What Is The "Painted Essay"?

When we write, we are both constructing and communicating meaning about some body of knowledge or set of ideas. To be effective, a piece of writing must be a connected, coherent chunk of thought. When students are learning to write, there are several aspects of the process that may present difficulty.

The first is knowledge. Students may be trying to write about something they really do not know very well. For example, a child who is trying to write an informational piece (a report) about Susan B. Anthony is not going to produce a successful piece of writing if her knowledge of Susan B. Anthony is sketchy or inaccurate.

Besides knowledge, students need a focus - a perspective through which to think about the information. An effective report does not simply give back information about Susan B. Anthony; rather, it synthesizes the information around a controlling idea, or focus. ("Susan B. Anthony worked for the vote for women" is a focus, while "Everything I know about Susan B. Anthony" is not.)

The second aspect of writing that may cause trouble for student writers is language. Even if they "know" what they are writing about (for example, fixing a broken bike chain), they may never have orally articulated that knowledge in words, or at least not with any fluency of language. With a lack of oral language about a subject, writing about the subject will be difficult.

The third aspect of writing that may challenge student writers is structure. Typically, young students have heard many stories, so they carry a "story structure model" in their heads. They have not typically, however, heard or read lots of articles or other chunks of informational writing. They do not carry "expository writing models" in their heads. When they come to write a report, they are frequently at a loss as to how to begin or how to build their writing.

This is where the painted essay comes in.

The painted essay was developed by Diana Leddy, a Vermont elementary teacher. It was based on the idea that students are visual learners, and need a very clear visual model of what informational writing actually looks like as a whole, complete chunk. The painted essay is a way of "seeing things whole", as Stuart Little might put it. It uses a clear, patterned structure tied to certain colors so that students are able to use and internalize a template for thinking - and therefore, writing.

The painted essay is NOT meant to suggest that all expository/informational writing fits neatly into four paragraphs, or even that all informational writing should be built in a "statement/proof" structure. What the painted essay is, however, is a very flexible, easy-to-modify organizational structure that helps students to both think and write clearly.
This is the introduction. It is colored red because it needs to get the reader’s attention.

This is the focus (controlling idea). It's green for “Go this way!” Sometimes, the green is omitted for primary children.

This is the “yellow” part of the (green) focus / This is the “blue” part of the (green) focus

This is the first body paragraph. Since it supports the first part of the focus, all of its details are yellow.

This is the second body paragraph. Since it supports the second part of the focus, all of its details are blue.

This is the conclusion. Since it reminds the reader of the focus, and synthesizes the yellow and blue ideas again, it is green. It is both the “what” (here’s a reminder of my focus) and the “so what” (here’s a bit of reflection on or extension of that focus)