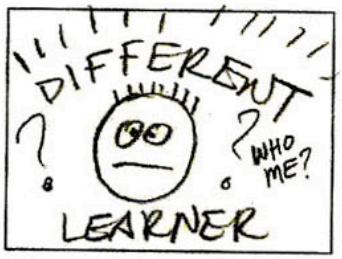
The Odd Fish Story

Writing about working with "different learners" can be a tricky business, especially if you've been labeled a "different learner" yourself. In third grade, I was sent to the psychologist for tests because I wasn't reading or writing. I remember walking down a hall I'd never seen to a small room with no windows. The psychologist was nice, but her tests only confirmed what was obvious to everyone, that I was always going to be behind in school. Today we'd say I was a "different learner" or we'd say I was learning disabled. Despite real gains in our understanding of how kids learn, we know that in the middle school halls, kids, then and now, are less careful about language; they'd say I was dumb, a SPED.



When I go to school now, I'm invited by teachers to show how visual/verbal tools help kids like me, kids who struggle with text, succeed. If you've never seen how eagerly students embrace an alternative to text, it's hard to imagine how dramatically they can transform a mainstream classroom for different learners. Let me take you to a seventh-grade language arts classroom to meet a student everyone knows is different and to see how alternative tools can change his learning experience. Equally important, let's see how his success transforms his classmates' and his teacher's view of him.

Meeting Donald

I'd been invited to Donald's school by the seventh-grade language arts team to show them how using pictures as a writing tool could help them reach their reluctant writers. I modeled a "Shared Picture Writing" process that follows the same steps as the traditional writing process from brainstorming to revision, but uses drawing and telling as students' primary writing tools. Students write on storyboards combining stick pictures and spare text. They build a story: create several drafts, share, conference, and revise, all before writing pure text. When I demonstrate this process in the classroom, I tell teachers that with many kids, picture writing is a shortcut to meaningful text; the longer you can delay going to text, the better the result. I also tell them that the different tools that work for reluctant writers work for *all* writers—the reluctant and the gifted—making writing more engaging and more fun for everyone.

The Basic Process

Figure 1 is an example of a student's storyboard. The story is written in simple stick pictures and a few key words. I encourage students to keep their

telling sparse. A storyboard is a kind of visual outline that is not designed to stand alone; it needs a telling to clue the reader in to the full story. Each square is like shorthand, notes in pictures and text.

In Donald's class, we used *telling boards*—a series of cards taped to a board—for purposes of sharing and revision with the whole class. A telling board is designed to make shared writing conferencing and revision easier. A story is visible to the whole class, and cards are added/moved to make revision cut-and-paste easy. For many students, seeing the parts of a story on cards helps revision make sense for the first time. Since everyone can see the whole story and easily follow the way it is built, square-by-square, they feel they can join in the revision process. Often students who've never participated in writing discussions amaze teachers by making on-target comments on others' work. When a storyboard is shared, the teller points to the squares as he or she tells the story. The board reminds the teller what to say and helps the audience follow and remember the story. The audience can see and comment on both the content and the construction of the story.

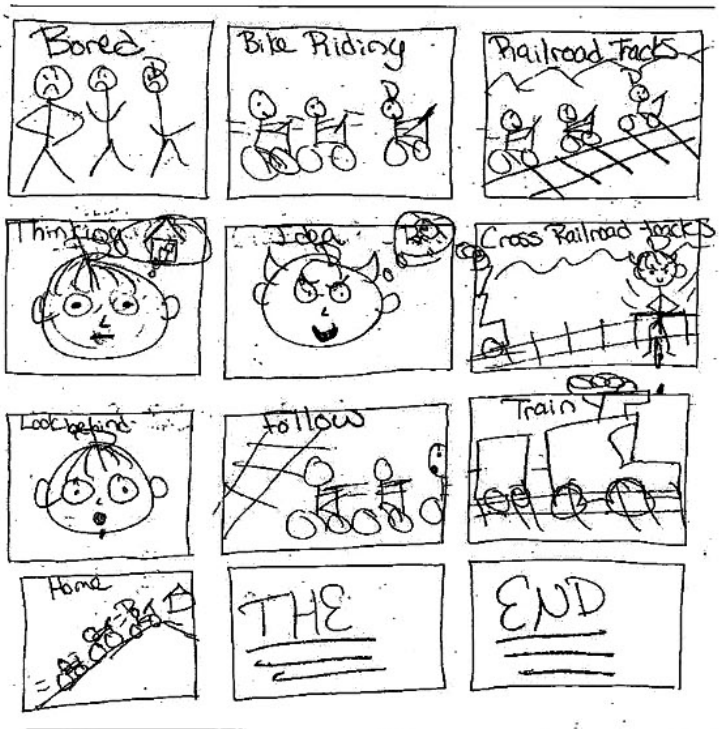


Figure 1. One student's storyboard.

Why Storyboards Help

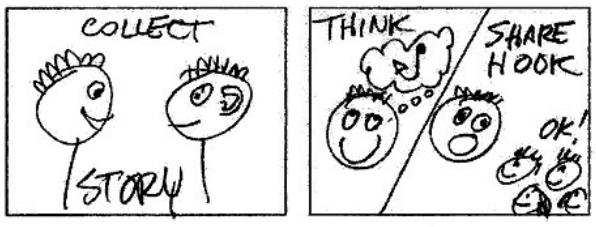
Storyboarding lets Donald get his story down on paper; it's like making a simple comic. He draws a loose visual outline, working comfortably without the difficulty of using exacting text. Once he can see his story on paper, he can tell it to an audience and get reaction, he can easily revise, and he can add cards or move them until it feels right. "Shared Writing" is no-fault writing; you can change anything with immediate feedback and support.

Once Donald knows what he wants to tell and the order he wants to tell it in, and he has road-tested his ideas with an audience, *then* he is ready to write his story in text. The final step is transcribing his telling. From Donald's point of view, he can use the comfortable skills of drawing and telling as a bridge to get to the difficult skill—writing text.

That's it. That's the basic idea of storyboards as a writing tool. They can be used from kindergarten to high school, or in professions from filmmaking to engineering to creating books. It's simple, and *that* is its real power

Laying the Groundwork

My first day in Donald's class, I introduced myself as an author–illustrator; showing my artwork and telling stories, I demonstrated how much of my writing comes from family stories, and how telling leads to writing. Then I gave everybody their first assignment: Go home and get a family story. I told them, "You'll know it's a story because it has a hook. The hook is the funny, scary, sad, interesting part. The hook is the reason you want to tell it and other people want to hear it."



We discussed hooks: accidents, disasters, broken bones, getting lost. I suggested they start their

story hunt with my favorite hook, "Ask your parents/grandparents to tell you about something stupid or foolish they did when they were young." This Story Hunt assignment is designed to get everybody going quickly. I know this for sure: If we want kids to write, especially the reluctant writers, the essential first step is to be sure they have something worth writing about. I've found family stories—if they have a solid hook—do the trick for me, especially when I need to connect with a lot of kids in just a few sessions.

When I met with Donald's class again, we were ready to see who had stories worth writing—in other words, who was ready to storyboard. I asked, "Who's got a story with a good hook?" Lots of hands went up. Then I upped the ante. I asked, "Who can tell me just the hook in their story." Ten hands were still up. As I looked for someone to get things going, I saw the class "cut up" had his hand up and a big grin on his face. He'd made several wisecracks during my opening day. He was either going to be a big help or trouble. I crossed my fingers, and asked, "What's your hook?"

He smiled a sly smile and said, "My Dad grew up on a farm. When he was maybe seven, he was in the pasture and had to go pee. He decided to climb up on a big stump to pee in the bushes." Pause. "He didn't see the electric fence in there." He stopped, and I put my hands up to stop the laughter. Several girls were making yuck faces. I asked the class, "Wait, let's review. Is disgusting a good hook?" A chorus of "Yeahhh!" went up. When another boy said, "His story is shocking," everybody laughed. I modeled tightening his hook, "When my Dad peed on an electric fence." We all voted he had a hook, and a story worth storyboarding—tastefully—with stick pics. I asked for hooks and lots more hands went up. Good hooks bring more hooks. We were cooking.

That day I was lucky; everyone thought they had a hook, and while sharing hooks, we helped those less sure of their story get a handle on what they had. If Donald was there, I don't remember hearing his hook—a fish that got away. The first time I remember Donald was when we got to the next step in the writing process.

After sharing hooks, I gave Donald's class a short introduction to storyboarding. I showed students how to tell their story using pictures and spare text. Then I told them, "Try storyboarding your story in as many squares as you think it takes. Do this fast, just get all the best parts of the story on paper."

We met the next day when everyone had a first draft on paper. (Students in Donald's class wrote their first-draft stories on telling boards, drawing on cards taped to a file-folder-size board.)

It was time to share again. Kids volunteered to come forward and tell, speaking while pointing to the squares on their board. The board reminds the teller what to say, and it helps the audience follow the story. Because the audience can see both the content and the construction of a story, this sharing makes class conferencing amazingly effective. This first telling is where stories get their trial

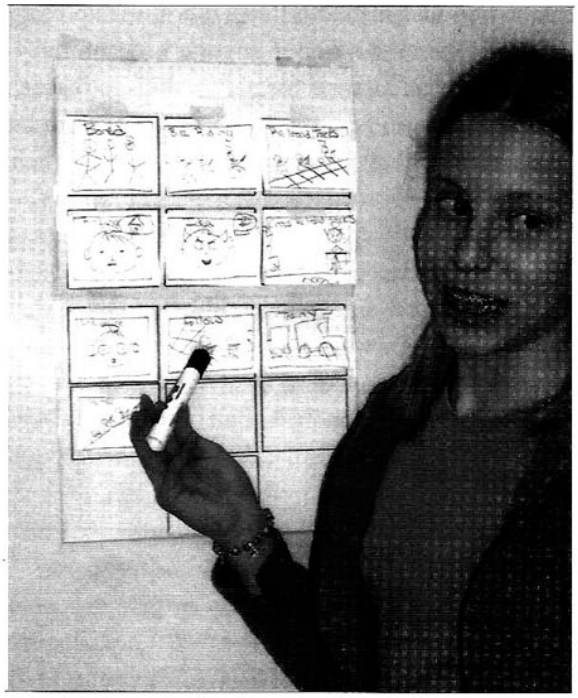


Figure 2. A student explains her telling board frame by frame to elicit response and advice from classmates.

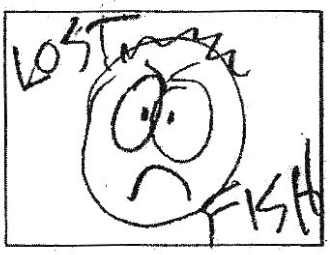
run, and where students learn from their audience that they need revision, too. In Donald's class, I saw the usual excitement Shared Writing generates. Students listened, engaged, and commented eagerly, suggesting revision, sharing ideas about what might improve the story. It was when Donald volunteered to get up and share his storyboard that I first remember seeing him. Donald was easy to miss, sitting quietly in the back, but I remember him now because he bombed big time.

Donald came forward awkwardly, self-conscious and nervous. I wondered why he had volunteered. His storyboard looked awkward, too; maybe six squares with weak repetitive pictures, no close-ups or dramatic events visible, and few key words. Storyboards can tell you a lot about writers. I guessed then he was a kid with an IEP. His basic story was all right—he shared a series of minor mishaps fishing—but his telling was so stiff and halting, it killed the story. Worse, before he was halfway done, I saw kids smirking and rolling their eyes. By the time he got to the good part where he hooked a small fish only to have it swallowed by a spectacularly *big* fish, which he lost—he'd lost his audience, too.

When he finished telling, there was no reaction, just stares. I asked if anyone had any questions, my usual method for getting kids to react to a story. They said nothing. Normally, I try to let kids carry the ball in a shared conference—their comments have more weight than any teachers'—but I was suddenly disappointed in this class. I encourage honest reactions to a telling, and I seldom see a mean-spirited class. I wasn't sure what Donald's history was, but he didn't seem to have any friends here. I had to intervene.

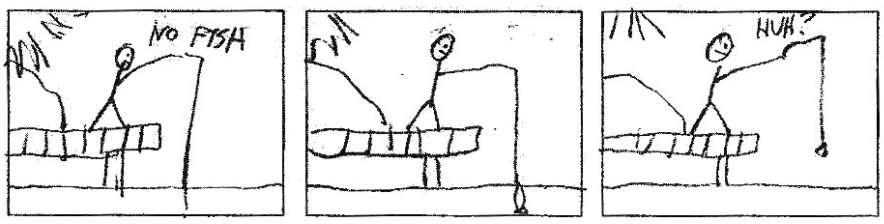
I simply told Donald he had built a solid story, one that needed to be expanded, but he had a good start. Then I turned to his class and asked what they thought. I saw their skeptical looks. I repeated strongly that it was a good story, but comedy was the hardest kind of story to tell well. I told them that if they wanted to learn how to do comedy, they needed to help Donald make his story funny.

They tried. Everybody agreed his hook was losing that big fish. But we agreed it wasn't funny alone; he needed to make his build-up, his all-day bad luck more dramatic, play up all his goofs. I drew a close-up of a face, a stickpic: hair wild, mouth grim, eyes wide, amazed at the size of the fish that got away. I knew simple dumb pictures would be his comic allies; bad stick pictures are funny. As the class ended, I wondered how much of that Donald had gotten. It was too rushed and I wasn't hopeful that he could make a good funny book.



Reading Aloud

Over a month later, I was invited back to see what kids had done with their stories. Although storyboards can lead to traditional text writing (no pictures), we asked this class to create a picture book. Students volunteered to read their storybooks to the class, and we had a great time. There were some terrific books, with students integrating text and pictures to tell their story. I asked who wanted to read last. I'd asked the teacher to signal me if there were willing students who normally didn't share; she pointed to Donald. The sad truth is, I didn't want Donald to read; I didn't want him to bomb again, but what could I do? As he got up and stumbled forward, I crossed my fingers for him.



[Author's re-creation of student work]

As he began to read his book and show his pictures, I was surprised to see big colorful cartoons—not art, but it was clear he had worked hard on them. His writing was basic, just

a few sentences per page, but it did the job, too. He'd come a long way. Still, he was too slow and awkward reading out loud. Just a few pages into his story, kids were glancing at each other. He was losing them. I went up front and said, "I like this story. Let me try reading it, to show how to read comedy." He looked relieved. I started reading, a little nervous myself. No one here knew I'd avoided all opportunities to read out loud in front of people till I was 45. I always got too uptight about stumbling; then I stumbled, too.

I started reading, glad his text was spare, glad for the pause to show his pictures. I put some drama in my voice and kids started laughing, but I swear it wasn't me; as the story built his dramatic/comic self-portraits, close-ups of his over-the-top reactions to events were really funny. As the disasters accumulated and then that big fish got away, we were all laughing. When I was done reading, Donald faced the class and beamed while everybody clapped. And they meant it!

Catching the Big One

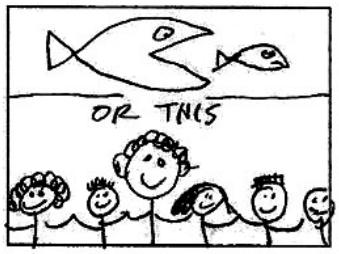
After all the kids left, I talked with the teacher about how well the reluctant writers had done. I asked if she thought Donald's writing was better than his usual work. She said, "I don't know."

I was confused. I said, "I was just trying to figure out if you thought storyboard helped him write."

She said, "The thing is he's not really in my class. I don't really know anything about his writing. He's Special Ed. He's not main-streamed in language arts. When we started planning this residency, someone asked, 'What about Donald?' We don't normally see him, but we decided since storyboarding was different, maybe he could do it, too. We decided to put him in my room to see how it went."

It just hit me! Donald was not mainstreamed. That explained so much. Then she said something I'll never forget: "The kids don't think of him as part of their grade, really. I'm afraid some of them make fun of him behind his back. But I saw them looking at him today, as you read his story out. I saw kids looking at him differently. *I think they were reevaluating who he is, because his story was good, really funny.*"

Big fish and little fish. We adults have so much power; we can make "different" students disappear. Unfortunately, Donald's classmates had help evaluating him. They learned from adults how "different" he was. Adults made it clear Donald couldn't be part of "normal" class using traditional tools. The good news is kids are adaptable; they can change their assessment of Donald, often more quickly than we adults can.



Donald and lots of other "different" learners have taught me this: many of us are only different when adults insist we learn with tools that don't work well for us. I don't know if Donald is mainstreamed now. I know those language arts teachers took the first big step toward Donald. ("We decided since storyboarding was *different*, maybe he [Donald] could do it, too.") The decision to offer kids a choice of tools in the language arts classroom was courageous. Including Donald was, too. Kids like Donald seldom get the chance to show what they can do with appropriate tools. The road back from Special Ed exile can be hard, but we can help kids return, and they can teach us essential truths about learning.

I want to say here that Donald was not the only student on the margins of the classroom to step forward and write for the first time. In his class, there were more dramatic breakthroughs like this. I see reluctant writers step up in every school I visit. It is essential to understand that if we want reluctant writers to write, we can't ask them to use SPED tools—techniques only used in the Special Ed room. We need to make visual/verbal tools mainstream, show that even the "good writers" easily embrace and grow with different tools.

Storyboards work wonders for reading comprehension, for making writing more engaging, for making note-taking more memorable, and they easily reinforce any classroom content. The truth kids have taught me and the classroom teachers I've worked with at all grade levels is that alternative visual/verbal tools are mainstream. They help everybody learn.

Roger Essley, a self-professed school failure and experienced disabled learner, is an author/illustrator and school consultant for alternative literacy tools. His Web site is rogeressley.com; he can be reached at ressley@aol.com.

THE ODD FISH STORY is a piece I wrote on the impact of visual tools in writing workshop published May 05 in "Voices from the Middle" (journal of the National Council of Teachers of English -NCTE). They had put out a call for articles on inclusive practice that supports "Different Learners."

Shortly after this piece was accepted for publication I got a call from a *Voices'* editor who said they'd discovered a strange "coincidence." Also accepted was an article on visual tools supporting reading comprehension that showed a picture of me presenting storyboards to students. It turns out a 7th grade team, a regular ed LA teacher and a Special educator, I was collaborating with developing visual tools for reading had decided to submit a piece as well. It seemed a significant "coincidence" that a national call for tools that support struggling learners highlighted students success with visuals for both writing and for reading.

(Doherty, J., & Coggeshall, K. (2005). Reader's theater and storyboarding: Strategies that include and improve. *Voices From the Middle, 12*(4), 37-43)

Doherty's and Coggeshalls' groundbreaking work with storyboards as a reading tool are highlighted in the first Scholastic *Visual Tools for Differentiaing instruction in Reading and Writing*
