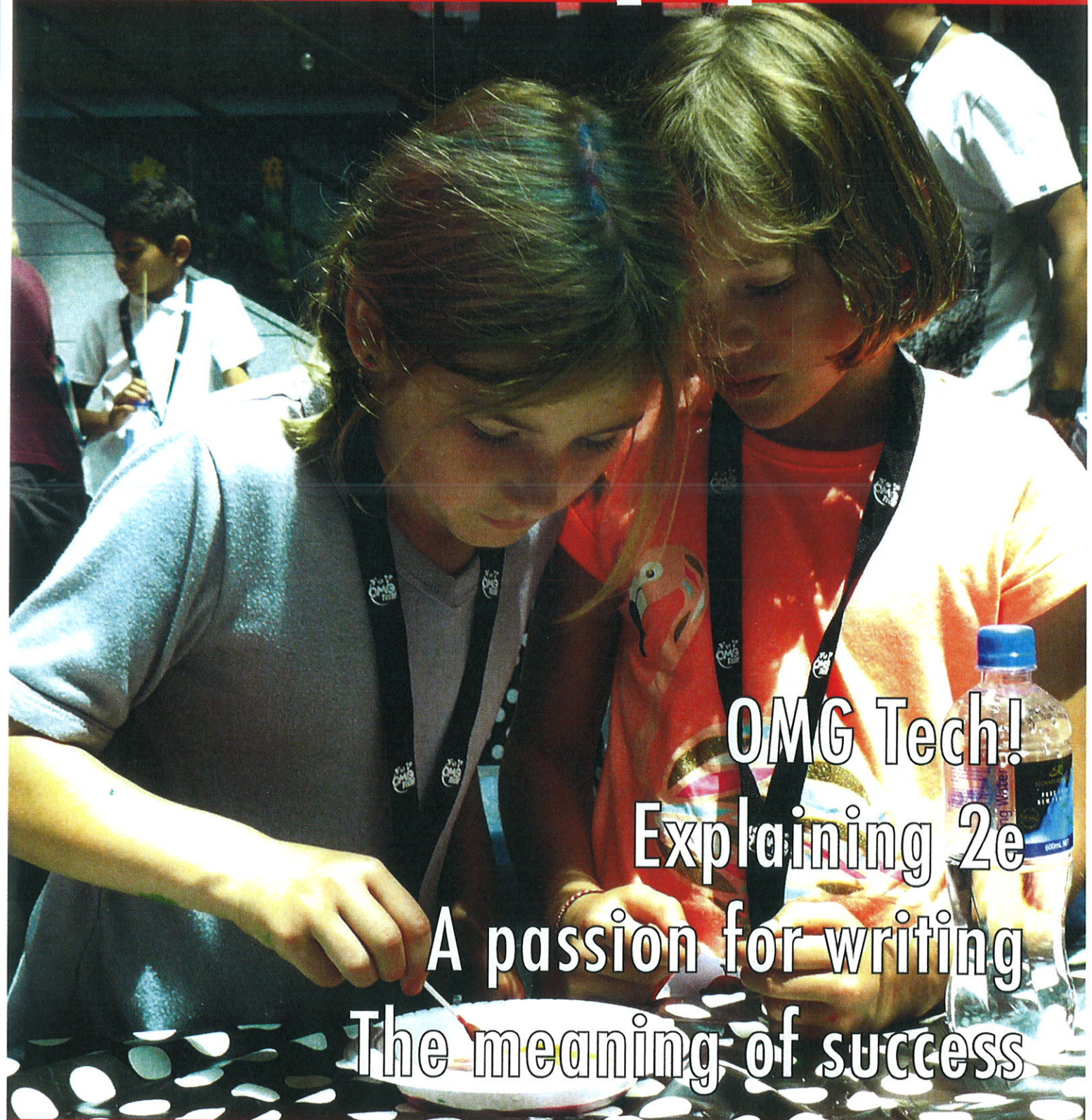


# Tall Poppies

Magazine of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children

Vol 41 No. 1 March 2016



OMG Tech!  
Explaining 2e  
A passion for writing  
The meaning of success

THEIR FUTURE - OUR CHALLENGE



# A passion for writing: working with gifted writers

by Sarah Kirby

'Writing is to me, as air is to a balloon. Life would be a little saggy without it.'  
Nina, age 12.

A young writer often has a lot to say about their passion if asked. These students choose to write for all sorts of reasons: to process their thoughts, explore their fears and express their creativity, to mention a few. As scholars like Robert Sternberg tell us, gifted individuals need to develop the kinds of expertise that render them gifted and our young writers need techniques and time to develop their gift.

Writing is a complicated passion. At school, a lot of writing is expected but the majority of tasks are designed to assess a student's knowledge of a particular subject rather than their writing skill and development, in itself. Writing for enjoyment is a crucial part of any writer's development and it can be forgotten in our busy classrooms.

In my current role as a specialist teacher with the New Zealand Centre for Gifted Education, I have had the pleasure of working with gifted, young writers aged from five to thirteen and, together with my previous experience setting up extension programmes for writers in mainstream classes, I would like to share six ideas that have consistently helped students to realise their writing gifts.

They will help to motivate any keen writer, add greater depth to their thinking and make the process of writing a fun and authentic challenge. The ideas are suitable for able writers well past the age of thirteen and most can be adapted for the very young too.

Our gifted writers need to be observing their world, experimenting with words and questioning their assumptions. These are our future thinkers and intellectuals, our creators of art and ideas. It is easy to underestimate the needs of these advanced, young writers. They require programmes that recognise their asynchronous development, both in terms of the technical aspects of the craft of writing and their advanced ethical and emotional awareness and ability. Any selection of concept or topic should allow for complexity and elements of personal choice. Ideally, these students need time and space to create at their own pace and to have regular chances to workshop their writing with their peers.

## TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR GIFTED WRITERS TO BLOSSOM

'Writing is to me, as a pensieve would be to Professor Dumbledore. It's a source of relief and a way to empty my thoughts.'  
Bailey, age 11.

### 1. Write with your students

Try to begin every session with a period of free writing for ten minutes and always write yourself. The message is: I value writing and think it's important. It is an activity that adults enjoy too and daily free writing is a pleasure that we can all benefit from.

This is a crucial tip. When we show that there is space in our adult lives for things that our students value we immediately give the activity authenticity and life long relevance. Seeing me write and take part in

group sessions as a learner has always had a powerful, positive effect.

### 2. Make your writing activities relevant and authentic

To hook a gifted writer and encourage their best writing, choose contexts that matter to them and their communities. One of the ways to tap into a young writer's sense of justice is to set an Op Ed (opposite the editorial page) assignment. The student decides on a local issue in their community that matters to them such as pollution in a river or children coming to school with no breakfast and then writes from their perspective, arguing their point concisely. It needs an effective title and powerful opening and closing paragraphs. These can be sent to local newspapers, published in school newsletters or be read out in assembly.

Choosing universal concepts is another dynamic way to provide gifted writers with great material. Introducing the concept of beauty or discovery and then setting tasks that differentiate for readiness, ability and interest will have the students exploring their own cultural beliefs and ways of thinking very quickly. We must speak to a student's culture not just their passion, if we expect to see their best writing.

### 3. Make it fun!

Writing is like any creative activity: it is much easier to create if you are enjoying the experience. Writing is mostly a 'work horse' in the classroom and for the gifted writer, the teacher can really help by injecting fun into the content, the process or the product.

A short daily dose of humour in the form of a satirical cartoon that draws comment, a wonderful childrens' picture book that inspires their own book writing project for a junior class or an excerpt from an animation or a



TED talk that gives them a new, global awareness of their world. If you love it and find it thought-provoking, your students will find it interesting too.

#### 4. Create trust and respect amongst the group

Recent research by LJ Coleman suggests that when we bring gifted students together in a specialised environment, it can cause a change in the students' sense of what they might be capable of achieving and allows them to express themselves and still be accepted. To create this 'social context' we need to give the writers in our class a chance to write together and build a community, with our guidance.

As teachers, it is worth reflecting that we are asking a lot when we expect expressive and evocative prose from our students. Writing is an intensely personal act and the best writing comes from accessing our dreams and concerns, and examining our core values. We need to be careful and respectful of what it takes to turn that kind of writing over to another, to be critiqued. Students will do it willingly and make great progress if you build this climate of trust and respect together.

#### 5. Challenge them!

When choosing options for gifted writers, make sure you give them the chance to demonstrate their capacity for depth and complexity. A gifted writer should be pushed out of their comfort zone now and then.

'The topics we've been forced to write about, bring me into a different world that isn't zombies and gore.' Boy, age 11.

You can find excellent writing ideas on [writingprompts.tumblr.com](http://writingprompts.tumblr.com) which explore topics that will appeal to gifted writers such as those involving ethical dilemmas and emotional intelligence challenges. eg Pretend you are in your eighties. Complain about kids these days.

Giving students the choice of writing prompts works very well and makes for fascinating group sharing sessions as they 'sell' topics to one another by reading excerpts from their latest effort.

In the *Listener* magazine there is a column called 'Wordsworth' which offers a literary challenge that my students enjoy and I would highly recommend Ian Byrd's website [byrdseed.com](http://byrdseed.com) as a source of ideas.

#### 6. Teach the craft of writing

Writing is a craft. It develops over a lifetime. Part of our job as writing teachers is to share the knowledge of other writers; to deepen the student's understanding of the conundrums, joys and challenges of the art of writing. They need to know that writers must develop the habit of perseverance and take risks to become really good. Our students can aspire to be talented adult writers themselves if we share these secrets early on.

Over the years I have collected quotes and excerpts from many writers and I share some each session, as a way into the mysterious and wonderful world of the professional author.

You can encourage your gifted writers to begin a Commonplace Book (a collection of quotes and extracts). New Zealand author, Elizabeth Smithers has written a lovely example. I also recommend *The Exercise Book: Creative writing exercises* from Victoria University



Press. This is an invaluable aid to any writing teacher, with trigger ideas and writing prompts from some of our top writers.

#### WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT YOUNG, GIFTED WRITERS?

Sadly, there is very little research into primary aged gifted writers but we can draw some interesting points from what has been undertaken to date.

Young writers write for the intrinsic pleasure. They require explicit adult modelling, direction and praise. It is the complexity of the reading models and writing prompts that make the difference to how positively they feel about their progress. This echoes the points above, about providing genuinely complex challenges and the importance of explicit teaching of the craft of writing.

For secondary age students, their primary motivation shifts to within themselves and they require freedom and space to turn their gift for writing into a talent. Researchers report that the constraints on their writing often escalate, just as they need increasing freedom.

These findings show the important role that primary school writing programmes can play in the development of our youngest gifted writers. By the later years of secondary school we may have very little influence on a student's motivation to write. All the more reason to take the time to find the gifted writers in our primary and intermediate schools and give them the best chance to develop their gifts, at the stage when our teaching will be the most valuable.

#### IN CONCLUSION

There are other important aspects of becoming a writer to bear in mind, such as the pivotal skills of drafting and editing, giving your students useful feedback, empowering peer to peer writer relationships and taking writers outside the classroom. I highly recommend these books as a way to inspire you further:

- *Provisions for Creative Gifted and Talented Children*: Elwyn S Richardson
- *Why we Write*: edited by Meredith Maran
- *Still Writing*: Dani Shapiro

My own passion for reading and writing has been a source of great joy in my life. We want our gifted writers to see their passion not just as a useful tool but as a wellspring for their creativity and a solace as they grow and change. By introducing them to the craft of writing and being respectful of their vulnerability, we can endow our students with a lifelong talent.

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