

The Spelling Worm

The class in the room at the end of the hall had been studying insects for three weeks. Butterflies fluttered in a wire cage. Silkworms the size of a teacher's thumb munched mulberry leaves in a plastic tub, and a pickle jar full of pillbugs sat on the science shelf. Even a line of ants paraded past the sink, hauling away cupcake crumbs.

On each desk stood a clear plastic vial. The vials contained three items—an inch of wheat bran, a cube of potato, and a green mealworm.

The tall teacher explained to the class, “Any day now, if you let your worm eat the bran and suck water from the potato, it will change into a white pupa. A week or so after that, it will turn into a brown beetle.”

Kate sat in the third row. A label on the side of her vial read, BOB THE MEALWORM. Her chin rested on her fist as she studied the worm.



“Come on, Bob, change,” she said. “You can do it. Don’t just be an ugly mealworm.”

A mealworm can't do anything but wiggle. Change into a beautiful beetle."

The mealworm squirmed and flipped over twice. But it remained a mealworm.

"Let's get busy, Kate," the tall teacher called out. "You have a story to write. And be careful with your spelling, capitals, punctuation, and handwriting."

Kate stared at the blank sheet of writing paper on her desktop.

"Writing stories is a pain, Bob,"

she said. "Spelling, capitals, punctuation, and handwriting.

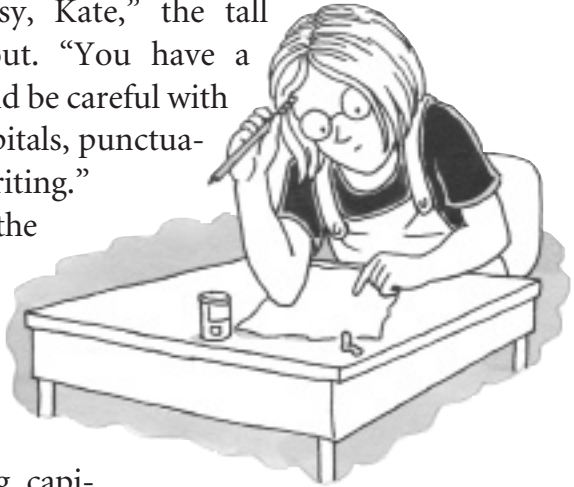
That's too much to worry about. How can you write a good story with all that on your mind?"

Kate pulled the top off her vial. She dumped the mealworm onto the corner of her desktop.

"My story is supposed to be about an insect, Bob," she said. "So I'll write about you. I'll write how a worthless worm turned into a wonderful beetle."

Copying off her vial, Kate wrote the title: "Bob the Mealworm." Twenty minutes later, with a jab of her pencil, she added the final period and brought the story up to the teacher's desk.

The tall teacher took one look at the paper and lost his smile. His expression would have been the



same if he'd bitten into a sour apple. "Oh, Kate," he said. "Oh, oh, Kate."

"Are you all right?" Kate asked.

"Your spelling, Kate. You've misspelled almost every word in this story. I can't read what you're trying to say. Please rewrite this entire thing. And if you don't know how to spell a word, use a dictionary."

Kate crumpled the paper and slam-dunked it into the wastebasket. She grabbed another sheet and slunk back to her seat.

"And don't forget to check your capitals, punctuation, and handwriting," the teacher called after her.

Kate rested her chin on her fist and frowned at her worm. "Spelling is the biggest pain of all, Bob," she muttered. "Did you know there are twenty-six letters in the alphabet? How can a kid remember which ones go in which word? And just to confuse us further, some words are spelled in the craziest ways. Did you know there are three ways to spell *to*, Bob? If you ask me, that's two too many ways to spell it. Yes, spelling is impossible."

Again Kate wrote "Bob the Mealworm" at the top of her paper.

"I'll start my story the way all great stories start: *Once upon a time*," she said. "And from how it sounds, *once* begins with a *w*."

Kate placed her pencil point on her paper. As she began to write, the mealworm wriggled. It flipped over and flipped back again. Finally it curled into a circle the size of a Cheerio.

Kate beamed. “What a coincidence, Bob. You’re shaped like an *o*, and *once* begins with an *o*, not a *w*.”

The moment she wrote a capital *o* on her paper, the mealworm squirmed again. It stopped, bent in two.

“Now you look like an *n*, Bob,” Kate said. “Another coincidence! That’s the next letter I need to write.”

She wrote down the second letter, and again the worm wriggled. This time it curved like a clipped fingernail.



“Now you’re a *c*, Bob,” said Kate.

Until this point the girl figured it was a fluke that the mealworm formed letters. After all, mealworms

often curl into *o*’s or *n*’s or *c*’s. But

when Bob wriggled into the next letter, an *e*, Kate dropped her pencil and her jaw.

“Hey, Bob, what’s going on?” she said. “You’ve spelled the entire word *once*. That’s no accident. What’s happening here?”

Quickly Kate wrote down the *e* and watched the worm. Yes, it began wriggling again. In quick succession it formed a *u*, a *p*, an *o*, and another *n*.

“Bob, you can spell!” she exclaimed. “And you’re spelling the words I need to write my story. I mean, I’ve heard of a spelling bee, but never a spelling worm.”

Again the mealworm went into action. Soon Kate had the entire phrase *Once upon a time* on her paper. Of course, the *t* was tricky for one worm to make. Bob looked more like an upside-down *L*, but Kate knew what shape the worm was trying to curl itself into.

“Mealworms must be smarter than scientists think, Bob,” she said. “I bet you pay close attention during our spelling lessons.”

Kate wrote the next sentence, the next, and the next. What a relief it was not to worry about spelling! Ideas burst from her brain. Words poured from her pencil. Whenever she forgot how to spell a word, the mealworm curled into the correct letter. No word, not even *people* or *enough*, stumped Bob.

To Kate’s great relief, Bob also helped with the punctuation. The worm made excellent exclamation marks and question marks. Its commas and apostrophes were impressive as well.

Twenty minutes later, Kate finished a story two pages long. “Well, I think we stuck in all the right capitals and punctuation marks, Bob,” she said, examining the paper. “Handwriting looks good, and won’t the teacher be surprised when he sees the spelling.”

Proudly she showed the tall teacher her story. Back and forth, back and forth his eyeballs went as he read it. Up and down went his Adam’s apple when he turned the page. Finally he said, “Oh, Kate. Oh, oh, Kate.”



Kate shuffled her feet. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Did I forgot to do that indenting thing? Did I write an *a* instead of an *an*? I bet I didn’t stick enough of those squiggly marks in my conversations.”

“No, Kate, this story is terrific,” said the teacher. “I never knew you could write such a clever, funny story.”

Kate let out a long breath of air. “Neither did I,” she said.

The teacher wrote A+++ at the top of the paper. Then he stood and read Kate’s story to the class. When he finished everyone clapped.

Smiling and flushed, Kate returned to her seat. “Did you hear that, Bob?” she said to the vial. “They liked my story. No one complained about spelling,

capitals, or punctuation. Writing isn't such a pain after all."

For the rest of the week Kate wrote whenever she could. She penciled long passages in her daily journal. She composed page after page of stories. Even in her spare time she grabbed some paper and wrote letters to her grandparents, notes to friends, and poems to no one in particular.

The mealworm kept busy, helping Kate spell any word she didn't know. On Friday, Kate was tempted to watch it during her spelling test. But that, of course, would have been cheating.

"Maybe I'll be a writer when I grow up, Bob," she said. "Maybe I'll write a great book and win the Newbery Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize all at once. Maybe I'll even get my name in the W. T. Melon school newspaper."

Monday morning a surprise awaited Kate on her desktop. The mealworm had vanished from the vial. In its place lay a white, comma-shaped blob of jelly.

"Well, look at you, Bob!" she said. "You're no longer Bob the mealworm. Now you're Bob the pupa. This'll make a great story."

She pulled her journal from her desk and wrote in a whirl. Not until the second paragraph did she stop and stare at the pupa. "I need to spell *magic*, Bob. But I guess you can't show me anymore."

She thought a moment before doing something she had rarely done before. She reached into her

desk and took out her Webster's dictionary.

"Dictionaries are a pain, Bob," she said. "Before I can find a word in this fat book, I forget what I wanted to write in the first place. Spelling worms are far more handy. But I've learned that people don't like reading stories with lots of misspelled words."

Two weeks later a second miracle occurred on Kate's desk. Now a gleaming brown beetle sat in the plastic vial.

"Congratulations, Bob!" she said. "You're more beautiful than I imagined."

That afternoon the class painted insect pictures. While painting, Kate pulled off the vial cap and let the beetle explore her desktop. Almost at once it crawled through a glob of blue paint. Kate watched it scurry around her paper, writing neat cursive letters. Finally it hopped, printing a blue period at the end of a sentence.

Bye-bye, Kate.

I'm off to another classroom for a spell.

"Bob! Not only can you still spell well, but you have excellent handwriting," Kate said. Then she watched the beetle crawl off her desk, across the floor, up the wall, and out the classroom window.

"So long, Bob," Kate called out, and she picked up her pencil to begin another story.

Throughout the rest of the year Kate wrote many fine stories. Although she never became a great

speller, she did remember that people preferred reading her stories if the words were spelled correctly.

Sometimes the tall teacher let Kate write on the computer. Before she printed her stories, she always hit the Spell-Check key. Any misspelled word would flash, flash, flash for her to correct. Kate had a name for that Spell-Check key. She called it Bob.

