

# Creating Instant Readers

by Gwynne Spencer

Has your three year old ever said, "Mommy, what does that word say?" If the answer is "yes," then your kid is ready to read! Many threes and fours are ready to read, which is clearly evidenced by their asking what the word says they know it's a word, they know it says something and they know that **you** can teach them how to read it!

The trick is finding them a book that is short enough to fit their limited stamina in the reading process and has big enough print for a little person's inexperienced eyes. Want to know a secret? The reason little kids don't read is that we have made the print too small. If you want to prove this to yourself, read this sentence, put the article down and walk away about ten feet and then try to read it. You KNOW what it says, but you can't read it. Why? Because the print is too small.

Similarly, little kids with inexperienced eyes need BIG HUGE print to begin the reading process. They also need it in RED ink, which is a longer wavelength and easier to see (that's why fire engines are red, why K-Mart, Wal-mart, McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, and Conoco logos are red). So where do you buy short books with huge red print and stories that will enthrall a three year old just beginning to read? You don't. You can't. You have to make them. But luckily, it's not that hard.

One of the sure fire ways to get even your littlest reader excited about being able to read the words all alone is to make your beginner books together. It can be as simple as a couple of pages of typing paper stapled together or as elaborate as a pop-up book.

When writing a beginner book, use a predictable text pattern, like **Brown Bear Brown Bear** by Bill Martin Jr. or a song that the child already knows. Other patterns to use include the alphabet, counting from one to ten, counting frontwards and counting backwards, counting on fingers and toes up to twenty (you can trace hands and toes into paper and make the book totally personalized), word families (boat/coat/moat for example), and by concept (vegetables, fruits, clouds, dogs, flowers, birds, cars, horses).

The most important thing in this business of writing books with your child is that the words belong to the child and all **you** do is act as a secretary. Little kids hate writing but love being authors, so your job is to be a great typist or scribe. You also get to be the queen of the Scotch tape and the glue stick.

"But I'm not creative. I can't write a book," you say. You don't need to be creative. All you need is a good pattern to follow. One of my son's first books had pictures of Coca-cola, 7-Up, Dr. Pepper, Root Beer and other beverages on each page with the thumping text "Beverage Beverage What Do I See? I see (name of beverage) waiting for me" written in BIG

RED PRINT with a marker.

Beginning reading is like beginning skiing: the learner has no tolerance for failure. It may be slow going at the beginning, but getting to the end of the run in one piece is a thrill. A good pattern book will help keep the reader upright and succeeding. Once you establish the pattern of a "brown bear" type book, you can do another book and another book and another book! As long as it works, don't change it. Try a book of "Vegetable Vegetable what do you see?" and cut pictures out of magazines or grocery circulars of various vegetables. Another hit is "Dinosaur Dinosaur What do you see?" All of these work perfectly well for young readers. The trick is to keep the print size HUGE.

This is about  
the right size.

# It is 72 pt.

Rule of Thumb: If an adult can read it about ten feet away, it's just barely big enough for a beginning reader. If an adult can read it twenty feet away, it's just right for a beginning reader.

If you're ready for a new pattern, try a favorite melody. Songs of all kinds that the child already knows are etched into their DNA. Whether it's "Jingle Bells" or "Happy Birthday" you can adapt the text. My son's first request was "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." I do NOT recommend Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, however. It went on and on and on. Chants, like jump rope rhymes or counting out rhymes are great "patterns" to follow. Think back to third grade, one potato two potato three potato ore...it will come back to you.

Using other people's published books that follow a pattern also makes the link to real literature easier for the child, leading them to reading. Some titles that are worthy of imitation include

**Quick as a Cricket** by Don and Audrey Wood

**The Very Hungry Caterpillar** by Eric Carle.

**Zak the One of a Kind Dog** by Jane Lidz

Mother Goose Rhymes also provide good structure for homemade books. Making up your own versions of "Wee Willie Winkie" or "Dr. Foster went to Gloucester" or Humpty Dumpty will provide lots of fun.

Another favorite patterns from poetry is "I am the One Who..." Kids list as many "things" as they are years old, going from general to specific. For instance, for a seven year old.....

**I am the one who has brown hair.**

**I am the one who has brown eyes.**

**I am the one who likes dogs.**

**I am the one who likes jelly and butter.**

**I am the one who hates cheese.**

**I am the one who threw up in the bus yesterday.**

On a long car trip, several kids who were riding with me invented a potent new pattern: THE BAD BABIES. Each story starts out

"Once upon a time there were three bad babies.

These bad babies were SOOOOO bad that they....

Each child adds one thing to the list. The kids found that themes helped the

books hold together. Their titles included "The Bad Babies Birthday Party," "The Bad Babies Go to Grandma's for Thanksgiving" and "The Bad Babies Mess Up Christmas." We've had some terrific fun with the adventures of the Bad Babies. They've gone to Hawaii, on a plane. They've gone to the restaurant and done ALL the things no child is allowed to do. They've gone to the mall and I won't even begin to tell you what they've done there. I think the worst of the Bad Baby stories were when they went to Thanksgiving by plane to grandmother's alone. Boy, were they bad! The kids will feed on each other's ideas once you get the bad babies really rolling. Then, they can draw pictures of these horrid little babies and shock everyone!

You cannot teach the alphabet too many ways or too many times. Doing an ABC of Flowers, an ABC of Dogs, an ABC of People in the Family, an ABC of Good Things to Eat, can help your young reader fall in love with the alphabet time and time again. .

Counting books are very powerful as beginning readers. The littlest reader knows what comes next. With the proper picture clues, they can read in an instant! Start out with My Counting Book of M&M's and actually tape the candy to the page (glue will not work, trust me). One yummy red M&M, two yummy red M&M's, three yummy red M&M's. you can change the color for a surprise in the text. You can do a backwards counting book,

too. For ideas, ask your local librarian for examples of outstanding counting books, of which there are many. Then steal the ideas and adapt them to your child's likes and dislikes.

Another pattern that can celebrate your child's immediate world is "I went walking, what did I see? I saw (.....) looking at me." As a variation, try "I went driving, what did I see? I saw (.....) looking at me." Or if you're going on a plane, try "I went flying, what did I see? I saw (.....use airplane related pictures....) looking at me."

Finding pictures in magazines can be tedious and boring for kids or tons of fun. If you participate and make it a race, it will be lots more fun. Old magazines are often available for nickels and dimes at the library or thrift shop. Announce a theme like CARS or CASTLES or SHOES. Set the kitchen timer for fifteen minutes. Give each child a pair of really good scissors with sharp points so they can puncture the page. Make it a race to find as many pictures on that topic as possible in the time limit. After you've got groups of pictures cut out, store them in ziplock baggies and label them. You'll always be ready to make a new book in a heartbeat. When you find a really cool picture that fits one of the categories, you can just pop it into the envelope.

Once your kids have made two or three books, you'll find the Steamroller Effect in force--they'll accumulate more and more pictures, and

you'll go through more and more glue sticks. And of course, the kids will read more and more. But we don't want any of that now, do we?

Using your old photos in homemade easy reader books is a great way to introduce even the youngest child in the family to members who are long gone and far away. If your photos are like my photos, they are living in shoeboxes in the hall closet. Much better that they be put to use to teach a kid to read than that they mildew waiting for the day when I find time to organize them into albums. Making books as gifts can also be lots of fun, once the kids get the hang of it. They can read it onto tape before they give the book away as a special treat, too. It's a great "cousins" present or "Grandma" gift.

Keep in mind that even the littlest kid understands that YOU know how to write and type a zillion times better and faster than the best and fastest kid. On the computer, you can pop the print size up to 72 points in a moment. If you're writing by hand with red marker, you can use all capitals if the kid wants, or all lower case. You can get books on fancy lettering at scrapbooking stores (if there's not one near you, go to [www.scrapbooking.com](http://www.scrapbooking.com)) or even take a workshop. I've found that various print styles thrill kids endlessly.

If you don't have a color printer on your computer, print the text out in black (or use the "shadow" option on your style bar to make hollow

letters) and color with markers after it prints out. It doesn't seem to matter to the kids, as long as it's big and bright. Neon red seems to be even more popular than regular red, as you might suspect. And "sniffy" markers are even MORE fun!

Take a trip to the paper store, or the paper aisle in your local stationery supply store or office warehouse and you'll find an amazing array of papers like wood grain, satin, strawberries, rainbows on the sea. What child can resist making books on paper as wonderful as this? If you get a group of moms together to do bookmaking, you can each buy a different kind of paper, sharing the variety and fun, since there are usually fifty sheets in a packet. At chain office supply stores you can buy these exquisite papers by the sheet; I've also found breathtaking paper at scrap booking stores for 25¢ a sheet. I'm pretty frugal, so I tend to make my books smaller than the full 8 1/2 x 11 inches to maximize each piece of patterned paper.

You have many choices when it comes to binding the pages of your book together. Staples are a simple solution. You can sew the pages together on the sewing machine using the longest stitch possible. You can whip stitch the pages together by hand. You can tape each page to the page before it with cloth tape or Scotch tape. You can even make a slobber proof book! Take four or five zip lock sandwich-size baggies, put your book pages inside the bags and staple along the zip line, covering the staples with

tape so they don't tear little fingers open. You can add cardboard covers if you leave a blank page at the front and back of each book--then glue the blank page to the cardboard cover. If you want to be really fancy, you can cover the cardboard with cloth or pictures before you attach the insides to it. Then you've got a REAL book, as the kids would say. Most books will take dozens of readings before they self-destruct. As long as the books stay "instant readers" and you don't make the kids wait three days for the finished product, you're on the right track.

Another tip for beginning readers--the sentence should end at the end of the line. Most beginning readers don't know how to scan down to the next line to continue a sentence until much later in the process. Make it as easy as possible: end the sentence at the end of the line, even if you have to glue on a flap of paper that folds out to continue the sentence.

How many books should you make? I'd try for one a week. As your beginning reader gets more and more practiced at reading homemade literature, the transition to "boughten books" will become easier and more natural. Teach your kids to look inside the book when in libraries and bookstores. If a librarian hears a kid say, "I like this book but the print is too small" they can deal with it. But if they hear a kid say, "I can't read this" they automatically think it's too hard. Teach your child to articulate the actual words, "The print is too small" so the reading process is not

impeded. I dare say you won't find any books printed in red ink. But you will find some wonderful books with big print, some delightful board book versions of old favorites with large print and shortened text, and some beginning readers with a real sense of story and celebration of the written word.

After about six months of homemade books and daily reading, don't be too surprised if your three or four year old one day picks up a copy of *Goodnight Moon* or some other favorite family book and reads it. They're not "just memorizing the words" (when was the last time you memorized a whole book?). They're reading! Celebrate. Have a party. Stick a candle in a cupcake and make it an event! Take a photo! It's time to celebrate because today, your young person has joined the ranks of the literate. And you did it yourself.

**Beverage,**

**Beverage**

**what do you see?**

**I see Pepsi**

**looking at me**

**(picture here)**

**Pepsi, Pepsi,**

**what do you see?**



**I see Coca-Cola**

**looking at me**

**(picture here)**

**Coca-Cola,**

**Coca-Cola**

**what do you see?**



**I see 7-Up**

**looking at me.**

**(Picture here)**

**7-Up, 7-Up**

**what do you see?**

**I see Dr. Pepper**

**looking at me.**

**(picture here)**

**Dr. Pepper, Dr. Pepper,**

**what do you see?**

**I see Kool-Aid  
looking at me.**

**(picture here)**

**Kool-Aid, Kool-Aid  
what do you see?**

**I see Creamland**

**looking at me.**

**Creamland, Creamland**

**what do you see?**

**I see Blue Sky  
looking at me.**

**THE END**

**Big dog,**

**big dog**

**what do you see?**

**I see a Saint Bernard  
looking at me.**

**Saint Bernard,  
Saint Bernard**

**what do you see?**

**I see a Great Dane**

**looking at me**

**Great Dane**

**Great Dane**

**what do you see?**



**I see a Doberman  
looking at me.**

**Doberman,  
Doberman  
what do you see?**



**I see a bloodhound**

**looking at me**

**Bloodhound,**

**bloodhound,**

**what do you see?**



**I see a sheepdog**

**looking at me**

**Sheepdog, sheepdog**

**what do you see?**

**Hardly anything  
with all this hair  
in my eyes.**

**I need a haircut!**

**THE END**

**DINOSAUR,**

**DINOSAUR**

**WHAT DO**

**YOU SEE?**

**I see a stegosaurus  
looking at me.**

**Stegosaurus,  
stegosaurus  
what do you see?**

**I see a brontosaurus  
looking at me.**

**Brontosaurus,  
brontosaurus**

**what do you see?**

**I see a triceratops**

**looking at me**

**Triceratops,**

**triceratops,**

**what do you see?**

I see a  
tyrannosaurus rex  
looking at me.

**RUN AWAY!**

**The End.**

