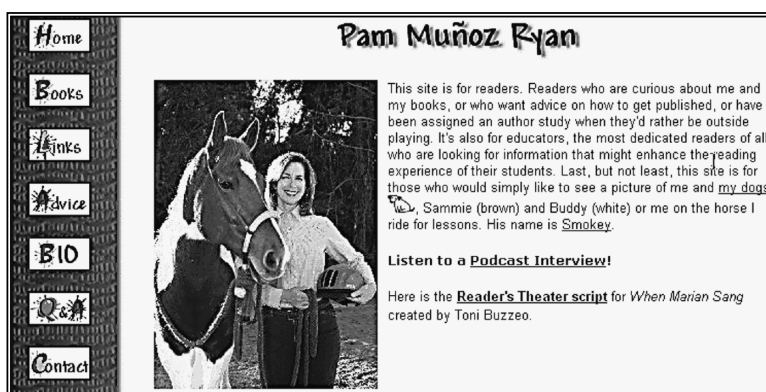


# Welcome to the World of Authors and Readers Online

**W**elcome to the world of author web sites! Like Pam Muñoz Ryan’s site (see Figure 1.1), this book is for “educators, the most dedicated readers of all, who are looking for information that might enhance the reading experience of their students.” In this book we describe how to make use of these rich web resources in your classroom, not only as a portal and extension to that time-honored language arts activity, author study, but across the curriculum. As educators who have been working with teachers for decades with this approach to technology-supported literacy learning, we know it will become a welcome part of your practice and help you pass the love of books to students—particularly those grappling with making reading part of their lives.

True, some of the practice and pedagogy presented here could in fact be done with just books, texts, and print materials without the use of technology. But using the web sites as indicated throughout these pages will make the experience so much richer. The classroom will become a place of infinite intellectual excitement and satisfaction as students acquire required literacy skills along with a lifelong passion for literature, authors, and reading as a lifestyle.



**Figure 1.1** Screenshot from Pam Muñoz Ryan’s web site

For some students, the use of technology is itself the hook. We have found a strikingly high level of student engagement when the use of author web sites is introduced. So-called reluctant readers or resistant readers rush to the computer. Once there, they sit mesmerized in front of their monitors as they are put in touch with authors who may have left them cold when print books were their sole calling cards. Through the authors' web sites and the remarkable treasures they offer, the students' experience is positively transformed. Reading takes on the aspects of exploring, of using a variety of one's senses, and of playing. The authors' literary work, digitally enhanced, comes alive on the web and has the power to turn many students into emerging readers.

Every educator in the field of literacy, including librarians, literacy coaches, and reading specialists, knows the excitement and thrill students get from meeting a *real* author in their classroom, school library, or local bookstore. This is especially so when students have already read one or more works by the author and learned a bit of his or her life story. Their heightened anticipation and the thrill of meeting that author in person often turns them into lifelong readers—readers who continue to savor the author's work and who venture far beyond it, avidly consuming the works of others once they get the feel and pleasure of it.

## VIRTUAL AUTHOR APPEARANCES

But how often does an author whose works you and your students are studying as part of your planned curriculum actually make a scheduled school, public library, or local bookstore appearance? This most valuable experience may be available to classes once, or perhaps a few times a year if the school has unusually generous literacy funding. For those who teach and learn in rural or inner-city schools, the opportunity is even less likely to be available. Most students never get the benefit of direct interaction with the authors of the literary works they study.

The author web site, however, allows you—as long as your school is wired and has Internet access—to bring a celebrity, curriculum-connected author right into your classroom and on your own schedule. Far more accessible than those rare in-person visits, a web visit makes author contact possible anytime it's desired and at any point during author study or reading and writing activities inspired by an author's work.

But can these web-based experiences really offer the richness of a real "live" author appearance? With proper understanding and preparation, the answer is yes. Just as students can be prompted and prepared for profitable classroom viewing of theatrical film or television presentations based on print books and related materials, so too can they be prepped to take advantage of authors' sites. If you take time to preview an author's efforts online, investing no more than 5–10 minutes, you can pick up little-known details about the author's life, interests, books, and pet causes—all of which can help you enrich the experience you offer to students.

A good site for your first visit is that of Pam Muñoz Ryan, a prolific, award-winning, bestselling author of books for young people, including *Esperanza Rising*, *Paint the Wind*, and *Nacho and Lolita*. Figure 1.1, at the beginning of the chapter, shows the landing page from her official web site ([www.pammunozryan.com](http://www.pammunozryan.com)). Her web site is emblematic of how this new tool continues to change writing, reading, and learning for the better; notice in the screen shot in Figure 1.1 how she has incorporated information that students might need for an author study or book report. Like many author sites, Ryan's also includes a link to a video interview.

**TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS****Activity 1.1 Welcome Screen Set-Up**

*Grades 3–8*

1. Select an author whose works are familiar to students, or have students individually select a favorite author.
2. Before they check out the author's site (or one that the publisher provides), challenge students to create a welcome screen or landing page for their favorite author (like the one in Figure 1.1).
3. As background, discuss with students what type of opening screens various author sites have (e.g., a photo of the writer with pets or tools of writing or art, a graphic of a writer's most famous character).
4. Review a number of examples with students, and reflect on what you find.
5. Present one sample screen shot as a focus. Challenge students to explain why they think it was selected for this important introduction.
6. Have students work in teams or independently to write about, draw, and perhaps collage with downloaded or clipped-out images their own suggested first screens for their favorite authors' sites.
7. Make certain that each student or team can explain their selection of images, photos, and graphics plus text for the author site. If a particular type of music or digital special effect would be appropriate for an author, have students explain why they would use it for the site.
8. After students share their anticipated and desired first screens for favorite authors, have them examine the actual first screens of the author sites. Facilitate a class discussion and/or ask students to reflect in writing on the extent to which the actual welcome screen matched, differed, or bettered their designs.
9. As an extension, encourage students to submit these design ideas to some of the author sites for author or webmaster feedback.
10. As a further extension, if the school has the resources and you and the students have the technological skills, have them use web authoring software or Web 2.0 online resources (e.g., Blogger) to begin their own fan sites in the spirit of official author sites (see also Chapter 6).

## A LOOK AT AUTHOR WEB SITES

Authors put up web sites for many reasons. These sites function as public relations and advertising campaign, bookstore, post office, and customer relations office all rolled into one. They are a one-stop-shopping point of contact between the author and potential readers, new and long-term readers, hardcore fans, and all sorts of people interested in them and their work.

Authors discovered long ago that readers are intensely interested not just in books, but in the people who write those books, particularly books that move them somehow. A web site is a perfect platform from which readers and visitors can obtain exactly the

background information that the author wants to make available. Generally, telling their own story results in increased interest and, down the road, increased sales, appearances, and opportunities.

Web sites also help readers get in touch with authors. They facilitate correspondence, often through forms embedded in the web site or an e-mail link that encourages readers to write to them. By posting much of the basic background information ordinarily requested, the author can move past this and be freed up to answer more in-depth questions on a one-on-one basis. This is also a way for the author to glean feedback about books, doing market research for future writing efforts. Furthermore, some author web sites have guest books or message functions that allow readers and fans to leave comments that can be shared with other visitors, a way to share their enthusiasm for an author, to cast their vote in favor of an author's work, so to speak.

Teachers will find information and suggestions on how to use the author's works with students, lesson plans, and ancillary materials that can be used to enrich instructional activities. Students will find games, entertainment items, and advice on how to write—all related to the work of the author whose site they are visiting.

There are certainly many other types of web sites with information about authors; publishers' sites, fan sites, "webliographies," and others all have information about authors and their works. The official web site put up or sanctioned by an author is a very special one, however, and generally is lavished with the most personal and interesting material. On an authorized site, teachers and readers can be certain that the facts, ideas, design, and experiences there are approved by the actual author or someone who has received approval from the author or his or her estate. This book is primarily directed at the official sites that authors feel generally offer the best option for digital author study.

### **Features of Author Web Sites**

Although author web sites sometimes have some unique features specific to the authors for which they are created, they have quite a few components in common.

#### **Home Page or Landing Page**

- Welcome message: may have accompanying music, animations, sound effects, and so on
- Site map: an overview of what's to be found on the site and where it's located
- Internal links to the various pages and sections of the site
- External links to other web sites selected by the author or web site manager
- Web site info: date last updated, name of webmaster, copyright and source of information, and so on

#### **Informational Features**

- Bio of the author (with photos of family, childhood, pets, interests, etc.): sometimes includes a timeline of the author's life milestones (see Figure 1.1a)
- Publications/catalogue: a list of all the works by the author; sometimes also called the "author's bookshelf"
- Upcoming: sometimes listed as "in press" or "what's next," books that the author is currently working on or that will be published within the next year
- Galleries: author biographical and appearance photos, sometimes including jacket cover art
- FAQs: frequently asked questions about the author's work along with the author's answers

**Contact Features**

- Guest book
- E-mail link

**Writing Tips**

- Writing tips: prompts for young writers or reflections on the inspirations for various works the author has produced; sometimes includes general advice and insight on how to write

**Extras**

- Stories or books other than those written by the author
- Special programs the author has established, like contests or awards for students
- Audio clips/video clips of the author doing readings of published works
- Information about the author's interests or activities other than writing
- Trivia/quizzes on book characters, plot happenings, and so on

**Author News**

- Newsletters
- Schedule of the author's personal appearances
- Articles or interviews featuring the author

## BALANCING LITERACY FOR NEW MILLENNIALS

### *Finding a Place and Time for Digital Author Studies*

Author web site-enriched literacy experiences, or any technology-driven approach for teaching reading and writing for that matter, may seem beside the point currently as educators have been mandated to go down what seem to them to clearly be other paths. School districts are very focused on test scores, teacher accountability, and initiatives to intensify and deepen literacy learning in content areas other than English language arts. In this era of No Child Left Behind and public demand for accountability, school accreditation and teaching success are based on student scores on standardized assessments, and the relationship between this and the riches found on author sites may not be apparent.

Teachers have to make certain that students learn and use various types of writing formats for their required literacy responses, including these:

- Procedural accounts (how-to or step-by-step)
- Procedural narratives
- Research reports
- Informational brochures
- Functional documents
- Poetry
- Science observations
- Short and extended responses to mathematical problems with paragraphs detailing how the students solved a particular mathematics calculation or used reading skills to comprehend what operation was needed to solve a word problem

**Home**

**Books**

**Links**

**Advice**

**BIO**

**Q&A**


**Contact**

**Order**

## Pam Muñoz Ryan's Biography

Need more information for an [author study or book report](#)?

Pam Muñoz Ryan, has written over twenty-five books for young people including the novel, *Esperanza Rising*, winner of the Pura Belpre Medal, the Jane Addams Peace Award, an ALA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults, and the Americas Award Honor Book. Her novel, *Riding Freedom* has garnered many awards including the national Willa Cather Award, and the California Young Reader Medal. Her picture books for the very young and picture books for older readers, include the award-winning *Amelia and Eleanor Go For A Ride* and *When Marian Sang*, the recipient of the ALA Sibert Honor and NCTE's Orbis Pictus Award. She received her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees at San Diego State University. She now lives in north San Diego County with her husband and four children.



Pam Muñoz Ryan was born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley. She is the oldest of three sisters and the oldest of twenty-three cousins on her mother's side. She grew up with many of her aunts and uncles and grandparents nearby and considers herself truly American because her cultural background is an ethnic smorgasbord. She is Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman.

During many long, hot valley summers, she spent most of her time riding her bike to the library. It became her favorite hang out because her family didn't have a swimming pool and the library was air-conditioned! That's how she got hooked on reading and books. After college, she knew that she wanted to work in a profession that had something to do with books, and she thought that would be teaching. She became a teacher, an administrator and then, at the encouragement of a friend who thought she could write, began her first book. That's when she finally knew what she really wanted to do.

Need more information for an [author study or book report](#)?

**AUDIO/VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR**  
[Good Conversations](#) Video from Tim Podell Productions.  
**from a review of Good Conversations Video**  
 "...Viewers will welcome the opportunity to see an author's office, family, and pets and hear practical advice based on Ryan's accomplishments. This excellent offering for author studies and writing curricula will be warmly welcomed by students and teachers alike." *School Library Journal*, Mar 2003.

[Home](#) | [Books](#) | [Links](#) | [Advice](#) | [Biography](#) | [Q&A](#) | [Contact](#) | [Order](#)

**Figure 1.1a** Screenshot of the bio page from Pam Munoz Ryan's web site

To add to this, many districts have adapted balanced literacy approaches for teaching reading and writing. These often require teachers to follow prescribed or scripted approaches such as the balanced literacy reading and writing workshop format for all lessons, with little margin for experimentation leftover.

### Balanced Literacy: What and Why?

A popular approach to literacy instruction that has been highly influential over the past couple of decades is balanced literacy. It has become so pervasive that in order to explore

The screenshot shows a website page for the book 'Esperanza Rising' by Pam Muñoz Ryan. On the left is a vertical navigation menu with buttons for Home, Books, Links, Advice, BIO, Q&A, Contact, and Order. The main content area features the book title 'Esperanza Rising' above a cover image of a young girl in a dress flying through the air. To the right of the cover is a paragraph of text describing the book's plot. Below the text is a link to an audio book. Further down, there are two columns of links for 'Family Photos', 'Questions & Answers', 'Links & Activities', 'Recipes', 'Student-Created Site', 'Discussion Guide', 'Teaching Plan', 'Multicultural Activity', and 'Author's Note'. A circular award medal is shown next to text about the Pura Belpré Award. Below that are several award titles including the 2001 ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, Smithsonian Best Books 2000, Publisher's Weekly Best Children's Books 2000, L.A. Times Best Books of 2000, Excellence in a Work of Fiction Award 2001, 2001 Judy Goddard/Libraries Limited Arizona Young Adult Author Award, and Jane Addams Children's Book Award. At the bottom is a horizontal navigation bar with links for Home, Books, Links, Advice, Biography, Q&A, Contact, and Order.

**Home**  
**Books**  
**Links**  
**Advice**  
**BIO**  
**Q&A**  
**Contact**  
**Order**

## Esperanza Rising

Esperanza Ortega possesses all the treasures a young girl could want: fancy dresses; a beautiful home filled with servants in the bountiful region of Aguascalientes, Mexico; and the promise of one day rising to Mama's position and presiding over all of Rancho de las Rosas. But a sudden tragedy shatters that dream, forcing Esperanza and Mama to flee to California and settle in a Mexican farm labor camp. There they confront the challenges of hard work, acceptance by their own people, and economic difficulties brought on by the Great Depression. When Mama falls ill from Valley Fever and a strike for better working conditions threatens to uproot their new life, Esperanza must relinquish her hold on the past and learn to embrace a future ripe with the riches of family and community. Pam Muñoz Ryan eloquently portrays the Mexican workers' plight in this abundant and passionate novel that gives voice to those who have historically been denied one. Scholastic Press

[Audio Book \*Esperanza Rising\*](#) (Listening Library/Random House)

[Family Photos](#)  
[Questions & Answers](#)  
[Links & Activities](#)  
[Recipes](#)  
[Student-Created Site](#)

[Discussion Guide](#)  
[Teaching Plan](#)  
[Multicultural Activity](#)  
[Author's Note](#)

**Pura Belpré Award** which honors Latino authors whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in a children's book

**2001 ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults**  
**Smithsonian Best Books 2000**  
**Publisher's Weekly Best Children's Books 2000**  
**L.A. Times Best Books of 2000**  
**Excellence in a Work of Fiction Award 2001 Children's Literature Council of Southern California**  
**2001 Judy Goddard/Libraries Limited Arizona Young Adult Author Award**  
**Jane Addams Children's Book Award, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**

[Home](#) | [Books](#) | [Links](#) | [Advice](#) | [Biography](#) | [Q&A](#) | [Contact](#) | [Order](#)

**Figure 1.1b** A page from Pam Muñoz Ryan's web site highlighting one of her popular works

how any new set of resources, and the practices involved in implementing them, can be adopted, one really ought to do so in light of compatibility with balanced literacy. However, like any widely adopted and adapted instructional philosophy that has been shaped by the work of a great many experts, a precise definition of the term is difficult. Nevertheless, teachers would do well to become informed about the following basic understandings about balanced literacy.

Balanced literacy is an attempt (successful in the judgment of many) to resolve the longstanding disagreement about how to effectively teach reading and writing—one school of thought holding that the teaching of basic skills is essential, the other that by teaching works of literature, teachers help students learn skills in context. In years gone by an “unbalanced” approach to reading instruction was taken either by stressing phonics and grammar or by implementing a whole-language approach with a focus on literature.

Balanced literacy holds that by maintaining a balance between the two approaches, an effective program is presented to students.

Some of the core beliefs of balanced literacy include the understanding that reading and writing should be seen and taught as complementary and that how students are taught is as important as what they are taught. Consequently, a balanced literacy instructional program is conceived as having definite pedagogical components that include the following:

- For reading
  - Read-aloud
  - Shared reading
  - Guided reading
  - Independent reading
  - Word work
- For writing
  - Modeled writing
  - Shared writing
  - Guided writing
  - Independent writing

A popular method of implementing balanced literacy is the reading and writing workshop model. In this approach, juggling the many components of balanced literacy, in terms of time allocation and structuring a proper sequence of instruction, is handled by what many consider a rigid set of organization frameworks. These often feature set scripts that prescribe what teachers will say in presenting materials and ideas as well as the amount of time to be spent engaged in the various activities.

It is particularly interesting for our discussion to note that Dorothy Strickland (1997), a noted authority on balanced literacy and a former president of the International Reading Association, includes in her widely published “Five Rules of Thumb for Maintaining Balance” the following statement: “Integrate print and electronic materials effectively. That way, your classroom will reflect the multimedia world in which students live” (p. 45).

### **Making Digital Author Studies Part of the Balanced Literacy Approach**

As we have emphasized, students like author web sites. These sites’ power to engage assures their usefulness for teaching and learning. Using them will enrich mandated author studies, something students very likely have to do anyway as author studies have always been part of teaching reading and writing and are currently an important part of balanced literacy instruction.

It may appear, however, that scarcity of instructional time represents an impediment to making much use of author web sites. After all, while the balanced literacy approach does include an author study component, even providing lists of suggested authors, it doesn’t call for an extensive allotment of time for web site explorations. The typical school day is often very structured, commonly featuring a basic balanced literacy lesson plan format that includes a minilesson of 10–15 minutes, small-group work for 15–20 minutes, and a final sharing activity that lasts 10 minutes or so. Author study facilitated through the effective use of author web sites as instructional resources can easily be made to fit within the literacy workshop model that so many school districts have adopted. This is true even though the daily instructional schedule may initially seem to be arranged as indicated otherwise.



## Guest Star Read-Alouds

One key component of a workshop-style balanced literacy lesson is a minilesson at the beginning of a class's literacy session. This involves the teacher providing direct instruction to the whole class, usually using a read-aloud or write-aloud activity. What's called for here is that the students listen while a reader, usually the teacher, reads aloud from a printed text or does a modeled write-aloud from a printed text, which is then the catalyst for the small-group work segment that follows.

Although a read-aloud or a spoken write-aloud is absolutely necessary as part of the balanced literacy workshop approach, it doesn't matter who reads aloud or voices the write-aloud modeling exercise. What's important is that the individual doing it is a highly literate speaker capable of modeling reading, speaking, and writing in an expressive motivational manner that will inspire the small-group and independent work that follows the minilesson.

So, could the read aloud for a T. A. Barron ([www.tabarron.com](http://www.tabarron.com)) book, say the adventure story *The Last Years of Merlin* or the nonfiction book *The Hero's Trail*, be read aloud by . . . T. A. Barron himself? Would you trust the author to know how to read his own work expressively? Might the author provide a write-aloud giving his tips as a published and celebrated writer, and echoing the many children's trade books he writes, to inspire students as they create their own works? That would be fabulous and even better than the teacher reading the same selections, even if the teacher's speaking voice is wonderfully expressive. If T. A. Barron were to actually do a read-aloud for students working on his adventure/fantasy series or his nonfiction collection of young heroes who make a difference ([www.barronprize.com](http://www.barronprize.com)), students would be thrilled to hear the actual voice of the author!

T. A. Barron's web site offers digital recordings that visitors can listen to. In the Book Readings section of his site, for instance, there are recordings of Barron reading the introduction

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Audio Books" with a navigation menu on the right. The main content area lists two audio book options:

- The Great Tree of Avalon trilogy:**
  - Book One of The Great Tree of Avalon trilogy: *Child of the Dark Prophecy***
  - Listening Library/Random House (2004)
  - ISBN: 1-4000-9099-7
  - To hear the introduction read by T.A. Barron, [click here](#)
  - To hear the prologue read by Richard Easton, [click here](#)
- The Lost Years of Merlin epic:**
  - Book One of The Lost Years of Merlin epic**
  - Listening Library/Random House (2000)
  - ISBN: 0-8072-6170-X

The right-hand navigation menu includes: Picture Books, Young Heroes, Nature Books, International Editions, Merlin—The Movie, Audio Books (highlighted), Games, Maps, What's Next?, Book Awards, List of All Books, and Buy Books.

Figure 1.2

Screenshot from a page on T. A. Barron's web site offering audio clips of Barron reading selections from his popular books

or excerpts of quite a few of his books (see Figure 1.2). By clicking on these audio files, it is possible and easy to have T. A. Barron deliver a read-aloud.

Is there a more popular book with youngsters than *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? Perhaps *James and the Giant Peach* is a close second. As students work on these books by Roald Dahl, they can get to know him personally by listening to his answers to a number of questions about writing that have been asked of him and appear on his official web site ([www.roalddahl.com](http://www.roalddahl.com)). A common feature of a writing workshop lesson is the think-aloud in which the thinking behind literacy skills is modeled and reflected on. Using Dahl's web site, student writers could, after having heard his voice, continue to write an interview as he might respond to questions about his books and writing.

Another example connected to Pam Muñoz Ryan is that her presence can be summoned up in any classroom or home anytime through her recorded conversations. The video interview clip from her Good Conversations video (<http://tinyurl.com/goodconversationryan>) makes a great write-aloud. Although Ryan probably did not do that video to support the write-aloud component of the writing workshop, the practical advice and modeling of writing she discusses within the exact time allotted for a minilesson provides a valuable writing format for the follow-up small group work.

These examples of author web sites illustrate how two vibrant contemporary authors, T. A. Barron and Pam Muñoz Ryan, and even the deceased Roald Dahl can be invited into classrooms to provide content and inspiration for balanced literacy lesson read-aloud or write-aloud activities.

Using the author sites—with their capacity to replay the read-aloud for individual student learners, students whose native language is not English, or students from English Language Learner (ELL) families—would be wonderful for differentiating reading instruction, for teachers of ELLs and for resource room specialists.

### TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS

#### **Activity 1.2 Real Author Read-Aloud Marathon**

*Grades 1–8, Gifted and Talented*

Select an author whose works you have taught to your students or whom you want them to study.

1. Check out your author's site for a read-aloud audio clip or a podcast that features the author reading from his or her work.
2. Before presenting the author's voice and expressive reading to students, have them do their own choral or individual readings.
3. Record these using a tape recorder, a digital audio recorder, or easy-to-use audio recording software with a computer (e.g., Audacity for Windows computers, GarageBand for Macs).
4. Have the class vote on which reading is the more effective and compelling oral presentation.
5. Then have students listen to the author's reading of personal work online at the author site.
6. Encourage students to react to the readings and to compare and contrast different intonations.

Just as different actors can interpret the same text with contrasting readings, all of which may be valid, so too can students and the authors differ in their spoken interpretation of various works.

Many American-born students find British author readings of their works strange, while ELLs are validated by online native language and native language speaker readings.

What is important is the introduction of the concept that reading aloud is an art form, an aspect of literacy that can include many interpretations, and a vehicle for showcasing student reader creativity. Author sites bring the real author's speaking voice into your classroom anytime.

ELLs can practice English language speaking intonations by reading aloud in the style of the real author—a fun and authentic way to learn American English pronunciations if the author is an American-born English speaker.

### **Guest-Inspired Shared Reading**

Author sites can also be used for shared reading and guided reading activities. Shared reading can be done by teachers with small groups of students who need extra support or modeling or who want to work on reader's theater. This can be done by reading text online from any desired section of an author web site. The FAQs section available on almost every author site offers very accessible opportunities for shared reading as the teacher or student performs either the question or response part of this exchange. Built into it, if a student responds as the author, is the chance to begin to play the role of, and model, the writer. What is the main goal of balanced literacy, if it is not that?

### **Guided Reading**

Guided reading is an approach in which the teacher reinforces skills through questioning and then discussion of a shared text. This can be nicely facilitated and "professionalized" for students (in that the professional, the author, guides the reading), as they and the teacher work with the author as virtual online mentor, by focusing on a teacher- or student-selected page of the author's web site. The selected page may be about the author's childhood and pets, interest in the environment, position on censorship, or a sampler celebrating poetry month (as on Shel Silverstein's site, [www.shelsilverstein.com](http://www.shelsilverstein.com))—all of which make for fascinating reading and offer great human insights into the author's life and innermost priorities.

Not only does using an author site take the edge off this targeted reading comprehension skill, but it also draws teachers and students into a shared circle of online readers and writers. Focusing on the scrolling and sometimes audio-, animation-, or video-enhanced text takes such an activity many steps beyond the static, printed text and the stilted, obvious role of teacher as trainer. Using an author's web site, guided reading activities can facilitate the transformation of roles so that teacher and student become online coreading teammates working toward their mutual ongoing literacy growth.

### **Writing Workshop**

Clearly, author sites can be used in balanced literacy lessons to great effect, allowing for some thought and previewing on the teacher's part. Within the context of the writing workshop, the teacher has to work in partnership with students to compose written products that they discuss prior to, during, and after the writing session. This can work exceptionally well with various author web sites. For example, Faith Ringgold's site ([www.faithringgold.com](http://www.faithringgold.com)) includes a parable titled "How the People Became Color Blind," which she

invites readers to “rewrite, illustrate, comment on, question and enjoy.” This can be easily used as the prompt/schema for a shared writing or guided writing story. This model can work with a whole class or with students who need paired or small-group support.

Other authors also include beginnings of stories and poems on their sites, including Shel Silverstein’s site ([www.shelsilverstein.com](http://www.shelsilverstein.com)) and Seussville ([www.seussville.com](http://www.seussville.com)). The sites of Tomie dePaola ([www.tomie.com](http://www.tomie.com)) and Jean Craighead George ([www.jeancraigheadgeorge.com](http://www.jeancraigheadgeorge.com)) provide nonfiction writing starts that also can be used for guided and shared writings. The Advice page on Pam Muñoz Ryan’s site ([www.pammunozryan.com](http://www.pammunozryan.com)) offers great opportunities for independent writing tasks or could be used for guided writing with small groups of students.

Obviously, teachers already generate their own shared writing and guided writing story/constructive action topics. But how much more engaging and authentic it is to call upon a real, famous guest author to offer suggestions for writing starts and revising works. With the use of author web sites, teachers can take students so much further. In particular, teachers and students will learn much from working with the web site of R. L. Stine and downloading his “horrific” revision unit, which includes enthralling thriller-themed genre revision exercises and the answer sheets for those exercises so that students can self-check. New teacher educators and teachers new to the formal teaching of grammar and revision will really appreciate this unit, which is a free download of the Revising Your Work section of Stine’s Nightmare Room Writing Program ([www.rlstine.com/swf/e1/t1/rl\\_classroom\\_kit.pdf](http://www.rlstine.com/swf/e1/t1/rl_classroom_kit.pdf)).

If teachers and students go beyond their classroom community to respond to a published author’s online prompt, they will be able to e-mail this shared writing product to the author. They can then get feedback from the author or the author’s web site team. This feedback, perhaps posted on the author’s site, serves to expand, concretize, and validate the notion of a virtual community of readers and writers. Students become and are literally enrolled in a virtual circle of writers.

### TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS

#### **Activity 1.3 Outsourced Writing Prompts and Tips**

*Grades 4–8, Gifted and Talented*

1. Encourage students to seek out their own favorite online writing tips offered by a familiar author.
2. Display class postings of these in writing centers.
3. Give opportunities to independent student learners and those who have previously self-identified as student writers to share these prompts and their own response to them with their peers.
4. Have student writers use these favorite author site prompts to teach mini creative writing sessions to younger peers.

### **Phonics**

Many author sites can also be used to effectively and engagingly model phonics and word use. Despite the myth that balanced literacy does not include these, they are part and parcel of the balanced literacy approach. Sites such as Seussville, the authorized Shel Silverstein site, and

Scholastic's Author and Illustrator Index ([www.scholastic.com/librarians/ab/biolist.htm](http://www.scholastic.com/librarians/ab/biolist.htm)) include many opportunities for word play and for multimedia phonics instruction in a lively animated format that automatically captivates youngsters. Also, reading with (or after) an actual author, or famous actor who reads an author's work aloud online, can develop students' phonics and word work skills.

## Literacy Centers

It is currently common and approved practice for teachers to set up literacy centers in the classroom. One center could be an author study center with task cards for the various author studies to guide students when they go online at the center. (Teachers would obviously want to preview the sites.) Teachers don't necessarily even have to make up projects, assignments, or tasks for students. They can simply direct students to various pages on specific sites and have them follow the activity there or relate the information on the site to class lessons. Best of all, students can get their writing posted on the author site or sign the guestbook there, or they can download games or activities from the sites, which can be displayed in this classroom center. Working and exploring the site in an author study or genre center will also allow students to have something to present during the sharing section of the balanced literacy lesson.

## Literacy Celebrations

Another great way to use author sites is for literacy celebrations. This part of a balanced literacy approach not only represents value added but also perfectly complements the key lifelong literacy engagement goals of the approach, as well as all traditional, no-technology teaching approaches for fostering literacy. There are many ways to use author sites for literacy celebrations.

Say you want to conclude a unit celebrating an author study of Faith Ringgold. Have students who are getting ready to celebrate the unit go to her web site ([www.faihringgold.com](http://www.faihringgold.com)). Ask them how they could use components of the site to help decorate their classroom or gym area for the celebration. They could go through the site to get information for posters, a brochure about the author, a tour they want to give visitors to the site, music for the occasion (the site has Cassie's song), downloadable surveys (the site has a survey about racial attitudes that is appropriate for students in Grades 6 and up), and material for shared writing with Faith Ringgold that can be part of the site demonstration. Encourage students to collect quotes from the web site to post as part of the decorations for the celebration. They may want to create a timeline for her achievements (including her publications and arts exhibits) using information that is posted on her site. If possible, they may also want to download one or two pieces from her art collection, which can perhaps be used as material for a demonstration or talk during the celebration titled, for example, "Learn to Illustrate Like Faith Ringgold" or "Quilt Like Faith Ringgold" (if a student, parent, or arts educator has that expertise).

At many literacy celebrations, students costume and present themselves as either the author (if he or she has a distinct personality; e.g., T. A. Barron, Judy Blume, Eric Carle) or key characters from the author's canon (e.g., Merlin or King Arthur from T. A. Barron's adventure/fantasy series; young heroes from his *Hero's Trail*; Peter from Judy Blume's *Super Fudge* or Sheila from her *Sheila the Great*). Obviously, an author's comments and images, including photos of the author and his or her pets can tremendously inform and enhance the author characterization (check out Mary Pope Osborne and her two dogs on the Bio page of [www.marypopeosborne.com](http://www.marypopeosborne.com)).

## TEACHING WITH AUTHOR WEB SITES

### *Document-Based Questions and Other Testing Exercises*

Document-based questions (DBQs) and informational reading excerpts are currently key components of not only traditional K-8 social studies tests but also almost every standardized reading, mathematics, science, and social studies test administered in upper-elementary through middle school grades. Documents include, but are not limited to, maps, diagrams, photographs, announcements, advertisements, timelines, graphic organizers, quotes, illustrations, graphic arts, animations, and cartoons.

Check out the authorized site of any author you are studying with your students (e.g., C. S. Lewis, <http://cslewis.drzeus.net>; Shel Silverstein, [www.shelsilverstein.com](http://www.shelsilverstein.com); Roald Dahl, [www.roalddahl.com](http://www.roalddahl.com)), and you'll find much that qualifies as material for document-based studies. Search that author by using Google or any other popular search engine, and likely a great many sites will turn up.

#### TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS

##### **Activity 1.4 Document Author Sweep**

*Grades 4-8, English Language Learners*

Since responding to questions about maps, diagrams, timelines, graphic organizers, and graphics/illustrations/photos is such a major focus on standardized English, science, social studies, and mathematics tests, why not immediately connect student exposure to author sites' broad array of documents by placing them in competing small groups or teams?

1. Challenge the groups you assigned for this purpose to count and categorize the documents on a particular author site (e.g., photos, illustrations, site maps, guestbook entry forms, book reviews, flyers for upcoming books or author appearances, downloadable coloring pages, activities, teacher lesson plans, suggestions for parents and librarians, articles by or about the author, author bios, publication timelines).
2. Have one student serve as recorder for the count and one as the official presenter.
3. After the teams have had a set amount of time to search through their sites to identify the broad array of potential documents, give each team a chance to present their calculation and to discuss how they classified the calculated variety of documents.

What is most exciting about this activity is that the exact number of documents on a given author site is legitimately a matter of opinion. For instance, should an item like a photo gallery count as a single document, or should you count the separate photo documents that it contains? Does a full section of text count as one document, or should it be attributed with the number representing the sum of all its components? This exercise fosters authentic student discussion and exploration of the broad number of documents on a web site.

A short exploration of a typical author web site will reveal a number of links from its home page. Following a few of these and sampling the resources that they lead to, one can't help but notice an abundant source of material to use in preparing students for the various types of texts and questions that they are required to know for standardized tests.

The site map is legitimately a document (the type that constitutes the focus of DBQ), as are other pages within the typical author site. Students can use text, graphics, and media items to study and present findings about the author's life. One might design focus questions for each section of the web site that could accomplish two teaching goals: enhancing student reading and knowledge about the specific author and improving student capacity to respond satisfactorily to specific question formats.

One approach would be to use the four-option multiple-choice format that is common on standardized tests. One could also take an author site section such as Writing Tips (a common offering on author sites) and use it for extended response, narrative account, or essay writing test practice activities. Furthermore, as one becomes familiar with a number of the web sites of various authors covered in the curriculum, using such nonfiction excerpts as the texts for targeted multiple-choice, diagram, and writing response (extended and short) questions will come naturally.

These texts, which provide more data about an author whose works students are reading, will certainly be more engaging for students than the exercises in standardized test preparation booklets, which do not have any actual curricular connection for students.

In short, teachers can easily use author web sites and their mix of graphic, chart, nonfiction, fiction, photographic, and even video content as basic texts for the creation of test format multiple-choice or essay questions. An interesting variation would involve explaining to students as a write-aloud how to use the basic texts to create specific questions intended to help them improve their scores.

Next, students can be challenged, as part of their small-group or independent work, to take excerpts from the author site text for use as questions. In other words, students become test designers using author sites—including the same images, graphics, graphic organizers, nonfiction texts, and functional/informational announcements to design their own questions. This places them in control of their test skills practice, instead of having arbitrary test questions thrown at them. Students might even upload some of these author-inspired, student-created test questions onto the site, perhaps even getting a response from the author or from other student readers who have to take the same required standardized test.

A satisfying activity like this certainly beats the tedious test skills practice that so many students currently have to endure. Figuring out if Option B on the practice exercise was the right or wrong choice clearly can't compete. Does hearing from Judy Blume ([www.judyblume.com](http://www.judyblume.com)) or Pam Muñoz Ryan ([www.pammunozryan.com](http://www.pammunozryan.com)) online in response to an e-mail posted on either of these writers' sites "successfully" demonstrate functional document test-taking skills? Absolutely, and it's accomplished in a rich, alive, author-connecting exchange. Getting an authentic response from a real author or the author's staff beats rote testing skills practice tremendously. Technology provides an empowering set of resources that makes this so. Through the use of author web sites, which are rich repositories of tech-fueled, highly motivating materials, students are engaged and teachers benefit and grow. The following chapters guide you in tapping the vast resource of author web sites.

## **ADDITIONAL AUTHOR SITES AND WEB RESOURCES TO EXPLORE**

### **CLWG Children's Lit Web Guide: Authors and Illustrators on the Web**

<http://ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/authors.html>

This encyclopedic index of individual author sites is a great place to start any author study.

### **I.N.K.: Interesting Nonfiction for Kids**

<http://inkrethink.blogspot.com>

This is a blog that nonfiction writers Loreen Leedy and Kathleen Krull contribute to regularly. It offers a great opportunity for students and teachers to get to know the new breed of innovative nonfiction writer's way of thinking. Gifted students in Grades 4–8 may enjoy commenting on the issues raised by the authors.

### **Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site**

[www.carolhurst.com](http://www.carolhurst.com)

This is the premier children's K–8 multicontent, reflective, and instructional professional development site. A full two years of coursework in picture books, social studies, mathematics, science, and art themes, plus actual lesson plans and ready-to-go activities, is immediately accessible to the user. Literacy coaches, graduate education professors, and even veteran teachers can visit and revisit this one-of-a-kind treasure on the web.

### **HarperCollins Children's Books, Authors and Illustrators**

[www.harpercollinschildrens.com/kids/authorsandillustrators](http://www.harpercollinschildrens.com/kids/authorsandillustrators)

This is a collection of short, student-friendly biographical sketches of key authors published by HarperCollins. Some have links to publisher-designed author sites.

### **Scholastic**

[www2.scholastic.com](http://www2.scholastic.com)

This site contains lessons, chats, interviews, discussions, and activities for teachers. Do not miss the section for students, with its book stacks, and the one for parents.

### **Flamingnet**

[www.flamingnet.com](http://www.flamingnet.com)

These young adults' reviews of books for young adults are highly motivational for students in Grades 4–8.

### **Cynthia Leitich Smith**

[www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com)

While Smith is a juvenile author, her site is an extensive resource for information on a broad spectrum of diversity, multicultural issues, and young adult authors, topics, and issues. This site is great for teacher educators, librarians, and literacy coaches.