beyond measure to me. I have also had the honor of attending workshops led by Naomi Shihab Nye, whose insight, compassion, and poetry are fuel to us all. And long before I started teaching, there was William Stafford, the best friend I never met. I always loved the quiet eloquence of his poetry; I later rediscovered him as a teacher of writing whose ideas (in books such as *Crossing Unmarked Snow*) convinced me to give kids a little more space, to encourage rather than intimidate, and to allow writing time to be pleasurable.

Through SCWriP I was also introduced to theories of composition, literacy, and assessment, both classic and controversial, and I participated in classes led by superb teachers such as Bob Tierney (the writing process as discovery), Tom Romano (finding a voice), Patricia Lambert Stock (from experience to exposition), and Gabriele Luser Rico (crafting poetry through recreations), among others. Who could have conjured up a more amazing collection of guides? I am grateful.

On the other hand, it would be misleading to say that I consciously think about all of this in the day-to-day reality of the classroom. In fact, I was very reassured when one of the finest teachers I know recently confided, “I love to read educational theory, but I am definitely a teacher of the chewing gum and baling wire variety—whatever works—and sometimes just whatever I

can think of.” I believe this is a lot closer to the truth for most of us. Of course we draw upon what we’ve internalized through our reading and experience, but teaching is interactive by its nature, and situation-specific. No matter how diligently we prepare our lessons, we are constantly responding, fine-tuning, and sometimes even shifting gears or changing destinations altogether. I certainly know some wonderful and accomplished teachers, but I can think of no perfect teacher who does everything exactly right. Teaching is highs and lows, epiphany and drudgery. There are days when everything seems to hum, and days when I wonder if it’s time to switch to another profession. Mostly I just do the best I can and try not to lose heart. To the extent that I have teacherly wisdom, it has been hard earned and acquired over time. I am a kinder, gentler version of Cynthia today than I was ten years ago, far more patient with my students and more respectful of them as diverse and singular individuals. It’s an approach that I advocate today.

Some of the suggestions I offer in this book may work beautifully for you, others may require tweaking, and still others may not be workable in your situation. Don’t be afraid to experiment, and don’t be afraid to blow it, either, because you’ll learn a lot from that. I must admit here that almost all of my teaching experience, both public and private, has been in small rural schools, so I have not experienced the same challenges faced by those who work in urban contexts with broad cultural and language diversity and student loads that are triple mine. I acknowledge that reality, try to address it, and hope that this does not negate the book’s usefulness. Implementation and assessment will certainly be more difficult, but I believe the fundamentals still apply, and I think we can find enough common ground to make this a worthwhile resource.

Chapter 1 of this book is about getting started, and that is often the hardest part. The hope is that we can lead our students gently and playfully to writing, helping them to discover a sense of the medium of words in all their dimension and possibility. Poetry makes an entrance early on as the topic of Chapter 2; I think it was Naomi Shihab Nye who pointed out that our first thoughts as little children—fragments and feelings and flickers of light—more closely resemble poetry than prose, and that seems logical to me. Chapter 3 is about writing for results—in particular, letters, technical writing, and persuasive essays—practical and purposeful applications. Chapter 4 focuses

The Persuasive Essay

Having reached beyond our classroom and made written contact with the outside world through letters, we consider other ways in which the power



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of language can be used to inform and influence others. One approach is the persuasive essay, which attempts to convince the reader to think or act in a certain way. Of course, in order to convince someone of your opinion, you must first *have* an opinion, so students choose an issue that can be viewed from two distinctly different perspectives, learn a little more about it, and develop a point of view. It isn't hard to come up with such subjects from history, the news, or even Internet listings. I "googled" key words such as "controversial issues for students" and unearthed scores of possibilities. After they select a topic (see the next section *Helping Your Students Get Started*), remind students to gather ideas and arguments that represent both sides, even if they already have a definite opinion. Trying to understand opposing points of view is a strategy that will always serve them well, and they can present a stronger case if they anticipate the arguments of those who disagree.

The persuasive essay is a fairly traditional assignment, but the following are the section-by-section instructions that I would provide to my students, along with illustrative excerpts from the work of sixth-grade students:

The Introduction

Try to start with a "hook" or attention-getter. It might be a surprising fact, a question, an interesting quote, or an anecdote that will capture the interest of your readers and encourage them to read further. The hook is used to lead readers into the thesis of your essay, which is the opinion or idea that you hope to prove. You should state this opinion clearly right at the start, because it's more important than any other sentence in your essay. It is the reason you are writing—your purpose and challenge. With luck, by the end of the essay you will have proven your thesis and convinced your audience, so present it right away. This beginning section structures your entire essay. Once you have a good introductory paragraph, the rest falls into place more easily.

Here is an example of an opening attention-getter from Nikole's essay about animal experimentation:

A rabbit's head is locked in place with clamps, and clips keep its eyes open. A scientist drops a drop of oven cleaner into the rabbit's eyes . . . The reward for all this stress caused to the animal is a label saying don't let oven cleaner contact your eyes.

Nikole gets to the point shortly thereafter with a clear statement of her opinion:

These tests may keep people safer, but it isn't right to harm or kill animals for the advantages of humans.

Proving Your Points

This is the main body of the essay and it should be at least two paragraphs long. Here you will provide further information about the subject and discuss and support your point of view. You will need to go beyond your own knowledge and experience—use the Internet and library, or interview people who are experts on your topic. Build on the facts, examples, and statistics that you gather. Clearly state all your reasons for believing as you do, and don't lose sight of your purpose, which is to persuade the reader that *your* viewpoint is the right one.

Rufus decided to write an essay about whether or not teachers should assign homework. He drew mostly upon his own reflections, but at least he didn't engage in knee-jerk opposition. He argued that homework is actually a good thing when it is designed to help students more clearly understand what was taught in class that day *and* as long as there isn't too much of it. Here is an excerpt of his discussion:

Homework helps students a lot and prepares you for the work you will have to do out of school because a good life doesn't come on a silver platter. You have to work for it. The teachers want kids to work on what they have learned on their own. That way they can see how much the students understand.

Countering Other Arguments

Try to anticipate the arguments of those who disagree with you and show why their case is weak. Include a paragraph in which you specifically address the points that could be made by those who disagree with you. Then offer evidence that refutes their opinions and shows the strengths of your opinion. This is hard, but it is a valuable strategy.

This excerpt shows how Rufus handled it:

Lots of people think that homework is robbing kids of their childhood, but the average amount of time spent on homework for a thirteen-year-old is only an hour.

Those who oppose homework are mostly kids. They argue that homework is awful. (I think so too but you can't always get what you want.) They say that homework stresses them out too much. Also it takes away their time outside to exercise and be in nature and it limits the time they spend with their family and friends. Students don't get enough sleep and so they are tired the next day at school. Their case is weak, though, because they are not thinking of the future and how homework will help them.

The Conclusion

Finish with a flourish! Seal the deal! The conclusion summarizes what you have said in your essay, but it is much more than that: it is your final opportunity to convince the reader. Consider ending with a plea for action, a specific suggestion, or a memorable quote. Remember: if you do not convince the reader of your belief, then you have not fulfilled the purpose of the essay.

Nikole, our animal rights advocate, wrapped up her essay with some personal reflection about what she learned from her research. Although I typically discourage reference to oneself and one's feelings about the assignment within the essay, I appreciated her heartfelt search for tangible actions that she could take in her own life. She wrote:

I learned a lot from the topic I chose. It changed a lot inside me. I've always been against animal testing, but this made me think a lot. Now I'll only buy a shampoo that says not tested on animals on the back. Maybe someday I could make a speech about animal testing and how sick it can get. I had an idea that when a dog or cat at a pound has to be put down maybe they should give it to a lab, and if labs only took dogs and cats from the pounds, maybe that could decrease the number of deaths of dogs and cats. Then dogs and cats that are being put down could at least be useful in medical research. Even though I thought of that idea I still have reservations about animal testing.

Rufus concluded:

A little homework is good for you, but just enough to understand clearly. I oppose the kind that you get just for work but it doesn't help you. That's why kids have to do homework: to understand more about what the teacher says in class and work on it. So get out there and do your homework.

And Katie, who wrote about saving the wild mustangs of the West, listed some suggestions and concluded with this poetic vision on the next page.

The wind blows through the silky hair of the wild horses as they lope across the horizon, and the sky is painted with splotches of pink, orange and blue. Imagine running in the field of green with your closest friends in the background. My dream is to see this picture that I described. Someday I hope I will.

Helping Your Students Get Started

The success of the persuasive writing assignment has a lot to do with the topics your students select. As I mentioned earlier, there are numerous Internet sites that list controversial issues and provide links to more information. These encompass topics as diverse and complex as capital punishment, prayer in school, gay marriage, gun control, environmental protection, affirmative action, immigration, and animal rights, to mention but a few. Such an abundance of possibilities might seem overwhelming to your students, particularly when they aren't sure what most of these topics really mean; be prepared to guide them to something manageable and age appropriate. A good technique is to ask them to zero in on four or five possible topics about which they can answer "yes" to the following questions:

1. Do I have some idea of what this topic means?
2. Is it interesting to me?
3. Do I care about it?
4. Is it something about which I am curious and would like to learn more?
5. Is it something that people debate and argue about?
6. Can I frame this topic as a question?
7. Is there enough information available to help me understand it and form an opinion about it?
8. Is it substantial enough to write a full essay about it?

It may still take some conferring and compromise to further narrow down the possibilities to one final choice. I like to sell this to kids as a chance to go outside their comfort zone and explore something challenging and thought-provoking. It's true that if a topic is too complex and sophisticated, it can turn into an ordeal, but an easy one like school uniforms or homework can end up feeling flimsy or formulaic. Last year I had a student named