Writing How & Why Stories:
A Unit for Second through Sixth Graders*

Stories that explain why an animal or plant looks or acts the way it does, or how a natural phenomenon came to be, are often called "pourquoi" tales. ("Pourquoi" {pronounced por –kwa'} is the French word for "why.") For instance, through the ages, people around the world have wondered what causes thunder and lightning. Some said thunder was caused by angels bowling in the sky. Others believed the noise was rocks falling off a wagon, or giants fighting. Even after we learn the scientific reason for such phenomena, the stories still appeal to us since they speak to a different side of our brains. It's a good idea to have some of the books of scientific explanations on hand (listed in the bibliography at the end of this document) because pourquoi stories get students interested in nature and make them want to know the *real* reason for a natural phenomenon.

Time Required
Use the writing workshop format of a mini-lesson to begin each session, followed by a long writing time and then a sharing time. Mini-lessons topics can be chosen based on needs of the class as they move through the process. The total number of 45-60 minute sessions required would be six to eight: one to two introductory lessons and three to five for the writing portion.

Introducing a Pourquoi Unit
Collect as many pourquoi stories as possible using the bibliography at the end of this document and suggestions from your school media specialist. Begin with one or two introductory lessons where you read/tell pourquoi stories to the class and have them read more on their own. We also highly recommend that you use one session to do the impromptu "Pourquoi Play" exercise on page 38 of *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom* before students write their own stories. With second and third grade students it may be easier to present only stories about animals because they are more likely to fit a standard pattern and tend to be easier to write than ones about other natural phenomena.

For second graders we suggest that you read or tell:
From *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell* (Hamilton and Weiss, 1999; a CD/cassette recording is also available)
- Why Cats Wash Their Paws After Eating (Europe)
- Why Dogs Chase Cats (African-American)
- Why Hens Scratch in the Dirt (Philippines)
- Why Ants Are Found Everywhere (Burma)
- Why Bear Has a Stumpy Tail (Norway)
- How Brazilian Beetles Got Their Gorgeous Coats (Brazil)
- The Turtle Who Couldn't Stop Talking (India)

*Parts of this unit were adapted with permission from a writing unit done by Marty Kaminsky for the Ithaca, NY City School District.

Third through sixth graders will enjoy and understand *all* the stories in our *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell.* Some of the perennial favorites are:

- ♦ The Taxi Ride (Northern Ghana/Mauritania)
- ♦ Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together (Cameroon/Nigeria: Ekoi People)
- ♦ The Story of Arachne (Greece)
- ♦ How Tigers Got Their Stripes (Vietnam)
- ♦ Why Parrots Only Repeat What People Say (Thailand)
- ♦ Why the Baby Says 'Goo' (Penobscot Indian)
- ♦ Two Brothers, Two Rewards (China/Korea/Japan)

THE POURQUOI STORY PATTERN

If you begin with the "Pourquoi Play" exercise you will establish some of the similar patterns in pourquoi stories. Note that, in their simplest forms, pourquoi stories often begin something like: "Long ago, beetles had plain brown coats. But nowadays their coats are gorgeous. This story explains how Brazilian beetles got their colorful coats." And they often end: "And since that time Brazilian beetles have had . . . " OR "And that's why the bear has . . . "As you read pourquoi stories in class, point out that, although these tales all follow a basic pattern, they don't all have such formulaic beginnings and endings.

Using Story Frames

The "Pourquoi Story Frame" handout at the end of this document can be a helpful organizational tool to use when planning stories.

Begin With The End: Brainstorming Ideas for Pourquoi Stories

To create a pourquoi story, writers first decide on the natural phenomenon they want to describe. This is the *end* of the story. As students come up with ideas for 'how and why' stories, write the ideas on chart paper. As students decide on their topics and explanations, check to be sure that their ideas are not too bizarre or impossible to write about. Here are some possibilities if you wish to supplement your students' ideas:

- ♦ Why Owl Has Big Eyes
- ♦ Why Dogs Howl at the Moon
- ♦ Why Snake Has No Feet or Hands
- ♦ Why Geese Fly in the Shape of a V
- ♦ Why Birds Have Many Colors
- ♦ Why Roses Have Thorns
- ♦ Why Pigs Have Curly Tails
- ♦ Why There are Rainbows
- ♦ Why There Are Oceans
- ♦ Why Some Trees Lose Their Leaves and Others are Evergreen
- ♦ How Jellyfish Came to Be
- ♦ Why the Big Toe is So Much Bigger than the Other Toes
- ♦ Why Porcupine Has Quills

Don't Forget Local Natural Phenomena

Every place has its own local stories. The area where we live in central New York State is called the "Finger Lakes" region because there are many long thin lakes that resemble fingers. The Native Americans from our region, the Iroquois Indians, say that the Great Spirit put his hand down on the earth

and caused these lakes to be formed. As students study local lore suggest that they make up their own stories to explain how a nearby river came to be, or a peculiar trait of an animal or plant that is indigenous to the area.

Filling in the Story Frame
Model for students how to fill out each part of the frame. For example, if you had chosen, "Why Bulls Hate the Color Red,"[1] as your topic write that in the first part of the frame under "The End." Having students fill out their frames one section at a time allows you to maintain control and give help when needed. Continually checking the stories after each step helps you keep on top of how each student is doing and see what specific skills need to be taught in mini-lessons.

The Beginning
Next, students brainstorm ways that the phenomenon could have been different long ago and fill in "The Beginning." For example, they might decide that Bull used to be gentle and never got mad at anything. Beginnings establish the setting: where and when the story happens; and tell who the characters are and describe them. Read a few examples of good beginnings from the stories you shared with students earlier.

The Middle
Lastly, students work on the longest part of any story, the middle—what happened to get from beginning to end. They need to figure out details by asking questions such as: What caused Bull's personality to change? Why did Cardinal peck at Bull? Was it on purpose or by mistake? Why wasn't Cardinal afraid of Bull? Why did Bull get so angry when he never had before? Perhaps they decide "Once a cardinal pecked at a sleeping bull and Bull was so angry it charged at the bird. Ever since, bulls have hated the color red." Here's one way the story might be fleshed out:

Why Bulls Hate the Color Red
Long ago, Bull did not hate the color red. And he was not angry the way he is today. In fact, he was as gentle as a cloud floating in the sky. But one day this all changed, and here is how it happened.

Back then, Bull loved to sleep even more than he loved to eat. And he did *not* like to be disturbed while he was sleeping. One morning, Cardinal flew down and landed on a huge rock. Cardinal didn't realize that it was actually Bull, who was fast asleep. He flew up from behind and didn't see Bull's head or horns. Cardinal thought, "Maybe I'll find some delicious seeds or grains to eat on top of this rock." So he crawled up and began to peck at Bull.

Bull woke up. When he saw the little red bird, he was furious. Bull bellowed, "How dare you wake me up? I'll teach you to peck at me!" Bull charged at Cardinal. The frightened, little bird flew away and never went near Bull again.

To this day, Bull still gets mad when he sees anything red. It reminds him of the time Cardinal woke him up. That's why Bull charges whenever he sees a matador wave a red cape.

[1] According to the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (1988, 515-516*)*, the phrase to "see red" comes from the old belief that bulls become enraged after seeing a red flag. Actually, researchers have proven that the movement of the cloth, not the color, causes the bull to charge; bulls will rush after *any* color cloth waved at them.

Point out that someone else could take the same story topic but their idea could be: "Once an apple fell on a sleeping bull's head and ever since that time bulls have hated red." Ask students to share other ideas.

FLESHING THE STORIES OUT

The middle of the story consists of the 3D's—description, dialogue, and details—as well as action. Tell students that any details they add should be important to help readers/listeners to understand the story and move it along. The students' stories are, after all, modeled on folktales, and folktales tend to err on the side of *much* less detail than literary stories. Sometimes students resolve their problems much too quickly, and the story will be too short and not very interesting. When that happens encourage them to think of two or three solutions and pick the one that works best.

Developing Characters

Writers must do a good job of developing the characters in order for their stories to be effective. When describing main characters, writers can consider: species; personality; appearance; gender; name; age; job; important event in the character's past. (Note that characters often don't have names in folktales; they are simply "Bull" or "the chipmunk.") For more help with developing characters, try the "Character Study" exercise on page 105 of *Children Tell Stories*: *Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom.* To help develop writers' descriptive skills, do the following writing exercise which was inspired by "She is so mean" from *Games for Writing* by Peggy Kaye.

Exercise: He Was as Gentle As . . .

Begin by using phrases such as "She is so mean that . . . " "He is so smart that . . . " or "She is so foolish that . . . " Give students one full statement and tell them to try to top what you've said. For example, you could say, "He is so smart that he has already finished his homework before the teacher even says what it is!" or "She is so foolish that she puts her shoes on first and *then* her socks on over them!" You can give them some time to think and jot down ideas first, but they will inspire and learn from one another by doing this orally.

Then have them think of other ways to describe Bull before and after he got angry. For example: "He was as gentle as a baby sleeping in his mother's arms" or "as a snowflake falling to the ground." For older students, explain the meaning of "cliché." A cliché for anger would be "He was so angry that his face turned bright red," or "He was so angry that smoke came out of his ears."

To further improve descriptive skills, do the following exercises in *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom:* "Improvising Language," (pages 100-101), "Describing Familiar People/Places/Things," (page 101), and "The Five Senses," (page 102).

Use of Dialogue

Dialogue adds energy to a story and helps us to know the characters better because it is their actual words and thoughts. Use the "Narrative to Dialogue" exercise on page 116 of *Children Tell Stories*. Because characters can speak in many ways, writers should use other words than "said." Brainstorm ways that characters can speak (yelled, whispered, whined, roared, and so on).

Deciding on Story Titles

Read sample titles from pourquoi stories and talk about what makes a title interesting and catchy. The writer may not want to give away what the story explains in the title of a pourquoi tale.

Publishing "Pourquoi Stories"

Children will enjoy illustrating their stories and families will take pleasure from reading them. Consider publishing the stories together so that families can read the entire class collection.

Focus on Oral Skills

Have students continue to *tell* their stories orally as they develop them. Even after they have written part of the story and think it is "perfect" they'll find that telling it orally helps the story continue to grow. At the same time the informal telling process improves oral skills.

If students are experienced tellers and their stories are strong, give them the option of *telling* their pourquoi stories formally as part of a storytelling unit such as the one described in chapters 4-11 of *Children Tell Stories*. However, there are numerous reasons why we strongly recommend that students not tell their own stories for their *first* experience with formal storytelling. See page 76 in *Children Tell Stories* for details.

A Bibliography of Pourquoi Stories

A helpful teacher resource is *Folktale Themes and Activities for Children, Volume 1: Pourquoi Tales* by Anne Marie Kraus (Portsmouth, NH: Teacher Ideas Press, 1998). She discusses how to integrate pourquoi tales into many areas of the curriculum.

In addition to *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell* (Hamilton and Weiss, 1999), here are more 'how and why' stories to look for at the library. Many of the anthologies are not *all* pourquoi tales, but include a number of them.

Aardema, Verna. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West-African Tale*. New York: Dial Books, 1992.

Blathwayt, Benedict. *Stories from Firefly Island*. New York: Greenwillow, 1993.

Bowden, Joan Chase. *Why the Tides Ebb and Flow*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Bruchac, Joseph. *Native American Animal Stories*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003.

_____ and Gayle Ross. *The Story of the Milky Way*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1995.

Connolly, James E., editor. *Why the Possum's Tail is Bare and Other North American Indian Nature Tales*. Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House, 1992.

Ehlert, Lois. *Moon Rope*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Gail, Judy and Linda A. Houlding. *Day of the Moon Shadow: Tales with Ancient Answers to Scientific Questions*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1995.

Gobel, Paul. *Her Seven Brothers*. New York: Aladdin Library, 1993.

Greaves, Nick. *When Hippo Was Hairy and Other Tales from Africa.* New York: Barrons, 1988.

Johnston, Tony. *The Tale of Rabbit and Coyote*. London: Puffin, 1998.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Just So Stories.* New York: William Morrow, 1996.

Mayo, Margaret. *When the World Was Young: Creation and Pourquoi Tales.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

McDermott, Gerald. *Daughter of Earth: A Roman Myth*. New York: Delacorte Books, 1984.

Mollel, Tololwa M. *The Orphan Boy*. New York: Clarion Books, 1995.

_____. *A Promise to the Sun: An African Story*. Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1992.

Monroe, Jean Guard and Ray A. Williamson. *They Dance in the Sky: Native American Star Myths.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Rosen, Michael and John Clementson. *How Animals Got Their Colors: Animal Myths From Around the World*. New York: Harcourt Young Classics, 1992.

Sage, James. *Coyote Makes Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Shute, Linda. *Rabbit Wishes*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1995.

Vogel, Carole G. *Weather Legends: Native American Lore and the Science of Weather*. Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 2001.

If you own our general story collections, you will find more pourquoi stories in them.
Stories in My Pocket: Tales Kids Can Tell (Fulcrum, 1996) includes "Why Crocodile Does Not Eat Hen," "Clytie" (first sunflower), and "Why Anansi the Spider Has a Small Waist."
Through the Grapevine: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell includes "The Argument Between the Sea and the Sky," "The Tail Trade," and "Why Sun and Moon Live in the Sky."
Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom includes "How the Milky Way Came to Be," "Why Frogs Croak When it Rains," "Why Deer and Tiger Fear Each Other," "Why Parrots Only Repeat What People Say," and "The Argument Between the Sea and the Sky."

A Bibliography of Books with Scientific Explanations of 'How and Why"

Have some of the following books on hand so that students can also read scientific explanations of "how" and "why."

Ardley, Bridget and Neil Ardley. *The Random House Book of 1001 Questions and Answers.* New York: Random House, 1989.

Charman, Andrew. *I Wonder Why Trees Have Leaves and Other Questions about Plants*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Chinery, Michael. *The Kingfisher Illustrated Encyclopedia of Animals.* New York: Kingfisher, 1992.

Ganeri, Anita. *I Wonder Why Camels Have Humps and Other Questions About Animals.* New York: Kingfisher, 2003.

_____. *I Wonder Why the Sea is Salty and Other Questions about the Oceans*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

National Geographic Society. *National Geographic Book of Mammals.* Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1998.

Pope, Joyce. *Do Animals Dream?: Children's Questions About Animals Most Often Asked of the Natural History Museum.* New York: Viking Kestrel, 1986.

Taylor, Charles, and Stephen Pople. *The Oxford Children's Book of Science.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Whitfield, Philip and Joyce Pope. *Why Do the Seasons Change: Questions on Nature's Rhythms and Cycles Answered by the Natural History Museum.* New York: Viking Kestrel, 1987.

Wood, Jenny. *I Wonder Why Kangaroos Have Pouches and Other Questions About Baby Animals.* New York: Kingfisher, 2003.

Suggested Books on Teaching Writing

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understanding About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

Davis, Donald. *Writing as a Second Language*. Little Rock, AR: August House, 2000.

Haven, Kendall. *Write Right!: Creative Writing Using Storytelling Techniques*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

Kaye, Peggy. *Games for Writing*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1995.

If you'd like to purchase the book/recording of *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell*, go to www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com under "Books and Recordings" or contact August House Publishers at 1-800-284-8784 or online at www.augusthouse.com. Multiple copies are available at a discount price.

Pourquoi Story Frame Name_____

The End: What animal, plant, or other natural phenomenon will you explain something about? What characteristic will you explain?_____
_____
_____
_____

The Beginning: How did the plant/animal/natural phenomenon look or act before? _____
_____
_____
_____

The Middle: What is your explanation for how the plant/animal/natural phenomenon got this characteristic? _____
_____
_____
_____

Characters: Write the names of the characters in your story and write at least one sentence to describe each character_____
_____
_____
_____

Problem: What is the problem the main character faces?_____
_____
_____
_____

Resolution: How does the problem get solved? _____
_____
_____

Title: What are some possible titles for your story?_____
_____
_____