



# “Writing Is Not Really Something I Do”

## Engaging Reluctant Male Writers

by Steven W. Garlid

In fifth grade, I went to the dark side. Mr. Ruskin, our teacher, had assigned us to write a short story. Inspired by *Jaws*, which I had recently seen, I wrote the most violent, blood-splattered short story I could come up with. My story, “Pick up the Pieces,” was about a man named Fred Dotslop who returns from work to find body parts hidden all around his house. At the climax, Dotslop finds

an eyeball floating in an olive jar. I can’t say what possessed me to write it (and its sequel), or what inspired me to turn it in to my teacher. What I can say is that Mr. Ruskin read it to the class, in what ended up being one of my proudest moments of middle school. What was he thinking? Writing like this would not be permitted in most schools or afterschool programs today.

For many students, that’s the problem.

Of the many trends I have observed in 20 years as a classroom teacher, one of the most disheartening has been a deteriorating interest in writing among male

students. Their disengagement manifests in many ways, from quiet malaise to blunt verbalization. “Writing is not really something I do,” Aidan, a fifth-grade boy, reported. “I’d rather read, which is kind of the opposite of writing.”

Despite my focus, over the last decade, on *process* rather than *product* in writing, the majority of boys I taught continued to show a lack of enthusiasm. Writers’ workshop models that focused on developing “seed moments” through personal narratives did little to spark their interest. I prodded them to write descriptive, clearly organized essays, but they showed little commitment. As a result, I saw well-organized writing that was

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fairly impressive, but behind it was an absence of passion and a growing disdain for the subject.

To explore the problem further, I joined the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship program in Seattle through School's Out Washington, a local nonprofit advocacy group for out-of-school time instruction. Supported by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the National Writing Project, the fellowship brought teachers like me together with afterschool practitioners. Inspired by this collaboration, I began to see new solutions to the problem of dwindling engagement among male writers. I began to realize that the school-time context of writing instruction contributed to the problem. The pressures on students and teachers to meet deadlines, reach achievement goals, and address standards encouraged more compliance than creativity. What if students could write in a more liberated context—where grades, products, and achievement goals were no longer factors?

These questions led me to develop Write After School, an afterschool writing program. Write After School offers choice within structure and encourages interaction in ways designed to engage reluctant male writers. Kids choose their own topics, receive feedback, and have chances to share and talk about their work. Although I don't encourage the kids to use the same blood-spattered butchery I wrote about in Mr. Ruskin's class, I do encourage them to follow their interests and trust their instincts. These attributes help to address the issues that can make it difficult for boys to feel engaged in writing as it is traditionally taught in the classroom.

### Legacy of Struggle

The difficult relationship between boys and writing is well documented; its causes and solutions are the source of passionate debate. According to Peg Tyre (2008), boys get expelled from preschool at five times the rate of girls. They are more often diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and more likely to be held back. They lag significantly behind girls in reading and writing (Tyre, 2008). "Boys and girls started off the same," Tyre writes in *The Trouble with Boys* (2008). "Around fourth grade, though, girls pulled ahead" (p. 19).

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In *Raising Cain*, Kindlon and Thompson point out that boys "act and speak in simple terms. Their more slowly developing language skills are apparent in their often blunt and unsophisticated humor or their preference for action over negotiation" (p. 30). In high school, the split between boys and girls grows even more dramatic (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). In every racial subgroup, boys do worse in school than girls who come from identical environments (Tyre, 2008, p. 45).

The struggles males face with writing have far-reaching implications. Of the fourth-grade students at my school, Bryant Elementary in Seattle, who did not meet standards on the writing portion of the state-mandated Measurement of Student Progress in 2011, 70 percent were boys. On the 2004 Washington Assessment of Student Learning, only 48.6 percent of fourth-grade boys met the standard in writing compared to 67.3 percent of girls—a difference of nearly 19 percentage points (Fletcher, 2006). In his book *Why Boys Fail*, Richard Whitmire (2010) reports that, in the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, female writers reached proficiency at nearly twice the rate of males.

Experts point to numerous diverse factors to explain boys' lack of interest in writing. Video games, medical problems such as attention deficit disorders, a lack of male teachers at the elementary school level, "feminization" of classrooms, and increased emphasis on testing are all identified as obstacles to male success. Another issue is a growing emphasis on male peer pressure: the "boy code," which Martin (2002) defines as "a fear of not living up to popular images of masculinity, fear of being labeled a sissy or seen as feminine in any way, fear of powerlessness, and fear of having their sexuality questioned" (Martin, 2002, p.62).

The proposed solutions vary widely. Some experts demand more active leadership and mentoring around literacy. Others propose single-sex settings for learning, extending school hours, and establishing consistent expectations. Some point to teacher perceptions and low expectations for boys. As Whitmire (2010) notes, "Poor handwriting is just the beginning of what teachers often find dismaying about boys' writing" (p. 69). Peg Tyre (2008) writes:

By broadcasting our cultural expectations about children, we risk conditioning boys and girls to favor certain activities and accept certain limitations. We make them vulnerable to a phenomenon known to scientists as the “stereotype threat.” (p. 180)

David Gurian (2011) points to brain research that suggests that physiological factors could also be responsible. Areas of the brain linking language, thought, and verbal communication develop earlier in females than in males. Furthermore, the female brain has a more highly developed hippocampus and Broca’s area than does the male brain, allowing females to retain memory, develop vocabulary, communicate verbally, and access information more readily than males. Females tend to have more access to emotively descriptive language in written assignments (Gurian, 2011).

To me, these arguments skate around the central problem, which has less to do with boys themselves and more with how writing is taught and when. Many of my male students show intense interest in other subjects including math, science, drama, reading, sports, music, and video games. They throw themselves into math problems, fully focused, only to check out during writing time. This ability to focus in other areas indicates a problem not with the boys as learners, but with the teaching methods and learning environment. The gender of the teacher does not appear to matter, nor does adherence to the boy code or feminization of the curriculum (Cleveland, 2011). What does matter is method.

In my classroom, boys have expressed an increasing disinterest in writing over the last several years. This displeasure can be either subtle or, as in the case of Aidan, overt. Students will ask to use the restroom, sharpen pencils, talk, daydream, doodle, feign illness, ask for bandages, and spill pencil shavings—anything to avoid the writing task at hand. With girls, I see a much higher level of engagement, focus, and persistence during writing. Although girls do not always consider writing to be their favorite subject, most work around their preferences, manage time well, and produce work that meets grade-level standards.

### Practical Solutions

To unlock the barriers to male engagement in writing, we must examine the environments in which writing is taught. Regie Routman (2005) suggests multiple approaches, on which I base the recommendations below.

**Step 1:** Let the students do the talking. Learners respond positively to opportunities to talk throughout the

writing process (Routman, 2005). A study conducted by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education in the U.K. indicates that talking provides “oral rehearsal for writing” and “a means to inhabit and explore characters or dilemmas” (Barrs & Pidgeon, 2002, p.5). Does this mean allowing continuous off-topic discussion every session? No. However, providing opportunities to talk at various points throughout the writing process allows students to shape and clarify their ideas and to provide feedback in a context of social interaction.

**Step 2:** Work collaboratively. Routman encourages a practice she calls “shared writing,” in which students and instructor work together on a piece of writing. In my experience, boys often appreciate opportunities to interact verbally in small groups. The process encourages talking and collaborative problem solving—two activities most boys respond to (Routman, 2005). Allowing students to talk about ideas and interact verbally through the early stages of the writing process provides guidance, safety, and interaction: qualities that I have found to engage students.

**Step 3:** Broaden the spectrum of writing topics we consider acceptable. Newkirk (2002) addresses the issue of violence in adolescent male writing, asserting that, when we limit the scope of the topics we deem appropriate, we fail to support the tastes and values of young male culture. Genres such as comics and topics including violent action and toilet humor have been shunned by the intellectual community. Consequently, Newkirk argues, many boys find little meaning in assigned writing—and therefore underperform. Instead of rejecting the topics boys embrace, Newkirk suggests that we “view boys’ culture as viable, alive, and worthy of attention” (p. 21).

Newkirk calls for a “permeable curriculum,” a broader circle that includes genres teachers might initially dismiss:

In the end, a broadening of the literary spectrum will not only benefit boys; it will benefit any student whose primary affiliation is to the “low status” popular narratives of television, movies, comics, humor, sports pages, and plot-driven fiction. (p.171)

Newkirk invites teachers to meet students more than halfway—to enter into our students’ worlds, to “join the game” (p. 182). Quoting Basil Bernstein, Newkirk concludes, “If the culture of the teacher is to be part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher” (p. 120).

Broadening the range of acceptable topics in order to engage boys need not mean that we offer an “anything goes” environment. When I see violence in student work,

I see an opportunity for discussion. In many cases, through conferencing, students can think carefully about the causes and effects of violence. A student who develops a character whose parents both die may not be expressing a hatred of his parents. He may instead be exploring the sensation of losing his parents through divorce or revealing a desire to pull away from them as he matures. The most surprising discovery I've made about providing students with more choices in writing has been how infrequently violence appears at all.

Along with choices, boys need structure. I find that a consistent focus on sentence mechanics, language conventions, and handwriting provide the technical foundation necessary for boys to write competently and develop confidence. Daily writing warm-ups in writing journals can help students learn different sentence constructions. Note-taking strategies such as keywords and fact-question-response bring a balance between factual reporting and student voice. Mini-lessons can teach an array of specific writing techniques such as the use of powerful verbs or figurative language (Fletcher, 2006), providing more colors on writers' palettes. Perhaps the most powerful way to reach male writers is to ask them how they feel about writing and what they want to write about.

### Student Attitudes at Bryant Elementary

To investigate the student attitudes about writing at my school, I designed and administered a writing interest survey to 189 students in grades K–5 in spring 2012. The survey asked students to respond to ten statements about writing by circling responses ranging from “not at all” (a score of 1) to “a whole lot” (a score of 5). The results of the survey confirmed my suspicions. Fifth-grade males scored lowest of all groups of students when responding to the following statements: “I write in my spare time,” “Writing is fun,” and “I like to share my writing.” Furthermore, fifth-grade males showed little confidence in sharing their writing compared to males in younger grades.

To assess the adult perspective on writing, I administered a 10-question online survey to parents in the Bryant community. Survey results show that boys' disinterest in writing does not stem from a lack of parental concern. Of the 142 parents who responded to the survey, 97.5% said that they see writing as “extremely important.” When I

asked the question, “How do you use writing in your own life?” parents said that they wrote primarily for work. One parent explained, “Kids should be writing every day, writing about what they are reading, writing about what they are learning in math, science, social studies, etc., in addition to writing for pleasure.”

### Developing an Afterschool Writing Program

I designed Write After School to enhance enjoyment and engagement in writing among students in grades 3–5. The program offers a casual setting for up to 18 students to explore ideas and interests through writing, with me as their teacher. Held Tuesdays and Thursdays right after school, the course runs for 12 weeks at a time, three times a year. Parents have shown strong interest in the program: For the Fall 2012 course, I received 51 applications for 18 available spots. Of the 51 applicants, 19 (37%) were boys. I offered the course again in Winter 2013 and Spring 2013, with new participants each session. The ratio of girls to boys remained the same for each session.

I begin each session with a 10–15-minute mini-lesson. Then I allow extensive time for student independent work, peer editing, and individual student-teacher mini-conferences. I permit students to explore a range of genres including comics or graphic novels, short stories, research reports, personal narratives, and poetry. During the course, I teach strategies to help students generate ideas, write for various audiences, peer edit, revise, and present their work. The course is designed to be replicable, students centered, and fun.

I find that using a cue, in the form of a short question or an unusual object placed on a center table, can create an engaging hook for writers. During one session, students responded to the question, “What does a time machine look like?” After drawing and then writing for 10 minutes in spiral notebooks, students shared in pairs. Several asked to share with the whole class. “My time machine is made of wood and covered on the inside with red velvet,” said Ava. Zach's machine looked like a sarcophagus; Henry's, like a sled. Every student conceived of his or her time machine without help, and no two were alike.

Each one-hour session closes with two or three students sharing their work with the whole group. I encourage students to “find something that's working” in their

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pieces. For some, this means two paragraphs. For others, it means just a sentence. The amazing thing is, once they have written, most students can find at least one fragment of success in their work. The question “What’s going well?” provides a positive starting point for conferences and class discussions.

To structure program content, I surveyed student writers to generate ideas for our weekly themes. During the Fall 2012 session, we examined superheroes, humor, freaky stories, animals, science fiction, movie scripts, poetry, adventure, mystery, food, and sports. Students did not always finish a piece during a session. Instead, throughout the term, they began multiple pieces, and they often wrote outside of our twice-weekly sessions. At the conclusion of the spring session, the students submitted a story to a class book of short stories. The students each received a copy as memento of their Write After School experience.

Now in its second year, Write After School seems to be working. Students like Methaab, who were restless and unfocused during the first sessions, settled into a pattern and began to channel energy into their writing rather than off-task behavior. I hear from parents that some boys are beginning to write at home—for the first time ever. I hear students asking to take the course again. The students appreciate the flexibility of topics, lack of deadlines, and emphasis on fun. As the instructor, I use classroom management techniques, but I don’t need to pressure students to finish projects. As in any class, I see a range of needs. While Evelyn needs a way to share her work, Izzy needs help getting started.

The boys have responded positively to the class’ topics and its possibilities. I’ve noticed that many boys make more of a commitment to their topics and write for longer periods of time. When presented with more options, more boys have been making wise choices and pursuing their topics with conviction and personal connection. Having choice gives most boys in my workshop more to say about their topics, so they project a stronger voice and write more pages.

Some boys get so engaged in the process that they suggest additions to the curriculum. William, who in the first weeks expressed little interest in writing, began to open up and make suggestions for course content.

*William:* Can we invent our own words next time?

*Me:* Can you share an example?

*William:* Yeah, how about combining “run-dog”?

*Me:* That sounds interesting. What else?

*William:* We could put “-itis” on the end of it: “run-dogitis.”

When we listen to and encourage the language boys use, we affirm their voices and cultivate their connections to written language.

## Developing a Boy-Friendly Writing Program

The following recommendations come as a result of my own trial and error in starting an afterschool writing program to engage writers, particularly boys who resist writing.

1. Start by assessing the needs of the community. Will the course be open to boys only? I decided to open the course to both genders, since both boys and girls can benefit from strategies that enhance engagement.
2. Secure a consistent location for the program that is quiet, accessible, and free of visual distractions.
3. Make sure you can be there consistently to facilitate, or choose a facilitator who can.
4. Structure program content around student interest. This step provides many opportunities to become aware of the range of interests students have. Include your own interests as well.
5. Schedule sessions no less than once per week. Twice a week or more is ideal to create a writing community more quickly.
6. Present high expectations in a calm environment. With high expectations, writers expect more of themselves and make noticeable progress. A calm working environment helps writers focus, gain control, and take risks. The combination of high stakes and low pressure helps build confidence.
7. Provide all supplies students will need, including journals, pencils, dictionaries, thesauruses, and so on. Keep students’ journals on site. Provide a separate journal to take home if a student wants one.
8. Maintain communication with parents or guardians regularly. Include them in the process.
9. Provide a course syllabus in advance. Students appreciate knowing what topics will be discussed prior to each class.
10. Reduce emphasis on product, and place more emphasis on process and support.
11. Celebrate student accomplishments by hosting a public reading, publishing a class book, or both.

One way we can give students options is to ask them *when* they enjoy writing. In April 2013, my students completed brief exit-ticket surveys (Fletcher, 2006). The exit slips gave them two statements to complete: “I like to write when...” and “I don’t like to write when....” Their responses are summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Fifth-Graders' Responses to Exit-Ticket Surveys**

I like to write when...	I don't like to write when...
<p>I have a good idea.                      It is quiet in the classroom.                      There is choice.                      We get breaks.                      There is no time limit.                      We can write about monsters.                      The lights aren't too bright.                      It is calm.</p>	<p>It is loud.                      The teacher assigns it.                      It isn't as long as you want it.                      There are no breaks.                      My hand is sore.                      It's judged.                      We're being tested.                      We're doing something really fun right afterwards.</p>

Addressing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may help with funding for the program. The key writing strands in the standards ask students to be able to write opinion pieces, informative or explanatory texts requiring research, and narratives—and to do so proficiently, over both shorter and longer time frames. The CCSS also require “clear, coherent writing” and a writing process that includes planning, revising, and rewriting. These requirements could easily fall within the scope of a program like Write After School.

### Taking a New Look at Writing Instruction

We must look seriously at the problems boys have with writing. The causes of boys' disengagement with writing stem from a variety of factors—biological, societal, and instructional. To address the problem, we must re-examine our teaching practices and offer alternative settings for writing instruction. An afterschool setting offers freedom from the pressures of state standards and content area coverage that may limit teachers during the day—though it could also embrace those standards, depending on the needs of the community. Afterschool programs like Write After School aim to meet writers where their interests are, instead of demanding conformity.

If we expect boys to grow as writers, we must strive to meet them where their interests and passions lie. Teacher Tom Romano writes, “Students gain self-confidence and develop respect for writing when they engage in frequent conferences carried out in an atmosphere of acceptance and trust” (Romano, 1987, p. 101). The goal of engaging male writers at the elementary school level is within our reach. If we wish to encourage boys to see writing as an ally, rather than an adversary, teachers and out-of-school practitioners must, at the very least, accept and trust the spaces their minds and hearts inhabit.

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