

## The Write Way

*Donald Graves started a revolution just by watching young children as they wrote in school*  
by Kimberly Swick Slover

---

**A** class of second-graders at the Josiah Bartlett Elementary School in Bartlett, N.H., sits on the floor, on beanbags and in chairs, as their teacher, Lucy Swain, reads her story. Swain has begun an experiment in her children's writing instruction: She is writing her own story, and each day, she shares the process, her missteps and small successes, as she struggles to compose her piece. Knowing their teacher is a great animal lover, the children are thrilled when two of her dogs, Oakley and Tucker, appear in the story and talk to each other in goofy dog voices.

When the story ends, the children yell out the names of Swain's other dogs and demand that she put them, and her horses, in the story too. "You could have the dogs rounding up the horses!" suggests one. Swain feigns exasperation. "I could choose to have eight dogs in my story or 19 dogs, but I just want two!" she says. "Writers have to make decisions about their stories. In your stories, you'll have to make your own decisions."

Donald Graves, a UNH professor emeritus of early childhood education and former director of the Writing Laboratory, watches from the back of the room. Accompanying him is a film crew that will assist in producing a DVD series for teachers called "Inside Writing." As the pioneer in literacy education who changed the way that writing is taught across the United States and the English-speaking world, the 74-year-old educator is now leading the revolution he sparked in new directions.

"For years I've recommended that teachers write with their pupils, but very few have done that," Graves explains. "These DVDs will show teachers teaching through their own writing. Teachers need to see how effective it is in instruction."

Swain is a recent convert who has come to see that by writing with her pupils, she can model thought and writing processes and show her children, step by step, how to write.

After class, Graves interviews Swain, cameras rolling, about how her writing has changed the way she teaches. He sits near her, listening intently as she speaks. "I used to tell pupils to think of a beginning, middle and ending before they started writing a story, but now I see it doesn't really work that way," she says.

**F**ollowing his retirement from UNH in 1992, Graves and his wife of 50 years, Betty, moved to a mountaintop home overlooking New Hampshire's Mt. Washington Valley. On a late October day, as he chats in his second-floor study, gray scudding clouds descend from the peaks of North and South Doublehead, two mountains that loom outside his window. Within minutes, heavy raindrops patter on the skylight. From his perch on Green Mountain, Graves often witnesses storms in the making.

More than two decades ago, Graves created his own storm with the publication of *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*, based on a two-year study of elementary school children in Atkinson, N.H. His research revealed writing as a natural human need for self-expression and a way to develop and hone critical thinking skills. "Children want to write," Graves begins in the first chapter. "They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school, they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils... anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am.'"

At a time when educators believed children should not try to write until they were proficient in reading and spelling, Graves called on teachers to help even young children pick their own topics, read and revise their work, and confer with fellow pupils and teachers—in short, to become writers. In his best-selling book, he addressed teachers as if he knew them and understood their daily struggles in the classroom. His conversation with teachers has continued in more than two dozen books, many of which he's completed in retirement. His books address how to teach the writing of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, journals and student portfolios.

"Retirement is glor-i-ous," Graves proclaims, throwing his arms open with a Buddha-like smile. "I have more time to write." "Retirement" seems a misnomer for Graves' current state: he remains engrossed in the dissemination of his evolving ideas to a vast network of educators.

**G**raeves calls himself a "late bloomer." The son of a public school principal, he struggled in college, and only out of necessity—after four years in the U.S. Coast Guard, marriage and the birth of a child—did he follow his father's career path into education. His first teaching job was a class of 39 seventh-graders in Fairhaven, Mass., in 1956. Two years later, he was promoted to principal in the same school where his father had served. He left after three years to begin a new career in educational ministry with a church in Hamburg, N.Y., attending seminary school at the same time to

become a Presbyterian minister. In 1967, he gave up full-time ministry to begin doctoral studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

In graduate school in the early '70s, Graves became disenchanted with his fellow students' emphasis on reading disabilities: He thought it was more important to focus broadly on how children learn. Switching to language arts, he began an independent review of writing research. "No one had observed real children in the process of writing," he explains. Graves stepped into the void.

Over the course of six months, Graves watched elementary pupils write. His findings astounded him. One 7-year-old boy drew pictures before writing. Graves saw that the boy's pictures served as a rehearsal for his writing. "That to me was revolutionary," he says. "At an unconscious level, he was laying out what he was going to write."

Graves made two key discoveries that would become central themes in his work: that children need time to process their thoughts and "rehearse" before writing, and that their best writing flows from their deepest interests. His dissertation won the Promising Researcher Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

**I**n 1973, when he had completed his Ph.D., Graves was hired by UNH's education department as an assistant professor, and moved with Betty and their five children to Durham. Soon after his arrival, he and Donald Murray '48, then head of the journalism program and a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Boston Herald, struck up what would evolve into a lifelong friendship and dynamic working relationship.

"We found we had a lot in common," says Murray, now professor emeritus of English. "We were south-of-Boston kids, and both of us felt like failures in school at some point. We were both intrigued by the writing process, he in the teaching of writing, me more in the writing."

Early in his UNH career, Graves was agonizing over a research report and sought Murray's help. He arrived at his home, draft in hand, and watched anxiously as Murray scanned the report and then rooted around for a stationery box. He taped the lid shut and cut a slit in the top. "I want you to sit down and just write," Murray told Graves, "and as you finish each page, put it in the box. Don't look back until it's all done."

Graves was skeptical but forced himself to write without concern for punctuation, grammar or organization. Soon he had stuffed 150 pages in the box. "I had been censoring myself," Graves recalls. Like many academics, he thought he had to get it right the first time. Graves retrieved his rough draft, re-read and revised it again and again, until he had his best work before him. "Don literally taught me to write," he says. "He showed me that the craft of writing is re-writing. I've used this technique with hundreds of writers. It teaches you to just get it down." Murray's simple advice, "Write research to be read," also stuck. "I used to write with educational jargon, and Don knocked it out of me," says Graves.

**F**or several weeks, fifth-grade teacher Sue Ann Martin has been writing an "Edge of Your Seat" story along with her 22 pupils at Broken Ground School in Concord, N.H. Martin, a marathon runner, is writing about a day when she ran alone in the dark and began hearing noises behind her. She reads her story aloud while the children listen, riveted. She also reads three different possible endings, and explains the elements of mystery and surprise, reflective and circular endings. The children head back to their seats to write at least two different endings for their stories.

While they work, Martin circulates to review and comment. Her feedback is positive; she turns shortcomings into opportunities. "Each of these lines is so important, you could expand them into a paragraph," she tells one boy. She draws out a reluctant writer with questions: "What were you feeling when it was over? Relieved? Happy? Tell the reader how you felt inside." One pupil asks another how to write a circular ending. "The end of the story is similar to the beginning, so if you wrote an action lead, then the ending has to have action in it, too," he explains.

As writing time comes to a close, Martin asks who would like to share their favorite ending. Hands shoot up around the room. The endings are full of the "honest detail" and "internal and external tension" they've been practicing. "The coast was clear, but I was biting the sleeve of my sweatshirt," reads one boy.

Martin makes it a practice to do whatever writing assignment she's asking her pupils to do. She has been strongly influenced by Graves' teachings, and she says as a result she has raised her expectations. "I really push them to find the heartbeat of their story and to think deeply about their writing. I tell them, 'This is what authors do, and what we expect you to do.'"

These methods of writing instruction also work well with older students, says Linda Rief '66, '83G, an eighth-grade teacher at Oyster River Middle School in Durham. "The principles of time, choice and response that came from Don Graves have grounded everything I do," says Rief, who was mentored by Graves while working on her master of arts in teaching degree. "Kids of all ages need good role models and constant feedback on their writing," she says.

She applies these principles to the middle school curriculum. "I ask my students to write in certain genres, but they have a lot of choices within the genres," she says. Students who felt strongly about the U.S. presidential election wrote letters to the editor for class and then sent them to local newspapers. "They want to write for real audiences

about issues they really care about," Rief says.

Teachers who write with their students are the exception rather than the rule, and Rief thinks she knows why. "Teachers want to be in control. As Don says, when you put your writing out there, it's like standing naked in front of 25 kids," she says. "Writing is very personal. By writing themselves, teachers show they really value the process and know how hard it is."

Once he retired, Graves assumed he would give up writing as well. But then he met with Lois Bridges, an old friend and a newly hired editor for Heinemann Books, Graves' publisher. Bridges swiftly disabused him of that notion.

"Don is the most beloved voice in language and literacy education," says Bridges, a former teacher, who, like many people who've worked closely with Graves, talks about him with deep affection. "We'd only just begun to learn from him," she says.

In his post-retirement writing, Graves has explored fresh territory, publishing a book of short stories, *How to Catch a Shark and other Stories about Teaching and Learning*, a novel, poetry and essays. He has also re-worked and re-released some of his previous books. And with his most recent books, *The Energy to Teach* and *Testing Is Not Teaching*, Graves has entered a more controversial arena, striking out against the No Child Left Behind legislation and what he sees as growing federal encroachment into public education.

Bridges says Graves, as a former minister, is attuned to feelings. "He could see teachers were hurt and confused," she explains. "In these books, he has been able to take all this angst and anxiety and wrap some language around it. In a clear and direct manner, he's given teachers the ammunition to say, 'I disagree with this direction, and here's why.' It's highly significant that he is speaking out." The response to *The Energy to Teach*, which has been reprinted six times, led Graves to create a Web site, <http://www.donaldgraves.org/>. "Quite suddenly I was coming into contact with more teachers and administrators than at any point in my entire career," he writes. "I couldn't keep up."

When conversation veers in the direction of public education, Graves, normally serene and soft-spoken, becomes animated, even angry. He blasts No Child Left Behind as a stealth campaign, under-funded and based on faulty research, to undermine and discredit public education. Already, he says, the initiative has resulted in the labeling of schools as failures, the demoralization of teachers and their exodus from the profession. The effort to standardize public school curriculum and assessment is "un-American," he contends, and has lowered standards and diminished teachers' ability to focus on developing children's critical thinking skills, creativity and individuality. The overemphasis on testing has inflated schools' curriculum, in Graves' view, and turned classrooms into pressure cookers.

While he sees the need for assessment and accountability and finds current "left-brain" testing methods effective for math and science, he believes these methods are wholly inadequate for measuring progress in reading and writing. "Current tests require one right answer," Graves writes in *Teaching Is Not Testing*, and condition children to think "this is what learning is all about." Graves proposes testing methods that give children more choice in selecting the reading materials and writing topics on which they will be tested, and more time and space to master the material and demonstrate their knowledge.

Graves travels the world to speak at educators' conferences, where he is described variously as a rock star and an evangelist for teachers. By all accounts, he is a mesmerizing speaker who walks into the audience and tells stories that revolve around the classroom, with funny and moving imitations of principals booming over loudspeakers and of teachers and children submerged in the hard and messy work of learning. What comes through, teachers say, is his deep respect for them and the work they do, and for children.

His influence on writing continues at UNH, where a former colleague, English professor Tom Newkirk, established the New Hampshire Writing Program (now expanded into the N.H. Literacy Institutes). It also continues elsewhere across the country: Examples include the Center of Teaching and Learning, established by Nancie Atwell in Edgecomb, Maine, and the Reading and Writing Project, founded by Lucy Calkins at Columbia University's Teachers College. In his own neighborhood, Graves has partnered with Penny Kittle in working with teachers in the Conway, N.H., schools.

Graves' first book, *Writing: Teachers and Children At Work*, sold hundreds of thousands of copies and launched Heinemann into its position as the nation's leading publisher in literacy education. Many of his collaborators—including Calkins, Atwell, Kittle and Rief—and hundreds of other teachers have become influential authors published through Heinemann. Graves himself views his role in empowering teachers to write and publish as the single greatest impact of his life's work.

As a retired revolutionary, Graves keeps an active schedule. He usually writes from 5 to 11 a.m., when he goes running, skiing, cycling or hiking. On some days he gardens or works in his wood lot. Clad in hiking shorts, running shoes and a fleece vest, he looks fit and vigorous, the result of a demanding exercise regime.

After running for 34 years for fun, he began competing in his running club's half-marathons in 1998 at age 68. He won

first place in 1999 and second-place awards in 2000 and 2003.

He and Betty have many shared interests. Each summer for the last several years, they've biked in Europe with Elderhostel, and they often hike and cross-country ski together. Their social life revolves around their church and their family, which now includes eight grandchildren.

Betty, a voracious reader, is helping local prison inmates learn to read. While she gardens and makes quilts, Don pursues his interest in U.S. history and World War II. He talks to Don Murray on the phone almost daily. Every evening, Graves and Betty sip a glass of wine and read poetry and short stories aloud to each other as darkness falls on the mountains around them.

And, of course, Graves stays involved, speaking at conferences, writing and working with local schools. E-mail and faxes now connect him with fellow writers and scholars around the world. In progress are two books, due out in January, and his DVD series. For Don Graves, retirement seems a lot like work, only better.

*Kimberly Swick Slover is the director of communications for Colby-Sawyer College in New London, N.H., and a former editor of UNH Magazine.*

[Return to UNH Magazine features](#)