

FRIDAY FREEBIE

**DRAMATIC PLAY**  
IN THE EARLY YEARS

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Building Belief

### Building Belief through Use of Blank Paper

Although it may sound improbable, one of the best ways to build belief and begin the story is to use a blank piece of flip-chart paper and a marker. There is something magical about this as the children gather on the carpet and you draw something that may look like a river, a forest, mountains, or a lake depending on the story. If you begin by saying something like, "I know that there is a mountain range here, but I forget where we are in relation to it," inevitably, a child will point to a place on the paper where the group is located. Thus, the story begins with specifics. Other children begin to add to the map. They point out more details not previously discussed so that the group will know where — and sometimes what — dangers or challenges are to be faced.



*Building belief with blank paper*

In dramatic play about regaining a castle (see *How Dramatic Play Unfolds*, pages 15 to 17), the story's beginning came into focus when a blank sheet of paper was shown. To begin, the dramatist simply drew a wobbly line, suggesting a river, and asked where their hideout might be. The group went on to locate the castle and identify other landmarks that could be important to the story. For children, the imagination can color-in details, even on a largely blank sheet of paper with just a wobbly line, a circle, or an X marking the spot.

This approach is a delightful way in which to begin a very open-ended story, but also relevant to use if the children already have some background knowledge and you want them to develop a story together as a group. For example, a Grade 4 class was studying the Cree First Nations before European contact. Students sat around a large blank piece of paper, and the dramatist drew a wavy line indicating a river. She looked at one of the children and asked, "Where is your teepee?" Without hesitation the child pointed to the top of the paper, adding that the teepee was near a forest. Thus, the story began with a community establishing itself on an almost empty sheet of chart paper.

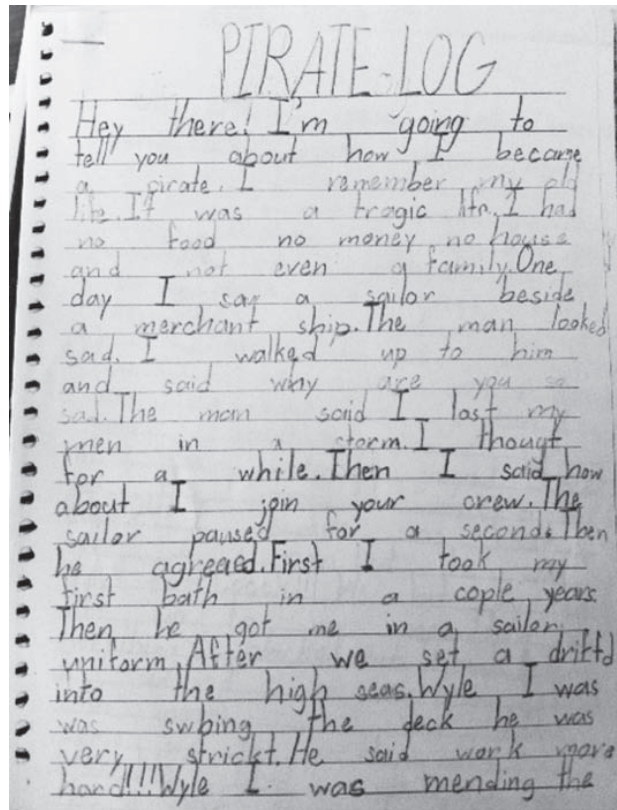
### Writing in Role and First-Person Singular

When the story has begun it may be necessary for the children to fill in detail through writing a journal in the first-person singular or writing in role. This experience invites them to enter into the backstory of their character in order to build their imagination and deepen their beliefs about who they are and how they are affected by their circumstances.

The backstory can also be enhanced by research. In the example below, the Grade 4 student as pirate has obviously researched some of the vocabulary of a sailor. Her story serves her well as the class enters further into the large-group experience as pirates.

**Transcription:**

Hey there! I'm going to tell you about how I became a pirate. I remember my old life. It was a tragic life. I had no food, no money, no house, and not even a family. One day I saw a sailor beside a merchant ship. The man looked sad. I walked up to him and said why are you sad. The man said I lost my men in a storm. I thought for a while. Then I said how about I join your crew. The sailor paused for a second. Then he agreed. First I took my first bath in a couple years. Then he got me in a sailor uniform. After we set a drift into the high seas. Wyle I was swbing the deck he was very strickt. He said work more hard!!! Wyle I was mending . . .



Part of a pirate's log

Writing in role is a thinking tool for children, particularly in the higher grades, enabling them to reflect back on their lived-through experiences. It gives them time to gather their thoughts and add a personal perspective to the group story. Because the story is a lived-through experience demanding the child's imaginative participation, writing in role supports a richer, more dimensional writing than is usually achieved through imagining alone. Writing about what actually happened and how it felt expands children's understanding of story with built-in details, atmosphere, tensions, conversations, and interactions that fuel the children's writing and drawing.

### Writing in Role on Set

In the story of regaining the castle (see "How Dramatic Play Unfolds" in Chapter 1), the children built a tunnel in the classroom. The teacher later invited them to crawl back into the tunnel to write personal stories in their journals. Because this was a "real" experience full of tension, emotion, and adventure, the children's motivation to tell about their characters' experiences was heightened. Their writing was much more expressive than usual.



*Writing in the castle's secret tunnel*

### Your Role in Building Belief

Pausing throughout the dramatic play experience to discuss next steps and build belief is one of your major roles as you create a story with the children. You need to determine what will deepen belief while moving the story forward. Do the children need to write in role? Do they need to create a space in more detail? Is there a role you might play to move them further into the story? (See Chapter 7 on teacher in role.) Pausing allows you the time to craft whatever is necessary to further the story with the children.

As the dramatic story progresses, however, you may see the need through your own research to fill in some of the areas that are missing in order to deepen the students' belief. Making masks makes the transformation into animals believable. Creating some kind of badge suggests that the students are part of an organization. Drawing a picture of the castle makes the imagined visible and adds detail to the circumstance. Building belief is a constant spiraling as you move with the children through the story, pausing along the way, reflecting, writing, drawing, and researching in order to develop their understanding. At the beginning, however, all that the children might require are the lights out, some sound effects, or a rearrangement of classroom furniture.

Throughout the story you will find that you ask a wide range of questions of yourself and of the children, for example:

- Do we need to arrange the space for the children to believe that they are in a different setting?
- What do they need to research in order to fill in their understanding of who they are or what their situation is?

As you pause the story, make sure that you stay open to the children's ideas, asking yourself questions like these:

- Does the child's suggestion build belief in the story?
- Does the suggested idea need to be lived through?