

Writing Noodlehead Stories

A Unit for Second through Sixth Graders

What's a noodlehead? A person who doesn't use his brains, so much so that his head appears to be filled with noodles. World folklore is rich with stories of fools (referred to as either 'noodle' or 'noodlehead' stories). Because we've all been caught not using our brains at one time or another, everyone enjoys a good numskull tale. It reminds us we're not alone when we hear a story in which someone *else* is the fool!

Children love these 'noodle' tales, and the excitement and sense of fun they engender can be channeled into writing activities. We suggest you read the brief introduction to our *Noodlehead Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell* and then, in your own words, share the important points we make with your students. We feel it is especially important to point out that these stories should not be told in the spirit of making fun of others, but in the spirit of laughing at the noodlehead in all of us. Tell your students a silly thing you've done. Ask them if they've ever done something really foolish. Then read your students some 'noodle' stories.

Preparation:

Before beginning this unit collect as many noodlehead stories as possible. See our suggestions below for specific grade levels and also the bibliography at the end of this document. Your school media specialist may have other suggestions. Because your enthusiasm is crucial, be sure to pick stories that *you* really love to read to students. If your students have not had much writing experience, you may want to begin by picking a limited number of stories that fit a pattern. Using those as a model can make it much easier for remedial students to write their own stories.

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 Noodlehead Unit

For second graders we suggest you read or tell:

from our *Noodlehead Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell*

- The Boy Who Sold the Butter (Denmark)
- The Donkey Egg (Algeria)
- Next Time I'll Know What To Do (England)
- Juan Bobo and the Pot That Would Not Walk (Puerto Rico)

These will help you demonstrate that people all around the world tell these kinds of stories. Then read an assortment of simpler stories to serve as models for their writing. The *Frog and Toad* and *George and*

Martha books follow a pattern, for the most part, and are easy to use as models. Either read or have your students read as many of the following as possible:

Lobel, Arnold. *Frog and Toad Together; Frog and Toad are Friends; Frog and Toad All Year; and Days With Frog and Toad.*

Marshall, James. *George and Martha; George and Martha One Fine Day; and George and Martha Rise and Shine.*

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

- I'd Laugh, Too, If I Weren't Dead (Iceland)
- Next Time I'll Know What To Do (England)
- The Man Who Didn't Know What 'Minu' Meant (Ghana)
- The Farmer Who Was Easily Fooled (Lebanon)
- The Wise Fools of Gotham (England)

Note that if your older students have not had much experience with writing, you may want to have them use the *Frog and Toad* and *George and Martha* books as a pattern because their structure is more predictable. Older students will be quite open to this idea if you suggest that they write their stories to share with younger students at your school.

Discuss the patterns you see in the stories:

Before reading the stories, point out that the noodleheads in the stories always have a problem. Ask the students to act as detectives as they listen. What is the problem? How does the problem get solved? Some noodleheads, such as the boy in "The Donkey Egg," believe whatever anyone tells them. Others, such as Jack in "Next Time I'll Know What To Do," follow directions literally instead of using their brains. Many have no common sense. As you read the stories, ask students to figure out what the character's problem is. Tell them they will need to have a broad definition of 'problem.' Sometimes a problem could be easily solved if the character wasn't such a noodlehead. A problem means something is not going the way the character wishes it were going.

In the *Frog and Toad* and *George and Martha* books, one character is always silly and the other is essentially the "straight man." One tends to get in trouble because of his silliness and the other one bails him out.

Brainstorm a list of the key elements in a noodlehead story and write them on chart paper. These elements will help you make a frame for students to use when planning their stories (or you can use the one we've included later on). Also see more information that follows on how to help students use a frame.

Then have students read more noodlehead stories on their own. Give them the "Patterns in Noodlehead Stories" sheet on page 7 of this document. It will help them to identify the structure of most noodlehead stories. Remind them that there are often exceptions so they may have to be a bit creative as they fill out the pattern forms.

Developing Characters

A key element in noodlehead stories is the characters. Students must do a good job of developing the characters in order for the stories to be effective. To help them with this, play the following writing game. This will also help students realize that they have ideas and are capable of making up their own

noodlehead stories. (This game was inspired by “She is so mean” from *Games for Writing* by Peggy Kaye. It is a wonderful book with lots of ideas and is listed in the bibliography.)

Writing Game: The Biggest Noodlehead in the World

Begin by saying something like:

Do you know the biggest noodlehead in the world?

He is so foolish (use “silly” for younger kids) that he wears his socks on his ears.

She is such a noodlehead that she can’t even remember when her birthday is.

He is so foolish that he hits the ball and runs to *third* base.

She is such a noodlehead that she puts her cup of coffee on the roof of the car while she opens the door.

Then she forgets and drives off with the cup still up there. (Perhaps you’ve actually done this? We’ve talked to many who have!)

You can use our examples but you’ll have more fun if you make up your own. Then ask students to think of something even sillier than what you said. To help them get ideas, tell them to think of what a noodlehead would do in ordinary situations such as shopping for food at the supermarket, going to bed, eating dinner, driving a car, going to school, and so on.

Have them do this orally. 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 out loud. You may want to write their ideas down on chart paper.

We also highly recommend that you have students *tell* their stories orally in small groups first before writing their first drafts. You will see much stronger writing as a result. In *Writing as a Second Language*, storyteller Donald Davis, a terrific crafter of tales, explains why this is a good idea: “When we are writing, only one person is working on the story. Even if we rewrite it a hundred times, only one person is working on the story. But when we tell the story to six or seven other people whose faces are immediately giving us helpful editorial feedback, there are immediately six or seven people helping us with our creative process.” This informal telling process will also improve oral skills.

Using Story Frames To Write Their Own Stories

Using a frame can be helpful but you must point out to students that there will be many exceptions so they should use the frame when it is helpful and not feel hemmed in by it. Frames are very useful to aid remedial writers but children who are skilled writers may not need the frame.

Model for students how to fill out each part of the frame.

For example, if you were working with second graders, model how you would fill out the part about “Characters.” Think out loud and say you are going to pick two animals, one silly like Toad and one more serious like Frog. Figure out two characters and give them names. Write one sentence to describe each character. For example:

Flea was so silly that . . . AND Beetle was so serious that . . .

Have students fill out their frames one section at a time.

This will allow you to maintain control and give help where it is needed. Continually checking the stories after each step is the way teachers keep on top of how each student is doing and see what specific skills need to be taught in mini-lessons.

You will need to be flexible to help students to flesh out the stories. For example, if students resolve their noodleheads' problems much too quickly, the story will be too short and not very interesting. You could then suggest that they try two solutions that *don't* work before the one that does.

As students decide on their characters and problems, check to be sure that their ideas are not too bizarre or impossible to write about.

Deciding on Characters

It will take one whole class to have students choose their characters. Some of the things they can think about to describe their characters include: species; personality; appearance; gender; name; age; job; important event in the character's past. (If older students are writing stories in the pattern of a folktale, point out that characters often don't have names; they are simply "the woodcutter" or "the fool.")

Have students share information about their characters with the class as a whole, or in small groups. What do their characters look like, wear, eat for lunch, do for fun? Note that they will *not* put all this information in the story. But it will help them know the characters better so the information they do decide to put in will be really effective and make the story better.

More ideas that may help children get ideas for characters and plots for their own noodle stories:

1. Have students choose a favorite character from our *Noodlehead Stories*, such as 'Clever Elsie,' or 'Juan Bobo,' and make up more stories about her/his adventures.
2. Take two or three of their favorite characters from *Noodlehead Stories* and put them together in a story of their own.
3. Take one of the old stories in *Noodlehead Stories* and set it in modern times. To get ideas, have students read Alvin Schwartz's two noodlehead collections, *All of Our Noses Are Here and Other Noodle Tales* and *There is a Carrot in My Ear and Other Noodle Tales*. He has taken a lot of these old stories and told them as if they had happened to a family of noodleheads called the Browns.
4. Suggest that students interview family members or friends. They can tell family members one or more of these stories and then ask what kind of 'noodle' things they have done. Their answers may give students more ideas for stories. They can also, of course, think of foolish things *they* have done.

Good Beginnings

Read students examples of at least five beginnings of noodlehead stories. Ask students if there are any common characteristics of noodlehead beginnings.

Beginnings should establish the setting: tell who is in the story, where it happens, when it happens, and what the characters are doing. Have students write a possible beginning on their frames. Don't have them fill out any more of the frame at this point. It is best to determine the resolution and the title after they have written more of the story.

Have kids who have written good beginnings read them to the class. They will serve as models, especially if you point out clearly what it is that makes them effective.

The Middle

After the setting is established, have students introduce the characters and their problems: "She was such a noodlehead that she . . ." Remind them of examples of problems of noodleheads in the stories they've read. The problems that noodleheads have can be silly, everyday problems such as forgetfulness, losing keys or glasses, and so on.

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. The students' stories are, after all, modeled on folktales, and folktales tend to err on the side of *much* less detail than literary stories.

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).

Good Endings

Use examples from the stories you've read and have students try to verbalize what makes a good ending. Write their thoughts on chart paper.

Deciding on Story Titles

Read sample titles from noodle stories and talk about what makes a title interesting and catchy. The title should be the *last* thing the author does, not the first.

Publishing "Oodles of Noodles"

These are wonderful, funny stories that families will enjoy. You may want to publish the stories so that families can read the entire class collection. Children may want to illustrate them as well.

Just for Fun: Make a Noodlehead !

A college student working as an intern for the publisher of *Noodlehead Stories* came up with a wonderful idea for making a noodlehead. He took a colander and some extra long rubber bands. He cut the rubber bands, tied a knot in one end, and slipped the rubber bands through the holes of the colander with the knot on the inside. When all the holes were filled, he covered the knots with duct tape so they would stay in place. To wear it you turn the colander upside down and place it on your head. Kids always love our noodlehead! If you can find a colorful colander, that's the best. Ours is green. The rubber bands on ours were colored with magic markers to look like tri-color pasta! It is always a huge hit and we think you definitely need to enlist your students to help make one for your classroom. To see a photo our noodlehead, go to our Web site at www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com and look under "Author Visits."

Focus on Oral Skills

If you want to really have fun, focus on children *telling* these stories. 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 "noodlehead" 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.

More Noodlehead Stories: A Bibliography

Here are more noodlehead stories to look for at the library. Some are out of print and may be hard to find.

- Allard, Harry. *The Stupids Die*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
 _____ . *The Stupids Step Out*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
 _____ . *The Stupids Take Off*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.
 Carrick, Malcolm. *The Wise Men of Gotham*. NY: Viking, 1973.
 Denim, Sue. *The Dumb Bunnies*. NY: Scholastic, 1994.
 Ginsburg, Mirra. *The Twelve Clever Brothers and Other Fools: Folktales from Russia*. NY: J.B. Lippincott, 1979.
 Jagendorf, Moritz A. *Noodlehead Stories From Around the World*. NY: Vanguard, 1957.
 _____ . *The Merry Men of Gotham*. NY: Vanguard, 1950.
 Leach, Maria. *Noodles, Nitwits, and Numskulls*. Cleveland: World, 1961.
 Schwartz, Alvin. *All of Our Noses Are Here and Other Noodle Tales*. NY: Harper & Row, 1985.
 _____ . *There is a Carrot in My Ear and Other Noodle Tales*. NY: Harper & Row, 1982.
 Simon, Solomon. *More Wise Men of Helm and Their Merry Tales*. NY: Behrman House, 1965.
 _____ . *The Wise Men of Helm*. NY: Behrman House, 1945.
 Singer, Isaac. *Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus*. NY: Dell, 1973.
 _____ . *When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw and Other Stories*. NY: Dell, 1968.
 Zemach, Margot. *The Three Wishes*. NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986.

Suggested Books on Teaching Writing to Children:

- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. 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 *Noodlehead 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.

Name _____ Date: _____

Patterns in Noodlehead Stories

Title: _____

Who is the noodlehead in the story: _____

What is the noodlehead's problem:

Is the problem solved?_____ If yes, how is it solved? _____

Does the story teach a lesson?_____ If yes, what is the lesson?

Noodlehead Story Frame

Name _____

Characters: Remember that noodlehead stories are not meant to be told for the purpose of making fun of others. They are told in the spirit of laughing at the noodlehead in all of us. Don't use words like "stupid" or "dumb." Try to use humorous words like "silly," "nincompoop," "ninnyhammer," or "numskull." Write the names of the characters in your story and write at least one sentence to describe each character.

Problem: Which of your characters is a noodlehead? What problem does the noodlehead have?

Resolution: How does the problem get solved?

Ending: What do the characters learn from this story?

Beginning: How will the story begin? Practice writing your first sentence here.

Title: What are some possible titles for your story?

