



## TUTOR TIPS

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# Enticing Reluctant Writers

by Hazel Davidson

We've all encountered students who balk at writing. Many can tell a story or explain a problem but, as soon as we say, "Now, let's write it down", they freeze. So we need a way, preferably several ways, to get them past the hurdle of the first sentence. Once there, they are likely to attack the task more readily on future occasions. So here are a few angles I've tried and found successful.

## 1. When I was a child

This exercise is a simplified adaptation of Jenny Trevino's language experience project. (See reference below)

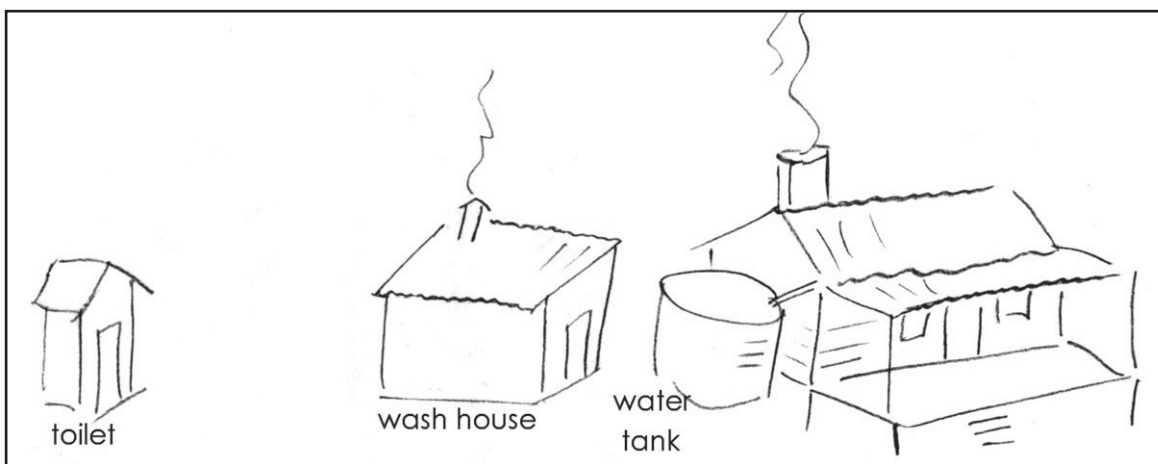
### a) As always, talk first

What was your house made of? The walls, the roof? How many rooms did it have? Did it have electricity? Tap water? Air-conditioning? A separate bedroom for each child?

### b) Draw

The tutors draw their own childhood home to demonstrate, not only the method but also the simple standard of the drawing required. Then the students draw theirs.

Old photos can also be used if they are available and if the tutor or student has the skills and equipment to scan them.



### c) Write

Write a single sentence or several sentences to describe the house. (Don't focus on spelling and grammar at this stage. Your main aim here is to break the fear barrier. Unless the errors make the sentences incomprehensible, you are better to take note of them and return to them at some other time.)

### d) This procedure can be repeated with:

- Geography** of the area: many other houses? hills or plain? creek or river?
- Garden &/or crops** around the house: plants for decoration or eating, for sale or private use?
- People:** size of family: extended or nuclear?
- Animals:** pets and/or livestock?

e) Maybe scan pictures and type text, depending, of course, on the availability of equipment and the student's skill and interest in using technology. Possibly make a book. The tutor's work, plus that of each student can be printed and bound into a plastic folder. I have had students return to class many months, even several years, later still proudly displaying the book they wrote in such a class.

D. Court et al (eds): *A Whole New World*, pp. xiv-xv, 2006 Sugarbag on Damper, ISBN 0 9757593 3 7.

## 2. Voice to Paper

Some students speak extremely fluently and enthusiastically but then freeze at the mere idea of writing what they have described or explained just minutes earlier.

a) Encourage the student to talk (yet again!) about the topic at hand. It doesn't really matter what the topic is, providing it is something the student is interested in or has an opinion about. Don't, however, let the talking last more than a short time initially.

b) Ask the student to repeat into a voice recorder. If you still have a functioning tape recorder, that's an even better option. It allows you and your student to replay very short segments a number of times, and to turn the machine off and restart at exactly the same spot in the following session, whereas many of the more modern pieces of equipment return to the beginning of the track each time. This presents a student lacking in confidence with too much text to cope with at one time.

c) Replay the recording one sentence or one phrase at a time. The length of the segments replayed will obviously depend on the student's ability to remember and to transcribe. As a student's confidence grows, he/she will be able to cope with longer chunks of text at a time.

d) Ask the student to write down what you have just replayed. Allow the student to ask for whatever help is needed with spelling, punctuation etc. Don't apply pressure to work independently because you are trying to overcome a mental block. Again, remember that the shortest meaningful chunk is more manageable than a longer segment. Allow repeated replaying of each phrase or sentence as many times as the student requires.

e) Continue through the recording one short segment at a time.

f) Ask the student to read back what he/she has written.

# 3. Picture stories

a) Talk first - of course!

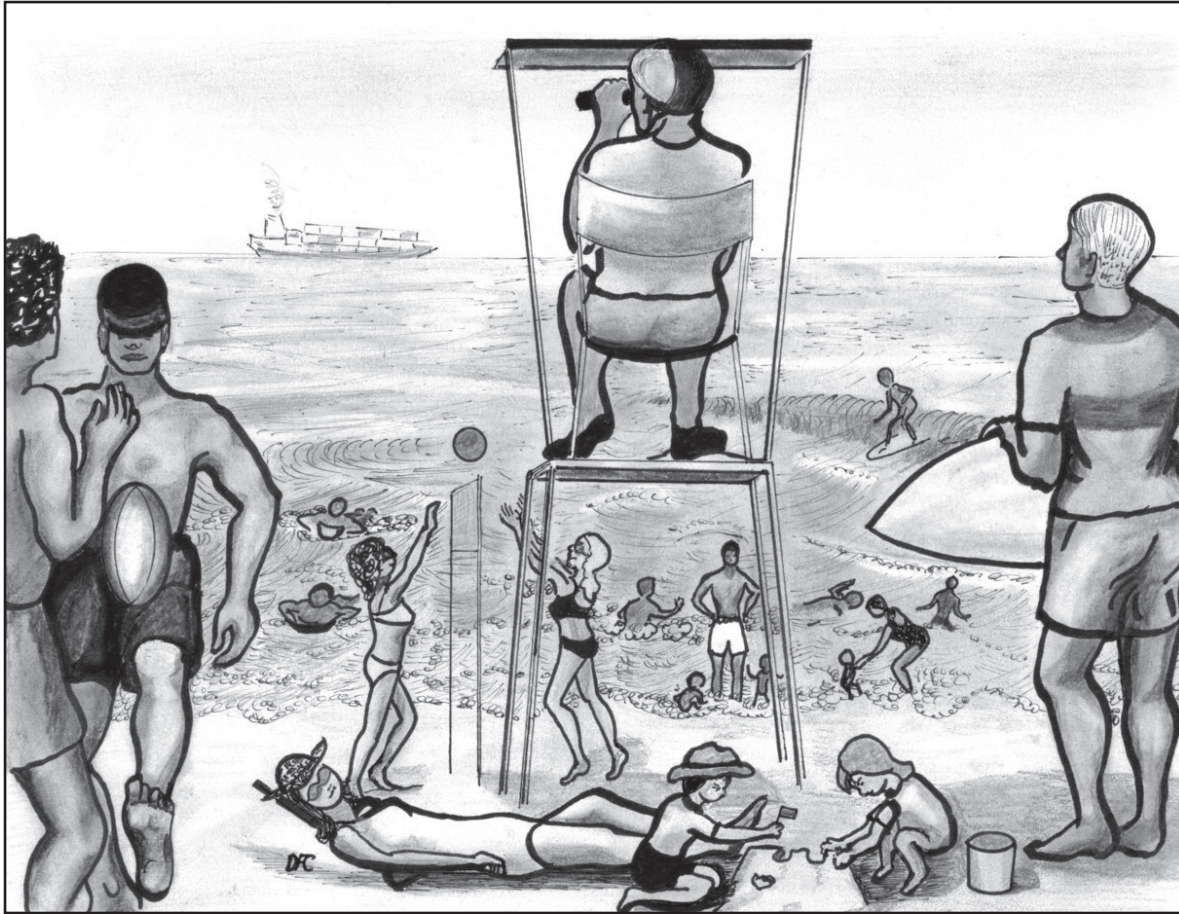


Illustration by Dorothy Court

b) Prompt with basic nouns:

|            |        |             |            |       |
|------------|--------|-------------|------------|-------|
| children   | footy  | sand castle | ship       | surf  |
| surf board | surfer | teenagers   | volleyball | woman |

c) Make some verbs in three basic tenses:

|         | <b>Now</b><br>not finished yet | <b>Anytime</b><br>sometimes,<br>always, never | <b>Past</b><br>yesterday,<br>last week, last year |
|---------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| play    | they <u>are playing</u>        | they <u>play</u>                              | they <u>played</u>                                |
| watch   | he _____                       | he _____                                      | he _____  |
| sunbake | she _____                      | she _____                                     | she _____   |
| build   | they _____                     | they _____                                    | they _____  |
| throw   | she _____                      | she _____                                     | she _____   |
| kick    | they _____                     | they _____                                    | they _____  |

**d) Write!** With the help of the nouns and verbs above, almost any student will write at least one sentence, and probably a grammatically correct one at that! You can choose what tense you want your students to use. If they manage one alright, then try them on another.

Right now \_\_\_\_\_

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Every summer \_\_\_\_\_

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Last Sunday \_\_\_\_\_

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**Always stop before the student reaches the point of exhaustion.** Remember writing is an extremely difficult task for reluctant, insecure students. You can return to the task after a break or in your next session together. It is best to elicit even a very small amount of text with your student ending the session pleased and enthusiastic about what has been achieved. **In every case praise and encourage throughout, but not so lavishly that your student feels you are insincere.**