

Being a Reader: The Power of Breaking Complex Tasks into Doable Parts

By Elizabeth English | Categories: Reading

For as long as I can remember, I have been terrified of expressing myself artistically. Even in the privacy of my own world, knowing full well that I could hide any attempts from the eyes of others, I have been paralyzed to put pencil, crayon, or paintbrush to paper. In all honesty, I don't know where that fear comes from, but I'm not sure it really matters.

Recently, I made my first visit to the home of a friend, who happens to be an artist. I was there on an occasion completely unrelated to art, but immediately found that her home is literally filled from floor to ceiling with her watercolor creations. I was in awe of her talent and shared my longheld fear, to which she responded, "I can teach you 16 paint strokes in three two-hour sessions." Well, immediately I knew I could do that. Suddenly, the daunting task of creating a masterpiece was reduced to 16 strokes.

I went for my first class, and my skilled teacher immediately taught me three not-so-simple brushstrokes with a Chinese paintbrush. She called these leaf, trunk and branch strokes. I began with the leaf stroke and practiced many, many times until my approximation resembled the final pattern. To that she added a trunk stroke, followed by a branch stroke. All strokes were done in black ink, reducing the complexity of color, and she showed me how I could add those three strokes together to create a complete picture, which I did. I created not one, but three pictures in my first two-hour session. I was so proud of my accomplishments I was willing to post them on Facebook. In just two hours I had gone from someone unable to create art in the privacy of her own world to one who was posting three completed pieces on social media.

As a literacy educator, I began to wonder if the daunting task of learning to read is sometimes met by students with the same fear and trepidation. The notion of reading a complicated book could be viewed as beyond one's capability. As teachers, it is our responsibility to break this complicated task into manageable units, taught in sequence, in a manner that allows students to get a sense of the whole process, feel successful, and take pride in their accomplishment.

Being a Reader is founded on this principle of teaching students the foundational units of language. As students master them, they can successfully apply their learning to meaningful text and as a result feel that same degree of satisfaction and success. When a five-year-old closes the first book he's read in small group instruction and says, "I can read," his enthusiasm and sense of satisfaction propel him toward the essential ingredient of self-confidence, which assures him of becoming a reader. Believing that you can do something is the first step in being able to accomplish it.

Will I ever become a renowned artist? Probably not. But will the same principles applied to reading assure that students will become successful readers? Probably so.