

Where It All Started

By Tom Newkirk

The Behind-the-Scenes Story of Don Graves' First Book That Set the Course for Creating Writers

Learn the Teaching

Children want to write. attend school. This is no marked up walls, paved pens or pencils . . . any

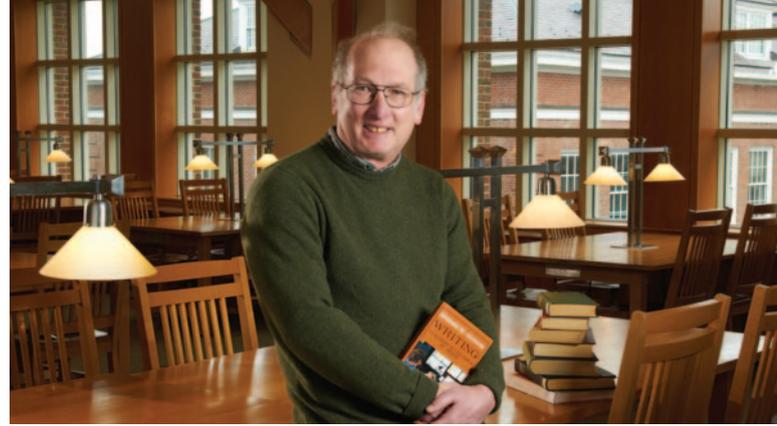
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"Children want to write." This is the quietly stunning sentence that marked the birth of Heinemann. It is, of course, the opening to Donald Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*.¹ "Children want to write" is not the kind of sentence you would expect an award-winning academic researcher to write. There would normally be some hedge, some qualification: "most children," "children generally." It is direct, no throat clearing, no background; it ushered in a new style of writing that would be the signature of Heinemann.



The road to this sentence, for Don and for Heinemann, was circuitous. In the 1970s Heinemann’s U.S. operation—actually a couple of rooms on Front Street, Exeter, New Hampshire—was devoted to the difficult task of marketing textbooks written for British schools. Philippa Stratton (Lead Editor at Heinemann at the time and later co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of Stenhouse) recalls that one of her favorites was *Rodents of Economic Importance*.² Teachers weren’t much interested in these offerings. According to Tom Seavey, Heinemann’s Marketing Director at the time, “Teachers wouldn’t even spit on us—and we gave them little reason to.”

In 1980 Heinemann authorized the U.S. office to begin producing books for teachers, with the subject matter to be determined (perhaps more rodents). But the trail for Philippa began with Marie Clay’s *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior*,³ which had been acquired by Heinemann’s New Zealand office and was finding adherents in some U.S. universities. In the spring of 1980, Philippa traveled to New York University and asked Angela Jaggar, Bernice Cullinan, and Trika Smith-Burke to suggest people who were doing interesting work. In a notebook page, we can see the first mention of Graves, along with other future Heinemann authors Jerome Harste, Jane Hansen, and Lucy Calkins. So the road from Exeter to the University of New Hampshire went through Washington Square.

Philippa sought out Don and attended a talk he gave at the Exeter Writing Project, where she invited him to write for Heinemann. At this point Don had completed his landmark two-year study at Atkinson Academy and was on his way to spend a sabbatical year in Scotland writing a book—for Holt.

Two things about Don’s sabbatical stand out. One is that he picked up a thick Scottish burr that took him years to fully lose. The other is that he had surprising difficulty with the book. Three decades later, it is hard to imagine how intimidating it was to move from article writing to book writing. There were few models, and of course it all had to be typed and retyped.

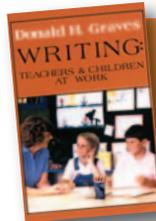
I was tending the Writing Process Lab at the time, mostly sending out “the packet” of articles from Atkinson to teachers around the world (including Nancie Atwell). Don would send over chapters of the book, and many were clearly too abstract for his teacher audience. His obsession with Piaget would get in the way. I recall one conversation when I admitted I couldn’t understand the way he was using “time.” After I explained my difficulty, he said, “See the trouble is, Tom, you’re thinking of chronological time.” I didn’t know there was any other kind.

In the spring of 1981 he made a short visit back to Durham, where he received a rude surprise. Holt wanted out; the deal was off. So he called his faithful advocate at Heinemann, and Philippa hopped in her Volkswagen Golf and met him at his office in Morrill Hall, while some of us waited in the lab to see what would happen. As it turned out, no contract was signed or proposed, but the wheels were greased to unwind the Holt contract and go with Heinemann.

Only one other thing remained in the way: writing the book. In this case Donald Murray, the godfather of writing in Durham and a colleague of Don’s at the University of New Hampshire, invoked a rule he drilled into all of us—make one central point. Actually he used the acronym SOFT—say one thing, with the F being a word I can’t spell out. He convinced Don to write much shorter chapters, each making a particular point, which is the form the book took.

The rest, as they say, is history, our history. Don moved quickly to finish the book so that it could come out at the 1982 NCTE conference, where the 200 copies quickly sold out.

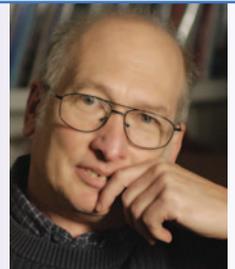
The 2007 NCTE conference was held in New York, and Heinemann held a celebration for Don in the Algonquin Hotel. We met in a function room, one floor up from the dining room where Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Harold Ross, and the rest of the “club” had met at the famous rectangular table. The room was packed. As part of the celebration, Leigh Peake, Heinemann’s Executive Editor, placed huge sheets of paper along the walls and invited each of us to trace influences on our work. On the central sheet was Don’s name, and lines started out from him. Like a great ancestry map, we could all find our way back to him, to the book that launched a company, indeed a new way of writing about students, for teachers. We could return to the sentence that started it all: “Children want to write.”



More than 1000 times the original print run of *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work* have sold in the 30 years that followed, and new readers continue to discover this foundational book under its latest edition title *Writing, 20th Anniversary*.

1. Graves, Donald H. 1983. *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
2. Barnett, S. A., and I. Prakash. 1976. *Rodents of Economic Importance*. London: Heinemann Educational.
3. Clay, Marie. 1977. *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour*. Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann Educational.

Tom Newkirk, recipient of the University of New Hampshire’s prestigious Lindberg Award in 2010, is the author of numerous Heinemann titles. His *Misreading Masculinity* was cited by *Instructor Magazine* as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Tom also wrote the books *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones* and *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* which won NCTE’s David H. Russell Award for Research. His latest titles are *Children Want to Write* (coauthored with Penny Kittle), and *The Art of Slow Reading*. A former teacher at an at-risk high school in Boston, Tom now teaches at UNH and directs the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes.



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