

FRIDAY LETTERS

Connecting Students, Teachers, and Families Through Writing

Terry H. Newman ■ *Sarah A. Bizzarri*

It seems as though each year our team of four core fifth-grade teachers and one learning support teacher debated on what to do to keep the families abreast of their child's academic and social progress. This past year Terry (first author) suggested that the students write a letter to their parents each Friday detailing their behavior and academic accomplishments for the week. It was important to increase communication between students and families, but it was equally important that the students became involved with communicating this message to their families.

Involving families in literacy activities, including letter writing, facilitates students' growth as writers (Clay, 1987). Texting and e-mail are prevalent means of communication in today's society, but they do not necessarily promote proper writing skills, and not all students have access to these resources in classrooms or at home. Traditional letter writing provides an authentic, meaningful means by which students practice their writing skills and communicate with their families. Additionally, the ability to correctly craft informational writing pieces is assessed on our Standardized State Assessment and is a needed skill as students' progress through school.

Writing Friday Letters

When the Friday Letters were first introduced at the beginning of the school year, the students quickly learned that the focus of the letters changes at their

discretion. Providing students with choice increases their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and promotes engagement in their writing. The idea of writing to their parents really seemed to spark their interest, and the students quickly demonstrated this excitement by asking questions regarding the content and wondering when they could start writing. Writing to such an authentic audience makes the writing meaningful to the students (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Mada, 2007). The Friday Letters seemed simple enough with a simple purpose; however, as this idea came to fruition, it quickly became apparent that the Friday Letters would open up a plethora of learning opportunities.

We Talk

As a class we discussed the purpose of the Friday Letter and the contents of the letter. The students felt it was important to include information about all their core subjects, special events, and also their behavior. Although we wanted the letters to be informative, time was also an issue. It was a goal that the letters could be written in 30 minutes or less.

Terry H. Newman and **Sarah A. Bizzarri** are teachers with the Fairfield Area School District, Pennsylvania, USA; e-mail taanewman@comcast.net and sarahabizzarri@gmail.com.

Modeling

The next step was to model the process for crafting the Friday Letter. Modeling and explicit instruction are the first of three steps in the optimal learning model that we followed for writing instruction (Routman, 2005). First, the teacher thinks aloud as he or she brainstorms ideas and records them. The second step was to number the ideas in the order in which he or she wanted to write about them. We asked the students to do this second step of prewriting because we have discovered over the years that most students can brainstorm a myriad of wonderful thoughts and ideas but struggle when it is time to use their ideas to succinctly craft their writing. Then, the initial draft of the letter was written on chart paper in front of the students while the teacher continued to think aloud. When finished, the teacher read aloud the letter to demonstrate the value of reading aloud and “hearing” the writing.

Shared Writing

Next was a shared writing experience. At this point, the students were responsible for generating the ideas for the initial brainstorming. After recording the students’ ideas the class decided on the order in which to write about the ideas. Finally, at the students’

direction, the teacher crafted the letter on chart paper in the front of the room for all to see. The shared writing event concluded by reading aloud the writing.

Independent Writing

Finally, the students independently wrote the Friday Letter. Initially, the modeled writing example and the shared writing example were available for the students to view. Sarah (second author) also developed an outline (Figure 1) to help struggling writers get started. The outline was necessary for some students, but we did not make all the students follow the outline because we did not want to limit individuality in the letters. Part of the success of the Friday Letters was because of the freedom students were given when writing. Each week fewer and fewer students relied on the outline to guide them. As the year progressed students began to craft their Friday Letters quite quickly and accurately. Some students wrote one page, whereas others crafted a Friday Letter consisting of two or more pages. Each finished letter was read and initialed by the teacher and returned to the student to take home for a parent signature.

Teacher Help

It is important to understand that the teacher provided little assistance during the writing of the Friday Letter. Aside from some peer collaboration, the students brainstormed, organized, and drafted the letters independently. We sent the letters home “student perfect,” meaning the best the student could do without teacher assistance. Student perfect enabled the students, parents, and teacher to better assess student progress over the course of the year. Student perfect also provided a clearer picture of what the student can do independently as a writer. Student perfect is different from “teacher

Figure 1 Friday Letter Outline

Date _____

Dear _____,

This week at school I learned _____.

My behavior during this past week was _____.

One thing I really liked this week was _____.

Love,

x _____

perfect,” which is writing you typically see coming from writer’s workshop. A teacher perfect paper has been revised and edited by the teacher so that it can be published without errors.

Improved Communication Between Students, Teachers, Families

The Friday Letters provided an opportunity to inform families of what students learned each week. Each student wrote about what they learned about in each subject and any other fun or exciting events that took place that week. The letters provided an avenue for students to let families know about upcoming events, due dates for assignments, upcoming tests, field trips, or special events. Figure 2 illustrates part of Sammie’s (all student names are pseudonyms) letter in which she described upcoming events and makes light of April Fool’s Day.

Students were held accountable for what they learned during the week; so when students asked, “What did we

Pause and Ponder

- How can I make writing more authentic for students?
- How am I currently communicating with families?
- Are my students enjoying writing and writing enough?

Figure 2 Excerpt From Sammie's Friday Letter

Dear Mom and Dad,
This week was awesome!
Nobody flipped a card. I am so happy
that the writing PSA's are over!
I did Narrative, informational, and persuasive.
There is a game coming up. It is
Wednesday, April 13, 2011. We also have
Spirit week starting Monday, Monday - 4th
day, Tuesday - 5th day, Wednesday -
Change your Identity day, Thursday - Hot day,
and finally Friday - Spirit day. Did I
mention I went to the Principal's
5 times today because me and
ally threw water balloons at the
Principal? APRIL FOOLS!

learn this week?" or "I know we studied fractions in math, but what else did we do?" we turned it back on them, "You tell me, use your books, notes, or neighbor." Sharing and peer discussion are important when crafting writing pieces (Graves, 1994), and the students had this opportunity when writing Friday Letters. Moreover, we believed it was important for students to talk to one another as they generated ideas, as this promotes breadth and the depth in the students' writing.

We have also been pleasantly surprised about the students wanting to write about their behavior. Perhaps as important was that by writing about their behavior they recognized their behavior, albeit good or bad, and by doing this were able to reflect upon the events during the week and what needed improved. Students who did struggle with behavior issues took such pride when they were able to write to their parents stating they had a great week. We made an effort to jot a note on letters of students who struggled academically or socially who have made progress within a week, month, or semester. This often generated some written feedback from parents, which was duly appreciated by both the student and the teacher.

"We wanted to address student concerns and explicitly teach the students skills they needed to advance their writing."

On other occasions students wrote more in-depth about a single topic. For example, when studying the Civil War students wrote about specific facts they learned. Other times students wrote about something they learned and included a few questions for their parents to answer, sort of like "Are you smarter than a fifth-grader?" Figure 3 illustrates how Addison challenged her parents with questions from math, social studies, and language arts and provided a space for her parents to answer. Students reported how the questions prompted discussion with their parents and were enthusiastic to share whether or not they stumped their parents.

Minilessons and Feedback

As previously mentioned, the writing of the Friday Letter provided a plethora

of teaching opportunities. However, before discussing those instructional opportunities, it is important to understand that the writing of the Friday Letter was in addition to the everyday writing completed during language arts. Minilessons based on student need (Routman, 2005) occurred throughout the week during writer's workshop. Minilessons took place before and as the Friday Letters were written because we wanted to address student concerns and explicitly teach the students skills they needed to advance their writing.

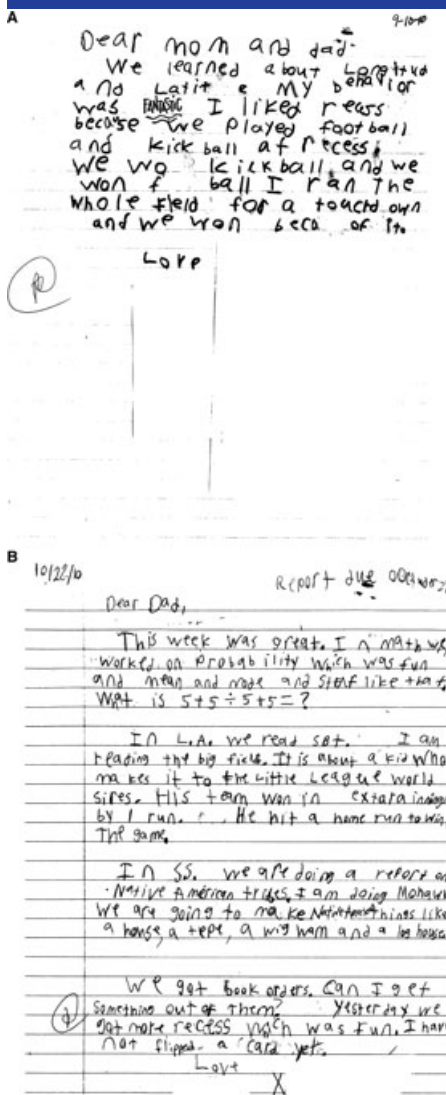
The Friday Letters offered opportunity for individualized instruction. It is important to be able to provide different levels of instructional support to young writers (Tompkins, 2000). After the first few weeks of Friday Letter writing, shortcomings in the students' writings became apparent. At this point students were pulled aside for small-group or individualized instruction during the Friday Letter writing time. For example, Luke struggled with simple sentence structure and paragraph formation (Figure 4A). As a result of the individualized instruction, less than 2 months later Luke was able to craft a multiparagraph letter (Figure 4B). In contrast, Abby entered fifth grade with a basic understanding of paragraph structure (Figure 5A). Instruction for Abby focused on the use of transition words and greater breadth and depth in her writing (Figure 5B).

Instructional opportunities surfaced as students continued to write each week. A noninclusive list of the lessons

Figure 3 Addison's Friday Letter

Dear Mom & Dad,
This week was fantastic! My behavior was
great, and still nobody has flipped a card
(but not the whole year). Instead of me writing a few
paragraphs about what I did this week, I
am going to give you a little test.
So in math we are making squamen based on
ounces, pounds, and money so... Can you convert
80oz into lbs & oz? 5 lbs 6oz.
Next, in Social Studies we are learning about
the Civil War so, here are two questions on the
Civil War. 1) Where did the first gun shot of
the Civil War take place? Fort Sumter.
2) What was the Underground Railroad made for?
escape route for slaves to Canada.
Finally, in Language Arts we were writing
persuasive letters about more food in the
cafeteria, here is your last question... What
are the other two different kinds of writing?
Inform & Entertain.
Love,
X

Figure 4 Luke's Friday Letter Samples

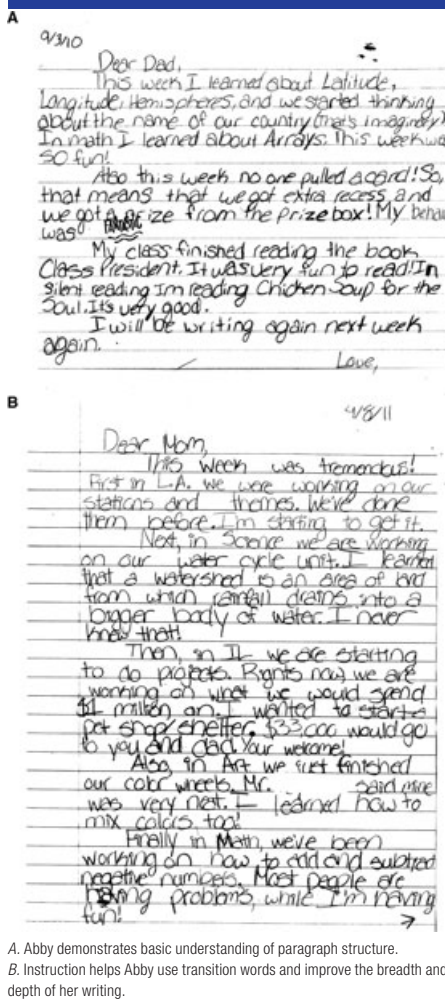


A. Luke struggles with simple sentence structure and paragraph formation.
B. Less than 2 months later, Luke crafts a multiparagraph letter.

we taught include writing complete sentences, placement of periods, indenting, staying on topic within a paragraph, elaborating, and the proper use of transition or signal words to begin paragraphs.

Once a skill was taught, students were expected to demonstrate the skill proficiently in any and all of their writing. To facilitate success, students were provided focused feedback that described where the student was in

Figure 5 Abby's Friday Letter Samples



A. Abby demonstrates basic understanding of paragraph structure.
B. Instruction helps Abby use transition words and improve the breadth and depth of her writing.

relation to mastering the skill and also guided the student toward mastering the next goal. Using a combination of cognitive and motivational feedback was important, but so was identifying what type of feedback was best for each student (Brookhart, 2007).

Friday Letters provided students of all ability levels the opportunity to advance their writing skills. The writing of the Friday Letter gave students the authentic opportunity to practice informational writing and the associated elements of writing that are important to communicate clearly in written form. Students enjoyed practicing writing

strategies and skills in this authentic manner of writing, which was far more engaging than completing isolated skills on worksheets. Additionally, this writing aligned with our state standards of writing with a clear focus and identifying topic, purpose, and audience.

Family Reactions

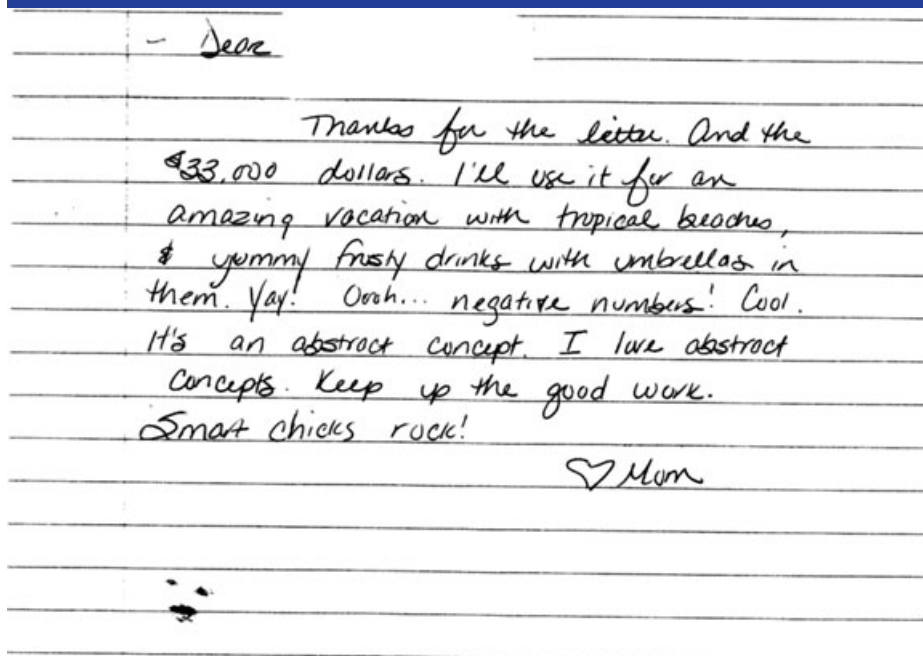
Responses to the Friday Letters have been overwhelmingly positive. At our beginning of the year back-to-school events, we explained the purpose of the Friday Letters and asked that a caregiver sign the letter so the student could return it on Monday. We explained why the letters will be student perfect and encouraged any type of written feedback to the student or to the teacher.

During the fall parent-teacher conferences, approximately 8 weeks after we began the Friday Letters, we received an outpouring of encouraging comments about the letters. "I love the Friday Letters; I always know what's going on in the classroom" or "I use to have to fight to get any information from my child; now they're excited to share with me what they did in school for the week." Some parents decided to revise and edit with their child before signing the letter, whereas others provided a note back to their child (see Figure 6). Families appreciated not only the weekly letters, but also the chance to see how their child's independent writing progressed over the course of the year. Each letter was kept in a student folder and occasionally reviewed by the teacher and student to discuss growth and future goals. At the end of the school year, each student created a portfolio of all their Friday Letters to take home to their families.

Teacher Reflection

One benefit we were not expecting of the Friday Letters was a weekly

Figure 6 Sample Parent Note in Response to Friday Letter



review of ourselves as a teacher. We looked forward each Friday to reading the letters as a formative assessment of our own teaching effectiveness. The students did not hold back their thoughts and personal feelings to what lessons and activities they liked and did not like. If a lesson was taught and the majority of the students wrote about it positively and reflected accurately on the lesson, then the lesson was a success. In contrast, if students struggled to remember what we did in a certain subject or expressed some concern about a lesson or topic, then we needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson.

A concern we all expressed throughout the year was finding time to write the Friday Letters. It seemed as though there was always something that caused us to be short on time by the end of the week. As a fifth-grade team, we simply decided that the Friday Letter was a priority. The students wanted to write and the parents were expecting to receive a letter each Friday.

We also believe that we were able to communicate with some parents who we may not have been able to communicate with otherwise, due in part by asking for a weekly signature

“A concern we all expressed throughout the year was finding time to write the Friday Letters.... We simply decided that the Friday Letter was a priority.”

TAKE ACTION!

Follow these steps to write Friday Letters (in 30 minutes or less!):

- 1. We Talk**—As a class, discuss the purpose of the Friday Letter and the contents of the letter.
- 2. Modeling**—Model the process for crafting the Friday Letter and record for all students to see. Brainstorm ideas and record them as you think aloud. Number the ideas in the order you want to write about them. Write the initial draft for all to see and read it aloud.
- 3. Shared Writing**—Brainstorm ideas for the Friday Letter with the students and record for all students to see. With the students assisting, number the ideas in the order you want to write about them. Draft the letter for all to see based on shared input from you and the students. Read the letter aloud when finished.
- 4. Independent Writing**—Students brainstorm their own ideas, number each idea, and begin to independently write their own Friday Letter. A skeletal outline may help some students get started.
- 5. Teacher Help**—Teachers provide little assistance during the independent writing of the Friday Letter. Aside from some peer collaboration, the students brainstorm, organize, and draft the letters independently. However, use the completed letters to identify areas of instruction.
- 6. Once the students have completed their Friday Letters, read and sign them.** Have students take their letter home over the weekend to be reviewed by their families. Have students return the letters on Monday with a parent signature and file the letters.
- 7. At the end of the school year, you can have students create a mini booklet containing all their Friday Letters.**

MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- “Involving Students and Families in Ongoing Reflection and Assessment” by Traci Gardner
- “A Journal for Corduroy: Responding to Literature” by Marilyn Cook

IRA Book

- *Bringing Literacy Home* edited by KaiLonnie Dunsmore and Douglas Fisher

IRA Journal Articles

- “Starting Out Together: A Home–School Partnership for Preschool and Beyond” by Jeanne R. Paratore and Gail Jordan, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2007
- “Write Soon!” by Timothy Rasinski and Nancy Padak, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2009

Even More!

- *Family-School Partnerships: Essential Elements of Literacy Instruction in the United States* (Position Statement), 2002

on the letter. One teacher commented, “You will never believe who wrote me a small note on the Friday Letter,” whereas another noted that several parents appreciated the information on upcoming assignments.

Final Word

The writing of the Friday Letters became a weekly routine in fifth grade and strengthened the connection between students, teachers, and families. Students looked forward to writing their Friday Letter, and they have grown as writers. The letters provided students the opportunity to review the week’s lessons and practice writing with a clear focus to an authentic audience. Students were unknowingly reaping the benefits of repeated reading as they read and reread their own letter and the letters written by their peers. Our simple idea

with a simple purpose exploded into a meaningful, engaging experience for students, teachers, and families.

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