

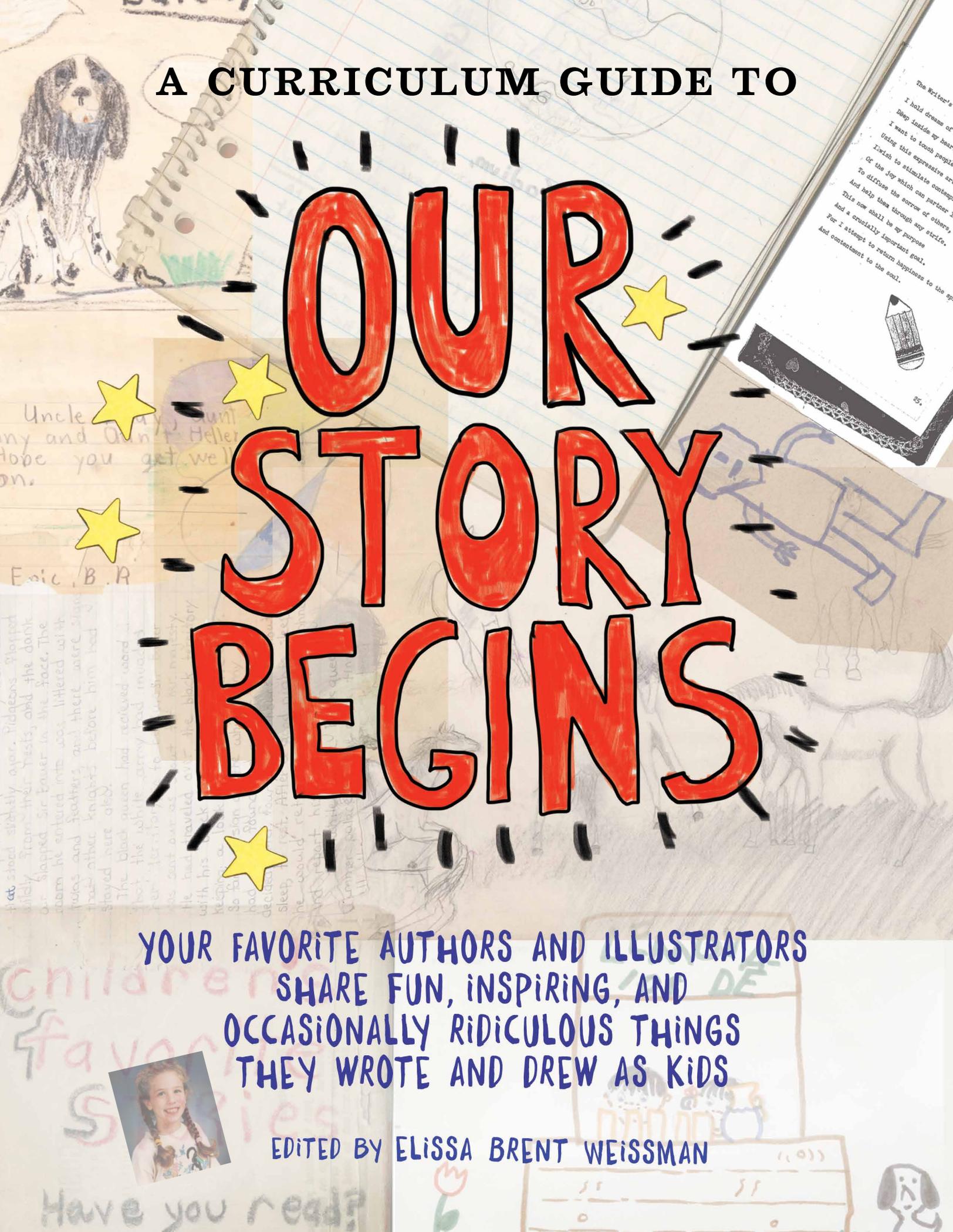
A CURRICULUM GUIDE TO

OUR STORY BEGINS

YOUR FAVORITE AUTHORS AND ILLUSTRATORS
SHARE FUN, INSPIRING, AND
OCCASIONALLY RIDICULOUS THINGS
THEY WROTE AND DREW AS KIDS



EDITED BY ELISSA BRENT WEISSMAN



ABOUT THE BOOK

What kind of writing did children's book authors do when they were kids? What kinds of drawings did illustrators create? Elissa Brent Weissman decided to find out, and this book is the result of her curiosity. Twenty-six children's authors and illustrators share samples of the work they did as children and some of their early thoughts about writing and illustrating. Did you know, for example, that author Chris Grabenstein wrote comic books for his friends and skits for them to perform? Or that Brian Selznick's introduction to art was making things out of tinfoil (or so he has been told), and he later graduated to copying the work of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo? Or that the prolific author Rita Williams-Garcia wrote five hundred words every night, and by the time she was thirteen, she had filled up thirty-nine notebooks with her sketches and ideas for stories?

These true stories give us glimpses of the creative process at a time when writers and illustrators were just beginning to develop their talents. What did they do to help their abilities grow? They worked at it! They practiced, gave themselves challenges, kept notebooks, and wrote for friends and relatives. Today's young writers and illustrators can do the same. This book gives us the inside scoop on how careers in writing and illustrating can begin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

Key Ideas and Details

The discussion questions and activities below draw on Common Core State Standards for reading informational text (RI) that ask children to ask and answer questions about a text, read a text closely, and draw inferences from it (RI.3–7.1), identify the main topic and key details that support a text and use this information to summarize it, (RI.3–7.2) and describe the relationship between a series of events, concepts, or ideas (RI.3–7.3).

1. In the introduction, editor Elissa Brent Weissman describes how she got the idea for the book. What did she want to know? How did she find out?
2. The authors and illustrators featured in the book describe what they did to improve their work. What did they say about each of the following activities? Give evidence from the book.
 - Practicing every day
 - Giving themselves challenges
 - Listening to stories and reading
 - Daydreaming and using their imagination
 - Keeping journals and notebooks
 - Copying illustrations and ideas from books
 - Writing for friends and relatives

What other activities can you add to this list to help you become a better author or illustrator?

3. What Did Authors and Illustrators Do When They Were Kids? The authors and illustrators featured in this book worked hard to improve their drawing and writing. What did they do as kids that helped them develop their creative talents? Go back to the book and look for evidence of how they helped themselves. Then use this evidence to fill in the chart below. The first entry has been done for you. Blank spaces are provided at the bottom of the chart so that you can add additional authors and illustrators. You can even add yourself!

AUTHOR OR ILLUSTRATOR
(OR BOTH)

WHAT HE OR SHE DID TO GROW AS
AN AUTHOR OR ILLUSTRATOR

Dan Santat	He practiced every day. He copied pictures of “cool comics” and cartoons. He gave himself tougher and tougher challenges.
Marla Frazee	
Jarrett J. Krosoczka	
Eric Rohmann	
Rita Williams-Garcia	
Candace Fleming	
Brian Selznick	
Ashley Bryan	
Alex Gino	
Gordon Korman	



Which activities or practices from the chart would be helpful to you? With a partner, discuss which one you would like to try. Then give the activity or practice a try and share some of the results.

4. What was the most useful advice you received from one of the authors or illustrators in the book?
5. Look carefully at one or more of the longer samples of writing that authors did as kids. Select from the following:
 - Marla Frazee’s chapter book *June and John* (pp. 19 – 23),
 - Jarrett J. Krosoczka’s book *The Owl Who Thought He Was the Best Flyer* (pp. 26 – 29)
 - Candace Fleming’s story *The First Move* (pp. 105 – 108)
 - Tom Angleberger’s encyclopedia entries about the world of Yodium (pp. 119 – 125),
 - Tim Federle’s camp diary, *Farewell Island Lake* (pp. 138 – 146).

Discuss what you notice about this writing. Think about the topic, word choice, organization, characters, setting, and plot. How would you describe the author’s writing from when he or she was a kid?

6. Look at some of the following examples of the art that illustrators created when they were kids:
 - R. J. Palacio’s illustrations of horses (pp. 13, 15)
 - Eric Rohmann’s get-well card to his aunt (p. 36)
 - Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s illustrations for her book *The Food Fairies* (pp. 45 – 48)
 - Chris Gall’s drawings of new creations and imaginary places (pp. 76 – 79)
 - Grace Lin’s illustrations for her book *Dandelion Story* (pp. 157 – 166)
 - Ashley Bryan’s drawings of his brothers and sisters (pp. 186 – 189)

How would you describe the illustrator’s artwork when he or she was a kid? Consider the illustrator’s use of line (bold, simple, curved, curly), color (light, dark, bold, pale, earthy), and shapes. What do you notice?

Craft and Structure

To learn about craft and structure, the Common Core State Standards asks us to help students determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings (RI.3–7.4). In the exercise below, students will use their own words to explain quotes from the text.

7. Looking Closely at Descriptions of the Writing Process. The contributors to *Our Story Begins* share information about their writing process. Examine each of the descriptions below and explain the meaning in your own words.

- **“So for me, writing has always been a way to fill spaces, to explore in a very deep way our most earnest longings. I couldn’t own a horse. But I could create one. And that was almost enough.”**

—Kathi Appelt

What this means: _____

- “I was often under the spell of my own imagination and unashamed to drift off in search of story ideas. I was a daydreamer, reader of the dictionary, explorer of our 1930s Funk & Wagnalls encyclopedia. When homework was done, I was an incessant notebook scribbler.”
—Rita Williams-Garcia

What this means: _____

- “As an eleven-year-old, I lived in the world of books. I devoured mysteries and fantasies and historical fiction. Like my favorite authors, I wanted to write stories that would leave my readers feeling all wild and trembly inside. But I didn’t know how. So I imitated the authors I loved.”
—Candace Fleming

What this means: _____

- “I have learned something: Whether you’re talking or writing, you can’t just blah blah blah all the time. You’ve got to think about who is listening and figure out how to keep them listening and how to make what you’re saying sensible to them.”
—Tom Angleberger

What this means: _____



Writing

Common Core State Standards emphasizes writing informative, explanatory, and argumentative text. The writing activities below provide experience writing to give an opinion and supporting it with reasons and information (W.3–5.1), to inform and explain (W.3–7.2), and to explain a sequence of events (W.3–7.3).

8. How Did Your Story Begin? Take the opportunity to tell your story as a writer and illustrator. Use the entries in the book as a guide for creating a description of the writing and drawings you did when you were younger. Include samples of your work.

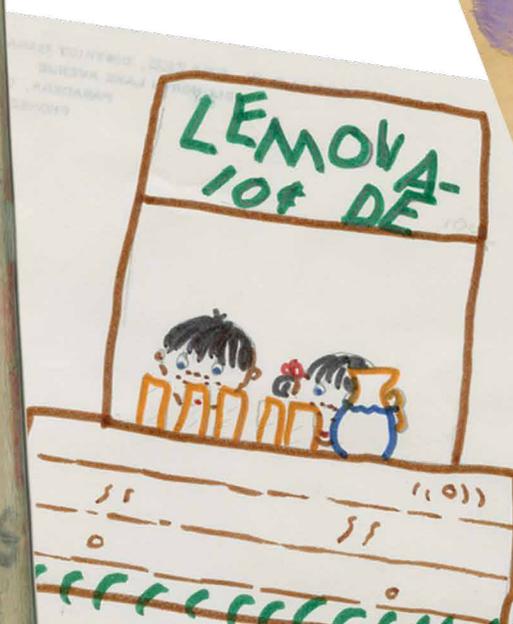
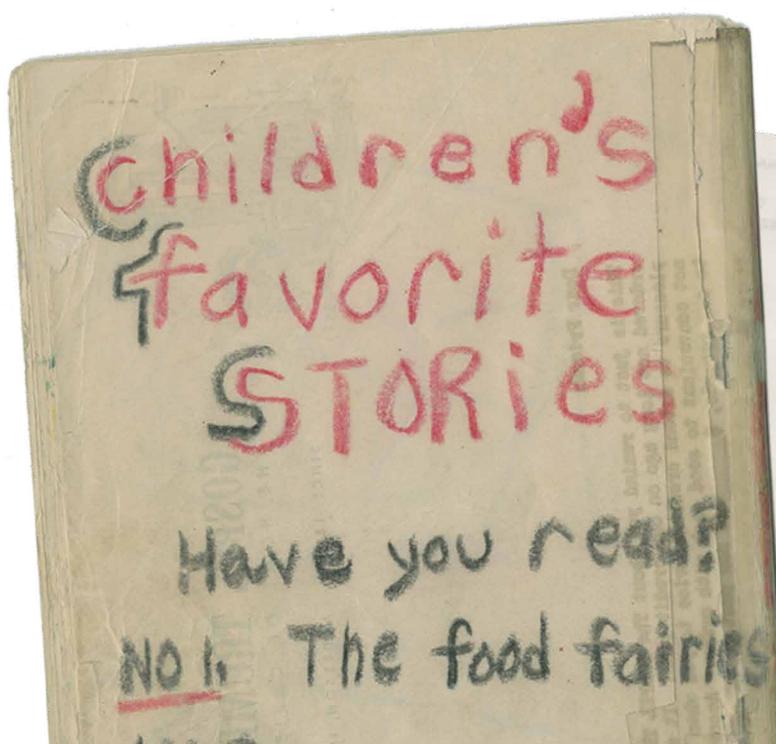
Here are some suggestions of what to describe:

- What you liked to write about
- What you liked to draw
- How you got your ideas for writing and drawing
- What you notice about your earlier work

9. Continuing Your Story: Twenty Ideas for Writing and Drawing. Try out the ideas used by the authors and illustrators in *Our Story Begins* when they were kids:

- (1) Like Dan Santat, Brian Selznick, and Yuyi Morales, copy pictures of things you like—comics, cartoons, whatever! As you continue to copy more and more pictures or photos, notice your improvement.
- (2) Give yourself tough challenges. What would you like to learn how to draw? Continue to work at it over the course of your school year. Did you notice any changes in your ability by the end of the year?
- (3) Make your own books like Marla Frazee, who started a chapter book series called June and John; or Jarrett J. Krosoczka, who wrote his first book in third grade; or Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, who wrote a book called *The Food Fairies*.
- (4) Invent stories for special people you know, like Thanhhá Lại did when she wrote for her mother.
- (5) Write and illustrate your own cards for friends and family the way Eric Rohmann did when he created a get-well card for his aunt Helen. What's the next occasion you can create a card for? Is there a family member's or friend's birthday coming up? How about a special holiday?
- (6) Write something unexpected like Linda Sue Park did when she wrote a *serious* limerick instead of a funny or silly one.
- (7) Write books and stories like the ones you like to read, just like Elissa Brent Weissman did when she wrote *Sisters*, which was like *The Baby-Sitters Club*.
- (8) Write about your world as you would like it to be, as Kathi Appelt did when she created her own horses.
- (9) Write your own newspaper, like Gail Carson Levine did when she was a member of the Scribble Scrabble Club.
- (10) Draw your dream home, underwater lab, or car to travel the world. Then, write a story to go along with the drawing to match Chris Gall's "draw first, write later" strategy. Gall first drew whatever he wanted, and later created the stories to go along with his art.

- (11) Over the course of the school year, fill up your notebook with story ideas and sketches like Rita Williams-Garcia did. She filled up thirty-nine notebooks by her thirteenth birthday!
- (12) Draw a daily comic strip and share it with your friends, like Peter Lerangis did.
- (13) Imitate the authors you like, the way Candace Fleming and Marla Frazee did. Review your favorite authors' writing style, and take the opportunity to learn from them.
- (14) Take a tip from Tom Angleberger: Think about who is going to read what you write. Write something—a poem, story, or comic—for someone special. That's what Kwame Alexander did when he wrote a poem for his mother.
- (15) Try keeping a diary the way Tim Federle did when he went to camp. Write about the events of your day. Add sketches.
- (16) Use some actual events from your life when you write a story. That's what Grace Lin did when she wrote *The Year of the Dog*. The main character entered a national book contest the same way Lin did in real life.
- (17) Write skits for you and your friends to act out the way Chris Grabenstein did.
- (18) Draw pictures from life like Ashley Bryan did when he began using his brothers and sisters as models.
- (19) Become better acquainted with the dictionary and thesaurus the way Rita Williams-Garcia did when she became a “reader of the dictionary” and Chris Grabenstein did when he asked for a thesaurus for his birthday and a dictionary for Christmas. Like these writers, have your own fun with words.
- (20) After reading the final page of *Our Story Begins*, which lists tips from the book to get you started, list your own tips. Explain why these tips have been useful to you.



Extending the Experience of Reading the Book

10. Read these nonfiction picture book biographies of children's book creators, and discuss what you learned about each of their creative processes. How did each of these creators make such an impact in children's literature? Is there any that you particularly admire? Why?

- *The Boy on Fairfield Street: How Ted Geisel Grew Up to Become Dr. Seuss* by Kathleen Krull
- *Imagine That!: How Dr. Seuss Wrote The Cat in the Hat* by Judy Sierra
- *Wanda Gág: The Girl Who Lived to Draw* by Deborah Kogan Ray
- *A Poem for Peter: The Story of Ezra Jack Keats and the Creation of The Snowy Day* by Andrea Davis Pinkney
- *Balderdash!: John Newbery and the Boisterous Birth of Children's Books* by Michelle Markel
- *Big Machines: The Story of Virginia Lee Burton* by Sherri Duskey Rinker
- *Pocket Full of Colors: The Magical World of Mary Blair, Disney Artist Extraordinaire* by Amy Guglielmo and Jacqueline Tourville

11. Listen to and watch the video of the song "Writing Is Cool!!!!!!!!!" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqDkKgMXdyk>.

Learn the words and sing along.

12. Watch several videos of children's authors and illustrators speaking to children about their writing process at <http://www.nbclearn.com/writers-speak-to-kids>

There are videos of the following authors :

- Michael Buckley
- Amy Ingatow
- Nick Bruel
- Rebecca Stead
- Philip C. Stead
- Laura Vaccaro Seeger
- Douglas Florian
- Clare Vanderpool
- Gordon Korman
- Jacqueline Woodson
- Ridley Pearson
- Judy Schachner
- Peter Brown
- Doreen Cronin
- Jeff Kinney
- Daniel Kirk
- Mo Willems

What can you learn from watching these authors and illustrators talk about their creative process? Is there any particular process that you plan to follow when creating your own work? Have any of them inspired you to be a writer or illustrator?

*Note that page numbers refer to the hardcover edition of *Our Story Begins*.

Guide written by Myra Zarnowski, a professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, CUNY.

This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.