

## The Next Level: Using Journals to Write Great Short Stories by Jack Gantos

As a writer of books, I've been very fortunate to have the most voracious readers and the most critical readers in the country -- children. As we all know, part of the purpose of reading is just to enjoy the plain pleasure of words as they re-create poems, stories, and novels within us. But another, educational purpose for books is to inspire young readers to write. In recent times, journal writing has become a widespread part of the curriculum in the classroom, and I am very pleased to see it. But I want to add to the effectiveness of journal writing. I want to take the students to the next level -- using their journal entries as raw start-up material to write well-written short stories.

I have a natural relationship with journal-writing students because many of my books are based on stories I wrote in my journals as a kid. *Heads or Tails*, *Jack's New Power*, *Jack's Black Book*, and the forthcoming *Jack on the Tracks* are all books of autobiographical stories that first began as the journal entries of a young writer. But as a professional writer, I had to take those entries to the next level -- I had to transform them into stories full of well-rounded characters, interesting themes and problems, great action and resolutions. Good stories don't just spontaneously fall into shape in the real world, so a writer has to capture the inspiration for a story, then stretch the truth, exaggerate a bit, and manipulate the events/action into a story with a solid beginning, middle, and end.

This is easier said than done. So let's proceed to the first, thorny problem that faces most young writers.

### **The Biggest Hurdle Is . . . Getting Started**

"Nothing interesting ever happens to me!" This is the all-ages writer's lament. Yet, with a little prodding, some well-directed questions, and some prompts, most writers soon find that interesting things do happen to them -- either they are not paying attention or they just don't know if their experiences are worth writing about. For example, a young girl came up to me after one of my journal-writing presentations and said she wasn't sure if she had anything interesting to write about. I asked her if she had ever had an "embarrassing moment." "Yes," she replied. And then, with a good bit of hand wringing, she told me that the previous week in school had been picture week. And all week she had been preparing to look her best for her yearbook picture because all the previous ones had been pretty lousy -- missing teeth, huge fake smile, blinding shiny spot on forehead, frilly outfit with large lace collar -- and so she was determined to be poised, well groomed, and show off her new smile sans braces. So on the big day she put on her new, sophisticated outfit, and had her hair pulled back so it wouldn't cast a shadow across her face. When her class was called down to the library for the picture session, she had her big orange comb in hand and was nervously waiting in line and compulsively combing her hair into place, when disaster struck. Somehow in her combing frenzy the comb had knotted up in her bangs and she couldn't get it unfastened, and suddenly it was her turn to take a seat, and, before she knew it, she had her picture snapped with the big orange comb hanging down over her forehead and covering one eye.

I listened patiently.

"So," she concluded. "Is that worth writing about?" And then she opened her purse and pulled out the picture.

It was a classic.

"Yes," I pronounced. "Your story is certainly worth writing about." Then I asked, "Do you have a journal?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then paste the picture in your journal and use it as inspiration to write the story of 'The Worst Picture Day Ever.'"

She bit down on her lip. "Thanks," she said. "I just wasn't sure it would be interesting."

I walked away thinking, "If she doesn't use that story, I will."

I didn't get far down the hall before I was cornered by another student. "I think I might have something interesting to write about," he said.

And on it went until, by the end of the day, I felt like Father Flannery stepping out of a confessional with an earache.

So, when I work with students on their journal writing I am very sympathetic to their doubts about the quality of their material. And in order to help dissolve their doubts I begin the journal-writing-to-short-story-writing in an easy, systematic way. The first thing I do is enlist the students in making a long list of possible or common story subjects. I go around the room and ask each student for a subject, and I allow them to say anything. And I mean anything. If some kid blurts out "quantum physics" I put it on the list. I don't even ask what he or she knows about it. After all, we are in a spontaneous brainstorming session where there are no rules. Finally, as a classroom, we collect a long list of possible story ideas. (See the sample list in box.)

**Common Story Subjects**

- |                               |                          |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Lessons/Piano/Dance/Swim   | 21. Picture Day          |
| 2. Favorite Day/Miserable Day | 22. Teen Idols           |
| 3. Adventures                 | 23. Baby-Sitters         |
| 4. Bikes/Roller Blades        | 24. Dentist/Orthodontist |
| 5. Bus Ride to School         | 25. Glasses              |
| 6. Dogs/Cats/Fish/Pets        | 26. Church/Sunday School |
| 7. Sports/Teams               | 27. Haircuts             |
| 8. Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts     | 28. Family Vacations     |
| 9. Teachers/Subs              | 29. Work/Chores          |
| 10. Summer Camp               | 30. Birthday Parties     |
| 11. Slumber Parties           | 31. Secrets              |

12. Private School	32. Relatives
13. Moving	33. Self-Discovery
14. Field Trips	34. Violence/Punishment
15. Lunch Time	35. Broken Promises
16. Gym Class	36. Lost and Found
17. Bullies	37. Divorce
18. Teasing/Names	38. Adoption
19. Sickness/Fake Sickness	39. Twins/Only Child
20. Broken Bones	40. Tests

Now, once we have the class list of common subjects, I write it all down on a large sheet of paper and tape it up on the wall. This then becomes the master list for possible stories.

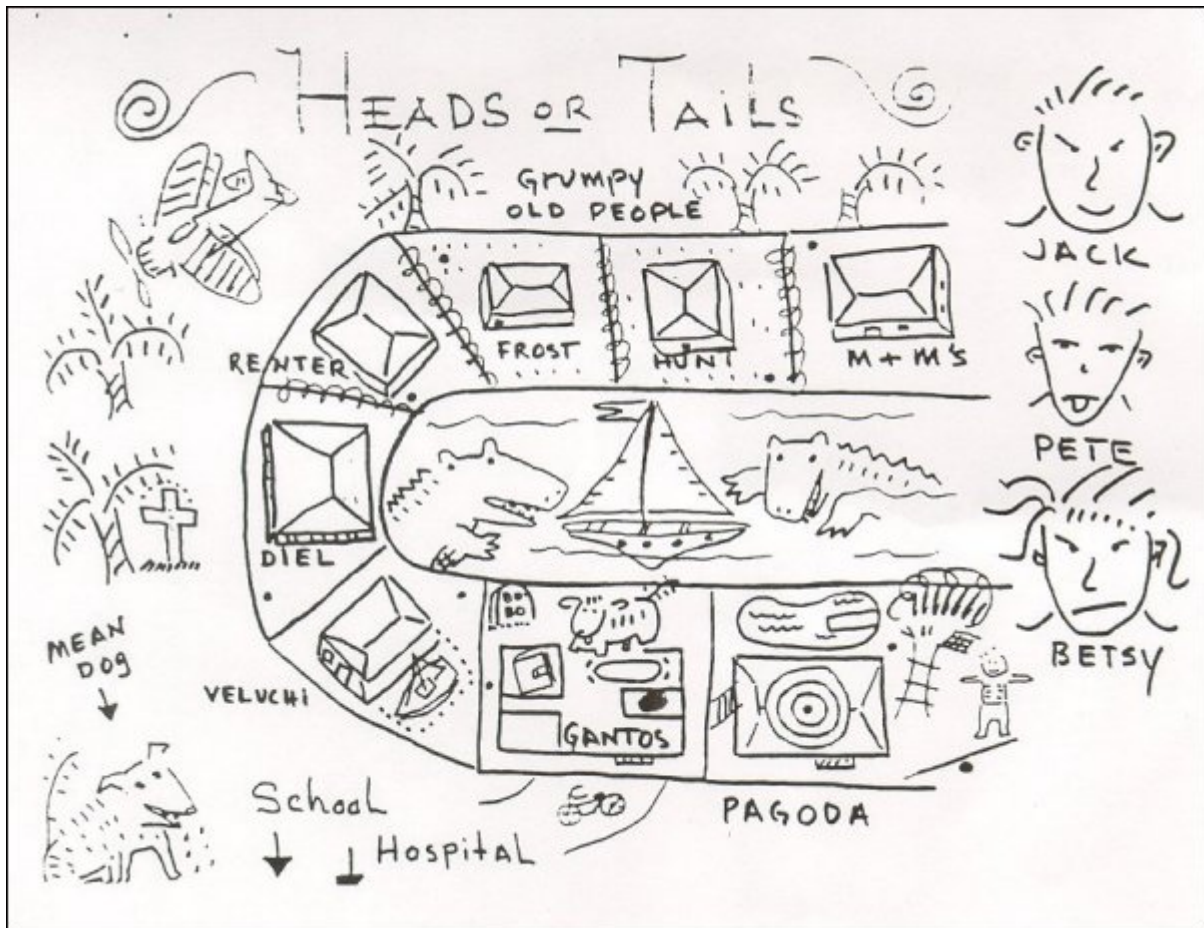
Next, I make them draw maps of the places they most inhabit: their neighborhoods, homes, and school. I have included a map of my neighborhood from sixth grade, when I lived in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. We had alligators in our canal, so I drew them in. One of them ate my dog, BoBo, the dumbest dog in the world. We had mean dogs in the neighborhood and one bit me and I thought it gave me rabies. I threw up a huge bellyful of spaghetti on the living room wall and we could never remove the stain. I drew it on the map. We lived next to the Pagoda family -- whom my mother labeled the "low supervision family." They were, and I was forbidden to play there. Of course, I was wildly attracted to them and got into lots of trouble -- see that little boy on the map, flying through the air over their yard? That is my brother Pete. I broke his arm at the Pagoda house while playing "Barnum and Bailey Circus Dare." We had an airplane crash in our neighborhood. We had grumpy old people that didn't like children. I built a golf course by burying a coffee can in everyone's yard. We sailed boats in the canal, and lots, lots more. It's all on the map. The final step is to add the major characters: your family, friends, and yourself.

I give the students plenty of time to work on their maps. The slowness of the drawing gives them time to reflect on what events happened, where they happened, and how they happened. Plus, it gives them "visual" prompts for start-up material. As the students draw their maps, it's a good idea for the teacher to draw his or her map, too.

The teacher can model for the students how the richness of visual detail will add to their story material.

Once the maps are drawn, I ask the students to look over the list of common subjects and find three that may match up with anything they might have drawn on their maps.

That list of three then becomes the table of contents in their story journal.



### Beginning/Middle/End

The classic beginning, middle, and end structure of a story will never change. What I find is that most students are first attracted to the middle of a story, because the middle is where we find most of the action. And action is what most students find most reassuring, because it is physical and it probably happened to them. Once I locate the action in the middle of my story, then it is my job to build a beginning and an ending. I find that students are unsure of what goes into a beginning. So, knowing the basic elements of writing is a big plus. The beginning should introduce the main characters and the setting, and declare the problem or situation. Then, the middle contains the action and plot and terminates in the crisis or moment of discovery (as in a mystery story).

The end should contain the resolution or solve the problem. Finally, there should also be an emotional and/or mental ending, by which I mean that the character or characters introduced in the beginning should, through the experience in the middle, in the end reach some new emotional growth or mental insight into themselves and others.

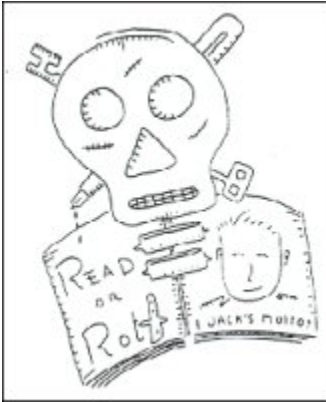
Again, talking about a specific story is easier, so let me give you a quick example of a straightforward story.

One morning I was standing at the bus stop and I was by myself. Usually there were other kids around, so I wasn't sure if I was late, or really early. I said to myself, "If I had a watch I would know if I was late or early." Just then, I looked down at the ground and there was a watch. I was thrilled. I picked it up and held it to my ear. It worked. Better yet, I put it on my wrist and looked at the time. I was very early, so I waited and soon all the other kids arrived. On the bus, I was thrilled with my watch. I looked at it. I polished the crystal and was mesmerized with the way the thin second hand went around and around. When I got to class, I was soon busy with my work and forgot about the watch. But then I noticed something special. I was sitting next to a window and the sun shone through and reflected off the watch crystal and made a little spot of light on the ceiling. That is so cool, I thought, and soon I was rotating my wrist and aiming the little spot of light around the room. By accident, I zapped a kid in the eyes with the reflection, and he blinked. I thought, this is cooler yet, I can make kids blink. So I went up and down the rows of kids, zapping each one in the eyes until I had zapped them all. When I ran out of kids there was only one other person to zap, the teacher. The only problem was that he was a very strict man. He was huge and he always carried a long wooden pointer in his right hand and banged on the blackboard to keep our attention. I knew it was dangerous to zap him, but I just had to. After all, why else have a watch if you can't have a little fun with it. So, when he was standing sideways, I zapped him. He blinked furiously and looked around the room, but by then I was putting on my innocent act. He turned sideways again, and again I zapped him. He was very upset. Then he turned away, and just when I went to zap him again, he spun around and caught me. He made an angry face and marched toward my desk. "Jack Gantos," he growled, "let me see that watch!" I held out my wrist. "Take it off," he instructed. I did. "Put it on the corner of the desk," he said. I did. Then he stepped back, raised the wooden pointer up over his head, and savagely brought it down on my watch. SMACK! The watch blew apart into a million little pieces right in front of me. "Now," he said, "you will never annoy anybody with that watch again." I nodded and he returned to the front of the class to continue the lesson. I glanced down at my wrist where I once had the watch. How I wished I still had it. I didn't expect I'd ever find another one. "Well," I said to myself. "Next time I'll know better."

In the beginning of this story, I didn't have a watch, then found one. In the middle I zapped everyone, including the teacher, and then -- BOOM -- the watch was destroyed. In the end I wished I had a watch, and would know better what to do with it . . . if I ever found one again.

#### **Getting Started: Know the Elements of Writing**

1. Characters
2. Setting
3. Problem/Situation
4. Action/Plot
5. Crisis/Moment of Discovery
6. Resolution/Solving the Problem
7. Emotional and Mental Change in the Character



## The Writing Goal: Real Books

I have the students work in their journals a little bit every day (fifteen or twenty minutes). When writing is a regular part of the daily curriculum, they get better and better. If you write just on Friday afternoons, when both students and teachers are at their wit's end, then the writing will not be effective. I make the students write their first drafts in their journals. (I encourage teachers to write their own stories in their own journals.) Then, they have to rewrite them (usually two to three times). On the finished draft, they must be able to point out how they used all the basic elements of writing. This is how I assess their work --

through the use of the literary elements and not with red ink or a grade. When all three stories are complete, I like to see them bound into a small book with a cover, title page, copyright and press page, dedication page, table of contents, and the three stories, and then at the end I add a few extra pages for reader/peer comments, and finally, on the back flap, I have them write up "something about the author" and paste on a picture of themselves. Then, these finished books can be placed on a special author's shelf in the classroom. They can be checked out like regular books. The writers can then get feedback on their work. And, when it comes time to write the next round of stories, the already completed books exist as living reminders that they can be interesting, successful -- maybe even professional -- writers.

Nationwide, as I visit schools and work with students, I have always found that when they have the finished books they have written, they are filled with pride, and a great sense of earned accomplishment.

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