

# Art and Writing Must Be Non-Intimidating

From Corbett Harrison, Northern Nevada Writing Project  
[corbett@corbettharrison.com](mailto:corbett@corbettharrison.com)

I've only met one teacher who absolutely refused the Mr. Stick idea that I share here. She told me twice at two different workshops, "I can't draw." But what she meant was, "I *won't* draw." Something bad had happened to her in her past that made her detest the notion of making a picture to help explain her thought process. Did a sibling run circles around her by drawing much better than she, or did someone thoughtlessly make a comment about her attempts at art that just stuck with her forever? Did she have a teacher who intimidated the students with art by out-drawing them? I feel bad for anyone who *won't* draw. It means they had a bad experience with art, which is such an important thinking tool. To me, bad-mouthing art is like bad-mouthing oxygen.

My students were required to show each other their Mr. Stick assignments, and no one's art skills were ever compared in my classroom. The beauty of Mr. Stick is that he levels the playing field for all artists; there was no need for comparison. A stickman is a recognizable stickman in all students' hands. While my gifted artists found time to add fingers and toes, my lesser artists gained more confidence in basic shape and design, but no one was creating intimidating art.

I drew alongside them to get them started and continue their thinking; my Mr. Sticks were on the overhead or the whiteboard. My students learned quickly that they could outdraw me without much trouble, and that gave them loads of confidence. What I modeled for them best with my Mr. Sticks was how I used the drawing to show a deeper level of thinking about the content at hand.

"Mr. Stick," I told them, "is not just here to relay the facts." They already had notes that did that! "Mr. Stick," I explained, "is here to move your thinking to the next level about this information."

I say this up front so you won't mistakenly think this idea is about drawing cute pictures that go alongside your content notes. This is ultimately a writing assignment (preceded by a quickly-drawn stickman) that aims to make students think deeper about classroom content through original words given to the Mr. Stick drawing..

## Where Mr. Stick came from...

"Mr. Stick" remains the best idea that came to my classroom! **Ever!** I say that with all sincerity. He became my classroom note-taking mascot. He became my students' journaling icon. He was our classroom logo, and he communicated with me on my students' behalf when they did or did not understand new content. I've shared Mr. Stick with so many teachers that I am often called "Mr. Stick" by them when they forget my name years later.



Mr. Stick wasn't my first class "Margin Mascot" though...

My first class mascot was named "Mr. Pickle." It's actually a VERY long story, so here's my Cliff's Notes version:

*One day, at the end of class, we had a few minutes to spare, so—on a whim—we held a pickle drawing contest. The thing we discovered about drawing pickles was that anyone can draw a lump that looks like a pickle; even my worst artists could draw something that seemed just as pickle-ish as my top artists. We laughed. The bell rang. We went home.*

*The next day, I found several second attempts at pickles drawn in the corners of my students' homework assignments. One of the pickles was not only colored, but he also sported a face and had a dialogue bubble that told me, "This was a dilly of an assignment, Mr. H." I laughed, shared the joke with my students (they groaned), and we attempted to leave it at that.*

*The next day, I found lumpy pickles drawn on probably ten of the turned-in assignments; many drawings now had dialogue bubbles that spoke to me as teacher. They were "checking in" with me through their pickle-talk when their drawings reported things like "I couldn't finish...family emergency...sorry" and "Question number three makes no sense."*

*The day following that, I entered the classroom to find a huge pickle with a face and a top hat drawn on the whiteboard, with a greeting for the entire class: "Welcome to Mr. Pickle's Class!"*

We had successfully developed an icon...our private, esoteric symbol. He stood for us. He became ours. I started to **require** his appearance on assignments and note pages. He was our private classroom joke...but more importantly, he became the voice that had been missing from our journals and notebooks. Throughout that year, taking notes in our notebooks or after writing in our journals, my students invited Mr. Pickle onto their notebook pages. His quickly-drawn presence and accompanying dialogue bubbles showed me where my students had made connections and had questions or could provide commentary. My students willingly revisited their notes for the first time because I required them to re-read them before they could add their icon and share their thinking. This class note-taking mascot became so effective that it would take over every one of my classes' journals and notebooks the next year...but only after he had a face-lift.

The next year, Mr. Pickle became "Mr. Stick"—a more evolved version of the stickman that was a little less esoteric and even easier to draw than a pickle. Early on in our school year, we held one 10-minute drawing lesson, followed by two 5-minute practice sessions on successive days. That was all it took to make every one of my students believe they could add Mr. Stick's presence to their notes and journals.

What I became good at was finding clever ways for them to really look back at their journal entries and content notes... add Mr. Stick's presence. I found it wasn't hard to do. I found the kids really liked to find things to say (through Mr. Stick) about what we had talked about in class.

Ten years after inventing Mr. Stick (Can you really invent a stickman?), I have seen many variations of Mr. Stick in many different curriculum areas:

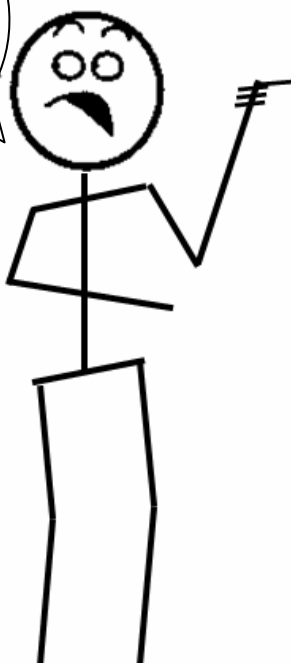
- Mr. Rational and Mr. Irrational in a math class;
- Mr. Fraction in a different math class;
- Mr. Einstein in a science class;
- Mr. Communism, Mr. Socialism and Mr. Democracy in a government class;
- Uncle Stick (like Uncle Sam) in a social studies class;
- Señor Stick in a Spanish class.

All of the variations kept the same basic idea: require students to draw Mr. Stick in the margins near the notes or journal entries. Have Mr. Stick's dialogue bubbles (be they in English or Spanish or Pig Latin) verify what students are learning and the connections they are making.

### **Making students THINK when adding Mr. Stick to journals and notebooks:**

After my students had taken lecture notes or done some journal writing, Mr. Stick would visit their margins. This became known as a "Mr. Stick Assignment." This might happen once a week. It might happen every day. I was amazed how much my students came to like these assignments. Often, they asked, "Aren't we doing a Mr. Stick today?"

I was shocked how much this first method helped them think about their notes.



- I might instruct my students with, "Use the *Give Your Mr. Stick Emotions* handout, and add three emotional Mr. Sticks to today's class notes. Have your Mr. Stick point out and explain how you are feeling about this new material."
- Or I might say, "Make Mr. Stick versions of three people you took notes on this week...Add a dialogue bubble to each Mr. Stick that provides an insightful thought that person might have had."
- Or I might say, "I asked you to write every day in your journal this week. Please have Mr. Stick visit and point out where your best writing was and where your not-so-best writing was. I expect Mr. Stick to say something that makes it very clear why he is singling out this passage or that."
- Or I might say, "Have Mr. Stick point out three connections you've made between your notes from the last three weeks."

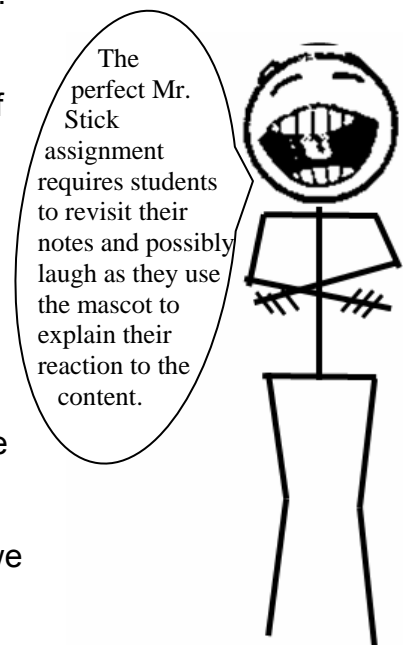
I'll repeat here something I said earlier:

*"Mr. Stick," I told my students, "is not just here to relay the facts." They already had notes that did that! "Mr. Stick," I explained, "is here to move your thinking to the next level about this information."*

In my class, Mr. Stick was assigned one of eight jobs when he visited students' note-taking margins. Each of these jobs was designed to get students to a higher level of thinking. I modeled these jobs with my blackboard and overhead examples of Mr. Stick assignments, and this is what made Mr. Stick more than just a fun drawing activity. Mr. Stick was a thinking activity first and foremost, and my students knew this.

Let's say we're studying irrational numbers in math. Here are Mr. Stick's eight potential jobs when he's invited to visit the margins around our class notes:

- Mr. Stick needs to point out a comparison (similarity) between what you've taken notes on and what you already knew before this class began. For example, Mr. Stick's dialogue bubble will compare a fact about irrational numbers to a fact about skateboarding or to Britney Spears.
- Mr. Stick needs to point out a comparison between what you've taken notes on today and what you've taken notes on previously. For example, Mr. Stick will compare a fact about irrational numbers to a fact about decimals or to dividing fractions.
- Mr. Stick needs to point out a contrast (difference) between what you've taken notes on today and what you've taken notes on previously. For example, Mr. Stick will contrast a fact about irrational numbers to a fact about whole numbers.
- Mr. Stick needs to paraphrase the main idea of the day's notes with a language challenge. A "language challenge" means the paraphrased main idea needs to take the form of a haiku or a limerick or a riddle or a rhyming couplet.
- Mr. Stick needs to point out the two most important facts you have pulled from your notes and explain why they are the most important.
- Mr. Stick needs to show how he would use a newly learned fact to complete a real-life task. The student must invent his/her own real-life task, not simply regurgitate an example the teacher has provided.
- Mr. Stick needs to predict where you believe you might have trouble with the notes if there was a test over the content tomorrow. Mr. Stick needs to explain the prediction.
- Mr. Stick needs to tell an intelligent joke about the content we have taken notes on today.



## Extending the note-taking mascot to other writing across the curriculum assignments

Before introducing Mr. Stick to my classroom, if I asked students to write higher-level thinking responses to content, I was met with moans and groans. After Mr. Stick, the moans and groans almost completely disappeared. This fact still baffles me, making me realize how funny kids are. They were doing the same thing as before, but I added a brief drawing assignment between the note-taking and the writing, and suddenly the writing seemed less burdensome. Figuring out my students is something I should probably give up on some day; I don't think it's possible.

Teachers are a little less difficult to figure out, I now know. In 1997, I began giving the Mr. Stick idea away to teachers at presentations I did for the Northern Nevada Writing Project, and I should have predicted what would happen. The teachers took the basic idea, and they tweaked it to fit their classrooms and content. Next, Mr. Stick began leaving the margins and taking up entire pages in journals and notebooks. Then, he left notebooks and journals completely, entering larger assignments. I found his presence on other teachers' larger assignments and even on their tests and quizzes.

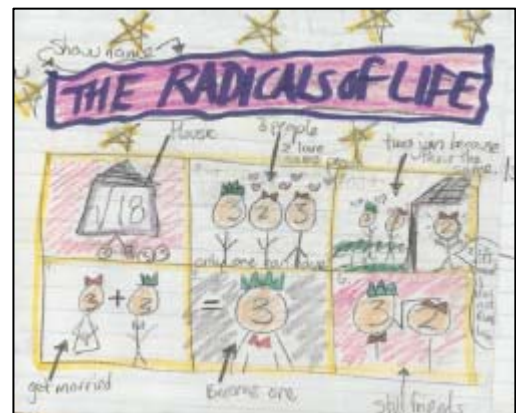
I applaud teachers who do such things. It's what I did as teacher. An idea didn't feel like one of my teaching tools until I modified it to fit my style. I invite you to take the idea and tweak it as you see fit. Just be certain that writing always accompanies your Mr. Stick assignments.

Here is a list of creative ways I've collected over the years from teachers who turned Mr. Stick into their own classroom tool. These are ways that I've seen simple Mr. Stick art go beyond journal and notebook pages.

My list:

- Hieroglyphs assignment: You're an archeologist! You've discovered a cave wall that proves that ancient man predicted [insert content name here] before it ever happened. Sketch the five hieroglyphs that you've discovered on the cave wall. Write a short paragraph that explains what is happening in the hieroglyph, using the voice of your archeologist.
- Movie Poster assignment: You're an advertising agent! They are making a new movie about [insert content name here], and it will star Mr. Stick. Design the movie poster and include enough words to show that this film will not only be entertaining but also factually based.
- The Haiku Comic Strip: You're a newspaper comic! You are only allowed three panels. Each panel must have its own drawing. Your first comic panel must use only five words; your second comic panel must use only seven words; your third comic panel must use only five words. Your comic must explain the three most important things you learned today. (See student sample on page 37 of the NNWP's *Writing Across the Curriculum Guide*.)

- Vocabulary assignment: You are a dictionary artist! Your company is putting out the first Mr. Stick visual version of the dictionary. Each dictionary entry will be accompanied by a picture of Mr. Stick showing each word's meaning through a picture of him doing something. Take two of this week's vocabulary words and create a Mr. Stick illustration for this new dictionary. Copy the definition neatly near each drawing, then explain how the picture is showing the meaning of each vocabulary word in a sentence. (See student sample on page 38 of the NNWP's *Writing Across the Curriculum Guide*.)
- Vacation Diary: You are on an imaginary vacation and keeping a diary! Put on your clever-thinking hat and write an entry that not only explains what happens on a day in your vacation but also demonstrates to the teacher that you learned and understood what we have taken notes on today. Illustrate your diary entry with at least one Mr. Stick drawing. (See student sample on page 40 of the NNWP's *Writing Across the Curriculum Guide*.)
- Mr. Stick Genealogy: You're a genealogist! After reviewing our current unit of study, you've discovered two long-lost relatives of Mr. Stick. Sketch them and be prepared to explain how they are related to Mr. Stick (and our unit of study) when you come to class tomorrow. You will be introducing them to other students. (See student sample on page 41 of the NNWP's *Writing Across the Curriculum Guide*.)
- Mr. Stick Soap Storyboard: You're a soap opera writer! You're creating a scene for your soap opera that centers around what we've learned and talked about in class today. Use a blank storyboard and Mr. Stick illustrations to map out your soap opera scene. Be sure to use all or most of the vocabulary we talked about in class today in your storyboard. (See full-sized student sample on page 42 of the NNWP's *Writing Across the Curriculum Guide*.)



## Connect Instruction to the Writing Traits: Note-taking “mascots”

Up the ante! Build better student writing skills by challenging them with writing trait language as you explain your expectations for your Note-taking Mascot assignments.

Here are writing traits this WAC activity could easily help reinforce in student writing:

### Idea Development

- “Have Mr. Stick explain an *original* solution you came up with to a science or math problem. IDEA DEVELOPMENT is all about coming up with original ideas and explaining them well enough so someone else can make sense of them.”
- “IDEA DEVELOPMENT in writing is often about looking at the same topic but using different *lenses* to examine it; you know, looking for different ways of looking at the same thing. Have Mr. Stick visit your notes on \_\_\_\_\_ today. Make him observe three very different things about the same topic. Each time he visits your notes, make sure he talks as though he is looking at the topic while wearing different lenses over his eyes.”

### Voice

- “When you give Mr. Stick an emotion from the *Give Mr. Stick Emotions* handout (page 31), consciously write words alongside him that help to express that emotion. Having VOICE in writing means the writing has the ability to convey the correct emotions.”
- “Turn your Mr. Stick into a person from history that we have talked about. What would your Mr. Stick have to say in order to REALLY sound like this person from history? VOICE in writing is choosing words that really sound like they might come from another person who actually existed.”

### Word Choice

- “Instead of pictures of items that show where (or when) your Mr. Stick is, try surrounding your Mr. Stick illustration with words that attempt to do the same thing. Using words as backgrounds—if you make the right WORD CHOICE—can be just as effective in conveying the mood or the tone of your drawing or the thinking behind your drawing.”
- “When Mr. Stick talks today, practice good WORD CHOICE by only letting him talk in powerful verbs. Show me your verbs are powerful by writing them a little bigger than the rest of the words he says today.”