



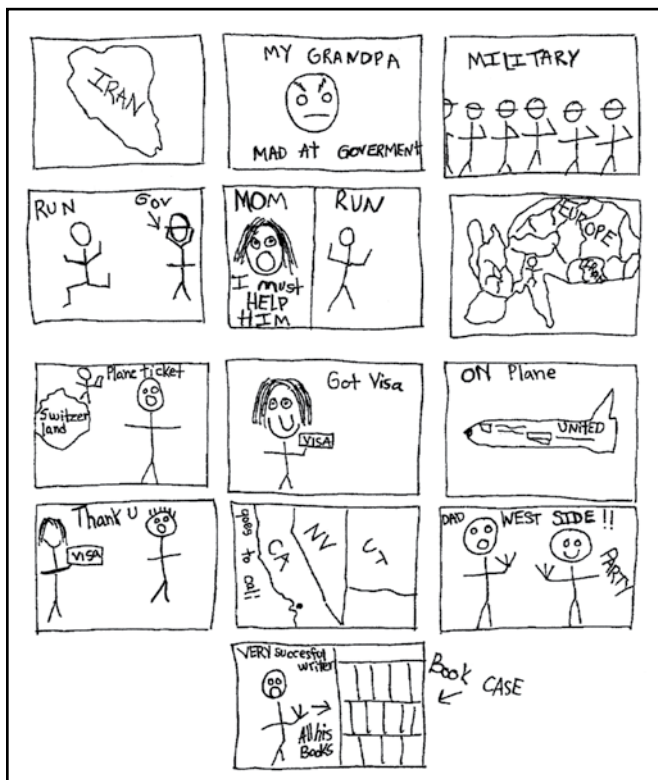
She said there was lots of good writing, including exciting visual work from some of her best writers and breakthrough pieces from her reluctant writers. But she ended by saying, "You got everybody writing, but you didn't get to Shane. He didn't storyboard. He did nothing."

She was sad, but matter-of-fact. I was disappointed too. I'd really thought Shane would somehow rise to the occasion, that the excitement of shared writing, being part of a community writing process, was irresistible. But what did I know about Shane? I confess I started to try to "explain" his behavior to myself in a way that must have been the way Linda felt. We had both missed connecting. I thought, "No matter what you do, some kids can't be reached."

### WHAT HAS SHANE DONE?

About three weeks later, Linda called. She said, "I wanted to tell you what happened with Shane. Yesterday, I went over and sat with him. I told him I was frustrated and saddened that he hadn't done any work in my class all year. I told him I didn't know what else to do; he hadn't been interested in anything. He hadn't done anything. Then I told him I felt bad, but he was going to fail the class."

That's when Shane said, "But I have done something, Mrs. Rief." He reached into his notebook and pulled out a storyboard. It was a family story. Shane told her, using his storyboard, about his grandfather's escape from the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.



Shane's first-draft storyboard



With Linda's questions and suggestions, Shane expanded his storyboard through several more drafts, and then he transitioned to text. All text. You'll remember that to fulfill the assignment Shane could have gone "text-lite," made a comic, but Linda found Shane was determined to go for pure text, two full pages—far more than he had written all year. His grandfather's escape from Iran—why and how he escaped—was a compelling story that Shane was proud to tell.

## RESEARCH: THE BRIDGE TO TEXT

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Shortly after that call, I went to see Linda. We sat on the stairs near her classroom to talk about Shane. Despite seeing his breakthrough, she couldn't make sense of it. She raised questions I've heard many times before from teachers who've seen similar breakthroughs. The questions boiled down to these:

1. "Why wouldn't Shane write before now?"
2. "If Shane *wants* to write, why draw first?"

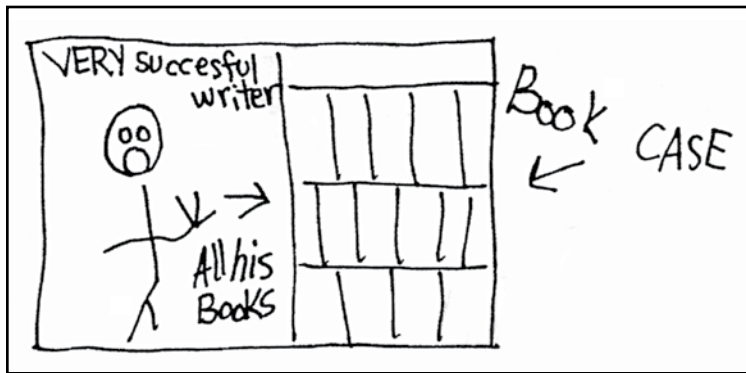
That day, all I could say for sure was that Shane's response to drawing was not unique; it fit a clear pattern I'd seen in many settings and across all grade levels. Now, with Linda's help, and with the research her colleague Donald Graves had conducted, I know there are compelling answers to teachers' questions about drawing as a writing tool, answers that resonate because they grow from kids' hard-won learning experiences.

### **Shane's *Other Story***

We can start with Shane's work—his first-draft storyboard—to find answers. Like any piece of honest writing, it can tell us a lot about its author. His board is a loose summary of his grandfather's escape from Iran. Until we hear Shane's full verbal telling, we can't know everything he has to say, but we can get a feel for his story.

We see Shane's story starts long ago in Iran and ends in the present. Look at his last square—the picture of his grandfather (once a penniless refugee) now standing by a full bookcase, with key words in the form of a headline—"VERY SUCCESSFUL WRITER." That simple stick-pic, like a formal family portrait posed with significant objects, speaks volumes. Shane tells us (consciously or unconsciously), "In my family, writing is *important*. Writing well is a sure sign of intelligence and of accomplishment."

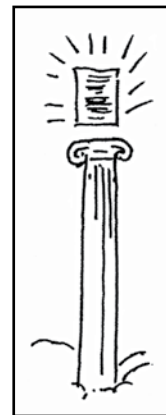
I'm pretty sure that picture holds a school story all his teachers need to know. I'm guessing Shane, like many reluctant writers I've met, thinks of writing as something too important to do badly. We can guess he has failed at text many times before. Now, in eighth grade, he feels doomed; he



Shane's final square, an essay on the importance of writing

has nothing to say, especially in a class with a teacher like Mrs. Rief, who really cares about writing, who really wants to help. Shane has calculated the pain of writing poorly and decided he'd rather be seen as a lazy goof-up than a true failure: a bad writer.

Ironically, Shane (like many hard-core reluctant writers I've worked with) *values writing too much*. Contrary to their slouching, I-don't-care veneer, these students suffer from long-held, painful writer's block. This is one of the most common side effects of a text-only focus—kids stalled by text come to think they have nothing to say. Add adults' well-intentioned efforts to celebrate writing as *very important*, and the results make failure too costly. With the best intentions, we set the writing bar too high for lots of learners.



## Drawing and Telling: Bridge to Text

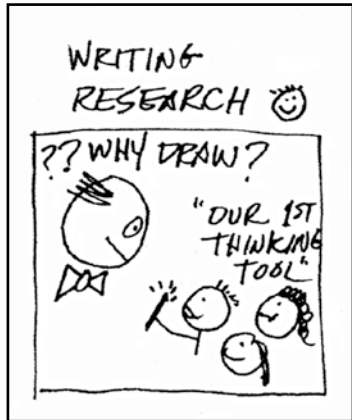
But our experience with many breakthroughs with older students shows that blocked-by-text is only half of Shane's story. That brings us to Linda's second question, "Why does Shane want to draw before he will write?"

Donald Graves, a literacy researcher and teacher of writing, stumbled on the answer while observing young students learning to write. Graves repeatedly saw kids drawing before they would write. His breakthrough came in discovering that kids were using drawing as a natural path to writing.

Graves came to see drawing as kids' first on-paper thinking tool—a way of getting ideas on paper, organizing and growing them. When he saw kids telling a story out loud from their pictures, then putting the same words on paper in text, Graves realized kids were using their natural drawing skills in concert with telling



to build an effective bridge to text skills. Describing a young student's writing process, Graves wrote, "Drawing is the driving force behind much of Toni's writing. It serves as a rehearsal for the text as well as an important bridge from speech to print" (1984, p. 85).



Shane's sudden engagement with drawing seems less mysterious when we recognize this natural path to writing. And his use of drawing in the older classroom seems less strange when we recognize with Graves that drawing is a thinking/writing tool that can be used at any age. Describing the mechanics of kids' draw-and-tell-to-write process, Graves says, "The drawing, the hieroglyph, is an intermediary between oral and written discourse. At the same time, it should not be seen as something a child will outgrow. Pictorial representation continues to be a valuable tool for externalizing thought into adulthood—as such professionals as physicians, engineers, and writers will attest" (1989, p. 14).

Having seen what can happen when drawing appears in the older classroom, let's let Linda tell us how these visual-verbal tools have evolved and changed the learning landscape in her classroom.