

READ WRITE TEACH

*Choice and Challenge in the
Reading-Writing Workshop*

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DEDICATED TO TEACHERS™

Positive–Negative Life Graph

I ask students to make two columns on a blank page in the response section of their WRN: one column labeled "Positives" and the second column labeled "Negatives."

"What are seventeen of the best things that have ever happened to you?" I ask. "These could be personal or world events," I add. "Invention of the cell phone. Winning a state hockey tournament. The birth of your little brother." With the mention of a little brother I usually hear—"Can that be in the Negative column too?" For seven minutes we list dash facts (short phrases to get them back to the memory) in the Positive column.

"What are thirteen of the worst things that have happened to you, either personally or in the world, directly or indirectly. Your dog was hit by a car. The World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorists. The birth of your little brother." For another seven minutes we list.

I do my list right in front of them—and I try to keep it to within my first eighteen years of life—school days.

Positives (17):

grew up in Hingham
tri-capt HS basketball team
summer—tide pools
Mr. Webb—favorite teacher
and so on . . .

Negatives (13):

tried to cut out my sister's tonsils
played softball
discovered dad an alcoholic
Camp Aldersgate—slugs
and so on . . .

"Look back at your list and star three of the most positive things and three of the most negative." I star the ones on my list. "Is anyone willing to read what you starred?" Hands shoot

up most of the time. If not, I share first. I remind the students that something someone else has listed might remind others of a similar thing. "Jot down what you are reminded of. Add it to your list." Sometimes I ask the kids just to share their starred items with those at their table. I give them another two minutes to add anything to either list. Try for seventeen positives. Try to remember thirteen negatives. "If you don't have many negatives, you are one of the luckier persons in the world."

"Look through your lists and check those things that are most significant to you for one reason or another. They make you happy or proud, show your creativity or your talents, help you in your work or play, demonstrate you are confident, generous, loved, or they make you sad, embarrassed, angry, worried, fearful, disappointed, hurt."

After they've checked the most significant events, I have them jot down, on those lists, the age at which the event happened. I add those ages to my list: next to "tried to cut out my sister's tonsils" I write "age 6."

The students then chart the most significant positives and negatives in their lives on graph paper. They may not have seventeen and thirteen, but trying to come up with that many helps them to remember many more than if I said just to think of three.

I add positive and negative scales that run down the left side of the graph paper, +5 being the most positive of any event, and -5 being the most negative of any event. Then I add a line that runs across the page from left to right to represent their age. The distance representing each year should be the same, for instance, 5 cm = 1 year in their lives. If there is little that happened across several years, students can change the scale, giving greater space across the graph to the years when more happened.

I put a sample of a chart that was done well from a previous year on each table. At each point where the students chart an event I ask them to put at least three of the five W's (*who, what, when, where, why*) and *how*, focusing on the most important information in the limited space. I ask them to draw or find a picture that illustrates best what happened.

When I graph the time I tried to cut out my sister's tonsils as a -4 when I was age six, I draw a stick figure face with her mouth wide open and the uvula hanging down over the back of her tongue. I draw a pair of scissors in her mouth, and write: "tried to cut out sister's 'tonsils' because I wanted to be a doctor." Ultimately this becomes one of my pieces of writing because the students are so interested (flabbergasted and disgusted would be closer to their actual reactions) in what I did and why, and what happened. (The babysitter stopped me just in the nick of time.)

Just in case you, too, are interested, here's the lead to my story:

"I know how you can get a lot of ice cream," I said to my four-year-old sister.
"You want to do it."

My mother had taken us to visit Barbara Adams, who had just had her tonsils out. She had a big bowl of ice cream in her lap, and her mother said

that was all she could eat. We left her coloring books, crayons and a puzzle. I walked home with an idea planted in my head. I wanted to be a doctor. This would be good practice. I could cut out my sister's tonsils, despite the fact I had no idea where they were in her throat.

And so I began the story.

The point of the lifeline is to help students find those events, topics, and/or people who matter to them. By graphing the degree of impact on their lives (How positive? How negative?) the students (and I) can see how much these events mean to them. The graphs become invaluable resources for topics of writing—personal narrative, memoir, even persuasive or informational pieces. Many of the students' final pieces of writing throughout the year can be traced back to these graphs. They may not recognize this yet—but by spending time graphing, drawing, and noting dash facts with each event, they have planted the kernels of ideas.

In addition, the graphs give me invaluable visual clues into what each student's life has been like—how positive, how negative—so that I can begin to know them. The way I talk to them about these events helps them know me, and know how I will be with them. The better the students know me and trust me, the more honest they are. Do they have to include very personal negatives or positives? Not at all. Do they have to share their lists or final graphs with the whole class? Not unless they choose to.

I have noticed that the more opportunities I give students to draw, the more successful many of them are. Using stick figures and key words to convey information is not only acceptable, but encouraged. When we draw, we spend time thinking about what we are drawing. They talk to each other as they draw. They slow down. They think about how this event or person matters. They give ideas to each other, and they learn about each other. It sets a tone for the year.

I want kids to understand the process as well as the product, but I do not want the process to become the end product. If the listing alone helps them get to writing ideas, terrific. It's the spending of time graphing those events that lets many of them see even more clearly how this event matters to them. Letting others see and read their life stories gives the readers ideas and helps them get to know each other better.

We talk also about aesthetics. How can they make their graph appealing to a reader? How can they visually represent what they are saying to limit the use of words in such a small space? I simply want everything they do to be their best effort, especially if they go public—let anyone else view their work.

After the students finish their graphs, I start them thinking even more deeply about writing from them. I ask them to fold a standard eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch piece of paper in thirds. I have them choose three of the most memorable positive events and three of the most memorable negative events from the graphs—events or topics that surprised them, or they want to know more about, or that affected them most strongly. On one side of the paper they

Figure 5.1 Annika's Positive-Negative Life Graph

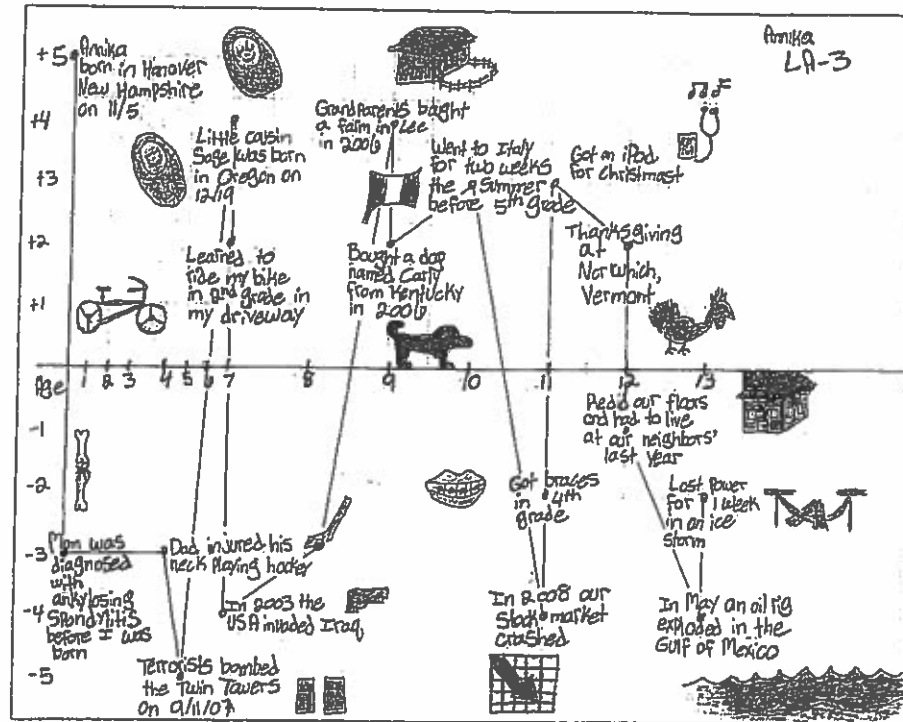
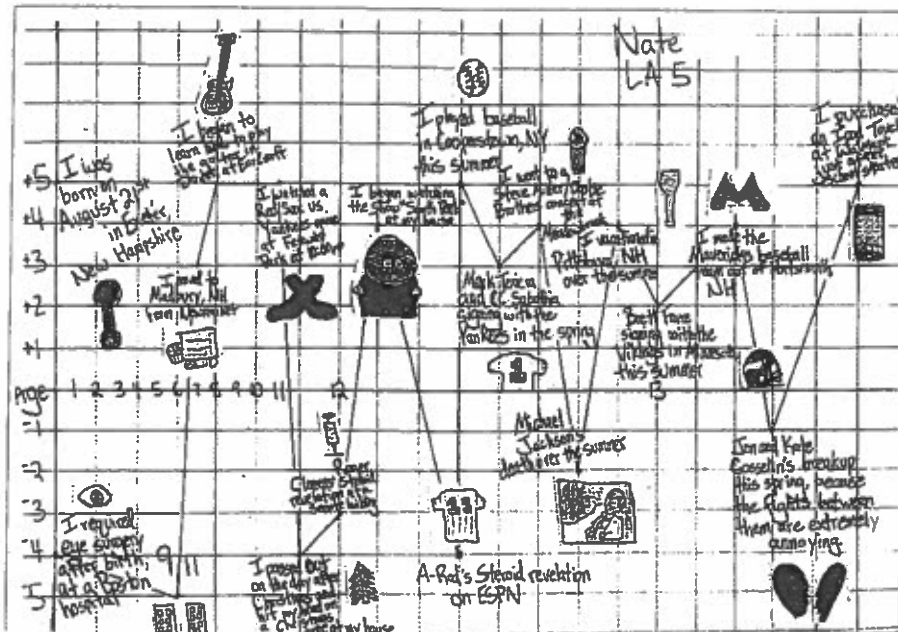


Figure 5.2 Nate's Positive-Negative Life Graph



list the three positives, each one at the top of a column. On the opposite side of the paper they list the three negatives across the tops of the three columns. I give them several minutes to list under each topic or event all the words, phrases, sentences, or questions that come to mind with respect to the topic or event. We go through all six topics, giving about three minutes to each column. One of the lists may lead the student to a piece of writing, because they have something from which to write.

They can fold the paper in thirds, and tape it down one side into their WRNs, so they don't lose all the ideas and phrases that came to mind with these six events.

Throughout the year, especially when the kids are stuck, I refer them to their list or their graph, often looking at it with them. "Aidan, you said that the death of your grandfather was one of the worst things that ever happened to you. Tell me more about him. What made this so difficult?" He wrote numerous pieces about his grandfather: poetry, personal essays, and reading response that often took him to the memories of his grandfather.

Annika listed her grandparents' purchase of a farm as one of the most positive events in her life. So much of her writing came from experiences on that farm. A first draft of an event at the farm became a more polished piece of poetry several months later.

Small pumpkins in random clusters dotted the bales of hay emitting a sweet dry smell; a barn's air freshener. Music ran from two fiddlers; a bouncing, dancing, leaping ribbon that tied together the sweet, warm, dry and crisp autumn essence that reverberated throughout the welcoming, even, yellow lighting of the barn. Some people clapped their hands to the lively beat of the music. Nothing modern, only authenticity characterized that moment and the barn seemed to sink around us, relaxing in the festive atmosphere.

Best draft:

The Pig Roast

Small pumpkins in random clusters
 Dot hay bales
 Emitting sweet dry smells:
 A barn's freshener.
 Music runs from two fiddlers—
 A bouncing, dancing, leaping ribbon
 Tying together
 Autumn's sweet, warm, dry, crisp essence
 Reverberating through the barn's welcoming, even, yellow light.
 People clap to the music's lively beat.

Nothing modern, only authenticity
Characterizes this moment.
The barn seems to sink around us
Relaxing in the festive atmosphere.

Outside, gnarled, twisted apple wood,
Piled sloppily,
Dry and brittle like the air,
Rests by the roaster.
A pig sizzles inside,
Radiating fall's quintessential scents—
Smoky-sweet maple and apple,
Intertwined with thick, flavorful pork and wood—
The signature smell of our annual pig roast.

From the life graph she also began thinking about age, drafting the following piece:

Fifteen

Fourteen had just become familiar;
I stopped stumbling, stuttering over the word
Hoping it was right,
Knowing it was right.
It came out awkward, choppy
From beneath the word "thirteen"
I shoveled back when people asked,
Because that wasn't right,
Not anymore.
Fourteen had just become familiar.
Just in time for fifteen.
Fifteen that came too fast
Because fourteen had yet to leave
And yet to come.
When did thirteen become fourteen,
And when will fourteen become fifteen?
When will I ever feel the age I am?
And when will I ever be the age I feel?