

# INTERACTIVE WRITING: First Steps

An interactive step-by-step writing and speaking program for young students

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The writing process in **FIRST STEPS** was influenced by **STEPS**, Interact's expository secondary writing program written by David Yount and Paul DeKock, former American Studies teachers at El Capitan High School, Lakeside, California, and Interact's co-owners. In 1985-1987 the National Council Teachers of English gave its Excellence Award to El Capitan High School for teachers' effective use of both **STEPS** and **RESPONDING**, the latter a cross-disciplinary writing program also published by Interact.

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## Purpose

FIRST STEPS is Interact's instructional, step-by-step writing and speaking program for younger students. Its main purpose is two fold:

- first, to teach students in grades 2 through 6 how to organize their thoughts clearly; and
- second, through continual practice, to help them learn to communicate their thoughts in clearly organized essay/speech formats.

Of course, a further purpose is to help them develop an interesting style—a “personal voice”—within the structures taught them.

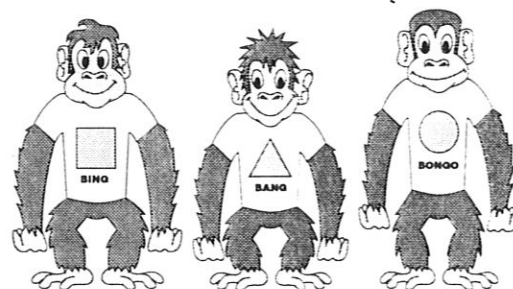
## Overview of Tab Sections

This notebook program is organized into eight tab sections. Tab 1 is devoted to this introduction; the next six present in detail how to teach six different types of essays on two ability levels; the final eighth tab section shows how to apply this instruction to letter writing, public speaking, and taking essay exams. A short description of FIRST STEPS' final seven tab sections follows.

## Tab 2: The Narrative Essay

Before students begin writing, we have them construct three “monkeys,” the bananas they eat, and a barrel to put them in. Needless to say, this activity gets the students attention! (The monkeys' names are **Bing**, **Bang**, and **Bongo**.) They then construct a poster using the monkeys and bananas plus their titles as symbols for the different parts of an essay. Next, they practice writing “frames.” As their

teacher, you lead them through developing the thoughts necessary for a good narrative essay. (“Narrative” is used here very generally to include any type of story expressing the student's feeling about something over time.) Both “left brain” outlining and “right brain” graphic organizers are introduced. After filling out two writing frames, students are introduced to editing through use of a WRITING RUBRIC CHART. Extensive teacher modeling and Student Guide use lead to writing success.



Tab 2

## Tab 3

**Tab 3: The Autobiography Essay**

The third section follows the same pattern as Section 2, but students focus more narrowly on a specific personal experience. The essay's parts are symbolized once again by the monkeys **Bing**, **Bang**, and **Bongo**; but, this time, Bing is used to describe the setting of the incident; Bang describes the incident, itself; and, Bongo, shows how the student has been affected by the incident. The discipline required in this structure prevents two usual student reactions—either a torrent of “gushing” or a complete mental block—that normally surface during a “free choice” type assignment. The instruction ends with evaluation.

## Tab 4

**Tab 4: The Report of Information Essay**

This next section again follows the same pattern as the first two, but it adds instruction on how to take notes from research sources. This instruction is not detailed and does not require a bibliography or extensive note-taking; however, it does teach student the difference between reporting their own thoughts about someone else's thinking and copying someone else's thinking—which all too often is what most young students (and even “old” ones) do when required to write a report. As always, the instruction ends with evaluation.

## Tab 5

**Tab 5: The Persuasive Essay**

Tab 5 is devoted to teaching students how to organize their thoughts and opinions while developing an argument for or against something. Again, the monkeys and their names are used to symbolize the parts; consequently, students learn the structure necessary to assert oneself powerfully is reinforced. In addition, students learn to use specific details to substantiate their assertions and to challenge an audience to take some action. The instruction ends with Editing Pairs helping one another through use of COMMENT SHEETS and Quads—a Quad is a group of four students—whose members do a RUBRIC EVALUATION of each paper, using their Student Guides.

## Tab 6

**Tab 6: The Contrast Essay**

This tab section shows the teacher how to teach students the difficult task of contrasting two differing activities or points of view about three items common to both. Without this training, most students cannot write a contrast essay because they lack the understanding of the structure necessary to control their explanation of contrasting items or ideas. Again, the poster with monkeys and titles is used to develop “right brain” understanding along with the “left brain” controlling outline of one’s thoughts. As always, the instruction ends with Editing Pairs helping one another through use of COMMENT sheets and Quads whose members do a RUBRIC EVALUATION of each paper, using their Student Guides.

## Tab 7

**Tab 7: The Problem-Solving Essay**

This section focuses on how to teach students to use problem solving techniques as the basic structure for solving a problem. Again, the monkeys are used, but this time Bing represents defining the problem; Bang, offering solutions to the problem; and, Bongo, evaluating solutions to determine the best. A concluding paragraph includes issuing a challenge to the reader concerning the problem. As always, the instruction ends with Editing Pairs helping one another through use of COMMENT sheets and Quads whose members do a RUBRIC EVALUATION of each paper, using their Student Guides.

## Tab 8

**Tab 8: Special Applications**

Tab 8’s final section shows the teacher how to use the previous “school essays” instruction as the basis for certain “real-life” situations: letter writing; public speaking, and writing essay exams in class. The lessons have students review the basics they learned in developing well-organized essays so that they are able to apply these fundamentals to their own writing and speaking. Many models are given to aid them in this task.

**Special note:** *Our experience with this writing program makes us confident that incorporating it into your classroom experiences will build and accelerate literacy while enhancing the reading-writing connection.*



... places in your  
*personal copy* ...

### The FIRST STEPS Student Guide

The Student Guide we designed for this program represents a first for Interact—a booklet students will use to evaluate their own writings and those of their classmates. Several principles and ideas guided this booklet’s creation:

1. **Rubric evaluation** Students would make a “rubric evaluation” by comparing pieces of writing to a set of standards on a rubric chart.
2. **User friendly** The Student Guide would be easy to use and would interest the students. They would enjoy using it.
  - a. To achieve interest and ease of use, we utilized computer illustrations of three monkeys, Bing, Bang, and Bongo, each of whom represents one of the three-body-paragraph ideas in a FIRST STEPS five-paragraph essay.
  - b. We also included computer illustrations of four upper elementary imaginary students—Lan, LaToya, Mark, and Carlos—who, along with their monkey companions, not only talk with one another but also talk to the students reading the Student Guide.
3. **Repetitive teaching and learning** In the Student Guide we used repetitive teaching and learning.
  - a. We expect students to compare how the monkeys and the imaginary students evaluate the Student Guide essays with how they will evaluate their classmates’ essays.
  - b. As the teacher you will study the monkey and imaginary students’ comments in order to have tutorial, small group, or full class discussions on what your students think of the commentary. We have stimulated powerful teaching/learning by sharpening students’ focus upon certain parts of the Student Guides.
  - c. Notice that Student Guide comments are repetitive. Don’t worry about such repetition. Repeating correct writing suggestions can be an important part of learning, particularly if it is done in a friendly, helpful way. Your students may soon be speaking the exact words that Bing, Bang, Bongo, and the imaginary students said in the Student Guide. If this happens, good for your students. Just insure that they’re using a gentle but critical attitude toward improving their classmates’ writing.

Finally, we recommend you carefully read and mark with colored pens certain places in your *personal copy* of the Student Guide. Place your name on your copy’s cover, punch three holes in the booklet, and file it in or before Tab 1 of your three-ring FIRST STEPS notebook. Then your own Student Guide will always be available when you wish to use it.



Sample Essays  
to  
Evaluate



Sample Essays  
to  
Evaluate

Americans eat more meat than any other nationality of people. This may not be such a great idea, because too much meat can be bad for you. Eating too much meat can make you gain weight, it can give you heart disease, and it is bad for our planet.

It's easy to see how eating too much meat can make you gain weight. Meat has a lot of fat in it, and that fat can be destructive to your figure! The most fat is found in ground meat such as hamburger, so think twice about what you order the next time you go to McDonald's.

Meat can also contribute to heart disease. The fat in the meat gets stuck in your blood stream, and can lead to blocked arteries. Those blocked arteries can eventually cause a heart attack or a stroke.

Finally, meat eating can be bad for our planet. Much of the meat we eat comes from South America, and the farmers there are chopping down the rain forest to make grazing land for their cows. We need the rain forest to help make clean air for us to breathe, and as a home for thousands of species of animals. It is not good for the planet to chop down the rain forest.

As you can see, eating too much meat has many unhealthy side effects. If you want to eat a lot of meat, it's wise to choose a low fat meat like chicken. Or better still, we can protect our health and the health of our planet by eating less meat.



Ben

May 17, 2000

## My Memories

I like to look at pictures. When I look at them, they take me to a special time, age, moment, and place. I go back in time and have fun. I chose 3 memories. They are funny faces that my friends and I made at Six Flags Magic Mountain, my birthday party sleep over, and the body pyramid we made the next morning.

When I went to Six Flags, I told my friends, Matt and Victor, to make a funny face and take a picture. It was my idea. My dad took the picture. As we took the picture, we were in line for a very scary ride. The line was huge. We had time to take the picture. The faces that we made <sup>were</sup> confused, scary, and funny faces.

Another memory is my sleep over party, after Six Flags that night. That night, Matt, Victor and I had lots of pizza and ice cream for my birthday. We had so much fun, that we got to choose a movie from Blockbuster. We rented, "007, James Bond". I gave my friends toy guns but there wasn't enough guns for Matt. He used his fingers as a gun to point at the bad guys.

Matt fell asleep early, but Victor and I stayed awake till 1:07 A.M.

My last memory is when Matt went home and Victor was still at my house. My sister, Allison, was playing tackle football with us. She wanted to make a body pyramid out of Victor and me. Victor and I were on the bottom and Allison was on the top. Allison chose to be on the top, but I wanted to, so we played a game of tackle football, to see who would go first. Allison is so much bigger than me, that of course, she won. Allison was on top of Victor and me. We could barely hold her up.

These are my memories that take me back in time. I look at my pictures and always, enjoy looking at them. Do you have pictures that takes you back to a special time, age, moment, and place?

Have you ever laughed so hard that you started to cry? That's how I feel when I'm with my three best friends. My best friends are named Alice, Joey and Maggie, and they are really a lot of fun to be around.

First let me tell you about my friend Alice. She is very generous. She shares all her thoughts with me, and she even shares food with me after school when I am hungry. I can always count on Alice to help me out if I need something. I feel lucky to have an unselfish friend like Alice!

My second fascinating friend is named Joey. He is very good at skateboarding, and he is a creative genius. He is talented at all sports, and my mom says he's a daredevil. He is mischievous and brave, but always friendly. Joey is a very adventurous person, and I'm glad he's my friend.

Last but not least is my friend Maggie. Maggie is a silly girl, with a wonderful sense of humor. She plays jokes on the teachers at school, which sometimes gets her in trouble, but mostly everyone loves her. Maggie is my favorite friend to hang around with on a Saturday.

So now you know how lucky I am to have three such fabulous friends. Alice shares with me, Joey and I go on adventures, and Maggie just makes me laugh. I can't imagine a better group of friends to spend my time with - I hope we stay friends for the rest of our lives!



I have the world's greatest Valentine! My Valentine is special because she's smart, she's beautiful, and she is an extremely caring person.

The first thing I love about my Valentine is that she's so intelligent. Whenever I get stuck on my homework, she always knows how to unstick me. She seems to have a gift for explaining hard concepts. In addition, whenever we have a problem at home, my Valentine always come up with a good solution. She is a miracle worker!

Secondly, I love that my Valentine is so pretty. She always looks her best, even if she's just wearing jeans. I'm proud to go anywhere with her, because she always looks so classy.

The third thing I love about my Valentine is her incredibly caring personality. She takes care of everyone, even our dog Molly. If I get sick, I know my Valentine will make me soup and read me a story. She tucks me in at night, and wakes me up every morning with a smile. I don't know how I would start the day without her!

Well, now you know why my Valentine is the best Valentine in the world. She's very smart, she always looks great, and she is a loving, caring individual. Mom, you are my special Valentine. Happy Valentine's Day, Mom! I love you!



## Playing Baseball

Baseball is a fun and exciting sport. Baseball is enjoyable and fun because you practice catching balls, running bases, and hitting homers.

One of the reasons baseball is fun is you can catch balls. It is fun to practice catching balls with a friend or a dad or a mom in the backyard or on a ballfield.

Another reason baseball is fun and exciting is running around the bases. Players have the thrill of the race from first to home ahead of the ball. They like touching the bases with their toes.

The last reason baseball is a great sport is the chance of hitting a homer. Hitting a ball is exciting, and a home run is a dream come true. People cheer for you.

All these things make playing baseball a great sport. Don't you think you would enjoy catching balls, running bases, and hitting home runs? I think you would!



## Essay Three

I learned all sorts of things in school that are going to help me shape the future. Three of the things that I learned are responsibility, time management and taking responsibility for my actions.

I learned that responsibility is one of life's hardest things. If you have to do something, you do it. For example, if you have a chore and you do not do it, you are not doing your fair share of the work. A second example is that if you don't do your school work you could become a dropout . You can get depressed and start using drugs and neglect your family and friends. If you neglect your family and friends you'll probably neglect your responsibilities to your pet, too.

The next most important thing I learned is time management. If you have a certain amount of time to do your work, you should get started right away and not wait until the last minute to do it. You should also stay focused when you are working. You shouldn't allow distractions to stop you. Finally you should remember to do work before you play.

My last thing is to take responsibility for my actions. I should not do something that will effect some one else. You should think of the people that are getting hurt by your actions that might effect their day or their decision making. I personally know what some one else's actions will do to some ones good day. It will make it a horrible day.

I hope I have shown you what the most important things are that will help you in the long run. These are the most important things you will have to do in your life time. I am going to try to be more responsible and manage my time better. I will also take more responsibility for my actions. When I can I will try my hardest to help the people who have helped me.

## Poor persuasive essay

I would like to go to London on a vacation. London is a cool place to go because the people talk funny. The things I would like to do in London are see the Tower of London and ride the double decker buses.

See the Tower of London. It is neat because lots of people were killed there. There is a lot of history, and the buildings are really old. I could see the jewels that the Queen wears, too.

I could ride the double decker buses. They are cool because when you sit on the top you can see lots of stuff. You can go all over London in the buses, and see all the cool sights. There are lots of fun places to see from the bus in London. You could also get fish and chips to eat.

My bongo is that I could go to all the museums in London. They are interesting. I would like to see the British Museum because there are lots of old mummies in cases. At the William and Mary museum kids can dress up in old clothes like the knights and court ladies.

Well, those are some things to do in London. You can see the Tower of London, ride the double decker buses and go to museums. London is an awesome place to go.