



ROBINS



A WRITING EXPERIENCE



ROBINS

Practice for Reluctant Writers
by Sherry Hayes

A WRITING EXPERIENCE

WHAT IS A WRITING EXPERIENCE?

If you are interested in writing as an experience, there is something you need to keep in mind:

WRITING IS
SPEAKING ON
PAPER.

And as it is speaking on paper, we can consider it is part of the larger category of "communication." So, when we write, we are *communicating*.

"But what do you mean by 'communicating'?" I hear you asking.

One could say it means you are trying to get ideas that are in your head across to someone who can't hear what you are thinking, and in a way that is clear and concise.

For instance, I might be thinking about having a cool glass of lemonade, lightly sweetened, with two ice cubes. If I wish to have my daughter fix one up and bring it to me, I will need to be specific. If I just say "Drink!" to her, she may not know how to respond. She might even go and get a drink for herself!

But if I use my skills of grammar, description, and etiquette (saying "please" is a great way to encourage someone to help you), I should have much better results.

Let's say you have no interest in writing stories or poetry or blog posts (which are actually essays). Without fail, you are still going to need some written communication skills, even if it's only composing an intelligible email to a doctor or a family photographer. Of course, you could neglect this area of your life and just wing it when you must, but have you ever been on the receiving end of one of these "communications"? That photographer you hire may think he's meeting you outside at the zoo when you are really wanting to be photographed inside the aviary, and the difference in lighting and equipment could cost both of you time and money. Or what if the description of an ailment you are experiencing causes your doctor to give you all the wrong advice (and wrong medicines--eek!).

Needless to say, competent writing is essential for both kindness and survival.

This "Robins" course is just a trifle of what it takes to be a really competent writer, so that's why we are calling it an "experience." We are going to be sampling some informational writing, akin to essays, but just enough to dip your toes in.

WHAT IS A WRITING EXPERIENCE?



First of all, let's look at some basic, direct informational writing, this time about a bird other than a robin:

Cardinalidae (often referred to as the "cardinal-grosbeaks" or simply the "cardinals") is a family of New World-endemic passerine birds that consists of cardinals, grosbeaks, and buntings. It also includes several birds such as the tanager-like Piranga and the warbler-like Granatellus. As such, membership of this group is not easily defined by a single or even a set of physical characteristics, but instead by molecular work. In general they are medium to large songbirds with stout features, some with large heavy bills.

Members of this group are beloved for their brilliant red, yellow, or blue plumages seen in many of the breeding males in this family. Most species are monogamous breeders that nest in open-cup nests, with many taking turn incubating the nest and taking care of their young. Most are arboreal species though the dickcissel is a ground-dwelling prairie bird.

Source: Wikipedia

Lots of significant information is crammed into these few words, and this may be important for someone writing a paper, or even as a quick reference for an ornithologist who wants to classify a bird he is observing. This is what we may refer to as "technical writing." Other examples of this are the directions for applying glue or assembling a set of shelves. We appreciate this type of writing because it is practical and helpful. Some people actually thrive on producing this type of communication, as it can be a real challenge to formulate words which accurately describe actions that need to be taken so you don't glue your bookshelves to your cat!

Of course, this is only one type of writing. There are many others, most of which are useful for our "human" side. For example, we not only like to know what genus a bird (such as a cardinal) fits into, we like to know what a person thinks when he sees one, or what their songs are like, or what sorts of emotions being in the presence of one can revive.

Be like the bird that,
passing on her flight awhile on boughs too slight,
feels them give way beneath her, and yet sings,
knowing that she hath wings.

Victor Hugo

WHAT IS A WRITING EXPERIENCE?



But I think there's a third category in-between these two. In this type of communication we give out technical information, but in a way that is also engaging and interesting. No matter the purpose, most of what we read and write can be called:

THE ESSAY.

Actually, essays can do more than relay important, technical information. They can also relay events (narrative essay) or attempt to convince someone to adopt a certain opinion, etc. Here are the four main essay types:

ARGUMENTATIVE	Convinces
EXPOSITORY	Informs
NARRATIVE	Tells a story
DESCRIPTIVE	Describes

On the following pages you will find an essay about Robins written by Anna Botsford Comstock in her *Handbook of Nature Study*.

We will be using this as our example for study.

Have you ever heard of Benjamin Franklin? If you haven't already, his autobiography is quite entertaining. Franklin was an excellent writer, penning numerous newspaper articles and books. In the account of his life, he relates how he taught himself to write by reading an example of writing and then attempting to replicate it.

We will be mimicking his method.

WHAT IS A WRITING EXPERIENCE?



Benjamin Franklin loved to read. When he was young, he borrowed books from anyone who would lend them. He read about all kinds of subjects. Franklin also wanted to write, but he didn't know how. He only had two years of school, so he taught himself. He found stories that he liked and rewrote them. Some he rewrote from memory. Others he turned into poetry and then rewrote back into stories. Sometimes he took notes on a story, then mixed up his notes and tried to put them back in the correct order.

Americaslibrary.gov



As you read through the Comstock sample, please notice the arrangement of the information. First of all, each paragraph has a specific theme, as follows:

1. Instructions to the instructor.
2. Habits of robins in the winter and spring.
3. Physical characteristics of robins.
4. Sounds of robins.
5. Actions of robins.
6. Nest building of robins.
7. Robins care of their young.
8. Other facts about robins.

Next, notice how these paragraphs are arranged in a way that makes sense, and how one flows into another naturally.

In the spirit of Ben Franklin, we are going to break down each paragraph and then rewrite the entire essay (in portions) in our own words.

The first step is to carefully read each paragraph and write down the main points in the order you find them. Then, when you have completed this task, use a notepad to rewrite the paragraphs (without copying the originals). If you can, try and put it in your own words and style, if not, just keep to the original.

When you're done, take your paragraphs and put them in order on the pages provided.

WHAT IS A WRITING EXPERIENCE?

WARM UPS

These are important to the writing experience. They serve the following purposes:

1. As a way to warm up before writing. Pick a page and do a little of the exercise--you don't have to finish the whole thing, just diddle a little bit.
2. As a way to break "writer's block." When your mind is wondering and you know you need to make progress but you can't write another word--that's another excuse to diddle.
3. To round out this study of robins. Who doesn't like robins? Enjoy learning all the facets of their appearance, and the appearance of one of their nests with eggs.
4. To explore the difference between poetry and prose. Why not extend your writing skills even further?

Of course, no experience could be complete without some scripture, so here is one to copy. Look it up in context and think about what is being said:

*Then the LORD answered me and said:
"Write the vision
And make it plain on tablets,
That he may run who reads it."
Habakkuk 2:2*

HANDBOOK OF NATURE STUDY

This is an excerpt about Robins taken from the book written by Anna Botsford Comstock and published by Cornell University

Read each portion carefully and write the important as bullet points in the spaces provided.

WHAT DO ROBINS DO IN WINTER AND SPRING?

Handwriting practice lines for the section 'WHAT DO ROBINS DO IN WINTER AND SPRING?'

THE ROBIN

Most of us think we know the robin well, but very few of us know definitely the habits of this, our commonest bird. The object of this lesson is to form in the pupils a habit of careful observation, and to enable them to read for themselves the interesting story of this little life which is lived every year before their eyes. Moreover, a robin notebook, if well kept, is a treasure for any child; and the close observation necessary for this lesson trains the

pupils to note in a comprehending way the habits of other birds. It is the very best preparation for bird study of the right sort.

A few robins occasionally find a swamp where they can obtain food to nourish them during the northern winter, but for the most part they go in flocks to our southern states, where they settle in swamps and cedar forests and live chiefly upon fruits and berries. The robins do not

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ANIMALS



Leonard K. Beyer

A robin and its hungry young

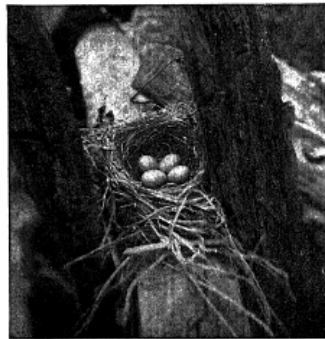
nest or sing while in Southland. When the robins first come to us in the spring they feed on wild berries, being especially fond of those of the Virginia creeper. As soon as the frost is out of the ground they begin feeding on earthworms, cutworms, white grubs, and other insects. The male robins come first, but do not sing much until their mates arrive.

The robin is ten inches long and the English sparrow is only six and one-third inches long; the pupils should get the sizes of these two birds fixed in their minds for comparison in measuring other birds. The father robin is much more decided in color than his mate; his beak is yellow, there is a yellow ring about the eye and a white spot above it. The head is black and the back slaty-brown; the breast is brilliant reddish brown or bay and the throat is white, streaked with black. The mother bird has paler back and breast and has no black upon the head. The wings of both are a little darker than the back; the tail is black with the two outer feathers tipped with white. These white spots do not show except when the bird is flying and are "call colors" — that is, they enable the birds to see each other and thus keep together when flying in flocks during the

night. The white patch made by the under tail-coverts serves a similar purpose. The feet and legs are strong and dark in color.

The robin has many sweet songs and he may be heard in the earliest dawn and also in the evenings; if he wishes to cheer his mate he may burst into song at any time. He feels especially songful before the summer showers, when he seems to sing, "I have a theory, a theory, it's going to rain." And he might well say that he also has a theory, based on experience, that a soaking shower will drive many of the worms and larvæ in the soil up to the surface where he can get them. Besides these songs the robins have a great variety of notes which the female shares, although she is not a singer. The agonizing, angry cries they utter when they see a cat or squirrel must express their feelings fully; they give a very different warning note when they see crow or hawk. This note is hard to describe; it is a long, not very loud squeak.

A robin can run or hop as pleases him best, and it is interesting to see one, while hunting earthworms, run a little distance, then stop to bend the head and listen and look; when he finally seizes the earthworm he braces himself on his strong legs and tugs manfully until he sometimes al-



Herbert E. Gray

Four blue eggs in a nest on a rail fence

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ROBINS

Handwriting practice lines for the section 'PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ROBINS'.

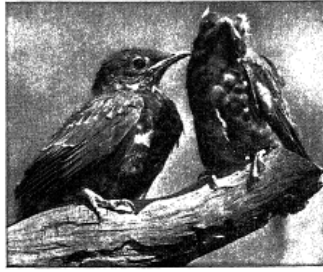
SOUNDS OF ROBINS

Handwriting practice lines for the section 'SOUNDS OF ROBINS'.

most falls over backward as the worm lets go its hold. The robins, especially at nesting time, eat many insects as well as earthworms.

The beginning of a robin's nest is very interesting; much strong grass, fine straw, leaves, and rootlets are brought and placed on a secure support. When enough of this material is collected and arranged, the bird goes to the nearest mud puddle or stream margin and fills its beak with soft mud; it then goes back and "peppers" it into the nest material; after the latter is soaked, the bird gets into it and molds it to the body by turning around and around. In one case which the author watched the mother bird did this part of the building, although the father worked industriously in bringing the other materials. After the nest is molded but not yet hardened, it is lined with fine grass or rootlets. If the season is very dry and there is no soft mud at hand, the robins can build without the aid of this plaster. Four eggs, which are an exquisite greenish blue in color, are usually laid.

Both parents share the monotonous business of incubating, and in the instance under the eyes of the author the mother bird was on the nest at night; the period of incubating is from eleven to fourteen days. The most noticeable thing about



A. A. Allen

Young robins. Their spotted breasts show their relationship to the thrushes

a very young robin is its wide, yellow-margined mouth, which it opens like a satchel every time the nest is jarred. This wide mouth cannot but suggest to anyone who sees it that it is meant to be stuffed, and the two parents work very hard to fill it. Both parents feed the young and often the father feeds the mother bird while she is brooding. Professor Treadwell experimented with young robins and found that each would take 68 earthworms daily; these worms if laid end to end would measure about 14 feet. Think of 14 feet of earthworm being wound into the little being in the nest; no wonder that it grows so fast! I am convinced that each pair of robins about our house has its own special territory for hunting worms, and that any trespasser is quickly driven off. The young birds' eyes are opened when they are from six to eight days old, and by that time the feather tracts, that is, the places where the feathers are to grow, are covered by the spinelike pin-feathers; these feathers push the down out and it often clings to their tips. In eleven days the birds are pretty well feathered; their wing feathers are fairly developed, but alas, they have no tail feathers! When a young robin flies from the nest he is a very uncertain and tippy youngster, not having any tail to steer him while flying, or to balance him when alighting.

It is an anxious time for the old robins when the young ones leave the nest, and



Leonard K. Beyer

A robin on its nest

ACTIONS OF ROBINS

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NEST BUILDING OF ROBINS

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ROBINS CARE FOR THEIR YOUNG

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Handwriting practice area with a decorative left border and several horizontal lines for writing.

they flutter about and scold at anyone who comes in sight, so afraid are they that injury will come to their inexperienced young ones: for some time the parents care for the fledglings, solicitously feeding them and giving them warnings of danger. The young robin shows in its plumage its relation to the thrush family, for it is yellowish and very spotted and speckled, especially on the breast. The parents may raise several broods, but they rarely use the



Leonard K. Beyer

This robin became so entangled in material it had gathered for its nest that it was unable to fly

same nest for two consecutive broods, both because it may be infested with parasites and because it is more or less soiled, although the mother robin works hard to keep it clean; she carries away all waste matter in her beak and drops it at some distance from the nest. Robins do not sing much after the breeding season is over until after they have molted. They are fond of cherries and other pulp fruits and often do much damage to such crops. The wise orchardist will plant a few Russian mulberry trees at a reasonable distance from his cherry trees, and thus, by giving the robins a fruit which they like better, and which ripens a little earlier, he may save his cherries. It has been proved conclusively that the robins are far more beneficial than damaging to the farmer; they

destroy many noxious insects, two-thirds of their food throughout the year consisting of insects; during April and May they do a great work in destroying cutworms.

The robins stay in the North later than most migrating birds, often not leaving us entirely before November. Occasional stragglers may remain all winter, in some protected areas. Their chief enemies in northern climates are cats, crows, and squirrels. Cats should be taught to let birds alone (see lesson on cat) or should be killed. The crows have driven the robins into villages where they can build their nests under the protection of man. If crows venture near a house to attack the robins, firing a gun at them once or twice will give them a hint which they are not slow to take. The robins of an entire neighborhood will attack a nest-robbing crow, but usually too late to save the nestlings. The robins can defend themselves fairly well against the red squirrel unless he steals the contents of the nest while the owners are away. There can be no doubt that the same pair of robins return to the same nesting place year after year. On the Cornell University campus a robin lacking the white tip on one side of his tail was noted to have returned to the same particular feeding ground for several years; and we are very certain that the same female bird built in the vines of our piazza for seven consecutive years; it took two years to win her confidence, but after that she seemed to feel as if she were a part of the family and regarded us all as friends. We were sure that during her fifth year she brought a new young husband to the old nesting site; probably her faithful old husband had met with some mischance during the winter.

SUGGESTED READING — *American Bird Biographies*, by A. A. Allen; *Audubon Bird Leaflet 46*; *Bird-House to Let*, by Mary F. Terrel; *Bird Stories from Burroughs*, by John Burroughs; *First Lessons in Nature Study*, by Edith M. Patch; *Nature and Science Readers*, by Edith M. Patch and Harrison E. Howe, Book 1. *Hunting*, Book 2, *Outdoor Visits*, Book 5, *Science at Home*; *Nature Stories for Child-*

OTHER FACTS ABOUT ROBINS

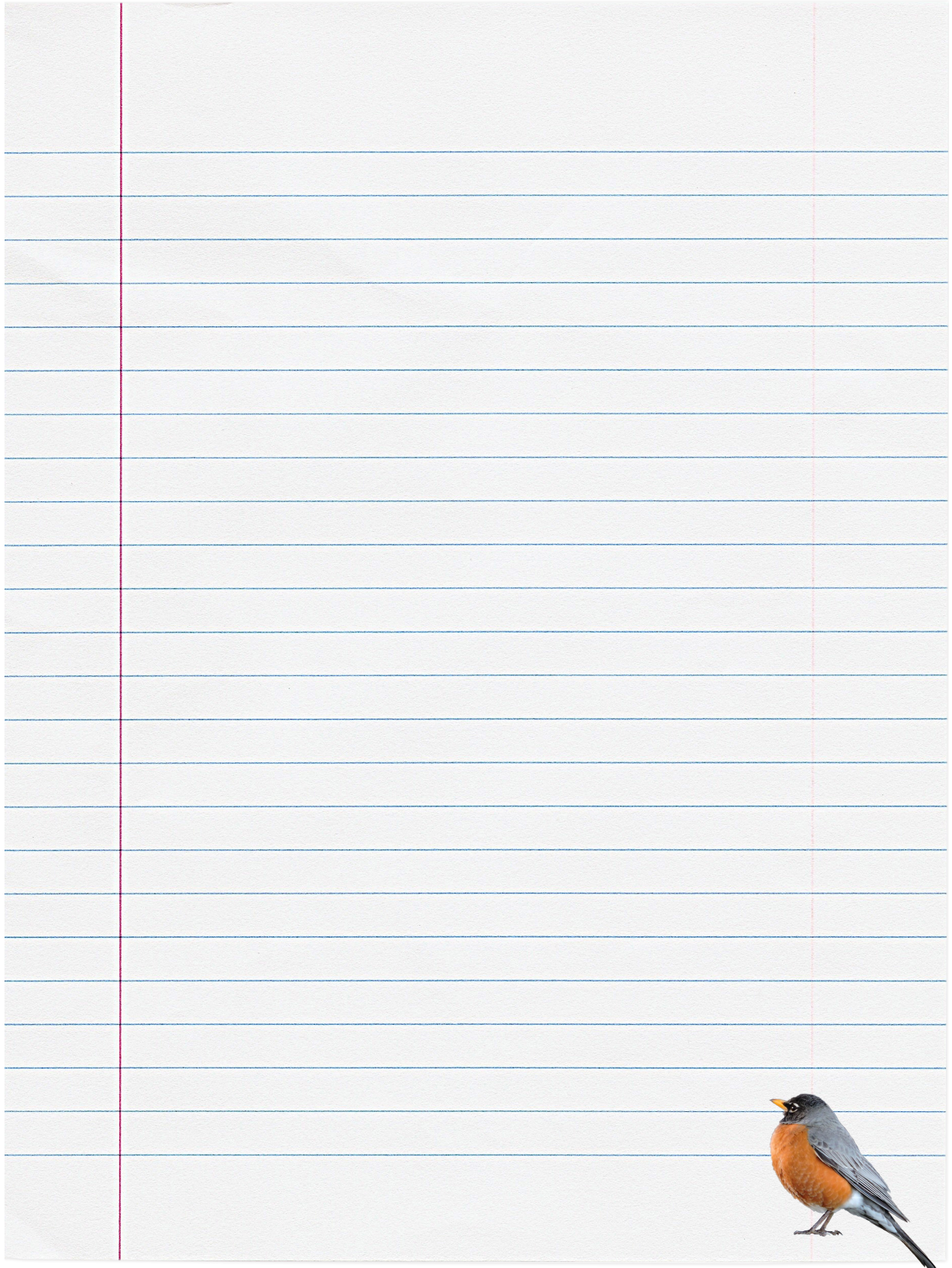




Habits and Physical Characteristics of

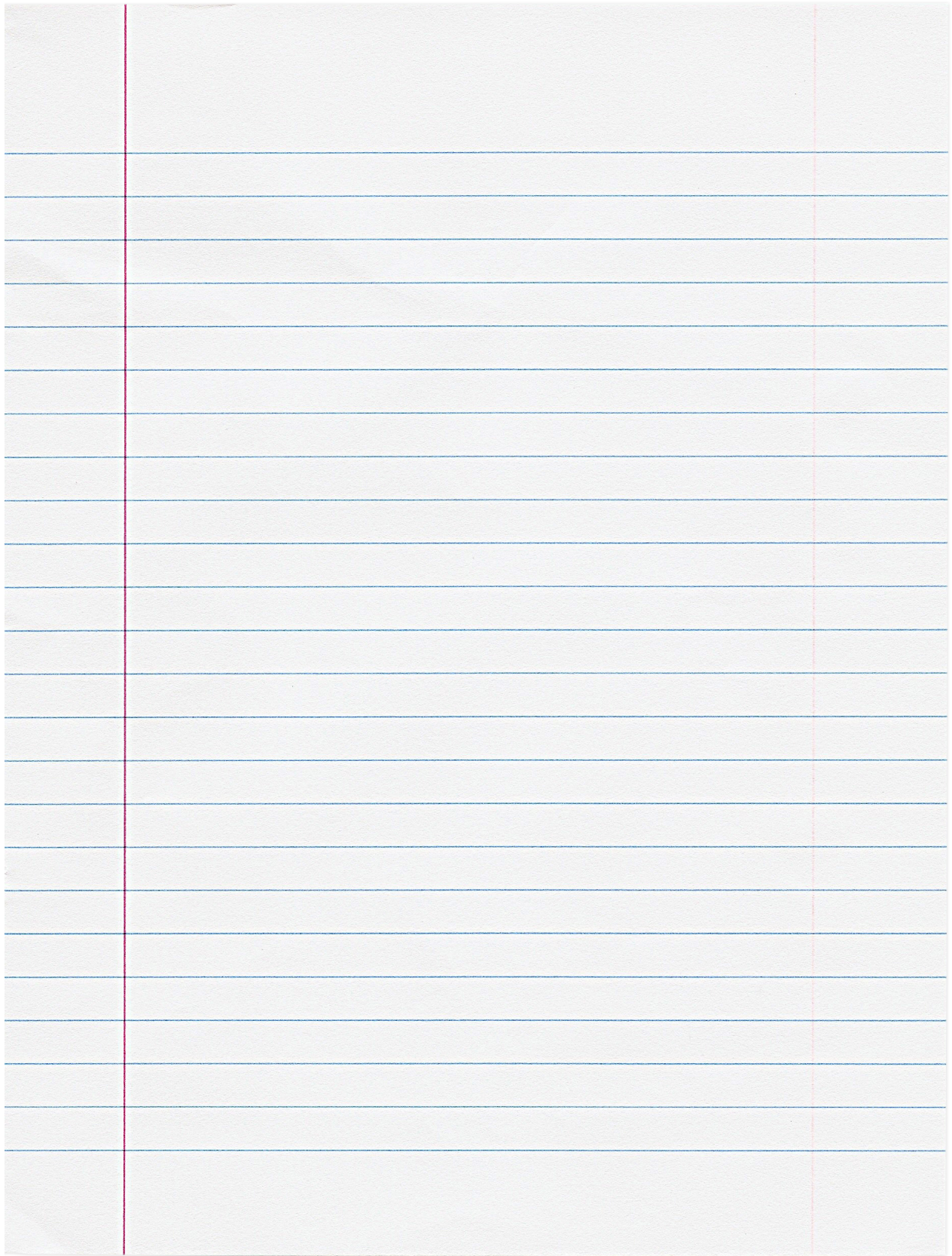
ROBINS

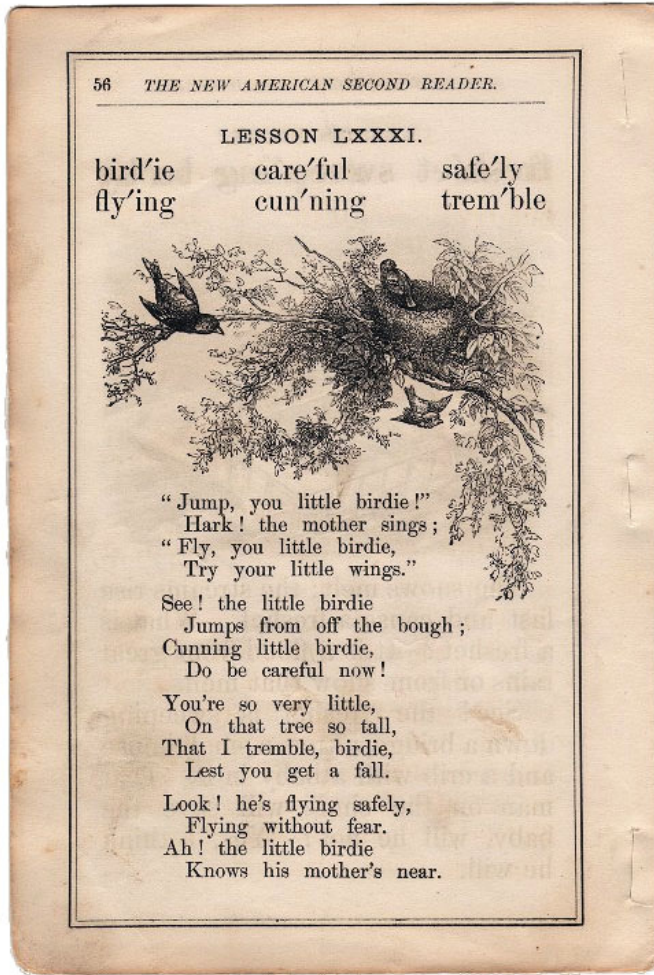
A large rectangular area of lined paper for writing. It features horizontal blue lines and two vertical red margin lines, one on the left and one on the right.





A large rectangular area of white paper with horizontal blue lines and two vertical red margin lines, one on the left and one on the right, intended for writing.





WARMUPS

and diddles

Here are some light things to do when you need a warm up or you get "stuck."

This is a page from an old reader. Read the poem and rewrite it in prose form below. (If you don't know what "prose" means, you can ask someone who knows or look it up.)

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COLORING



WORDS

lists

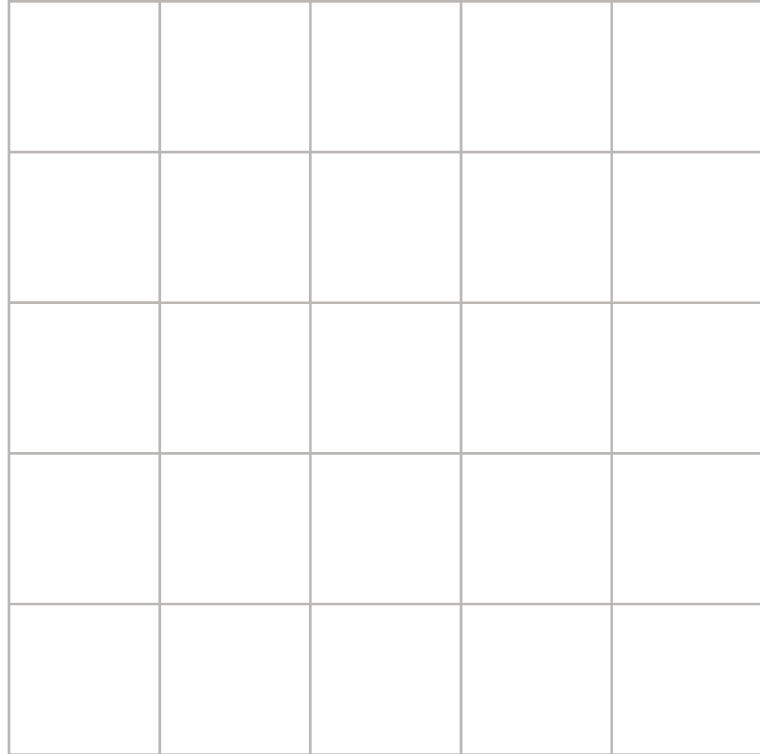
Spend some time observing robins. As you are watching them, think of some words that would describe them. You can use a thesaurus, either one online or a physical one, to help.

ADJECTIVES

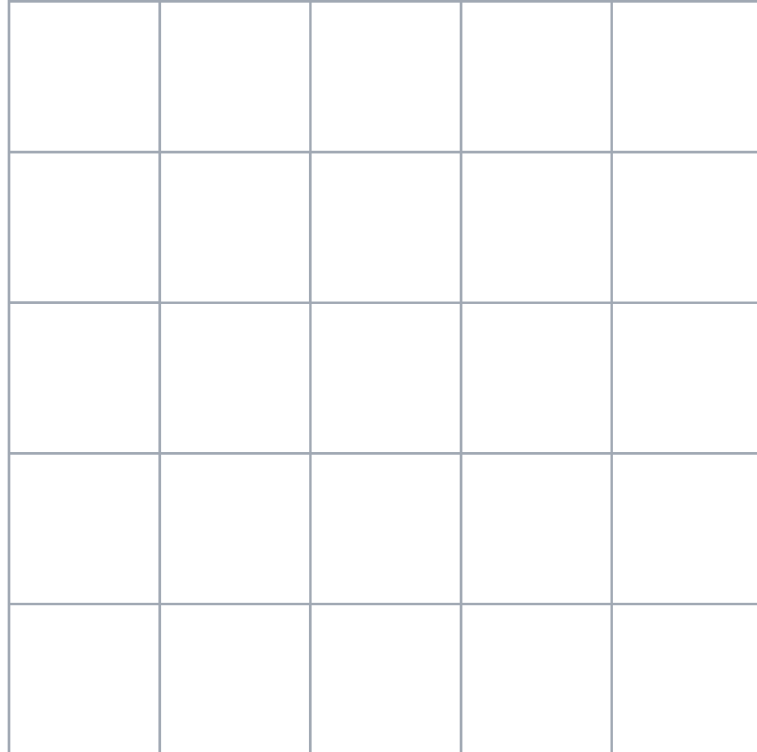
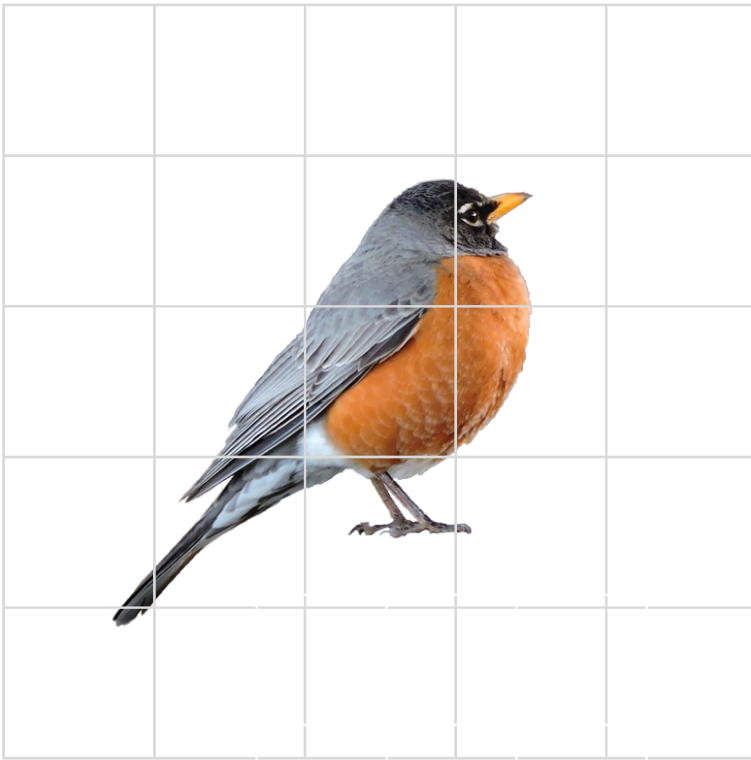
ADVERBS

Use your word lists to compose a Haiku (three lines with a pattern of five syllables, seven syllables, and five syllables) or a simple rhyming poem. You'll want to use some scribble paper until you get it right, then use the next page to write your final draft down.





USE THE GRID TO
DRAW THE NEST



USE THE GRID TO
DRAW THE BIRD