



# Meeting the Challenges of Second Language Writing Development in the Immersion Classroom

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## *Introduction to the Problem*

Many of the general principles of good writing instruction in the regular classroom are challenging at best to implement in the full immersion classroom setting. Freeman and Freeman (1996) discuss the characteristics of effective process writing programs. Two characteristics are providing students ample time to write and allowing them to choose topics from their own backgrounds and interests.

The first challenge in the immersion classroom is finding time for students to write daily. Cunningham and Allington (1999) describe the schedule of a “four-blocks primary classroom,” in which four blocks of time are spent on various language arts activities each day. Students in this classroom spend a minimum of 135 minutes daily on language arts. The teacher in this example is also able to work with six students on reading for an additional fifteen minutes after lunch and a couple more students during the 30-minute open center time. In contrast, though my third grade immersion students spend more time (160 minutes daily) on language arts than the non-immersion learning environment discussed above, seventy of those minutes are in English language arts; only ninety are in their second language (L2). The result is an overall French language arts deficit of 45-minutes, or stated differently, five minutes more than the 35-minute allotment for writer’s workshop in the Four blocks primary classroom (see Classroom Comparisons in Figure 1, page 3).

A second hallmark of effective writing instruction in a process-oriented classroom is that students decide for themselves what they want to write about (Freeman & Freeman, 1996; Calkins, 1994; Cunningham & Allington, 1999). This defining characteristic introduces another real challenge in the immersion classroom: trying to balance wanting students to write about what they wish, while ensuring that students have enough language to do so. “Whereas [first language] L1 students arrive at school with a command of 2,000 to 6,000 words, most immersion students begin their academic experience at point zero” (Belisle, 1997, p. 1). Though students typically acquire a much larger vocabulary than would be likely in a traditional foreign language program, students’ active vocabulary and knowledge of grammatical structures are far less developed in their L2 than in their L1, hindering their ability to express themselves as fully as possible were they functioning in the L1. Cunningham and Allington write about a teacher who models choosing a topic with her class:

*I could write about how cold it was at our house when the power went off and how it stayed off almost all day on Saturday...I could write about the visitor we are going to have this afternoon and the animals he will probably bring with him...I could write about the book I finished last night. I could write about running into Jamie at the grocery store on Friday afternoon and seeing her baby brother. (p. 91)*

To succeed with these four potential writing topics alone, some students would need to know how to write in the past tense; others in the future tense. They would need to know vocabulary as diverse as “blackout,” “blankets,” the names and characteristics of various animals, “stroller,” “pacifier,” “cashier,” and “checkout counter.” Expand this personal choice challenge to a class of twenty-five immersion students, each writing something different, and it can become overwhelming, if not impossible to scaffold the language needs and support each student in his or her individual writing endeavors so that each experiences success and grows as a writer.

Though immersion students learn to communicate in their L2 from the need to function in the classroom, they do not develop native-like oral proficiency without explicit instruction and activities designed to make them focus on the form of their speech, not just the content. Likewise, “the assumption...that given the right classroom environment and a climate that expects a quantity of writing across a range of purposes and forms, children will automatically learn to write on a variety of subjects and in many forms” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 57) does not readily apply to immersion students. Lisa Delpit (1988) argues that (as cited in Gibbons), “the conventions of writing must be explicitly taught, and that they will not simply be picked up by students for whom the language and assumptions of the school are unfamiliar” (p. 59). Espino-Calderón and Minaya-Rowe (2003) and Gibbons (2002) discuss adaptations to the teaching of the writing process for students working in their L2, including explicit attention to oral language development, vocabulary development, and the direct teaching of writing skills.

Gibbons presents a curriculum cycle as a way to help students be able to write independently on a given topic in a given genre in their L2. The curriculum cycle is composed of four stages: building up the field, modeling the text type, joint construction, and independent writing, and may take several weeks to complete one polished piece of genre-specific writing.

During the first stage—“building up the field,” knowledge and vocabulary about the subject matter are developed through speaking, listening, reading, and the development of research skills. Gibbons suggests many activities to help build students’ background knowledge, including creating a semantic web, wallpapering (a brainstorm activity in which groups come up with ideas that are wallpapered around the room for everyone to read and comment on), creating a list of questions about what students would like to learn, reading about the topic, using pictures to reinforce or teach vocabulary, developing a word wall or word bank, using cooperative activities (such as the jigsaw), using electronic resources, interviewing an expert, watching a video, visiting a museum, and practicing grammatical structures that will be useful in writing about the topic.

Figure 1. Comparison of Two Classroom Schedules

Four Blocks Primary Classroom		Immersion Classroom	
8:30-8:50	Opening	Opening	8:35-8:40
8:50-9:20	Working with Words	Gym/Music/Art (10 min. longer)	8:40-9:25
9:20-10:00	Guided Reading	Snack	9:30-9:40
10:00-10:15	Snack	Math	9:40-10:40
10:15-11:15	Math/Science/S.S.	Science/S.S./Library/Computers	10:40-11:20
11:15-11:50	Writer's Workshop	Lunch/Recess	11:25-12:10
11:50-12:20	Lunch	Read Aloud	12:15-12:35
12:20-12:35	Reading w/6 students (In-door quiet time for other students)	<u>Group A</u> L2 Language Arts	<u>Group B</u> English Language Arts
12:35-1:35	Specialists/Library/Open Centers	English Language Arts	L2 Language Arts
1:45-2:15	Self-Selected Reading		1:45-2:55
2:15-2:30	Daily Summary/School-Home Connection	Closing	2:55-3:05

During the second stage— “modeling the text type”, students work with texts similar to the one they will write. They analyze and discuss the text’s purpose, its organizational form, and linguistic features that are characteristic of the text. To further develop understanding of a particular genre, students can reconstruct texts by putting sentences or paragraphs in order, doing a dictogloss, or completing a cloze-type activity.

In the final two stages, students write, both collectively and independently. First, in “joint construction,” the teacher and students construct a text together, as the teacher models the writing process to the students. Then in the final stage, “independent writing,” students, singly or in pairs, write their own text.

Gibbons (2002) warns teachers that the entire process may take several weeks to go through and needs to be repeated throughout the year for students to become proficient in the type of writing or genre being taught. Two major difficulties in implementing the curriculum cycle are likely to arise in most immersion classrooms. As mentioned above, time restrictions immersion teachers have once English instruction begins is the first obstacle to successful implementation of the curriculum cycle; access to resources is another issue. Even the best-stocked media centers do not tend to have enough texts on one subject at appropriate levels for students to use in their L2 to carry out the first two stages of the curriculum cycle.

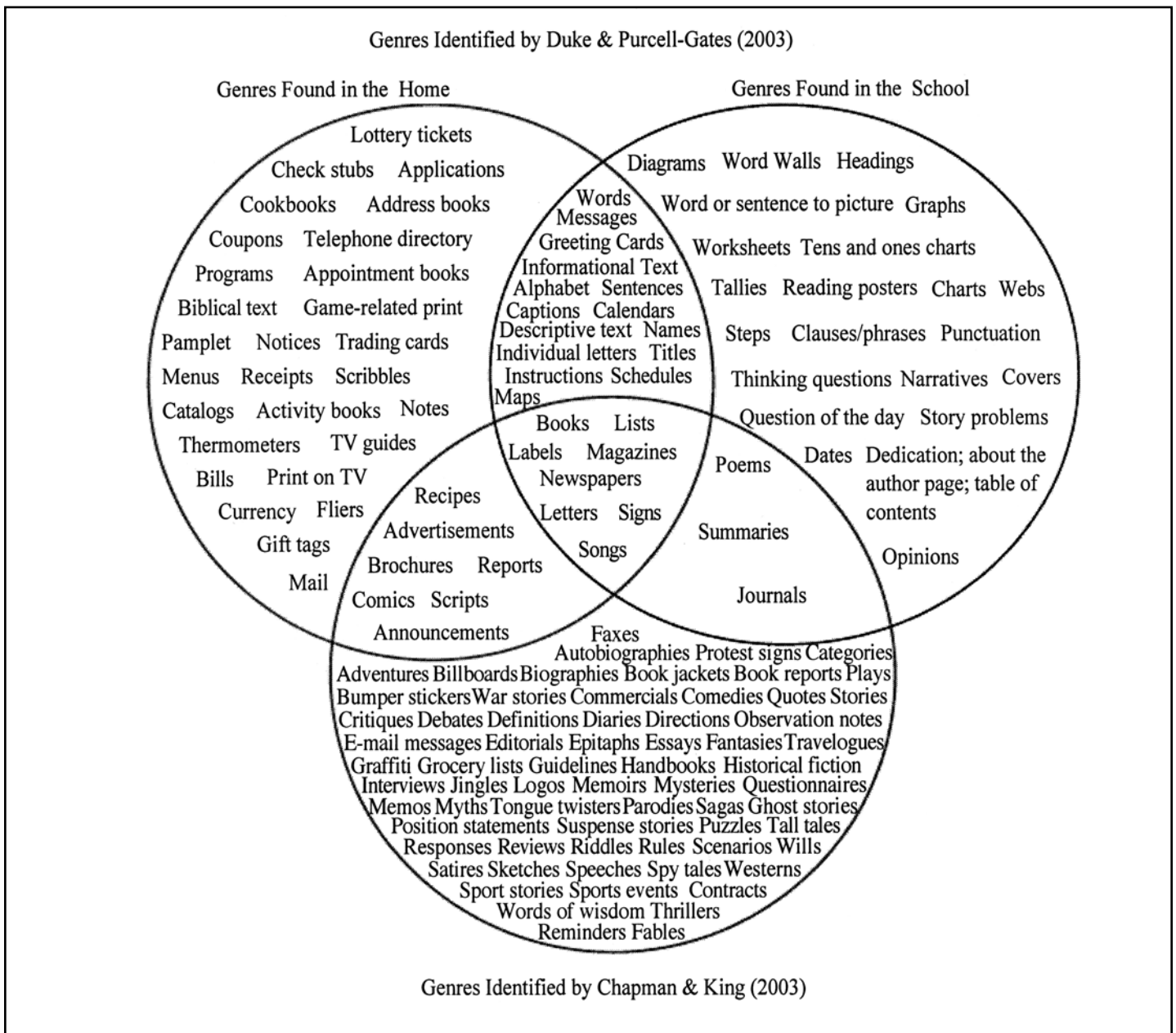
## ***So What's the Solution?***

One solution is as follows: First, writing instruction must be shared with the English teachers as neither they nor the immersion teacher has the time to teach the entire curriculum. Second, immersion teachers need to find other ways to integrate short periods of writing into their day on a regular basis. Third, the full curriculum cycle/writing process should be limited to a few projects throughout the year, focusing on specific topics for which resource materials can be (hopefully) collected to accommodate both the linguistic and informational needs of the students.

Typically when one thinks of writing in school, a few genres, or types of writing, come to mind: narrative writing, descriptive writing, informational writing, persuasive writing, and poetry. Gibbons (2002), Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003), and Chapman and King (2003) expand the definition of genre to describe any type of writing that has a specific purpose, structure, and linguistic features. Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003) created a Venn diagram showing typical genres found at the homes and schools of low-income school children. Added to their Venn diagram in Figure 2 (see p. 5) are the genres identified in Chapman and King (2003). Many genres included in this diagram can serve as a starting point for teachers to think of other types of writing they can use to infuse throughout all parts of their day.

Immersion classroom teachers and English language arts teachers need to work together to make sure that students are taught the entire curriculum, because there is not enough time to do it all twice in two languages, (nor should it be necessary given the role of positive language transfer [Cummins, 1981]). When time and resources permit to develop a longer piece of writing, immersion teachers need to be acutely aware of their students' abilities and limitations in their L2 and employ scaffolding strategies, such as those outlined in the curriculum cycle by Gibbons (2002). For example, students can jointly reconstruct a sample text by sequencing jumbled sentences or they can complete a cloze exercise in which the missing words or parts of words focus on either grammatical features important to the genre or vocabulary important to the topic. Even shorter pieces of writing need to be scaffolded if students are learning new language structures or vocabulary. To promote vocabulary development and knowledge of the grammatical structures of the L2, immersion teachers need to teach a wide variety of genres and infuse writing throughout the day every day.

Figure 2. Venn Diagram of Genres



## Content-based Writing Activity Ideas for the Immersion Classroom

This section contains a few ideas to integrate writing in the various content areas. Though the activities are meant to be short, some are a bit lengthier but can be completed in two or more shorter sessions. Many activities can also be extended into longer, more involved activities.

### Social Studies

**Subject:** *Native Americans/Inuit*

**Genre:** *Venn Diagram, Compare/Contrast Paragraph/Essay*

Students compare and contrast various aspects of Native American or Inuit life (past and/or present) with their lives. *Une vie inuit* (An Inuit Life) is an excellent web site (<http://www.kativik.net/ulluriaq/Nunavik/index.html>) on Inuit life in Nunavik, Quebec, today from the perspective of a 10-year-old student. If time allows, the information from the Venn diagram can serve as a pre-writing activity for a compare/contrast paragraph or essay.

**Subject:** *Canada*

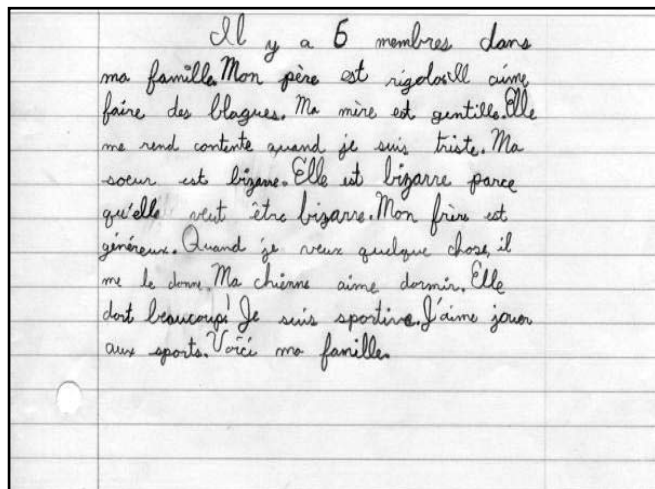
**Genre:** *Informational Sentences, Oral presentation*

After students create a poster or book describing various aspects of a Canadian province or territory, such as the capital, the official bird and flower, the languages spoken, the population, the weather, a couple of tourist activities and interesting facts; they then write this information in sentence form in preparation for an oral presentation of their project.

**Subject:** *Communities*

**Genre:** *Letters, Compare/Contrast Essay*

Students correspond with other students in their L2. Letters can be sent via snail mail, e-mail, or shared in blogs. The Image of the Other, [www.europeanschoolsproject.org/image](http://www.europeanschoolsproject.org/image), is an international teleproject in which classes exchange information, data, opinions, etc. This site contains links to teacher and student manuals which outline a series of subjects to write about. The manuals are available on-line in English, Italian, Dutch, and French. Letters should be kept short to facilitate a regular exchange and maintain student interest. If students correspond with more than one class, old letters can be revised, providing an authentic reason to practice this part of the writing process. Older students may take the information gathered about the products, practices, and perspectives specific to the other culture and write a compare and contrast essay to compare it to their own.

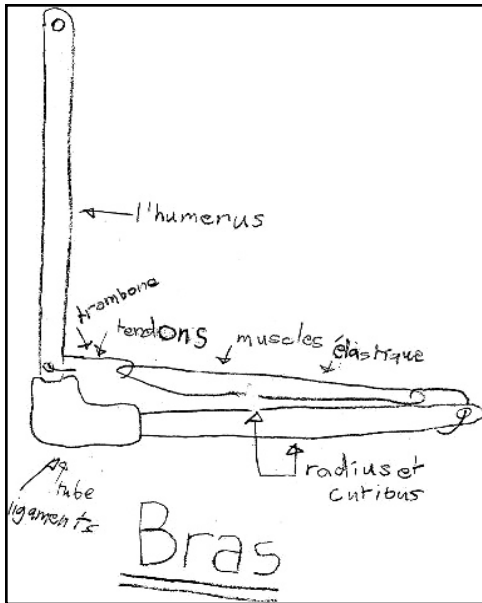


## Science

**Subject:** *Human body*

**Genres:** *Diagrams (labeling), Explanatory Sentences*

Students create models of the leg, arm, and thumb using wooden dowels, rubber tubes, paper clips, and rubber bands. After creating each model, students make a drawing of it, label all the parts, and write a sentence describing how the model works.



Quand le biceps se contracte,  
l'avant-bras se lève.

**Subject:** *Rocks and Minerals*

**Genres:** *Observations, Labeling (sketches), Structured Overview Chart, Summary Paragraph*

Students are given mock rocks which they observe in several stages as they perform a series of experiments to determine their “ingredients” (minerals, sand, shells, etc.). The rocks (or what’s left of them) are sketched and labeled. A structured overview chart can be used to organize the discoveries made at each step. Finally, time permitting, a paragraph can be developed from the chart to summarize how each experiment helped to identify more “ingredients.”

**Subject:** *Rocks and Minerals*

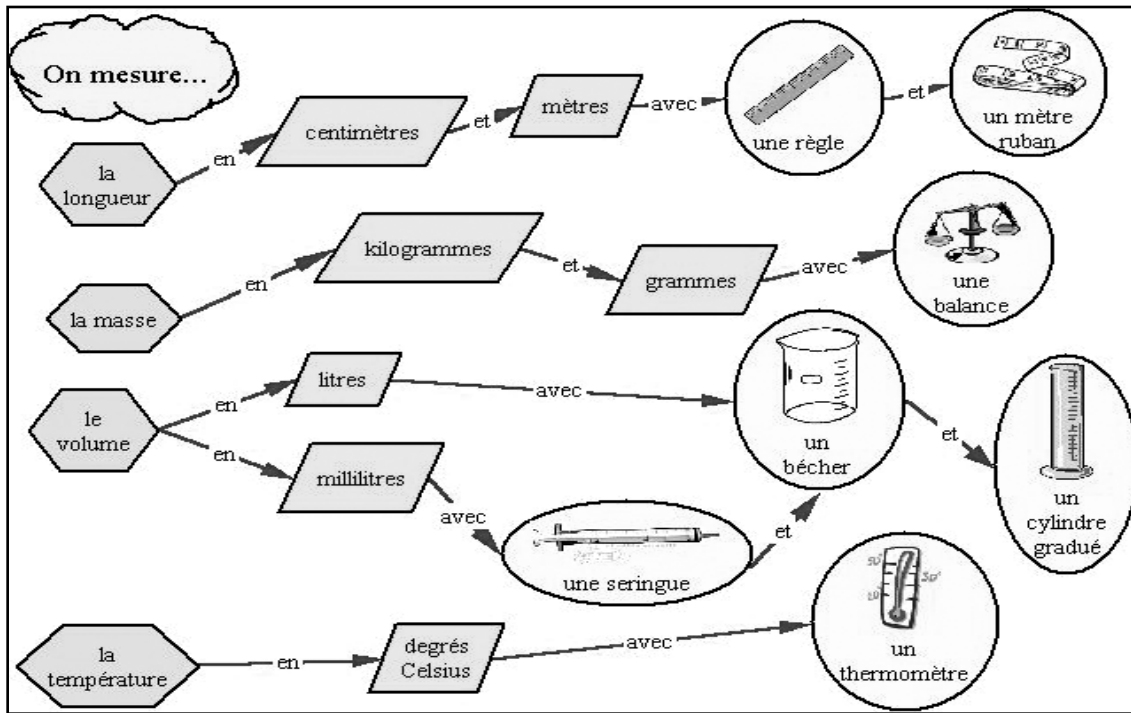
**Genres:** *Ordered List, Comparative/Superlative Sentences*

After performing hardness tests on certain minerals, students list them in order of hardness. Sentences can then be written (using comparatives and superlatives) to describe relative hardness.

**Subject:** Measurement

**Genre:** Concept Map, Concept-linking Sentences

Students create, perhaps as a class, a concept map linking the concepts of measurement: length, volume, mass, and temperature; the tools used (i.e. rulers, scales, etc.); and the units of measurement. The concept map could also serve as a scaffold for sentence writing.



**Subject:** Sound

**Genre:** Descriptive Paragraph

After making sounds through solids, liquids, or air with various materials, students describe in writing how the sounds were produced.

**Subject:** Plants

**Genre:** Log

Students draw, measure, and write a sentence about the seeds they planted each day for a few weeks.



## Health

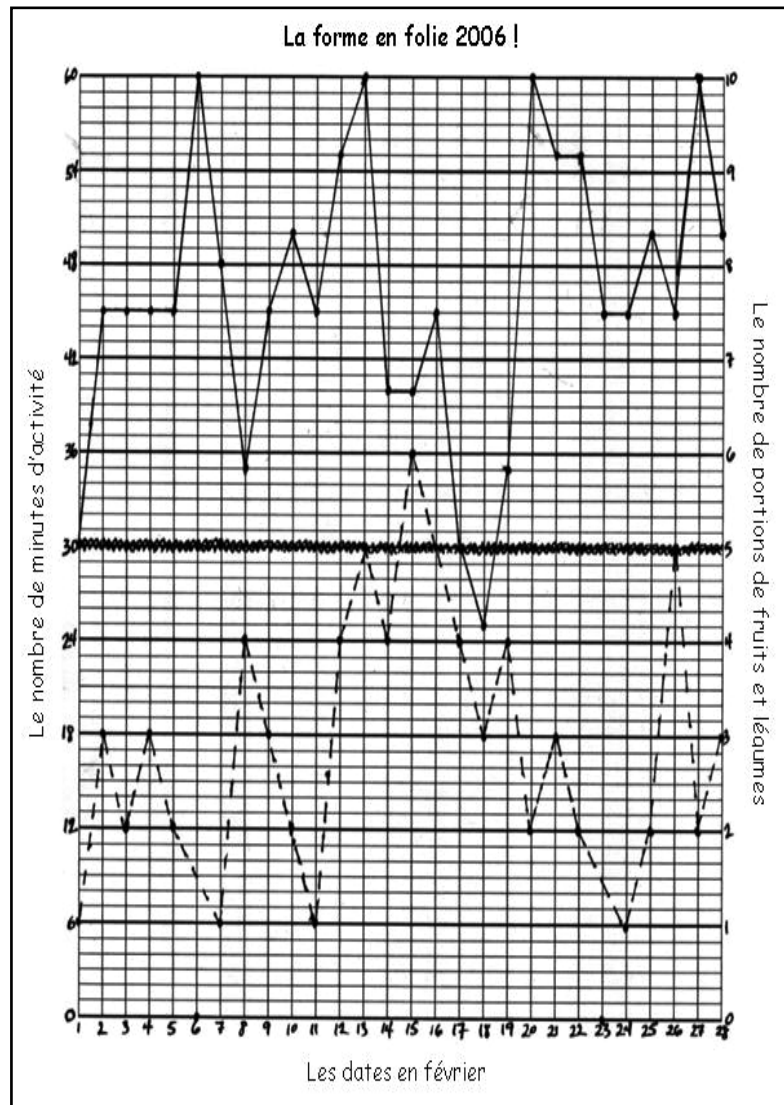
**Subject:** *Fitness Fever® (La forme en folie)*

**Genre:** *Log, words or sentences, Descriptive Paragraph, Personal Reflection*

Students are given goals to try and meet for one month, which encourage them to lead an active life and to eat healthily. For example, students may be asked to engage in physical activity for thirty minutes (including gym and recess) and eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Students keep a daily log to record how well they meet these goals.

At the end of the month, students make a dual-scale line graph to chart what their physical activity and fruit and vegetable intake were in relation to the goals. Then they write three brief paragraphs. The first one describes the graph. The second describes their physical activity: how well they met their goal, how they felt, and what they would like to continue to do or what they would like to do differently in the future. The third describes their diet of fruits and vegetables and follows the same format as the second.

*Je suis contente de l'exercice que j'ai fait. Je veux continuer à faire ce que j'ai fait quand j'ai fait la forme en folie. Je suis contente parce que j'ai fait beaucoup d'exercice.*

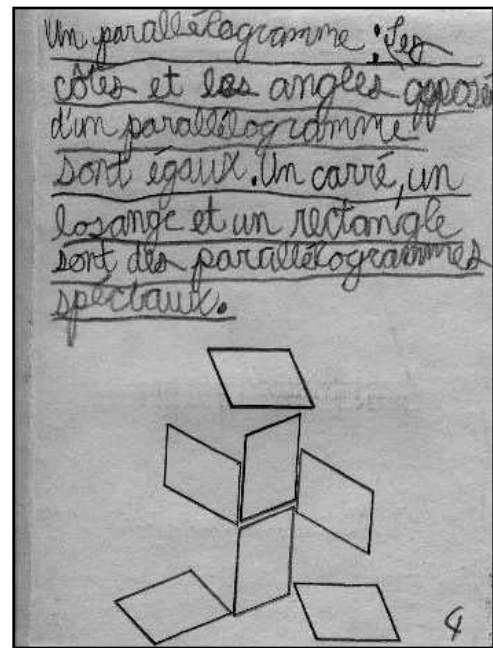


## Math

**Subject:** Geometry

**Genre:** Descriptive Text

Geometry lends itself well to writing short informational books, in which students describe the characteristics of various illustrated geometric figures. Subjects can include polygons; quadrilaterals; lines, segments, rays, and angles; and three-dimensional solids. These books can be traditional or electronic. A presentation program, such as PowerPoint, lends itself well to electronic books.



**Subject:** Word Problems

**Genre:** Explanatory Sentences

Students take the answer they find after solving a word problem and write it in a complete sentence. They can also specify in writing how they came to the solution. This is one way to monitor students' comprehension of the problem and ascertain that they understand not only what operation(s) to perform to find the answer, but also what their answer represents. Students should also be encouraged to use the verbs presented in the word problem instead of more generic verbs, such as "gets" or "has."

Remplis le tableau de multiplication / division pour chaque histoire numérique.  
Ensuite, utilise des jetons, un arrangement, des dessins ou ce que tu veux afin de  
trouver la réponse. N'oublie pas d'écrire l'unité avec ta réponse.

1. L'animalerie garde 5 chiots dans  
chacune des 3 cages. Combien de  
chiots y a-t-il en tout?

cages	chiots par cage	nombre total de chiots
3	5	?

Réponse:  $5 \times 3 = 15$  chiots  
L'animalerie garde 15 chiots en tout.

**Subject:** Timelines

**Genre:** Timelines/Schedules, Sequencing Sentences

Students create timelines outlining major events in their lives or schedules showing how they spend a day. Activities can be written out in sentences using the present tense. However, a timeline could incorporate both past and present tenses; the future tense might also be used if students are invited to make predictions about their lives.

## Language Arts

**Subject:** Literature (Character Response)

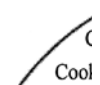



**Genre:** Sentence Completion

In “If I were in his shoes” (Chapman & King, 2003), students are asked to put themselves in the place of a character and complete a sentence such as “If I were as famous as \_\_\_\_\_, I would \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Subject:** Vocabulary Development

**Genre:** Triangle Tricks (Chapman & King, 2003)

In this game, students take the word in the bottom line, drop one letter and rearrange the remaining letters to create a new word in the line above. This process continues until all the lines have been filled in. In creating puzzles such as these for students in their L2, students may need to be given picture clues or other hints to find the word.

___	<u>A</u>	avoir
___ ___	<u>A</u> <u>N</u>	365 jours
___ ___ ___	<u>Â</u> <u>N</u> <u>E</u>	Genres  Cool
___ ___ ___ ___	<u>C</u> <u>A</u> <u>N</u> <u>E</u>	
___ ___ ___ ___ ___	<u>C</u> <u>R</u> <u>Â</u> <u>N</u> <u>E</u>	
<u>C</u> <u>A</u> <u>R</u> <u>N</u> <u>E</u> <u>T</u>	<u>C</u> <u>A</u> <u>R</u> <u>N</u> <u>E</u> <u>T</u>	

**Subject:** *Reading Comprehension*

**Genre:** *Response Journals*

Students write a sentence or two in their response journals about a story read in class. Below are a few ideas for the response journals. Each type of response should be modeled for students and as a response journal, the teacher needs to find time to respond to each student's journal periodically.

- favorite part or character
- something the book reminds you of
- why you liked or didn't like it
- scary, funny, sad, or happy part and why
- how you feel about it
- someone else who might like it and why (Valdez Pierce, 2001, p.78)

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