

5 Writing for an Audience: The Functions of Children's Messages

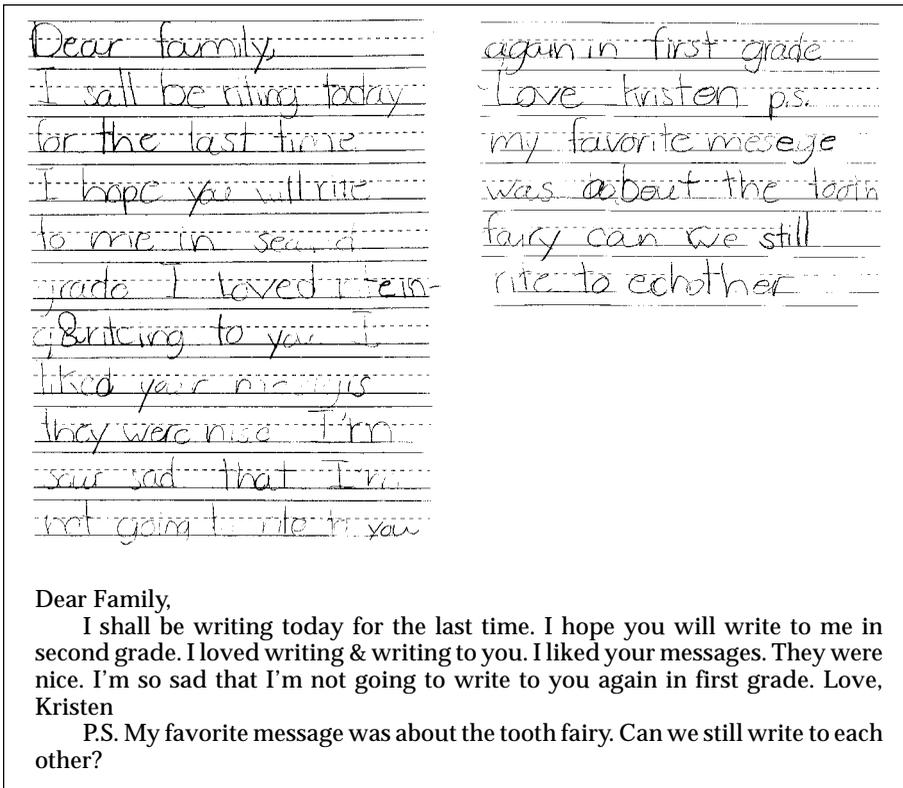


Figure 5.1. Kristin's final first-grade journal entry reveals the value students place on Family Message Journal correspondence.

In this chapter, I use a lens different from that in Chapter 4 to explore Family Message Journal entries. Here I focus on the messages' *functions*—how the first graders used their journals to communicate with and influence their families. Like Kristin's entry in Figure 5.1, many of the children's messages reveal that the journals became a significant aspect of their relationships with their families—a way to

interact with them on a daily basis around school-related topics. Kristen's message exemplifies the value children placed on this interaction. She indicates how much she enjoyed the written communication, hopes it will continue in second grade, and even recalls a favorite message written five months earlier. Her first sentence, one of many possible openings her class had discussed for this final message, is modeled after the words of Charlotte, the spider, in E. B. White's (1952) *Charlotte's Web*, spoken before spinning a final message in her web. Dina Carolan had recently read aloud this classic story to Kristen and her classmates, and they agreed that both the formality of and the sadness in Charlotte's words were a fitting way to wrap up the journal writing which had meant so much to them.

Message Functions

In order to look at the functions of the children's writing vis-à-vis their audience—their families—I have drawn on Halliday's (1975) category system for the functions of oral language, adapting this system to children's written messages. The adaptation makes sense because Halliday's categories fit so well when describing how the children's messages functioned. In fact, Halliday's categories more accurately describe and encompass the many functions than do category systems developed specifically for written language. This close fit may reflect the fact that the messages were similar to oral language in their conversational, interactive, and immediately pragmatic nature. They were (like talk) used by the first graders to act on the world and to get things done in the context of their immediate relationships with family members. The children's messages served the following purposes:

1. to inform families (like Informative Language in Halliday's framework)
 2. to regulate families' behavior (like Regulatory Language in Halliday's framework)
 3. to get things from families (like Persuasive Language in Halliday's framework)
 4. to interact with families (like Interactional Language in Halliday's framework)
 5. to share personal ideas and feelings with families (like Personal Language in Halliday's framework)
 6. to create an imagined textual experience for families (like Imaginative Language in Halliday's framework)
 7. to figure things out through communication with families (like Heuristic Language in Halliday's framework)
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This chapter explores multiple Family Message Journal entries exemplifying each of these categories; keep in mind, however, that any category system is somewhat artificial. While serving as a useful heuristic for examining the first graders' messages, the categories are not always discrete. Some messages integrate multiple functions. For example, personal feelings about owls may be included in an informative entry about owls, which might also involve an attempt to figure out why owls are considered wise in popular folklore. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity and explanatory power, I will look at each category separately.

Informing Families

Family Message Journal assignments frequently invited the first graders to inform families about information the children thought their families did not know, and often they were right. For example, Sara had learned some information about owls that surprised her family:

2/25/97

Whoo whoo Family,
owls mite eat mice, fish, snakes, rabbits, and even skunks! Do
you know why owl does not mind the smell of skunks? I do

Sara's suggestion that she knows something her family does not was typical in the children's entries. In talking about this entry at home, she answered her own question orally and enlightened her family.

Family Message Journals positioned children as the "experts" who had important facts to share. Kyle's message, written as part of a March unit on wind, exemplifies his sense of expertise as he begins "I know when hurricanes come":

Yipe Mom and Dad I know when Hurkans come in the late summer you need wind if we did't have wind we would't have anee kites and we would not have saleBoat we would't Be cool we would Be Hot for rest av are life

Late in the school year when studying local history, the first graders learned about the soldier after whom their school had been named. Asked to write about this lesson, Maryanne shared her knowledge, listing the facts she had learned and making some interesting personal connections to these facts:

May 23, 1997

Dear Mommy, L.T. [school's name] was a very important solgere. Hear are a few facts I know about him. 1. He died on November 29 that is my birthday! 2. Mrs. Wilensky went to school with Mr. [soldier's name]. She was in first grade when he was in sixth grade.

3. He was shot when he was 22. 4. He was born on April 23. Interesting facts, huh? Do you know that Greg's dad was in the army
Love, Maryanne

Like Maryanne's "Interesting facts, huh?," the children's rhetorical questions often revealed their sense of having something engaging to share.

Even when their information was more widely known, children's messages reflected their feeling of empowerment at being able to "test" their families' knowledge:

11/26/96

Dear Mom Did you know The Pilgrims, sleard [sailed] on The
May Flower Did you know that?
Love Kristen

Kristen's "Did you know that?" reads like a challenge to match her knowledge. Her mother obliged, replying with information about where the Pilgrims landed—nearby Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Families' replies often reinforced the first graders' sense of being bearers of genuinely new information. After engaging in a number of scientific experiments about vision and how the eyes play tricks on us, Maryanne wrote:

November 12, 1996
Abracadabra Mommy
Science is magic.
I can show you a few good trickx
Would you like that? yes no
Surcol your ansur

In her reply to this message, after being shown the "tricks," Maryanne's mother confirmed that she had learned something new from her daughter:

Nov. 13, 1996
Hi Maryanne!

Thank you very much for showing us the science tricks. It was fun. I never knew I had a hole in my hand or hot dog on my fingers.

Science is fun!

Love

Mommy

Reply messages frequently let the children know that their messages were having an effect—families were learning from the children and found it interesting.

Regulating Families' Behavior

Children's behavior is so often regulated by adults that it must be empowering for them to find that they can sometimes turn the tables. The first graders discovered they could use writing to tell their families to do something and that it often worked. Families allowed the messages to shape their behavior.

Some of the children's messages were simple reminders to families to do something that was required.

Dear Family

We are going on a fieldtrip!!!! I need to bring \$3.00 by May 29 I can bring a snack to eat on the bus.

Love, Sara

Sara's message got her family's attention, and she was given three dollars to bring to school the next day.

Children's regulatory messages were sometimes phrased indirectly or as suggestions, but they were nevertheless intended to make family members do something. Following a lesson on recycling, Sara wanted her family to reuse not only the back side of used paper, as they already did, but also to keep paper that had any blank spaces on either side and add to those until the paper was completely full:

Dear Family

We can use a peas of paper and draw on the back and add to the old ones Love Sara

Other regulatory messages were more directive. Maryanne wanted to make sure her mother, father, and older sister would follow the cafeteria rules when they came to visit for a school lunch. She explained exactly how they should behave:

March 12, 1997

Dear Mom Dad and Joanna who can come to lunch tommoro? Can Mom come, can Dad come, or can Joanna come. Whoever can come I have to tell them some rools. You must stay in your seet. Rase your hand when [the cafeteria monitor] dose that means be quiet. And if you don't be quiet you go in the five minut cloub that is not good.

Love, Maryanne

This message was effective in getting Maryanne's older sister to agree, in her reply, to come for lunch and to follow the rules so she could avoid being placed in "the five minute [time out] club"!

After a discussion of safety rules for automobile transportation, rules which integrated a series of lessons by the health teacher and a “Weekly Reader” article read with her classroom teacher, Maryanne wrote a strongly worded message to her family:

March 17, 1997

Buckle up!!! Mom and Dad

Please put Me in the back seat it's the safest playse in the car.
DON'T!!! drink alcohol befor driveing you Will get drunk and
you might get in a car acksedent. Allways buckle Me up buckle
your self up to. Dont drive when you are verry verry verry verry
old. Don't drive when the wether is bad.

Love, Maryanne

In the reply message, her family reinforced Maryanne's power to regulate their behavior by assuring her they would follow all of these rules and pointing out that they already did obey some of them, such as buckling seat belts.

Getting Things from Families

Messages written to get things from families were similar to those written to regulate behavior, but messages written to get things involved persuading families to buy something, help with something, or consider a special request. These messages were less commandlike than regulatory messages that told families they must, or at least *should*, do something.

The first graders discovered that a written message asking for something sometimes got more attention than an oral plea, in part because family members could choose to read it at a moment when they were able to give it their complete attention and in part because the writing reflected the amount of work put into making the plea, as well as the thinking behind it. The children also found that writing helped them organize and remember all of their ideas, so they made a stronger argument for what they wanted from family members than they might have made in spontaneous oral conversation.

Early in the year, most persuasive messages were simply requests with the word *please* used to enhance the chances of success. Maryanne's message accompanying a book club order form, asking that she be allowed to order a book entitled *Mouse Paint* (Walsh, 1989), is a good example:

September 26, 1996

Hi

MAY I PLEese GeT THE BooK MAWSPANTE

LOVE, MARYANNE

OXXOOXXOOXXOOXXOOXXO

Maryanne's row of symbolic hugs and kisses (O's and X's) could only help her cause! Such messages were common because the first-grade teachers gave the children responsibility for communicating with their families about book orders and other special opportunities and events.

Kristen took a slightly different approach to persuasion when her class was planning a special activity called spelling baseball:

5/20/97

Dear family

I need 4 words To do for spelling baseball what do you think cod
be good can you help me please it will be fun Love Kristen

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Kristen tried to get her family's help with generating words by arguing that it would be fun for them to participate and by giving them spaces to fill in. In other messages, she tried different approaches to getting what she wanted from her family. For example, when she wanted them to take her to see the fifth-grade play being staged at the high school, she wrote:

5/6/97

Dear family,

We are writing adout [about] Joseph's amazing Technicolor Dream
Coat let's go to the play Tonight Friday may 9th saturday May
10th 7:00 at the High school I wan't to go so much to the play I'll
be sad if you say no Love Kristen

In this message, she appealed to her family's compassion, saying she would be disappointed if they did not do what she had requested.

Several of the children's messages throughout the year related to science units about animals that are sometimes kept as pets. This led to a number of requests for a pet. When Kristen's class learned about newborn kittens, she wrote:

Meow mom And dad

a kitten stase with thier mother for 6 manths after thier born And
a kitten do not open thier eyes intill thier ten monse old that's
why I wont a kitten I'll die for one Love Kristen p.s But I Know
I'm algec [allergic] to them Mom I Don't mind if i'm lirgeck To
them I gest [just] wont one Plese Plese with a chere on top I wont
one I beg you plese plese plese I wont one so much beaus they
are so cyoot [cute] Plese mom I love you

I wont a kitten so Bad if you say no I'll die But I Bet I know you
wont care arent I rite you are the Best mom if you say yes so plese
say yes I'll Do ene [any] Thing I promis I Bet your tirD of reDing
so I'll stop

Kristen tried yet another set of strategies in this message, beginning with arousing her family's sympathy for a newborn kitten that clearly needs protection, as well as explaining just how much she wants a kitten—she would die for one. Moreover, she anticipated and tried to address her mother's potential objection that Kristen is allergic to cats, and continued her message with a common childhood plea (pretty please with a cherry on top). She also added further reasoning to support her wish—she wants a kitten because they are so cute. Trying another tactic, she attempted to arouse some guilt to further her cause, writing, "I know you won't care. Aren't I right?" Next she tried flattery—"Mom, I love you" and "You are the best mom" (but only if you agree to my request!). And, finally, she offered to reciprocate if she got what she wanted—"I'll do anything, I promise."

Like Kristen, the other first graders composed increasingly sophisticated messages to get things they wanted as the year progressed. Kristen's next message requesting a kitten focused on only one strategy of persuasion, but she developed her argument well and made the convincing and coherent case that she deserved a kitten:

1/16/97

Dear mom And dad can I Have a kitten for a Pet I Will take care
[care] of her I will feed her I will walk her I will Play
with her And I will Love her I promise Love Kristen PS please
may I have a kitten

This is an organized and well-reasoned, if less passionate, message than the first one. Kristen indicated her awareness that having a pet requires time and effort, and she promised to care for a kitten if she got one.

A similar message from Sara demonstrated her awareness that she must give something to get something:

4/11/97

Dear Family

I want to get lots of books from the bookorder and I want to clean
the dishes for you only if you pay me I don't care [care] how
much I get because I have lots of allowance [allowance] money but
I don't mind if I can't get any how many will I get if you can buy
me some I want it to be too sets of books I want the prairie [prairie]
ones can I they come in a pack there are nine books in the set
Love Sara

In her message asking for a family contribution toward the book order, Sara also offered to work to earn money to buy some of the books she wanted, as well as to spend some of her own allowance money, earned for doing chores and for good behavior.

The children's success with messages written to get things from their families demonstrated that writing is powerful. Aside from requests for pets, only some of which were granted, nearly all of the other persuasive messages the first graders wrote were successful—whenever possible they went to the events they hoped to attend; they were permitted to order books they asked for—and their families' replies included explicit recognition of how convincing their messages were. Many of these replies indicated that it was the children's awareness that they would have to make sacrifices to get what they wanted that made families agree to their requests. For example, Sara's father replied to her book order message:

4/14/97

Dear Sara

You've made a good start earning money to help pay for the things you want to buy. I'm glad you are beginning to appreciate how much time and work it takes to have the things you want.

Love, Papa

By writing in their Family Message Journals, the children grew increasingly skilled in convincing their families that they did have this appreciation.

Interacting with Families

Many of the first graders' Family Message Journal entries were used primarily to interact with families—to define, develop, and sustain relationships. Some of these messages focused on telling a family member what she or he meant to the child writer. Maryanne's Father's Day message is a good example:

June 12, 1997

Dear Daddy,

Fathers day is coming up. You could reseve a littl somthing! You are the best dad in the world! You are Dinamic, brave, and funny.

Love, Maryanne

Attached to this entry was a sheet of paper on which Maryanne had brainstormed special things about her father and all the words she could think of to describe him.

Other messages shared memories and feelings about activities enjoyed with a family member. Again, a good example is a message written by Maryanne to her father, a journal entry inspired by a poem her class read about walking outside and feeling the warm sun and seeing other early signs of spring (Aldis, 1968):

February 24, 1997

Dear Daddy - Do you Remember are nice walk on Sunday? remeber how I found my lost list of Bine [Beanie] Babies I wanted? It was fun wasent it! Love Maryanne

Sometimes the first graders were given the assignment to use their messages to express appreciation to their families for a special event or experience. After her birthday party, Maryanne wrote:

December 2, 1996

Dear Mommy + Daddy

I in joyed my birthday. I in joyed the presents I in joyed the cake and I in joyed the fun too

Love maryanne

Kristen wrote a similar message of appreciation when Dina Carolan invited her class to reflect on something special they had done over the December holiday vacation and tell their families how they felt about it:

Dear mom

I loved the basketball Game I thalt [thought] that bran bib [did] excslint And I loved Alisons houes Also I loved MicDanls [MacDonald's] it was fun Love Kristen

Other messages of appreciation explicitly thanked families for something they allowed or engaged in with the first graders. Kyle wrote to thank his mom for letting him sleep over at his cousin's house and also told her what he had done there:

H MoM Thaiks for leting Me go to My Ksin sleep Oaver We got to play on the Coputer it WaS Fun love Kyle

Sara thanked *her* family for a holiday visit to a farm:

HaPPy new Yeer

mom dad and Rosa i like the cows the moast and i likte the baby caf the moast thank you for brining me Love Sara

Families truly valued these messages of appreciation and thanks and let the children know how much they were touched by them, reinforcing the power of writing to maintain and enhance a relationship. These messages also introduced the children to an important and common form of out-of-school writing—the thank-you note—and helped them see how influential such a note can be.

Another type of interactional message involved asking family members for their opinions on an issue or idea, as if in a conversation:

1/7/97

fary [fairy] dust mom dad and Rosa I thinkg the tooth fary maks them [teeth] in to fary dust wut do You thingk mom and dad Love Sara

After offering her opinion, Sara asked her family members for their opinions on what the tooth fairy does with the teeth she collects. Similarly, Maryanne asked her family their feelings about sharing belongings:

December 16, 1996
 Dear Mommy + Daddy
 do you like sharing your earing's? how douse sharing make you feel? do you like to share?
 Love, Maryanne

In reply, Maryanne's mother expressed her feelings about sharing, acknowledging how it can feel to share as a child, but also explaining her feelings about sharing as an adult:

December 16, 1996
 Dear Maryanne,
 Yes, I like sharing. But when I was little I liked everything for myself. Now I like to share and to give. It makes me feel VERY, VERY GOOD and HAPPY. It makes me feel WARM inside!
 Love,
 Mommy

Maryanne's message and her mother's reply are like a conversation on paper, exemplifying how Family Message Journals can function to facilitate interaction within families and thereby maintain relationships.

Sharing Personal Ideas and Feelings with Families

Although many messages included personal feelings and ideas, the first graders' Family Message Journal entries sometimes functioned *primarily* to express their ideas and feelings to their families. Chapter 4 discussed messages in which the first graders got their ideas and feelings down on paper as a learning strategy. Here I focus on messages in which children were intent on *sharing* their ideas and feelings with family members. Some of these messages grew out of a series of lessons on becoming familiar with and conscious of our feelings and how each of us expresses them. One example is Kristen's message on feeling mad:

12/9/96
 Dear mom and dAd When I am mad my arms are crost And I stap [stamp] my Feet bcas [because of] my sister love kristen

Writing this message allowed her to communicate that what usually makes her mad is her older sister's behavior toward her.

Kyle also reflected on feeling angry, sharing his experience of going alone to his mother's room and quietly crying:

12/9/96

olu [Hello] DAD When I Whus Mad I Wet to My Momthers room
and be quighit [quiet] my fais [face] is cring [crying] kyle

Kyle's message is accompanied by an illustration of a child lying flat on a bed with tears on his face.

Maryanne's message about feeling mad addresses why people get mad. She imagined a situation which would make her mad:

October 25, 1996

Dear Mom + Dad Janet is Felling mad today Her frend was play-
ing with her dog boy was she mad Love Maryanne

Messages like these about common emotions and how they are aroused and handled met with sympathetic replies expressing families' understanding of how siblings and friends could make the first graders angry, as well as acknowledgment that anger is normal:

October 25, 1996

Dear Maryanne!

We all feel mad sometimes. But it is part of life to have feel-
ings. And it is very important to talk about your feelings.

I Love You!

Mommy

Sometimes the feelings children shared in their Family Message Journals were more immediate than the reflections presented in the preceding messages, which focus on past experiences with anger or events likely to make one angry. For example, when preparing to go on her first field trip ever, Maryanne shared a concern in her journal:

May 20, 1997

Dear Mommy, We'r having a feild-Trip. I'm a little nervis. Mrs.
Wilensky says mayby you can come. Can you come? Oh please
pritty pritty please with sugar and bunches of chocelet on top!
please! Natasha's mom is comming mayby you to can talk to-
gether

Love Maryanne

This message is a good example of how some entries served multiple functions. The message assignment was to inform families about the upcoming field trip and invite chaperone volunteers. This resulted in many persuasive messages, such as Maryanne's in which she tried to get her mother to come on the trip. But the Family Message Journal also allowed Maryanne to express her fears and doubts and receive needed support and reassurance. Maryanne's mother's reply was an attempt to help Maryanne overcome her anxiety about the trip.

In another entry, reflecting on the special, year-end athletic event called “field day,” Maryanne used her Family Message Journal to communicate her displeasure with her mother’s behavior:

June 10, 1997

Dear Mama, Today we are having popsicles. Field day was so much fun! But verry swety and hot! A verry good thing I brought my water bottle. You came late and left erly I’m not happy about it. Love, Maryanne

The journal allowed Maryanne to voice her anger and her mother to explain why she had to leave early—their new puppy was too young to stay in the hot sun for more than a short time, and there was no shade by the field.

Children also used Family Message Journals to share positive feelings. In a message in which the first graders were asked to explore their feelings about spring, Maryanne wrote:

March 25, 1997

Dear mom and Dad

I prifer the wether to be nice because we’r going on vacachon in florida. I also like spring because you don’t always need to ware jacet’s and it get’s warmer to. Spring is also the time I’m getting my ears pearst. oh I can’t wait till spring. Spring is the time wen easter comes. Spring is the time wen Mommy stops working. Spring is the time the birds come back.

Love Maryanne

Maryanne’s message communicated her excitement about upcoming events which her family had arranged. She let them know how much she valued their plans.

Similarly, when invited by her teacher to write about field day, Sara used her message to share her feelings with her family and, thereby, invite them to experience the fun she had:

Dear Family

my favoret thing was the balloon toss and the tugawar we all shoad good sportmanship and I really like the tugawar because felicia couldn’t hold on tight and I couldn’t pull hard enaf [enough] and Mrs. Carolan said it looked like water skeeing and Mrs. McKay and Mrs. Carolan hid a balloon intile [until] they could drop it on Mr. Bohane and when they did it went on his neck then Mrs. Walenscie put a water balloon in Mr. Bohane’s hat and when he put his hat on it went on his head every body thawt it was funny Love Sara

Writing this message allowed Sara to share her pleasure at watching her gym teacher get tricked by the first-grade teachers.

Creating an Imagined Textual Experience for Families

Though a number of Family Message Journal entries involved imagining and creating worlds or situations for the purpose of generating ideas or exploring a theme of study creatively, some entries were aimed specifically at creating an imagined textual experience *for families*. The children often sought family members' feedback before finishing these stories, which were usually written as a series of entries over two or three days. Family members provided a real audience—the children could gauge the impact of their imaginary ideas on readers who would respond. The first-grade teachers generated some story-writing assignments with this potential feedback in mind.

During a unit on mice, the first graders together brainstormed some ideas for “mouse tales” and discussed basic story structure. Then they began writing their stories as messages, accompanied by a teacher's note explaining the process and how they had worked on one story element in particular—setting (place and time). The note indicated that this was just the start; “we'll continue with the characters and plots later in the week.” The beginning of Maryanne's story for her family read:

November 5, 1996

Dear Mom + Dad

many years ago In a byuteeful medo ther was a mouse naemed gaby. the medo haed a stream the stream was Verea clean weth fish

Maryanne's family responded with interest and replied that they were eager to find out what would happen to Gaby.

Two days later, Maryanne continued the story in her Family Message Journal:

November 7, 1996

Gaby had a frend naemd Gordana Gaby and Gordana lovd to play together taye [they] like to play gayms like tage and hide and go squeek It was fun just then tay saw a cat! you cat! thay shreekt iff that cat cachis us that wolde [would] be the ende of us quiklee thay hed [hid]

This was as far as she got until the next day. Her family's reply to this second installment indicated how successfully Maryanne had created suspense, keeping them interested in reading what would happen next. Her father even made a few predictions about what he thought might happen.

By writing an imaginary text for her family and getting their replies, Maryanne was supported in her creative efforts and provided

with specific feedback on what she had done well as well as suggestions about where her story might go. In short, her family served as a skilled conference partner—just as her teacher might have. This is one example of families' abilities to serve successfully as teacher, and it is typical of the first graders' supportive, instructive experiences with Family Message Journals.

Figuring Things Out through Communication with Families

The first graders sometimes used their messages to explore ideas or ask questions of their families in an effort to solve a problem, figure out a challenge, or find out about something. Writing about science experiments for their families encouraged children to fully develop and explain their hypotheses and what they eventually found, and it allowed them to share their thinking with interested readers. In June, before conducting an experiment involving marbles on inclined rulers, the first graders were asked to write about what they thought would happen. Then they performed the experiment and wrote about what they had learned. Sara's two-part entry, accompanied by a photocopied sheet describing the steps in the experiment and how to set it up, is one example of this category of message:

I think the marbble that is on that rooler that is sideways is going to hit the other mabbles on the other rooler that isn't terned sideways and all the marbbles will fall off the rooler.

We learned that the marbble that is on the rooler that is sideways pushes one that pushes another that pushes another that pushes the last one that rolls off the rooler and the one before the one that rolled off moved a little but it dasn't fall off.

Her father's reply indicated his interest and asked that Sara show the experiment to him at home. Having an interested audience for Family Message Journals encouraged in the students clear thinking to explore possible and actual outcomes, and coherent writing to explain that thinking and to accurately represent how experiments were carried out.

Writing to their families was also a way for the first graders to solve problems on paper and sometimes get families' helpful input. When Dina Carolan challenged her students to figure out how she could pick up a cup without touching it, they were invited to use their Family Message Journals to try to solve the problem. Kyle guessed at one possible solution:

3/18/97

Dear famil

can Mrs. carolan pick up a cup without tuching it she could ty

[tie] a Big not [knot] in The cup and put The not and put the string Threw The Top and pull The string.

Kyle's mother replied that she thought Kyle's idea about attaching a string to the cup with a knot might work, and other families suggested trying the children's solutions at home to see how they worked. These message exchanges demonstrate how the process of figuring out a problem was not only supported by family members but sometimes advanced by their feedback to messages.

The first graders also used their messages to figure out things by questioning their families about specific situations or decisions which puzzled them. Maryanne questioned why she was told she could not pack her favorite beach towels for a trip to Florida. The opening sentence of her message also exemplifies the children's sense that they were conversing with families in their journals:

April 15, 1997

Dear Mommy I feel like talking abote Florida. When are we pack-ing up? I can't wait till tomorrow because Uncle and Aunt are comming from the PL. The beach will be fun but I hope there's no crabs! And a pool would be fun! But I still don't understand why evrybody can't take a beach towl. I disided that Im to worried to take my biny-babies not even one! I'll have to take some bord gams.

Love, Maryanne

In their reply, her family explained that beach towels would take up a lot of space in their luggage and that they would be able to use the hotel's towels while staying there. They also applauded her solution to the problem of what to take to play with—board games were less likely to get lost than the small stuffed toys called beanie babies.

Finally, the children sometimes used their messages to wonder on paper and get families' input on a topic under exploration. Writing a message about what she knew about owls after a series of lessons, Kristen progressed to the topic of what owls eat and realized she was not sure:

owls protekt themselvs with ther wings ther beacs and ther feet.
I think owls enamees are foxes hawcks and wolfs maibi [maybe]
olws eat

In this message, Kristen took a shot at a new topic by generating ideas about owls' possible enemies, but she really wasn't sure what owls might eat. She left her message as is and waited to see if her family could assist in this attempt to figure out the information she was wondering about.

Developing and Appropriating a Functional Perspective on Writing

Chapter 4 explored the importance of writing for personal purposes on various topics and in varied formats. In this chapter, I have highlighted the importance of learning to write for various functions. The first graders were discovering the power of writing to get things done, influence others, share ideas and experiences, and get helpful input. Their discovery was directly linked to the learning of new genres. “Genres are functional . . . social actions,” and their structures and strategies are central to communication, interaction, satisfying needs, and maintaining relationships (Cooper, 1999, p. 26).

It is important to note that the children were able to use their messages to achieve their own functions as well as those intended by their teachers. When their teachers invited them to write about plans for a school vacation, for example, many of the children used their messages to interact with their families or get something from them (e.g., requesting to be taken somewhere or to rent a video). Maryanne’s message about Easter, which fell during the upcoming spring break, is a good example. Her lengthy message about all the Easter activities she enjoys began with a question:

March 11, 1997

Dear Mom and dad

What do you want for easter. I cant wait till I find out what I get!
And colering the eggs and brining them to the chirch now that’ll
be fun won’t it! oh gee! can I wait no! The easter bunny will be
happy when he finds out that I left him a carrot and cabig and
water and some picktures.

Love, Maryanne

Maryanne began with a question to which she needed the answer in order to maintain her relationship with her family. She wanted to get her parents gifts they would like (with her older sister’s help). The teacher did not foresee this interactional function, but Maryanne seized the opportunity to acquire information.

Other examples of children appropriating and capitalizing on the functional aspect of their Family Message Journal entries include integrating requests for a pet into a message assignment focused on sharing information about the animal and using a message about a special school event to express anger because a family member could not attend or had to leave early. In short, the children were not limited by the functions their teachers had in mind when they assigned message topics. Rather, the teachers’ intentions were starting points,

revealing to the students the many possibilities for Family Message Journal entries to help them accomplish their goals by enlisting their families' interest, appreciation, companionship, support, and resources. From these starting points, which broadened their repertoires of composition skills and strategies, the children often took off on their own.

A functional perspective on writing—with the focus on how writing affects an audience and moves the audience to action—complements the individual use of writing as a purposeful tool. This flip side of the power of writing is essential to carefully designed writing curricula. Because of its multifaceted nature and the centrality of writing for an audience, the Family Message Journal can play a prominent role in such curricula.
