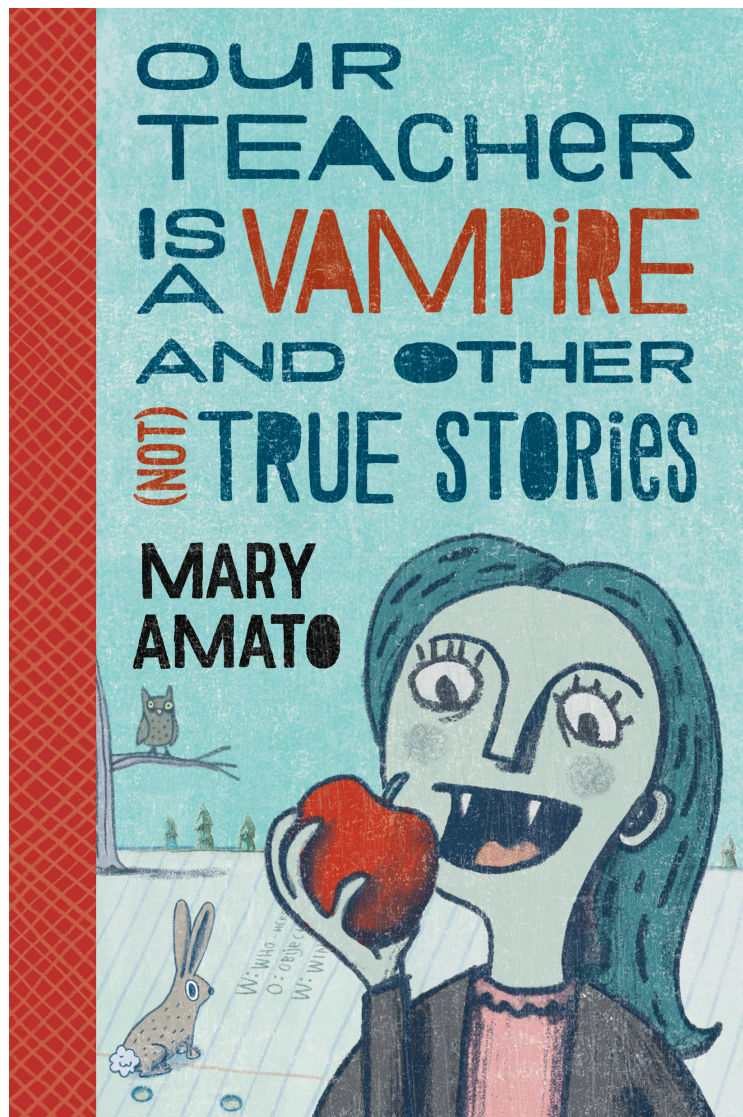


How An Idea Becomes A Book

Author Mary Amato shares the writing process with real examples of brainstorming, first draft, revision, editorial comments, and more.

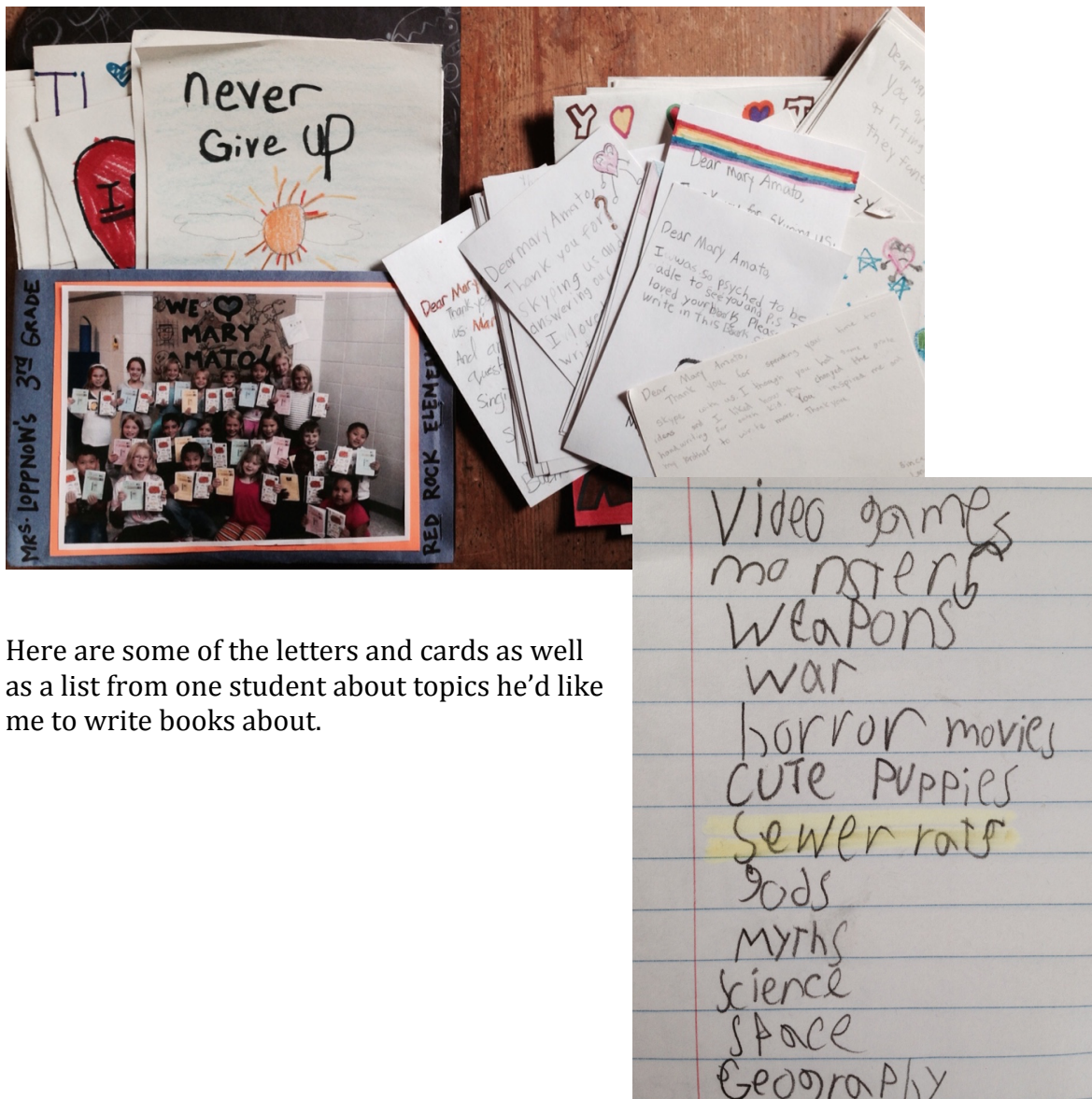


Inspiration



After Skyping with students at Red Rock Elementary School (MN), I received a packet of letters. The drawings and messages from the kids (many of them were begging for a sequel to *Please Write in this Book*) made me want to write another book. I got the idea for a book about students writing to an author.

Also included in the packet from one class was a list of topics that students found interesting and that they hoped would find their way into a new story. "Sewer rats" on one boy's list made me laugh out loud; even though I couldn't imagine sewer rats in the story, I hoped I could find a way to use it (and I did)!



Here are some of the letters and cards as well as a list from one student about topics he'd like me to write books about.

First Draft



I started by writing in the characters voices and seeing what might be on their minds. Below are the first three pages of the first draft. You'll see "xxx" appear several times. If I can't think of what I want to write, I often write "xxx" so that I can keep going forward. Then I go back later and fill in the blanks. My drafts change a lot during the revision process. After I'm done, it's interesting to compare the first draft with the final book to see how many differences there are.

Title: Please Write to An Author

Mary Amato 7-29-15

September 6, 2015

Dear Class,

Instead of telling you about our next project, I decided to write you this letter. I hope it was fun to walk in this morning and find this letter on your desk.

As you know, we have been reading XXX by Mali Koam. I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I have.

Tomorrow, we are going to write letters to her! First we will write our rough drafts. Let your personality come through in your writing. Think about word choice and make your writing sparkle. Here's what your rough draft should include:

1. The date
2. The greeting (such as "Dear Ms. Author")
3. A sentence about yourself
4. A sentence telling the author one thing you liked about the book
5. One interesting question
6. Closing (such as "Sincerely")

Today, I will give you class time to finish reading xxx. Have fun!

Sincerely,

Ms. Wurtz

September 6, 2015

Dear Ms. Wurtz,

I hope you find this letter. I left in on your chair. Are we going to actchooally send the letters for real? Or is this just another trick to make us practice our spelling? If it is for real, then I am exited. Will we get real letters back? I am going to ask the author how to rite a book and get rich quick.

Yours trooly,

Carly

P.S. This whole project would be faster and more fun if we didn't have to do rough drafts.

September 6, 2015

Dear Carly,

What a fun surprise to get your letter. I'm glad you are excited. Actually, we are going to send our letters. I'm not sure if you will learn how to get rich quick. I hope you will learn something.

Sincerely,

Ms. Wurtz

September 6, 2015

Dear Ms. Koam,

My name is Carly Grace Winston, and I have three sisters and two cats. Are you a famous writer or just a regular one? At first I didn't want to read your book because the cover looked boring. But when I got to the part about the xxx, I got this buzzy feeling in my chest like I get right before my birthday. Your book was like a birthday present and I wanted to tear it open but I also didn't want to because once I opened it all the suspense would be gone.

I am writing a novel. Please tell me how do I get it published? I would like to get rich and famous.

Yours trooly,

Carly

Dear Carly,

Thank you for the kind words about my book. I loved your simile: a book is like a birthday present! It takes a lot of practice to become a writer. I write everyday for hours.

September 7, 2015

Dear Author,

I got to page seven. My thing about me is I don't like to read. My question is why can't you write a book about explosions? I like things that explode.

Sincerely,

Freddy

September 28, 2015

Dear Carly,

I hope you find this letter. I left it in on your chair. Are we going to actually send the letters for real? Or is this just another trick to make us practice our spelling? If it is for real, then I am excited. Will we get real letters back? I am going to ask the author how to write a book and get rich quick.

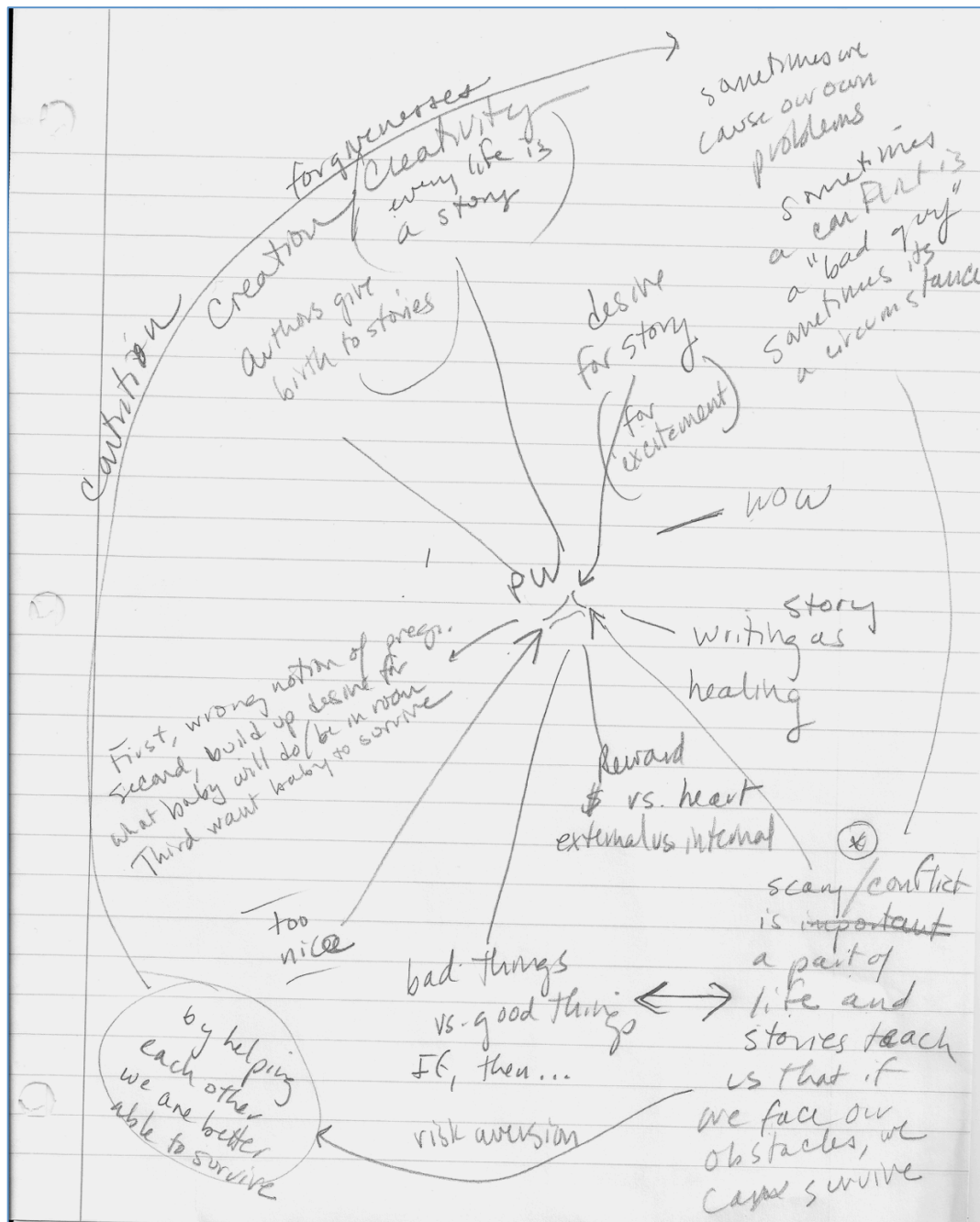
Yours truly,

Carly

Brainstorm Web of Theme



After writing some of the first draft, I stop and think: what is this book really about? Usually I make a web to brainstorm ideas. The PW in the center stands for Please Write to an Author, which was my original title for the book. In my writer's notebook, I brainstormed the various themes or big ideas that I thought I could develop in the story.



Writing and Revising



I started this book at the end of July and wrote many drafts. This is a screenshot of just some of my files in my folder for the book. It's hard to count the number of drafts because sometimes I am just making small changes and sometimes I'm doing a major revision. In August, I sent a description of the idea to my editor Mary Cash at Holiday House, Inc., and she was interested. So I worked on it. I often change titles in the writing process and so the draft titles change, too. PWA stands for the first title idea: *Please Write to an Author*. PW is just an abbreviated version. SWD stands for the second title idea: *Secret Writers of Delite*. Some of the files are research files. On February 6, I sent the completed manuscript to Mary Cash. She accepted it, but she wanted many changes; and so I began revising.

Please Write Materials		
Name		Date Modified
Please Write to an Author First pages	✓	Jul 29, 2014, 11:37 AM
Please Write to an Author	✓	Jul 29, 2014, 4:55 PM
PWA 7-30-14	✓	Aug 5, 2014, 1:14 PM
PWA 8-14-14	✓	Aug 15, 2014, 4:33 PM
Dear Mary Cash PWA copy	✓	Aug 18, 2014, 11:06 AM
PWA 8-18-14	✓	Aug 18, 2014, 11:35 AM
PLEASE WRITE proposal	✓	Sep 2, 2014, 5:05 AM
Revision of Please Write with character sketches	✓	Jan 2, 2015, 5:08 PM
PW Revision A-1	✓	Jan 5, 2015, 2:49 PM
PW Revision A-2	✓	Jan 6, 2015, 2:54 PM
PW Revision A-3	✓	Jan 6, 2015, 4:40 PM
minnesota facts	✓	Jan 7, 2015, 5:22 PM
PW Revision A-4	✓	Jan 8, 2015, 1:09 PM
PW Revision A-5	✓	Jan 12, 2015, 10:45 AM
PW Revision A-6	✓	Jan 13, 2015, 9:04 AM
Minnesota Facts from Red Rock ES	✓	Jan 13, 2015, 3:48 PM
Sneak back at midnight and catch her in the act	✓	Jan 13, 2015, 5:01 PM
PW Revision A-7	✓	Jan 14, 2015, 5:53 PM
PWA trash 1-14	✓	Jan 15, 2015, 5:03 PM
red rock ethnic groups	✓	Jan 17, 2015, 3:34 PM
PW Revision B	✓	Jan 28, 2015, 3:53 PM
PW Revision B-1	✓	Jan 29, 2015, 9:54 AM
extra material writers of delite	✓	Jan 29, 2015, 11:51 AM
PW Revision B-2	✓	Jan 29, 2015, 3:14 PM
PW Revision B-3	✓	Feb 6, 2015, 1:49 PM
SWD to Mary Cash Feb 6	✓	Feb 6, 2015, 1:50 PM
SWD revision 2-26	✓	Mar 4, 2015, 3:47 PM
SWD revision 3-6	✓	Mar 19, 2015, 10:45 AM
SWD revision 3-19	✓	Mar 19, 2015, 2:21 PM
SWD revision 3-22	✓	Mar 27, 2015, 10:48 AM

37 items, 4.16 GB available

Research with Red Rock Elementary School Students



I decided to set the story in Minnesota. Since I've never lived there, I had questions about what would be realistic to include. I wrote a letter (below) to the media specialist at Red Rock Elementary School asking if she'd give my questions to her students. You can see her reply in the two following pages. She used different colors for the responses of the different classes. My highlights show what material I ended up using in the book either directly or indirectly.

Hi Carla,

I'm working on my revision of the novel that is set in Minnesota. I thought your students might like to know that I'm doing some research to find out what life in Minnesota is like. I'm reading articles and asking people.

Besides making sure that it snows during the winter months, I'm wondering if your students think there are any details that I should consider adding to make sure that it seems as if the story is really taking place in Minnesota.

Are there any special things that kids in Minnesota like to do?
What sports are popular there?
What do kids do during the Christmas holiday break?
Where do kids go for spring break?
Are there any sayings or special lingo that Minnesota kids use?

If any of your students would like to give me any information, I'd be delighted to receive it!

Yours truly,
Mary Amato

Hi Mary,

Here are some responses from our third grade students:

Are there any special things that kids in Minnesota like to do? *Play in the snow, go sledding, rake leaves and jump in them, MineCraft, have lots of fun playing*

tag, "girls night out" (salon, shopping, out to eat, movies), shopping with mom, SuperMario 3-D World game, play on playground, use electronics, go fishing with family, go to our cabins, ValleyFair (amusement park) and MN State Fair (a really big deal here - and lots of fun), play with friends and neighbors, parties (pizza, sleep-overs, birthday, neighborhood, chili contests, super bowl party) skiing, making snowmen, making forts, sledding, snowboarding, ice skating, snowball fights, go to the cabin, polar plunge(jumping into the ice water of a lake), tubing, ice fishing, snowmobiling, video games, knee-hockey(inside) Sledding, outdoor & indoor hockey, skating, snowball fights, build snowmen, making igloos, making snow angels, painting, snowmobiling, MN Wild (pro hockey) games, skiing, football in the snow, snowboarding

What sports are popular there? Winter sports: hockey, racing on skis (downhill and cross country), basketball, wrestling
Gymnastics, soccer, volleyball, hockey, football, lacrosse, tennis, swimming, softball, baseball, boxing, wrestling, DODGEBALL, floor hockey, basketball, BOWLING, LASER TAG!!!!!!
Football, soccer, baseball, hockey, softball, LaCrosse, basketball, gymnastics, bowling, dance, tennis

What do kids do during the Christmas holiday break? All of the above and ...Play cards, board games/dice games, visit family, exchange presents, sitting by the fire, drinking hot chocolate, eating lots of cookies/baking cookies, cabins, parties
Celebrate with family, travel to grandparents house, attend church, open presents, go to Humane Society, Elf on the Shelf, make gingerbread men/houses, ice skating, sledding, snowboarding/skiing, snow tubing, ice fishing, ATV'ing or snowmobiling, decorate cookies, watch movies...
Go to FL, see relatives, make crafts like snowflakes (paper ones), make gingerbread cookies and houses, drink hot cocoa, go to church, catch snowflakes on tongue, build a snow fort

Where do kids go for spring break? Cabin, Wisconsin Dells, Duluth, Florida, Mexico (someplace warm) stay home(staycation!)
Florida: Disney World, Universal Studios
Wisconsin Dells, New York, Grandma and Grandpa's house, Cruises, Duluth, MN, California, Colorado, Cabin, Kid's Club (our after-school program!), Mexico, Mall of America!
Go on a cruise (Mexico, Jamaica, Disney), go to AZ, go to water parks (Wisc. Dells, Water Park of America), go to cabin, go shopping at Mall of America, go to Pinz (bowling alley and arcade), Chuckee Cheese (pizza arcade), sleep in

Are there any sayings or special lingo that Minnesota kids use? I know right?! Dude! Same! (I like that too) , Just kidding (JK), LOL, Sure (Yes) That's

my thing(That's what I like to do), Duh, Bro, Sup?(what's up?) Let's play HOCKEY!

"I know, right?"

"What the heck?"

"Oh my gosh!"

"OMG!"

"Hay-lo!"

"What's up?"

"Hey Brah!"

"What's up Dude?" With the head nod up!!!

"LOL!"

Hope this gives you some ideas. :) Don't hesitate to let me know if you have questions about how a MN kid would act/think/feel in your setting.

We are so honored to be asked to be a resource for you. We can't wait to see the book!

Keep in touch,

Carla

Carla Larsen
Media Specialist
South Washington County Schools
Red Rock Elementary

Fact Checking



Even fiction writers have to get the facts straight. Since Mrs. Penrose's pregnancy is an important part of the book, I had to make sure it was realistic. I wrote down the dates and checked them with a nurse who works with premature babies. I also asked two teachers who work with English Language Learners to look over the speech of Isabella, who moved from Central America to MN in kindergarten, to make sure that the mistakes she makes made sense.

PREGNANCY DATES

October 24 teacher tells class she is going to have a baby (19 weeks pregnant, in her 5th month at this point she is tired, she is showing, she is craving burgers). Baby is due in mid March.

October 31 belly is getting bigger; baby is starting to show.

November 18 she is in her 6th month and is feeling baby moving/kicking.

December 2 kids get to feel baby kick. She is in her 7th month.

December 17 baby arrives (26 weeks).

February 21 get a progress report from teacher: baby's lungs are growing; eyes open.

April 8 teacher comes to visit classroom with a picture of the baby. (Wouldn't bring baby yet).

First Edit

After sending in the manuscript, the editor will read the whole thing. He or she won't bother to correct small mistakes. The idea is to look for big things that the author needs to work on. My editor asked me to add more excitement in the beginning of the book. I decided to have a character suspect the teacher of being a vampire, which ended up being really fun. She had lots of other great suggestions throughout. On this one page, you can see my editor's suggestion and questions written by hand in the margins. She wondered if the letter that Harrison writes to author Mali Koam could reveal more about who Harrison is. Editors help authors to make the work better.



Where is Harrison from? Does he miss anything about home? Is he excited about anything about his new home? Seeing snow? Trying to cross country ski?

It would be nice to learn a bit more about Harrison.

20/Amato/PWA

October 14

Dear Mali Koam,

My name is Harrison. I am a new student at Fitzhugh Elementary School. I am always reading. I read all your books. I loved *Fur*, but my favorite is *Secret Pages*. I read it seventeen times. When I get to the part about Benjamin finding the book inside the tree trunk from that secret friend, I want to turn the page to read what happens, but I also don't want to turn the page because I don't want to the story to end. I feel this incredible buzzing in my chest. It is the same feeling I get when I am about to open up a birthday present. I want to tear off the wrapping paper, but I also don't want my birthday to be over.

My question is what inspired you to write about Benjamin? Did something like that happen to you? Did a secret friend ever leave a book for you inside a tree?

Your fan,

Harrison

Here is the same page from the final revision that I turned in. Much improved!

Amato/OTV

October 30

Dear Mali Koam,

My name is Harrison. I am a new student at Delite Elementary School in Delite, Minnesota. I moved here from Miami because my mom got a job at Rasmussen College, and I miss the palm trees and the ocean and my best friend whose name is Aaron and who loves to read as much as me. I miss my old school too. There aren't as many kids here that look like me, and that made me feel different. At first I didn't like anything about Minnesota. Now I like two things. First, I like the snow. When it snows, my backyard looks like a big, blank white page. Whenever the snow is fresh, I put on my boots and write a big message in the snow by making tracks of the letters with my feet. It doesn't matter if anybody ever sees it. I know it's there. (Yesterday, I wrote the word "Salutations" like Charlotte.) The other thing I like is this notebook we have in our class. I haven't written much in it, but I like to read it when nobody is looking.

My favorite book of yours is *Secret Pages*. I read it seventeen times. When I get to the part about Benjamin finding the book inside the tree trunk from that secret friend, I want to turn the page to read what happens, but I also don't want to turn the page because I don't want the story to end. I feel this incredible buzzing in my chest. It is the same feeling I get when I am about to open up a birthday present. I want to tear off the wrapping paper, but I also don't want my birthday to be over.

My question is did all the things that happen in your books happen to you in real life? Did a secret friend leave a book for you inside a tree?

Your fan,

Harrison

Brainstorming Titles



My first suggestion for a title was *The Secret Writers of Delite*. The publishing team thought the title was too quiet. They wondered if a title with the word vampire in it would boost interest and asked me for ideas. I tried to think of as many as I could and sent them to her. Authors suggest titles, and the final decision is made by the publishing team.

April 15, 2015

Possible Titles

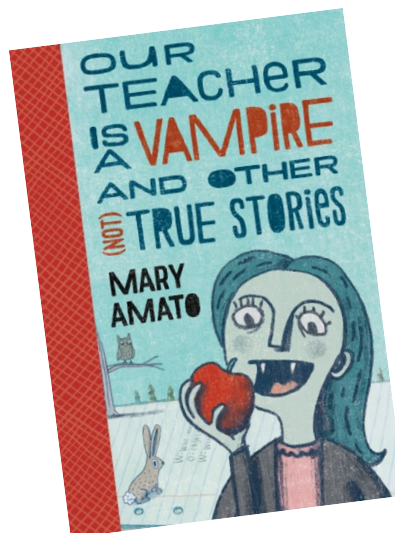
The Secret Writers of Delite
The Secret Writers
Secret Writers in Search of a Vampire
The Trouble with Not Having a Vampire for a Teacher
How to Succeed in Writing a Story Without Getting Bitten by a Vampire
How to Succeed in Writing a Story Without a Vampire
How to Succeed in Writing a Story Without Having a Vampire
Vampire on the Loose and Other Obstacles
Vampire Teacher Wanted for World's Most Suspenseful Story
Vampire Wanted for Story
Vampire Wanted for World's Most Suspenseful Story
Vampire Teacher and Other Possibly True Tales
Vampire Teacher and Other Possibly True Stories
Possibly True Stories about Vampires, Zombies, and a Rabbit named Riggy
Our Teacher is a Vampire and Other (Not) True Stories
The Secret Search for the Perfect Story
Our Secret and Possibly True Stories about a Vampire, a Giant Chicken, and a Rabbit named Riggy
A Vampire, a Giant Chicken, and the Secret Truth about Us
Once Upon a Vampire
Once Upon a Vampire: Our Secret Story
Once Upon a Vampire: The Secret Story of our Favorite Teacher
The Secret Truth about our Favorite Vampire (and the Cutest Rabbit in the World)
Roses are Red, Vampires are Scary, Read this Book, Or Else!

Cover Design

Publishers need the cover to start publicizing the book before the book is even printed. Covers are often designed before the book is completely edited. The artist usually comes up with several different ideas. Here are three cover possibilities by artist Eric Brace. The publishing team chooses the cover they think will be the best.

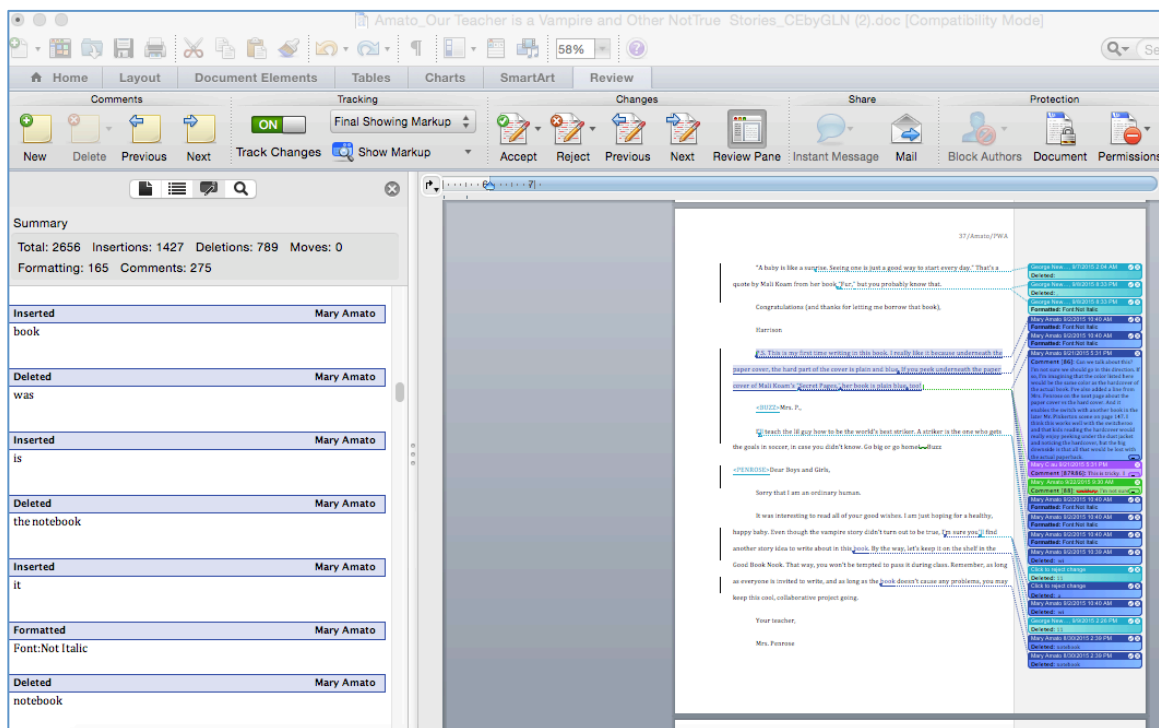


The publishing team thought the third image, the larger image of the teacher, would work better on “thumbnail” size images of the book, which is what are often seen online. I loved the bunny, owl, and trees from the other two sketches and asked if the teacher could be smiling. The artist made some changes. Look carefully to see the changes in the final cover that was chosen.



Copy Edit

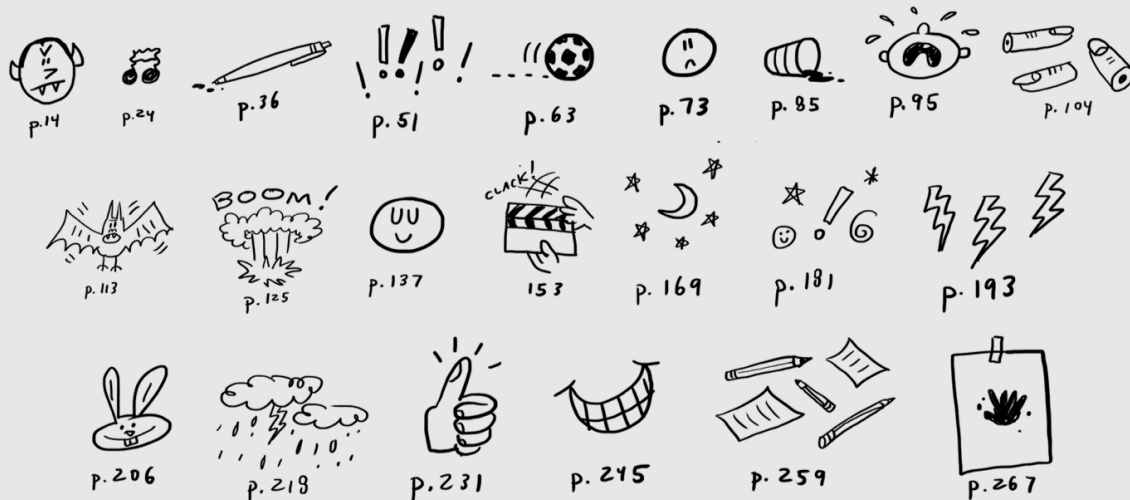
In April, I turned in my final revision. After the author turns in the final revision, the editor reads it again. If the editor thinks it's ready, then the manuscript goes through the copy edit process. The copy editor reads every sentence carefully and inputs questions or suggested changes in grammar, punctuation, and formatting. The edited manuscript goes back to the writer who then reads through the book and either accepts or rejects the changes. Writers also add comments and questions. This is a photograph of how one page appears on my computer screen. Notice in the summary on the left that there are over 2600 changes and 275 comments. I always go over a copy edit several times before sending it back. It takes many hours.



Interior Spot Illustrations and Graphics



While the writer and editor is working, the illustrator is working, too. These are the small black and white illustrations by Ethan Long for the inside of the book. Often, one artist will do both the cover and the interior illustrations. Sometimes, different artists are hired. I love the work of both Ethan Long and the cover artist, Eric Brace.



Galleys



Once all the changes have been made in the copy edit, then the book is designed. Font styles and sizes are chosen and the book is “laid out.” These new pages are called the galleys. Editors and authors check each page of the galleys to see if there are any mistakes or things that need to be changed. This is called “the first pass.” After the corrections are made, the editor and author as well as a separate proofreader will read through galleys again. This is called “the second pass.” Usually this is done online, but the editing software wasn’t working on my computer, so I did it in hand. Below is one page of the first pass of the galleys. You can see my change in pencil and an explanation of it to my editor on a post-it note.

Nick the Slick’s Graphic Organizer

How Will Mrs. Penrose, Mr. Pinkerton, Ms. Yang and Mali Koam Surprise Us?

1. They’ll tell us they’re all vampires. Mwa-ha-ha.
2. They’ll tell us that they’re writing a book about us because they think we’re vampires.
3. They got the state tests results and found out that we are all geniuses and we don’t have to go to school anymore.

The dashes look odd to me in this sentence:

I checked out three, and —
I hate to admit it — they
were fantastic.

Please simplify to:

I checked out three. I
hate to admit it, but they
were fantastic. →

* 256 *

MONDAY, APRIL 7

Guess who again. Before you get mad, here is the truth. Alexander gave me permission to write in here. Anyway, our class saw all your ~~WON~~ stories in the library. I checked out three, and I hate to admit it, ^{but} they were fantastic. Now our class is writing some to put in the library. I was very depressed not to win that contest, but now I am excited to have this new project.

I’m sorry that I stole this book twice before, but I’m also kind of not sorry, because I really like this book and it’s fun that I’m in it!

—Marcos

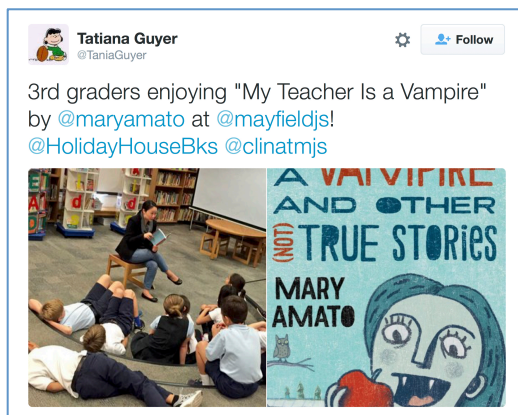
Thanks for sharing your tips. You guys are writing fun books. Please check out our books, too!

—DeeNice and Lauren

* 257 *

Sales and Marketing

Before the book is even printed, the sales and marketing team are working hard. They contact booksellers, librarians, and teachers and tell them about the book. They also send advanced copies to book reviewers in the hopes that a reviewer will want to write about the book. *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and *Publishers Weekly* are three of the most well-known journals for book reviews. Authors are important partners. I post news about the book on Twitter, Facebook, and my own website; I arrange book signings; I create “extras” for students, teachers, and librarians, such as this packet; and I promote the book every day. Publishers have to sell books in order to make money for themselves and the authors and illustrators who work with them. If books don’t sell, the author of those books is not likely to get another book contract.



To the left is a tweet from a teacher who is sharing an advanced reader copy from the publisher with her students. Below is a poster for the book on display at the Holiday House booth at the American Library Association meeting.

The first two reviews came in before the book was officially available.

Kirkus Review says: “Great fun, especially for budding writers; they’ll find kindred spirits within.”

Publishers Weekly says: “Readers will appreciate how the characters’ writing improves as they discover the rewards of collaboration and acceptance, as well as the healing power of the written word.”



Ready for Readers

Once the final galleys have been approved, the file is sent to the printer and the book is printed and bound. Boxes of the books are shipped to book distributors. Bookstores, libraries, and schools buy their books from distributors. Parents and kids buy their books from local and online bookstores. If they enjoy a book, hopefully they will spread the word. Writing online reviews, buying the book as a gift for others, and “word of mouth” (talking about the book) are great ways to support an author you love. As an author, the biggest thrill comes in getting messages and letters from readers.



“I didn’t like to read until I read this book!” is one of the most gratifying messages to receive. Letters often come with fun drawings like this one done by Molly from Minnesota. Whenever I get letters and drawings from kids, I always get inspired to pick up my pen and start on a brand new book.