

**Writing Whirligigs  
The Art and Assessment of Writing in  
Kentucky State Reform**

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## WRITING WHIRLIGIGS

### THE ART AND ASSESSMENT OF WRITING IN KENTUCKY STATE REFORM

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#### Abstract

In 1990, the state of Kentucky created a new school system through KERA (the Kentucky Educational Reform Act). While KERA mandates wide-ranging progressive reform, KIRIS testing (the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System) makes sure teachers get the job done. Though all Kentucky teachers are involved in writing, those at the fourth-, seventh-, and twelfth-grade levels are responsible for three basic student assessments: writing portfolios which contain students' original writing rather than specific prompts, open response questions in which students read short narrative and/or expository passages and answer related questions, and on demand writing in which students have 90 minutes to plan, prewrite, draft, revise, and edit their response to a specific prompt. Here we follow one exemplary, seventh-grade Kentucky teacher, Mr. Bass, as he teaches the art of writing while simultaneously addressing the demands of the state evaluation. In this brief case study, we discuss the paradox that occurs as Mr. Bass teaches his students to think of writing in terms of language play, prior knowledge, and life connections, but also instructs them in how to pragmatically share their art through "real-world" assessments.

This fall, Mr. Bass,<sup>1</sup> an exemplary teacher of writing in the rural hills of eastern Kentucky, taught his class the Newbery award-winning novel, *Missing May* (Rylant, 1992). The story centers on one family's struggle to survive the death of kin. Ob, grieving for his wife, is brought back from depression with the help of two children, Summer and Cletus.

A simple man with complex ideas about life and art, Ob had spent much of his adult life making whirligigs. Typically these are spinning contraptions hooked to a garden fence to scare off birds. But Ob's creations stayed indoors and captured the

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Bass is a pseudonym.

essence of things: thunderstorms, heaven, his wife May, whose whirligig had more spinning parts than the rest. As Cletus explains,

Ob won't just make a whirligig from something we can understand. He don't carve out little doggies and kitties. Because he don't care about things concrete. Ob's not making yard decorations. He's making art. I can understand why he never put the 'gigs out in the yard. He never meant to entertain the neighbors.

In this article, the description of Ob's whirligigs serves as a metaphor for what happens when teaching writing process becomes state policy. (See Figure 1.)

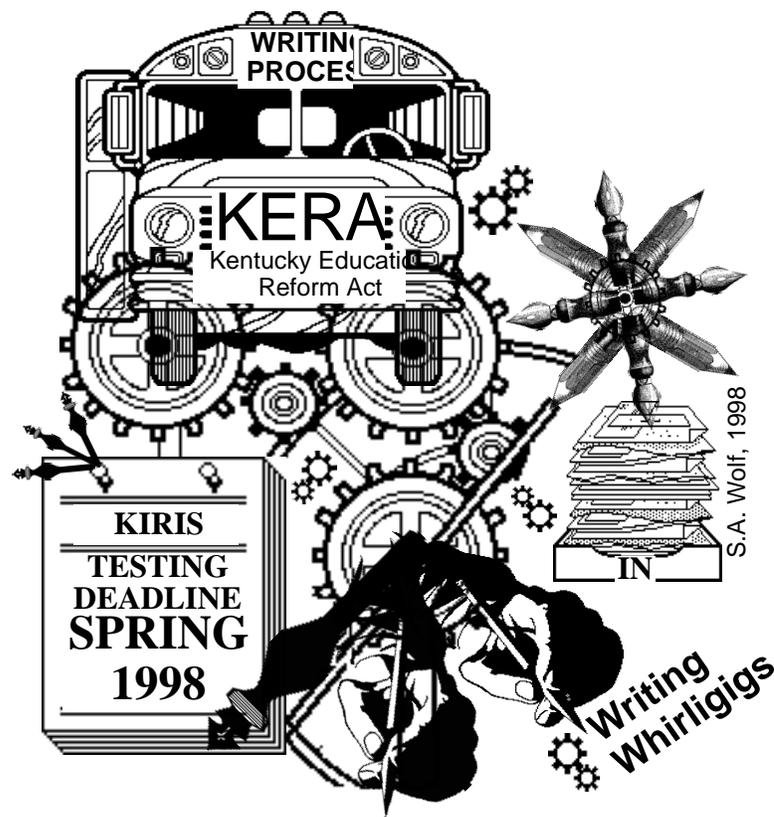


Figure 1. The KERA/KIRIS whirligig

Like Ob, Mr. Bass is a straightforward man with complex ideas about life and writing for his seventh-grade students. He works daily to help them create art in their writing, but because of the demands of the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) testing, he has learned to set out something concrete in his school yard every spring.

The paradox of teaching process, while helping students fit the form of KIRIS products is one that Mr. Bass well understands. Yet, he's not resentful. In fact, he's appreciative of a system that turned his teaching around and brought recognition to an area of the state that had been long neglected. Still, in our conversations together over the past year, he has reflected on the day-to-day irony of setting out his teaching and his students' writing for the neighbors to see.

### **KERA and KIRIS**

To understand the irony of his situation, it's important to define two Kentucky acronyms. In 1990, Kentucky did some-thing that had never been done before. Responding to a lawsuit that challenged school funding inequities, the legislature created an entirely new school system through KERA (the Kentucky Educational Reform Act). While KERA mandates wide-ranging progressive reform (including new finance formulas and ungraded primary classes), KIRIS testing makes sure teachers get the job done (Jones & Whitford, 1997).

Though all Kentucky teachers are involved in writing, those at the fourth-, seventh-, and twelfth-grade levels are responsible for three basic student assessments:

- Writing portfolios which contain students' original writing rather than specific prompts and include:
  - a table of contents;
  - personal expressive writing (personal narratives, memoirs);
  - literary writing (stories, poems, scripts);
  - transactive writing ("real world" writing in letters, editorials, brochures); and
  - a letter to the reviewer where the student analyzes and reflects on his or her writing.
- Open response questions in which students read short narrative and/or expository passages and attempt to answer-related questions with clear, thorough, and insightful communication.
- On demand writing in which students have 90 minutes to plan, prewrite, draft, revise, and edit their response to a specific prompt.

While students work on their portfolios throughout the year, open response and on-demand writing opportunities come in a week of testing in the spring. For Mr. Bass, the three forms offer quite different views of process and each must be addressed in unique ways.

### **Teaching Process**

Of the three forms, the writing portfolio best lends itself to the authentic and artistic aspects of process writing. Here Mr. Bass reads from literature and shows how authors craft their language into effective metaphors and images. He demonstrates typical steps in the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing—though not in rigid ways. He models his own writing process, once discussing a problem he was trying to solve in his own poetry. He also conferences with students about their writing, asking questions and pointing out organizational strategies.

On an early day in May, for example, he conferenced with students as they worked on personal narratives. One student wrote the following draft:

#### **My First Dirt Bike.**

I was just 6 years old when I got my first dirt bike. It was from my Grampa who has influenced me alot. Over the years he has taught me alot. The Apache language, how to hunt, and the ways of the forest. He has influenced me alot over these many years. He has shaped and molded who I am today.

In his conference with the student, Mr. Bass read the piece silently and commented, “You call your topic ‘My First Dirt Bike,’ ... but to me the piece goes quickly into your grandpa. If you want to write about your grandpa and how he’s influenced you, you could do that instead.”

The student agreed that what he really wanted to write about was his relationship with his grandfather, a man who had spent much time teaching him to fish and hunt in the woods. But he was unsure how to get his ideas on paper.

In response, Mr. Bass quickly sketched a hamburger explaining, “You’re building a sandwich. Here’s the bun. My grandfather has influenced me. But there’s no meat in it.” Using the words the boy provided, Mr. Bass filled in his sketch.

He continued, “You’ve got to build a triple-decker cheeseburger. You want to make sure that you support this statement. How has he shaped and molded you? What are specific experiences you remember when he did this?”

As the student turned back to his writing and Mr. Bass moved on to conference with others, we were struck by his effective, efficient, and age-appropriate image. The student was stuck, yet the metaphor of a triple-decker got him going again (Figure 2).



Figure 2. You’ve got to build a triple-decker cheeseburger.

In the KIRIS writing portfolio, there are strict prohibitions against teachers rewriting students’ pieces, but they are encouraged to act like true readers and ask authentic questions of student authors as well as model successful strategies for problem solving.

Questioning looks quite different in the second KIRIS task, for open response items ask students to answer specific questions based on a reading passage. The process for the task is also unique for Mr. Bass, like many Kentucky teachers, utilizes the “four column method” to help his students organize their thoughts for writing:

- **Know:** What do I need to know in order to answer this question?
- **Do:** What is this question asking me to do?
- **Examples:** What examples from the article can I give to answer each part of the question?
- **Connections:** How can I connect some part of my answer to a real-life situation?

Though this form is more prescribed than students' portfolio writing, Mr. Bass finds ways to add his own individual creativity to the process. For example, after reading a passage on bats, the students were asked to answer the following: "What would happen if bats became extinct? Use information from the article to support your answer." After taking his students carefully through note-taking aspects of the four column method and emphasizing key words like *support your answer*, Mr. Bass modeled several hypothetical responses which he had made up the night before. He then rated the responses according to the state scoring system. His first example modeled a 0 score which the state describes as "totally incorrect or irrelevant":

I don't like bats. Their ugle and try to eat my nek.

When he asked his students why the response merited such a low score, one boy laughingly retorted, "It ain't an open response and it ain't spelled right."

Mr. Bass chuckled, though he noted that spelling plays a minor role in open response scoring. More important, he stressed, "It has nothing to do with the question. The question didn't ask me my opinion of bats."

After demonstrating several differently-scored examples, Mr. Bass modeled a "4" response (the highest score) with an inviting introduction, clear support from the article, and a clever, synoptic closing. He reminded his students that they should not "regurgitate facts from the article." Instead, as he told us later, here the writing "just shines. It sparkles. It draws conclusions, makes generalizations. There may be several connections to the student's real life. With the bat question it might have begun with a real life experience, some type of anecdote, some type of humorous story. It may have begun with some kind of factual information that the student had prior knowledge of that's not in the article."

But the potential creativity of a distinguished response walks a thin line against the need to respond correctly. As Mr. Bass warned his students, open response items were not a time for a lot of personal voice. He commented, "Before you answer a question, you must know how to break that question apart, analyze it. You can't just fly by the seat of your pants and do what you want to do. You have to plan your answer. They [test scorers] are really interested in how you answer the question. Bottom line: Answer the blessed question."

Answering questions is also a feature of the third KIRIS task, on demand writing. Added to the accountability index in 1997 to standardize KIRIS testing even

further, students are given a choice of two prompts and 90 minutes to produce a final draft response to one. Here the writing process is encouraged, with space provided in the booklet for prewriting and planning as well as instructions reminding the students to “make notes, web ..., draft ..., revise and edit.”

But encouraging the writing process and compressing it into a specified time span seem to be contrasting goals. When Mr. Bass has his students practice this form of testing he takes them down to the team room to simulate the testing conditions. Still, what really prepares them for the 90 minute task is the portfolio work of the entire year. As TJ, a student in Mr. Bass’ class told me, “We went over so many types of writing, it wasn’t really that hard.”

However, students had two concerns with this form:

- **Time:** “It’s a lot harder. I’m so worried about the time, I don’t get to express myself as much. If I had more time I could make the second draft a lot stronger” (Anna).
- **No peer conferences:** “You don’t get opinions or anything. If they could change that—have like a person you switch with—that would help I think” (TJ).

Beyond these criticisms, students felt well prepared for the task. As Katie explained, “It gives you a chance to see what you can do in a certain amount of time and that’s good. See what you learned. Just takes time and courage. It was actually easy for me because I have courage in my writing.”

### Writing Whirligigs

Mr. Bass also has courage in his teaching, and like his students he has both compliments and criticisms of the demands he must meet every spring. Of the three forms, the portfolio is his favorite to teach, though in consideration of KIRIS deadlines as well as the unpredictable weather (which in eastern Kentucky can keep kids off slick mountain roads and out of school for days), he has learned to be pragmatic.

This year, rather than take students through the entire writing process for every piece, he has had them do a lot of drafting so they’ll “have at least one example of every possible portfolio piece by Christmas.” As he explained, “I can’t afford to spend let’s say three days revising a personal writing that Sally Jo will never use.”

The timing and the lack of conferencing in on demand writing worries him a bit, but he is convinced that deadlines and “real world” writing (like letters and editorials) are challenges that his students must be able to meet. Mr. Bass also praises the “immense” benefits practiced for years or, as Mr. Bass indicated, they feel it provides a new view of teaching that meets the needs of their students.

Still, his praise is tempered by the difficult contrast between teaching students the art of the writing process and meeting deadlines for writing that comes in bounded forms: “I’m responsible for the on demand. I’m responsible for the open response. I’m responsible for the portfolio. And daggone it, there are times that—Boy, this is really strange. Because of KERA, I changed my style of teaching to a more workshop-oriented approach. But because of KIRIS testing, I’m not allowed to truly implement that approach.”

Teachers in KIRIS accountability grades have tremendous responsibilities, and they often meet the challenge with a combination of resistance and compliance, going through the steps of the reform without substantively reforming their practice (Callahan, 1997). They refuse to invest in a reform which may not last. As House (1996) explains: “Most reforms are the simple ideas of political and educational entrepreneurs. Almost all become fads, only to disappear eventually.... Why bother?”

But the exemplary writing teachers we’ve talked with in the past year are willing to bother because they believe the reform makes sense. They feel that KERA validates the kind of process teaching they have practiced for years or, as Mr. Bass indicated, they feel it provides a new view of teaching that meets the needs of their students.

As reflective practitioners, however, they do not embrace the reform without question. Instead, they weigh the balance between writing as an artistic process and concrete policy that simultaneously opens and closes the view.

At the end of Missing May, Ob carries his ‘gigs out to the garden and sets them spinning. Each spring, Kentucky writing teachers do the same. Like Mr. Bass, they teach students to write whirligigs—shining, sparkling word ‘gigs as places for humor, prior knowledge, and life connections—but they also teach them to share their art with “real-world” neighbors. It is a paradox that occurs when process becomes policy, but it’s also a wind they have learned to live with, and even admire.

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