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ABSTRACT

This book contains a collection of articles written by teachers who, according to some of their students, really taught them how to write. The articles describe classroom methods for teaching composition that have actually worked for both teachers and students. Aimed particularly at English teachers in grades 10-12 the book includes specific assignments for students as well as course descriptions and more philosophical pieces. The authors describe various types of student writing: a unique letter-writing assignment in "Dear Mr. Hardy"; a journal-writing activity in "Be Your Own Boswell"; and other creative and expository experiences ranging from a one-paragraph "Exercise in Description," to a five-paragraph theme, "The Chinese Box," to a lengthy research project, "The Community Documentary." Several chapters describe composition practices associated with the study of literature. While a few of these articles clearly apply only to above-average, college-bound students, most present teaching practices that are applicable, or adaptable, to average, below-average, and unmotivated students as well. (SW)

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# THEY REALLY TAUGHT US HOW TO WRITE

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*Of all professions, teaching is perhaps the most idiosyncratic. Each teacher must find his own style, orientation and philosophy, and each must teach in a way that feels right. However, the more options we have available and the more "open" we are to them, the richer our style will become. We have much to learn from each other and much to learn from our students.*

*Margaret Labby  
Teacher of English  
Lincoln High School  
Portland, Oregon*

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## Preface

Reversing the usual order of teachers recommending students (for awards, scholarships, or grade-level advancement), the editors of this book gave students a chance to recommend teachers.

The students were 837 high school seniors who had demonstrated outstanding writing abilities by winning NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing. Each student was asked to name the one teacher who had had the most influence on his or her development as a writer. Altogether, the students named some 600 high school teachers of composition who, they claimed, had helped them develop their writing skills and styles.

Following up on the students' recommendations of effective teachers of composition, we invited those teachers to submit articles for this book, describing composition classroom procedures or teaching techniques that they had used with high school students and—more importantly—that had succeeded.

This book, then, is a collection of articles written by teachers who, according to some of their students, really taught them how to write; that is, the articles describe classroom methods for teaching composition that *have actually worked* for both teachers and students. This publication is aimed particularly at English teachers in grades 10, 11, and 12, and includes specific assignments for students as well as course descriptions and more philosophical pieces. Although the articles are organized by broad categories—prewriting, the writing process itself, and evaluation, ideas presented in the essays sometimes overlap the categorical lines, and individual essays focus on special topics. The authors tell of various types of student writing: a unique letter-writing assignment in "Dear Mr. Hardy"; a journal-writing activity in "Be Your Own Boswell"; and other creative and expository writing experiences ranging from one paragraph ("An Exercise in Description") to a five-paragraph theme ("The Chinese Box") to a lengthy research project ("The Community Documentary"). Also, many describe composition practices associated with the study of literature; a couple discuss cross-writing, re-creating a work in a different genre ("In



League With MacLeish" and "Drama as the Springboard to Successful Student Writing"). One author explains the use of writing models from currently published magazines ("Twelfth Grade Expository Writing"). Still others describe the use of nonprint media to teach writing ("The Humanities and Better Writing," "The Symbolism Game," and "Writing Short Stories"). Moreover, teachers' dissimilar opinions about what to do with the final written product are found in Part Three. But if one method of teaching is presented more often than any other of these articles—and not just in these thirty-three, but in all of the essays submitted—it is that of giving the students larger roles in the prewriting, writing, and evaluative processes: students getting together in small-group discussions to think about what to write, students exchanging papers during the writing of compositions to get each other's reactions, and students reviewing their classmates' final products or being in on the evaluation of their own papers through individual-teacher conferences.

While a few of these articles clearly apply only to above-average, college-bound students, most of the papers present teaching practices that are applicable, or adaptable, to average, below-average, and unmotivated students also. Part of the article "Follow the Leader" deals directly with "students who hate English"; the author gives a brief account of a successful summer course for such teenagers. And, "How to Run an Obstacle Course" presents a method of teaching composition "to large, heterogeneous classes of ill-prepared students."

Whatever reasons the readers of this book may have for picking it up—out of curiosity or empathy with composition teachers, for specific ideas or support, or in the hope of escaping from the doldrums in which writing teachers sometimes find themselves—the editors offer it in the same spirit as conventions and journals on the teaching of English are offered to teachers: as a sharing of various ideas. Many are innovative, we think; a few contradict each other; but all have been tried and judged successful. This book is nothing more nor less than a chance to learn what teachers of outstanding high school writers know about methods that work for them in teaching writing.

L.K.H.

for the committee

*Part One:  
The Student Prepares To Write*

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*In setting up writing objectives, . . . a teacher has to ask, more than any other question: what kind of writing best serves the development of the person concerned; how can the student search out himself, and how can he relate to the rest of the world? The student must do writing that satisfies himself, but ultimately he must communicate with others. The student has to write what he cares about in the context of life about him. To find relevance in the act, the writer must associate with his own time, with his own environment, and with concerns with which he can identify.*

*Sister Christina Welch, SSJ  
St. Agnes High School  
Rochester, New York*

## Introduction

The task of getting started is often more traumatic than the act of writing itself. Most of us have watched those faces around the classroom twist and agonize, pray and swear as each student seeks the proper visitation from his muse to bring to life on paper not only a good theme but a teacher-accepted one.

And so, the clock moves methodically forward with each ticking minute reminding the prospective writer that not only is he no nearer his goal, he is sinking deeper and deeper into a quagmire.

The first six essays in this book take as their special area of interest the art of getting the student started to write. The old tasks of motivation and preparation loom mightily on the compositional horizon. For the teacher it is easier to fall back upon the old thrust: as the bell rings the students charge for the deceptive freedom of a hallway, the teacher screams on tomorrow's assignment—to write a theme on a topic of your own choosing.

But there has been no preparation—no motivation—not even an indication that the teacher wants to read what will be written. Let's not deceive ourselves; the students know the rules—they are required to attend school in part to learn to write, and we are hired by school officials to read their writing. There's not much more thrill for them in writing for a captive audience than for us in teaching a captive audience.

Norman Frey, in the first article of this section, anticipates many of the burdens of teaching not just the composition itself. He urges that we teach the process of the composition. His emphasis is on teaching before the writing is done in order to avoid the frustration of a returned paper with teacher-scrawled red dicta that can only lead to student humiliation and discouragement. The "how-tos" are key factors in teaching composition; he eschews abstractions, observing, "The abstract terms . . . can be established as a result of the student's own experience, not as a preliminary dictum."

Frey offers one bit of sage advice reminiscent of that proposed by G. B. Harrison in *Profession of English* (New York: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, 1973). Both Frey and Harrison warn against comparing this fall's students with last spring's performers. Remember, the new faces in this fall's class have not experienced the great benefits of a year's tutelage by you, the master teacher. Harrison says in this vein, "One difficulty in our profession is that every year we ourselves know a little more of our subject while each new generation of students starts at the same level. Hence the feeling that this year's batch is always rather worse than its predecessors; which is depressing, until we realize that it is we who have changed."

In the second article, Mary C. Commers suggests a device for aiding the student uncertain of how to use evidence from within a literary work to support an established thesis. By using *Hamlet* as her work under study, she shows the students how to find supportive evidence for a theme topic as they study the work, rather than waiting until the end to decide on approaches and support for a subject.

The teacher as *provocateur* is the primary thrust of L. Dale Griffith's essay. Somewhat idealistic in his approach, Griffith is himself quite provocative in suggesting that motivation is the key to any successful writing. He employs the metaphor of wrestling with the angel of language as the means by which his students come alive on paper. No stilted, dull assignments for him. Instead there must be a conflict between student and teacher, between author and reader, that brings a composition to reality. Again there's the feeling that the teacher must be an appreciative and critical reader—one who responds to what he reads.

"Writing Short Stories" by Dorothea G. Burkhart proposes the use of pictures, sounds, experiences from which students may derive backgrounds for stories. Long ago, John Milton advocated delaying composition skills until students had encountered sufficient experiences to draw upon for their writing. Now, by means of all forms of media, the modern student vicariously absorbs times, places, people, events, and emotions to fodder his emerging imagination.

Using the approach that writing possesses great therapeutic value, Charles W. Spurgeon applies Dr. Thomas Harris's concept of OK-ness to the composition classroom. Spurgeon challenges the English teacher: "We can . . . provide excellent stimulation and encouragement for written communication through Teacher-Student interactions on the objective, problem-solving level of Adult-Adult." Once more it's a matter of respecting the student's expression of ideas and displaying an interest in reading that expression. He continues to observe that fantasizing a reading audience detracts from, if not destroys, much of the student's incentive. He knows he's writing for the teacher; the teacher should respond to that writing as part of a dialogue.

And Sandra E. Beebe sees value in film study to open doors for composition. Suggesting specific films to motivate, she uses especially

children's films to teach the value and use of symbols. Observing that the film employs techniques of good writing, such as succinctness, form, characterization, she notes, "Good films are constructed like good essays; there is a relation that binds together all art forms."

While these essays are aimed at helping you, the teacher, get your students prepared to write, perhaps their greatest strength lies in their motivation of you, the teacher, to teach, really teach, composition.

After all, that's what this whole book is about.

Dennis Loyd  
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## *Teaching Before The Composition Is Written*

*Norman L. Frey, Teacher, English Department  
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Teaching composition is more difficult to describe as a process than the "non-teaching" of composition. In the latter case, the teacher makes the assignment (Write a paper on the effects of isolation on Hester and Pearl, five pages in length, due Friday.); asks, "Do you have any questions?"; receives as a response complaints about the due date or, even worse, about the novel itself; manages to silence the disgruntled; and goes on to other matters. If real teaching occurs, too often it takes place after the damage is done and efficiently summed up by the symbol "C-." True, the postmortem has a certain value in showing students how, why, and where they went wrong (or, in some cases, right), because there is always the chance that these lessons will carry over to the next assignment; but for the majority of students, that chance is not a sufficient substitute for the real teaching of composition.

For too many students, the postmortem alone is ineffective as a teaching method because (a) the grade infuriates or bedazzles and, so, eclipses the explanation; either they are defensive, which gives way to sullenness and, later, offensive tactics, or they tune out the critique since the "A" or "B" indicates there is nothing more to learn; (b) they fail to make the transfer between review of the old in preparation for writing the new, because the next paper is a distant goal (unpleasant even to contemplate in the glorious now), and they are interested in more immediate gratification; (c) they lose interest in the instruction because the emphasis at this point is presented in the deductive pattern: the techniques and generalizations are applied to what is now a finished product, fossilized, and conclusions are prepackaged by the teacher and presented from the domain of his brilliance.

In a sense, the postmortem as the major method of teaching composition encourages the student to be a passive observer of composition, rather than an active participant in the process of creating and composing. Teaching composition cannot be regarded as a "filler" activity after the papers are returned to the class. On the contrary, to teach the skills of composition deliberately and sequentially requires time in class—and plenty of it. Even in conjunction with the study of literature, composition can be taught when the moment is appropriate. In fact, the two can be woven together. In the study of literature, this duality is certainly possible by giving attention to the matters of words and sentences and techniques of rhetorical effectiveness, as well as

the larger units of the paragraph, dominant effect, primary intention, etc. And, as ideas in the literature are discussed, they can be related to their use in student papers, both past and forthcoming.

As indicated at the outset, describing the process of how to teach composition is difficult, but general suggestions can be offered which the individual teacher may adapt to his own style.

Especially at the beginning of the year and during the first semester, begin teaching when the assignment is made, both to motivate the students and to instruct. Present the assignment to the class in detail; then, either in the large group, or in small group work or partnerships, have the students begin the process of thinking and composing. If you do not want to use the actual topic or problem you have assigned for individual student writing, use a theoretical example or assignment similar to the "live" one as the class sample. In the case of large-group instruction, use the blackboard or the overhead projector to demonstrate, to get down ideas. Most important, get discussion going so that the students become engaged in the work of composing. Occasionally, make use of individual conferences in the classroom. The time and occasions spent on teaching for the next composition can be varied. If the assignment is complex, break the time spent into several half-period sessions. Give as much role as possible to students themselves by asking them to prepare to demonstrate or discuss the next step.

Now that method has been introduced, the problem is what to discuss, what to demonstrate. Begin by letting the class suggest the approaches to handling the assignment. Encourage them to begin the actual composing. Consider the alternative ways of approach, depending upon the demands of subject and audience. Together, you and they should examine the ideas of substantive matter, enriching some ideas, discarding others for whatever reasons. Since you obviously will know your objectives in making the assignment (both compositional and substantive), you can direct your questions in order to stimulate the students' thinking and to elicit responses. It is not so necessary or important to focus on abstract terms (comparison/contrast, thesis, incident, sub-point details, although these should be recognized) as it is actually to show *how* to relate two points of comparison to a larger idea; *how* to compose an introduction that suggests the organizational plan of the total paper as well as stating the subject and indicating the writer's attitude toward it; *how* to integrate a text quotation into the writer's own sentence; *how* to accumulate details to support an idea and *how* to arrange them for maximum effectiveness; *how* to establish cogency between sub-points and paragraph topic. The abstract terms (which are really generalizations of experience) can be established as a result of the student's own experience, not as a preliminary dictum.

In more complex assignments, it is even a good idea to have students



bring in their introductory paragraphs or other parts of the writing for class discussion and critique before they invest time and energy in writing the rest of their papers. As the students become more knowledgeable about composition, they can work in pairs or in small groups, constructively evaluating each other's papers (or parts of the papers) before the final draft is written. The success of this technique, of course, depends upon the teacher's having clearly established the criteria of evaluation for all papers and, specifically, for the particular paper at hand. In addition, students might be asked occasionally to write a critique of their own papers before they are submitted to the teacher. Both paper and critique are then submitted so that the teacher can see the student's critical perceptions of his own work. Not only will this encourage a student to be more deliberate in his own writing, but the teacher will be able to spot the problem of a student's knowing *what* to do but not *how* to do it, thus identifying elements that require further instruction. Again, the value lies in actively engaging the students in the deliberate processes of composition, stimulating them to help each other (as well as themselves), drawing from them techniques of composition and ideas which many of them do know, but which lie dormant in the silence of their study corners at home.

During this process, specific questions will arise more naturally than they will in response to the isolated question, "Are there any questions?" And the questions will give the teacher the opportunity to teach. In addition to handling students' questions, the teacher will also have the opportunity to review areas from past papers that should be especially noted in the upcoming paper. Ask the students themselves to identify the important lessons learned in the past papers. They should review their last papers in preparation for the new and share the information with the rest of the class. Also, you, the teacher, will be able to present new elements of increasing difficulty. Obviously, the skills and demands are cumulative; but you should avoid expecting first-semester students to write as the best of last year's students did in May. If you understand your objectives and see them in sequence, you will know exactly what and how much to introduce in each succeeding assignment.

No teacher should feel that this kind of activity is time stolen from the study of literature. Instead, a class period (or two or three) spent preparing for the composition is a good investment. The postmortem that accompanies the returning of marked papers can then be used to reinforce the particular elements of composition stressed in that assignment. It is useful, in the postmortem session, to examine and discuss good papers (duplicated, shown on an overhead projector, or read aloud by students). But it is more important to look at the successes than at the failures. Isolating individual problems before the group can be seriously damaging to the individual student and, ultimately,

to the morale of the whole class. But presenting on ditto ten or twenty problem sentences or some problem paragraphs (whose writers remain anonymous) can be a natural part of teaching composition, if you have established an atmosphere of comfort and security in the classroom.

In one way or another, teaching *before* the composition is written should be a continuing part of the writing program of the entire year, but as the students become more experienced, more sophisticated, more capable of dealing with the demands of composition on their own, the procedure can be modified, shortened, and occasionally dropped, except for clarification of the assignment and direct explanation of points that are particular to that assignment. Teaching *before* the paper is due, however, is especially important in the case of demanding assignments. It is a good investment in that due date when you pack the fifty or seventy-five or one hundred papers into your briefcase, sharpen the red pencil, and anticipate the many hours of reading that lie ahead—hours that may be more pleasurable than painful.

*"What should I write about?" "I don't know what to say!" These are frequent complaints voiced by students once a composition or creative writing course is well underway and fresh subject matter seems hard to come by. An assignment that provoked thoughtful prose and some vivid poetry came from Time magazine's end-of-the-year news review. The major events of 1972 were illustrated by thumbnail action photos—Angela Davis on the shoulders of her devoted followers, Arab terrorists bloodying the Olympics, an IRA gunman, etc. These I cut out and rubber-cemented to 3-x-5 index cards and passed out the first day back from Christmas vacation. Students were allowed to trade cards if they were uninspired by the one they received at random. Responses were enthusiastic and varied—ballads, editorials, and a poem.*

*Barbara J. Dittrich  
L'Anse Creuse High School  
Mt. Clemens, Michigan*

## "Grounds More Relative" For Hamlet Essays

Mary C. Commers, Chairman, English Department  
Lincoln Southeast High School, Lincoln, Nebraska

Not only was "something rotten in Denmark." but something also seemed to be rotten with the *Hamlet* essays my seniors of former years had written as a culminating activity after class study of the play. Too often their essays expressed opinions not supported by the text.

This semester I tried a new approach. On the first day of our study of the play, I passed around a box containing more than forty thesis statements typed on individual index cards. Each student drew a card; if he disliked the thesis statement he drew, he was permitted to trade with a classmate during the period. By the end of the period, however, each student had copied his thesis statement on a master sheet so that no two students had the same project.

Students were advised to collect evidence relating to their thesis statements while we studied the play, act by act. As we completed an act, each student submitted a paper listing the thesis statement and lines from that act which either supported or negated the statement. By skimming the lines submitted by a particular student, I was able to determine rapidly whether that student understood his thesis and could collect supportive evidence for it. For those few students who had difficulty identifying appropriate lines in the first act or two, I suggested additional or alternate lines. After a little guidance, all students were able to find lines relevant to their particular subject.

Evidence for most thesis statements was contained in all acts, but for those few for which no pertinent lines appeared in a particular act, the student merely listed his thesis statement with the sentence, "I am unable to find evidence for my thesis in this act." Most students collected far more evidence than they could use in writing their final essays, and thus they had the worthwhile composing process of organizing, choosing, and discarding facts. Because the teacher was able to work with each student five times during the prewriting period, no student wrote a final essay which was unsuccessful because of either illogical or unsupported opinion.

A list of the thesis statements distributed among my students is included below; next fall I shall expand the list, for as I read and evaluated this year's *Hamlet* essays, I found myself thinking about the teaching of composition not as in former years:

O cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right!

but rather that my writing assignment had "prov'd most royally."

**Suggested Thesis Statements for *Hamlet* Essays**

Hamlet is representative of all mankind.

Hamlet is representative of Renaissance man.

Hamlet is frequently introspective.

Hamlet is capable of deep affection.

Claudius is a hypocrite.

Polonius is loyal to the king.

Gertrude is weak-willed.

Ophelia is a victim of circumstance.

*Hamlet* is a ghost story.

Shakespeare presents certain concepts about ghosts.

*Hamlet* resembles modern murder mysteries.

In *Hamlet* we see with Hamlet's eyes and think his thoughts.

Polonius is a futile busybody.

As the play progresses, Hamlet becomes increasingly more isolated from normal human relationships.

The events in *Hamlet* are influenced by forces greater than human.

Many questions are raised in *Hamlet*.

Horatio is a skeptical stoic.

Horatio follows Polonius's advice, "To thine own self be true."

Members of the Fortinbras family figure significantly in *Hamlet*.

Hamlet possesses great sensitivity.

Hamlet is primarily concerned with the pursuit of truth.

Claudius lacks redeeming qualities.

Claudius is concerned with the safety and welfare of his subjects.

Hamlet experiences both internal and external conflicts.

*Hamlet* contains scenes of dramatic spectacle.

Hamlet faces a hostile world.

In the course of the drama, Hamlet loses his childhood innocence.

Hamlet's actions are in contradiction with his conscience.

*Hamlet* contains images of disease and decay.

Hamlet was both a man of thought and a man of action.

*Hamlet* is concerned with several kinds of "play": wordplay, swordplay, and stage play.

*Hamlet* contains the theme of the distinction between what is real and what seems to be.

*Hamlet* involves both private and state affairs.

*Hamlet* teaches that atonement must be made for sin.

The central plot of *Hamlet* concerns a search for justice.

Horatio remains a true friend to Hamlet.

*Hamlet* concerns the role and responsibility of kingship.

A parallel may be drawn between the royal families of Norway and of Denmark.

Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are in similar situations.

## *Writing: A Wrestling With the Angel of Language*

*L. Dale Griffith, Chairman, English Department  
Barrington High School, Barrington, Illinois*

The best efforts in writing are provoked, not trained. And he who would fancy himself a teacher of writing would cast himself in the role of *provocateur* rather than trainer. If one accepts these premises, the emphasis will fall less upon the character of writing and more upon the conflict underlying all effective writing.

A majority of writing textbooks and classroom procedures in the teaching of composition occupy themselves with what I label the character of writing. They are concerned with the character of the product—whether a rough or final draft. They train the student in diction, correct constructions, effective transitional devices, rhetorical tools, et cetera. The underlying assumption is that the good drama of writing depends primarily upon the character of the product.

I question the assumption. Good drama does not begin with well-developed character studies. Engaging drama depends upon arresting conflict, out of which, in turn, convincing character develops. The drama of writing is no exception. Writing is a wrestling with the angel of language. The struggle ensues in the darkness, imposing itself upon the would-be author without his knowing what the outcome will be. He grapples with the angel until the angel promises to bless him, and then he awakens to behold the first evidence of that blessing.

Now this labor with the angel of language must be provoked. Neither the dreamer nor the angel enters upon it without sufficient provocation. That provocation must consist of vital conflict—conflict that the dreamer cannot resist or see fit to avoid.

What is so wrong, or so weak, with the writing programs in most classrooms is that the writing is unprovoked. No conflict has been stirred which the student is urged about. He would sooner sleep than dream. The role of the teacher is to help the student put himself in touch with the issues that will engage him in battle with the angel of language.

Surely few persons have grappled with this angel over the character of his word choice or sentence structure. Such dreams would be of fretful substance at best. These are matters left to oneself in ordering affairs after being granted the blessing. One fights for the blessing with the very soul of what he yet knows not, knowing only that he must

bring it to light lest the night of chaos never turn to the dawn of order and tranquility.

That substance is there for everyone. Who has not known the night that he would have turned to dawn? Often he will pick up the battle for himself if given time. Fifteen or twenty minutes set aside daily for journal writing will plunge many a person into that match sooner or later. At other times the would-be author is dependent upon someone else—why should it not be the teacher?—to become the incarnation of that angel of language long enough to hook him in a discussion of one of his anxieties. Or to press him to struggle with a newly emerging awareness growing out of his recent reading. In any one of these instances what is demanded is a *presence*. A person is present unto himself in a way that he usually is not, coming face to face with that inside himself which demands attention. Or another person—and again, why not the teacher?—is that presence entering into a dialogue that is demanding enough to pin down the blessing that so urgently wants to be spoken if struggled with long enough. That presence, however it is afforded, is the audience. That is with whom and for whom the struggle ensues. No one can fabricate or superimpose an audience to stimulate real writing. The angel of language does not appear in such disguises. The dreams he appears in are not the fabrication of, but the real stuff of the imagination.

I was invited to submit this essay because a winner of the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing designated me as a good teacher of writing. Thinking I know who he is, I am recalling an excellent piece of writing that he submitted in the competition. It was an essay that grew out of his reading of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* I remember how that student struggled with the existentialist definition of man coming to peace with himself versus the orthodox understanding of man's relationship with God which the student had brought with him to the reading of the drama. The several classroom hours of difficult, sometimes tedious prodding and of half-angry rebuttals are vivid. Out of that conflict with himself, with me, and with his classmates arose his convincing essay. That conflict, not the character of his particular sentences and phrases, was the substance of his essay. The character of his writing was a by-product of that conflict.

Yes, I can dimly recall working with him in refining that character, but that work was secondary to the primary endeavor that was finished. Whatever was demanded of that secondary task was spoken by the substance of the conflict that had emerged. What was involved at that point was an editing job, and my turning from the role of *provocateur* to that of assisting editor.

Perhaps someone will remind me that this final editing job won the Achievement Award in Writing. If so, awards are being handed out

for the wrong achievements, which is not unusual. The character of a great man is often gazed upon without recognizing the creative disturbance underlying it. Easy lyrics are written of dreamers and dreams with no awareness of the blessings procured in the depths of the night.

*There can be no quarrel with clear communication as a desired outcome of writing, but is it or should it be the chief motive? Is communication as a motive really applicable to the student, who mostly writes for one reader and that a hypercritical one? Some teachers get students beyond this single readership by designing assignments that will provide a wider audience: others in the class, or others in the building (through competition, newspaper, magazine), or even those outside the school. Fine, but the student may need no audience at all.*

*For above all—and it is an exquisite torture to come to know—writing is thinking, the most exact and exacting kind of thinking. It is not as though one somehow arranged materials in his own mind and then found the means of ordering them in like pattern on his paper. If that were so, students might rightly call the written word into question and wonder if speaking or drawing or taping thoughts were not as correct and certainly more efficient. But those will not always do, for the written word is the crucial sorting out, unfolding, and reshaping of thought and feeling. It is one of the last havens of quiet, precise, evocative expression in a world given over increasingly to generality and conventional phrase.*

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## *Writing Short Stories*

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"How can I write a short story?"

"Where do I start?"

"Do I have to know the ending first?"

If you have ever assigned the writing of a short story and then suffered through its evaluation, agonizing over how to keep a positive approach in your critical analysis, you know the problems. You may even have decided that the project is over-ambitious for high school students and resolved never to try it again.

Convinced, however, that even an attempt to write a short story is a valuable student experience, I continued to struggle. A cookbook, a cupboard, a camera, and a tape recorder came to my aid. Reading a recipe one pre-dinner evening, I was reminded that without a cupboard full of ingredients no recipe could insure a successful product. Was not this just what I was doing with my short story writing assignments—providing recipes without filling the cupboard first?

Enter the camera. A little searching in my own neighborhood yielded some interesting photographic subjects: an old Victorian mansion, a Wuthering-Heights farmhouse, a modest but substantial family dwelling, a ghetto-looking apartment facade. Projected simultaneously on ceiling, screen, and side walls, the slides invited immediate comment as my students entered the classroom several weeks later. A short story writing unit was launched.

As soon as conversation and comments quieted, I asked each student to zero in on one of the slides and to take about fifteen minutes to brainstorm his reaction to it. Single words, phrases defining sounds, textures, smells—anything the students could think of to bring the slides to verbal life—were to be written down. Floor plans were to be formulated, inside rooms sketchily described.

By the time the period was over, each member in the class had established a setting for a short story. Before he returned the next day, he had assembled his ideas, the first of several days' outside work. I then collected the papers recording the ideas and filed them into individual folders. They became the raw material for the short story each student now knew he would be writing.

The second day, pictures again greeted the students. If you are in-



terested in photography, you may have already developed a collection of photographic character studies; if you have not, you may find such a project highly rewarding. If you have neither your own nor access to another's collection, you can use the opaque projector with almost as much success. Whatever you do, have available a wide variety of photographs: babies, small children, young people, old people, blacks, whites, orientals, people singing, people dancing, people working, ordinary people, eccentric people. Project them, one after the other, until the sensibilities of your students are inundated with impressions. Do not linger with any, at least not at this initial showing.

Instructions should be simple: "Let your imaginations run loosely over all the possibilities you have for establishing a central character for your story." Then, shut off the projector and ask the students to take five minutes to think about a character they feel would make the best choice for a protagonist. Once they have done this, ask them to start writing. What does the person look like? How old is he? What does he like? What does he dislike? Is he lonely? Is he happy? Before the class ends, tell each student to turn in on the following day his present notes as well as some additional ideas for other characters he feels he might need in his story. Our second day ended with apparent success; interest and enthusiasm were both evident.

By the third day it was apparent also that we had established some basics, but we still had no plot, no story. Now it was the tape recorder's turn. A little concentration on moments of high tension in radio or television drama had produced some interesting audio-vignettes. (If this presents a problem, simply tape some readings from critical moments in fiction, although this is not quite so effective.) After we listened to the recordings, we joined forces to compose, on the board, an old-fashioned radio-announcer's soap-opera come-on: Will John get Alice even though Elizabeth has vowed she will do everything in her power to prevent their marriage? Will little Susan's father remember her existence [tension], or will he remain lost in his deep, personal grief [danger]?

It was not hard to move from a class formulation of those questions to a class identification of the element common to each: tension. How is tension produced? By fear. What created fear? Danger. Must danger always be physical? No, not necessarily. Danger is inherent in any threatened change in the status quo. Protagonists must be caught up in danger, react, fight, and eventually win or lose. And so student discussion led to the understanding that a story's beginning must establish tension, the middle must intensify it, the climax must focus it, and the resolution release it—for both the character and the reader. Also, pitted against danger, the protagonist must demonstrate whether he deserves to win or lose.

For the remainder of the period the young writers concentrated on

developing their own conflict-questions, due the next morning. Setting, character, and incident were joining hands. A plot was forming, and from the conflict-question a story theme was evolving.

The fourth day we listened to music: a classical fugue, a Strauss waltz, a Chopin prelude, a bit of rock, an electronic composition. We wrote and shared response words. We talked of mood and tone. We read beginnings of short stories:

We watched at the window all that afternoon. Old Gramma came out of the room and said, "Now you kids get away from there this very minute . . ."

We read endings:

Old Gramma said *Jesus!* and stumbled down on her knees by Mama. Then the awful bulging pain in my stomach exploded and I knew that Mama wasn't just sleeping now . . .

—J. F. Powers, "The Trouble"

By the fifth day the students were more than ready to write. Clues to plot were tumbling out of the landscape, springing from the personality of the protagonist, evolving along with the identification of tension, blending through the establishment of mood and tone.

One more week was needed for in-class writing and for teacher accessibility for comment and advice. A ditto sheet of directions as to how to write and punctuate dialogue was available for each student. Dictionaries and thesauri were plainly in evidence. A few minutes spent at the beginning of a period considering the use of a strong verb in place of an adverbial description proved very profitable.

A day or two before the due-date some group attention to title-writing offered a needed break. Again the slide projector was used to advantage. Slides of cars—a Comet, a Pinto, a Fury, a Mustang—were shown and the class identified them by name. What would have been the effect had they been called Moon, or Plowhorse, or Donkey? We moved on to slides of book jackets and discussed the alliteration in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Biblical allusion in *The Little Foxes*, the literary allusion in *The Sound and the Fury*, the imagery in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. By this time the young writers were so involved in their stories that their very egos were working overtime to help the teacher help them. They wanted to do their best.

Perhaps you, too, by stocking the cupboard with some imaginative stimuli, at least will have lessened the trauma of the write-a-short-story assignment. Even though you may not have guaranteed perfection, you will have assured some basic understandings; and, together, you and your class will have developed some interesting entrees into fictional creation.

## *Writing from OK-ness*

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More and more, I believe, the teaching of composition is becoming a therapeutic process. Although the secondary English classroom is hardly the place for a therapy session, I am convinced that good writing, that special combination of craft and skill with insight, intuition, taste, and style, is achieved only when classroom interactions convey "I'm OK—You're OK."

It doesn't take much experience in transactional analysis to recognize the psychological hazards to good writing imposed by the Parent-Child (Teacher-Student) relationship in traditionally structured classrooms, perhaps even in some "open" classrooms. In short, Teacher is OK, since he knows how to write, and Students are Not OK, since they haven't yet learned how to write according to Teacher's standards. Not-OK-ness implies serious self-negativity that generates self-conscious inferiority.

If, as Dr. Thomas Harris believes, the natural life position or self-attitude of the Child-Student is "I'm Not OK—You're OK," around this "if" are gathered the multitude of psychosocial variables and problems which every English teacher needs to recognize before he asks or commands students to write.

Is it possible to teach anyone how to write? I don't think we can teach writing per se any more than we can teach someone how to walk, talk, or read. We can, however, provide excellent stimulation and encouragement for written communication through Teacher-Student interactions on the objective, problem-solving level of Adult-Adult.

Teacher-Student relationships involve problems of greater concern than the traditional liberal-conservative touchy issues of censorship and freedom of expression. At least, for the teacher of composition in a Skinnerian-boxed classroom, censorship and freedom of expression depend upon the Teacher-Student relationship.

Consider, for a simple example, the tensions that exist and can erupt when a preadolescent or adolescent confesses personal problems to his English teacher in a journal or diary, but refuses to discuss private problems with his parents. This is in part, of course, a natural growth process in teenagers, seeking emancipation from parents yet exploring other adults as parent figures as a means of attaining Adult-Adult relationships.

Yet, how Teacher and Student cope with this tension is but the

beginning of learning to write, of actualizing honest thought and assertive self-expression. And, despite whatever arguments composition teachers may professionalize into reality, Student talking to Teacher is the crux of the composition experience in the classroom.

Why do we fantasize and phantomize the student's reading audience? To what possible reading population is the student "research paper" directed to justify his trying to become "one" instead of being "I"? In-class writing, like talking, has been so long corrupted by unrealistic teaching methods and learning environments that I feel a simple and wondrous joy when I meet a student who really wants to write. In every class I meet students who "know" they can't write—students who'll argue for hours, if I'm foolish enough to hassle them, that "it's impossible for me—you just don't understand."

But I do understand. And I'm a teacher. I know the misery of having my emotions and thoughts judged and graded by Teachers-as-Pavlov who could care less about the "me" who does the writing. Fortunately, I also know the helpful comfort of the teacher whose attitudes and appraisals of my writing communicate, "You're OK, though perhaps we can improve your writing."

Obviously, what I'm trying to say doesn't apply to every teaching situation, and it's a burden of language and ego not to generalize the truths of private experience. It seems to me, though, that most learning situations are ridiculously self-defeating, and teachers and students need survival strategies, not teaching-learning methodologies, theories, or behavioral objectives. So, in spite of the impossibilities of teaching writing, what do I do in my classroom that works?

First, realize that the room is not "my" classroom and that the I'm-supposed-to-be-here learners are not "my" students. This means killing the possessive and demanding Parent and becoming Adult.

Through realistic and natural enthusiasm I generate a sharing sensitivity in which we, learners together, can see the power words have over emotions, the power of words to control behavior through ideals, beliefs, doctrines, suggestions, associations, implications. Giving group attention to word magic, to myth, easily proves that behavior modification doesn't necessarily imply teacher-as-Skinner in a classroom box. Conscious attention implies free will and free choice of the Adults and Young Adults who choose to discover together the *how's* of words, of grammar and of rhetoric.

Good writing demands enormous attention, not concentration which is enforced, to meanings and the conventionalized skills and artistic techniques which help give meanings to others. Composition in high school classes should, therefore, be based on important meanings, the interests and needs of the students as well as those of the teacher.

Classroom writing should be emotional, exploratory, experimental, and should be guided towards objective understanding of personal

experience. "Standard English" should be shelved to reference book-cases. The polished conformity of the "Prestige Dialect" should not be deductively superimposed on learners, since the qualities and attributes of good communication can be inductively drawn into the realm of their conscious attention.

Perhaps the best single experience in a composition class is to thoughtfully ponder the Gestalt Prayer,\* then to analyze Teacher-Student interactions to see how language determines personal and other OK-ness. The Gestalt Prayer totally destroys the traditional expectations and demands of Teacher-Parent on Student-Child; it creates an atmosphere of linguistic democracy—not the mediocrity of equality, but the here and now development of language of, by, and for the people. Of course, the so-called Pygmalion effect of students trying to live up to teacher's expectations can give immediate and measurable results, which teachers who subsist on behavioral objectives may find necessary. Nonetheless, traditional Teacher-Student roles in composition classes reinforce the "please the Parent," and I don't believe anyone has ever learned to write well by kissing up to Pop.

Within the classroom, the Gestalt Prayer is a demand for OK-ness. The ending of Teacher's role as expecter-demander helps create the freedom to learn. In such freedom, self-negativity as well as self-realization can be actualized as good writing experiences. The success of composition instruction depends, I believe, upon the growth of Teacher-Student OK-ness, and the qualities and attitudes of "I'm OK—You're OK" can best be achieved in the classroom through use of the Gestalt Prayer.

\* The Gestalt Prayer is the gift of Frederick S. Perls to help each of us "to become real, to learn to take a stand, to develop one's center . . ." The Prayer reads:

I do my thing, and you do your thing.  
I am not in this world to live up to  
your expectations  
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you, and I am I,  
And if by chance, we find each other,  
it's beautiful.  
If not, it can't be helped.

—Introduction, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*  
by Frederick S. Perls (Moab, Utah: Real  
People Press, 1969)

# *The Symbolism Game*

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"One picture is worth a thousand words" is a trite and, happily, not altogether true statement for the teacher of composition; but in this visually oriented NOW, when television presents the entire Civil War in one hour (complete with a "chase" scene and a torrid love affair), the "with it" teacher cannot fail to use the power and fascination of the film as a teaching aid and a motivator of composition. I am an avid television-watcher and picture-show-goer, and I noticed that many of the most stimulating teaching days in my seventeen years at Garden Grove High School were spent in discussing how last night's "Star Trek" handled a specific idea or how Eve Arden as a pseudo-detective knew the criminal was smart because he used a semicolon correctly in the ransom note.

So when the opportunity to plan for a junior-senior semester elective called "Critical Reading and Writing" presented itself three years ago, I hied myself to our local film library to investigate the possibility of teaching the large body of basic ideas, concepts, and art-form techniques through the film. The eighteen-week time limit demanded a speedy, immediate, and graspable approach to the fundamentals of theme, structure, and technique. And the library provided the appropriate medium—children's films—which, for the child, provide the delights of balloons, animals, and other children but hold for the adult and the near-adult (who may be viewing them a second or third time) a wealth of new perceptions.

The films I chose, and the order in which they were presented in the first five weeks of the course, were the following ones:

1. *The Red Balloon* (Brandon, color, 39 minutes);
2. *The Stringbean* (Contemporary, color and b w, 17 minutes);
3. *The Golden Fish* (Brandon, color, 20 minutes);
4. *Paris Weekend* (Brandon, b w, 20 minutes);
5. *Baggage* (ACI Films, b w, 22 minutes);
6. *Chromophobia* (International Film Bureau, color and b w, 11 minutes);
7. *The Daisy* (CCM Films, color, 6 minutes);
8. *Refiner's Fire* (Entropy Productions, color, 6 minutes); and
9. *The Boiled Egg* (Contemporary, color, 5 minutes).

Other similar films would do, I am sure, as long as there is no dialogue to interfere with the visual conceptualization. For purposes of



our study, we lumped everything under the general title of "Symbolism," and anything qualified for discussion; a short film, like a short story, doesn't have time to waste on extraneous material.

Some sample questions might include "Why is the balloon red? Why not purple, pink, or puce? What's the difference between a red rose and a yellow daisy? Why does Maria in *West Side Story* wear white with a red sash at the beginning of the film and red and black at the end?" (The possibilities of color symbolism are endless.) "Why is the stringbean green? Why a bean at all? Why not a carrot or a potato? Why is the fish golden?"

"What areas of society reject the balloon? Why? What is the balloon? Just because it *looks* like a balloon, does it have to be a balloon at all? What is the stringbean to the old lady? She actually takes it (him, her?) for a walk in the park! And why is the park in color and her room in black and white? Is the man in the dark suit like the black cat? And does the cat (with a white heart on his chest?) deliberately drop the defenseless fish back in the bowl or does the fish slip out of his mouth before he can sink his teeth into it?"

From the first three films, we work into the exaggeration/satire of *Paris Weekend* to the problem-bearing theme of *Baggage*. (What problems, imaginary and real, do we bear, do others bear, and do characters in film and literature bear?)

Ordinarily I begin with a discussion of the first film and everyone is encouraged to respond with an idea, a comment, a question. Nothing is too "way out" if supportable by visual evidence. The second and third films are good hypotheses-formulating ventures. Good films are constructed like good essays; there is a relation that binds together all art forms. The idea of the "author" is supported by detail and reinforced by symbol; a conclusion is reached. There is plot, character, and action; one can trace the rising action, climax, and falling action. The possibilities are endless. The longer films are excellent motivators for take-home assignments (get-together-an-idea time). The days following the films can be spent in sharing ideas coalesced in compositions, evaluating each other's themes, expanding on related ideas. The shorter films lend themselves to one period compositions as culminating activities. (*Refiner's Fire* is especially provocative since social issues provide great stimuli to individual thinking, e.g., "Does society move to eliminate the 'impurities' of differences?" I show this film twice in one period, before and after the discussion.)

The five weeks go fast. It's fun, too, and students constantly bring in ideas from television and movies. All that is seen becomes a part of the class, and the class becomes a part of seeing.

So we have our basis for the next thirteen weeks. We work in a week of analysis of advertising propaganda (the selling of Brut, Geritol, and Ultra-Brite is strangely related to the "selling" of political

figures.) Bandwagon, transfer, name-calling, and card-stacking haven't changed much in essence from the 1957 *Hidden Persuaders*. A class period with day-time television is an eye-opener and writing motivator too.

During the last twelve weeks we read a lot (R. D. Altick's *Preface to Critical Reading* is pretty advanced, but the exercises are stimulating, particularly in the chapters on "Denotation" and "Tone"). Poems, short stories, essays, and short dramas are within our ken. We can see the greens and oranges of Wallace Stevens. We can see the day-progressing colors of the seven rooms of Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." We turn toward the western wall and know that the ebony clock will be there striking midnight. We go beyond the written work into the mind of the author, and we see with him and feel with him because we have had the experience of seeing those first pictures which to us have, for our short time together, indeed been worth a thousand words.

P.S. My classes requested that I tell you that the clue to some of the success of the "Symbolism Game" is "teacher involvement": dressing to match the color or theme of the day—a red dress or scarf for *The Red Balloon*, something green for *The Stringbean*. Everyone was present on the day we saw *The Boiled Egg!* (And, over the years, I've even perfected my Gothic novel imitation of a gnarled tree. The kids are getting pretty good at it too!)



*Part Two:  
The Student Writes*

## *Introduction*

The articles in this section are not easily categorized, for they exhibit a variety of approaches to and attitudes toward the teaching of written English. Since the table of contents suggests a useful division of the essays into two broad categories—short-term assignments and long-term projects—I shall suggest other possible ways of grouping some of the ideas and teaching techniques which have been successful for twenty-two teachers of English composition in grades 10, 11, and 12.

A perennial problem for teachers interested in new ideas is the sometimes limited usefulness of a specific teaching technique in terms of the makeup of a class. For example, both "Be Your Own Boswell" and "The Chinese Box" suggest ways of interesting "poor students" in the process of writing, while "One Approach to the Process" outlines an entertaining exercise which surely could appeal to the vocational student as well as to the college-bound. "The Humanities and Better Writing" is pointedly designed for a relatively small group in a specific geographical area; "An Exercise in Description" gives pointers for teachers of honors sections. Two essays, "A Rationale for Teaching Composition" and "Technique and Tactics," stress a relaxed classroom atmosphere and the "delicate balance" between freedom and discipline that very often makes for a successful teaching-learning experience, regardless of the supposed ability of the students. In "Dear Mr. Hardy," one teacher has hit upon an exciting assignment which seems to give all members of a class the "freedom to approach imaginatively a novel which already had been studied in depth."

Related to the various levels of attainment by students is the choice of reading material for a class in composition. Represented here are the "classics" as well as popular literature. For example, inventive uses of the newspaper are outlined in "Writing Experiences," "And Gladly Write," and "Three to Make Ready." "Students Walk Out" describes a quite provocative assignment derived from a poem published in the pages of *The New Yorker*. In "Leveling with Students" a structured, yet "enjoyable," method for the teaching of English composition in-

volves unconventional and innovative ways of using *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*. Still other examples ("In League with MacLeish" and "Drama as the Springboard to Successful Student Writing") herald the creation of a very exciting new literature, i.e., students' literature, which is often based on some staple items in "standard" curricula.

Indeed, the place of creative writing is debated in a number of the essays, some of which include excellent examples of students' prose and poetry; however, other points of view provide balance by warning against the encouragement of "rhapsodies in egoism" ("Creative Writing: A Means and Not an End") and what for some have become "the shibboleths of 'creativity' and 'self-expression'" ("How to Run an Obstacle Course"). Both "Advanced Composition: Another Approach" and "Twelfth Grade Expository Writing," which contains a particularly useful discussion of Doublespeak, praise the effectiveness of somewhat traditional, structured methods of teaching English composition, which tend to avoid the assignment of "creative" writing. One of the most interesting essays in the volume, "The Community Documentary," suggests an assignment which I believe to be a sensible amalgamation of high standards in composition and creativity in one of the best senses of that word.

Another recurring concept in "Part Two: The Student Writes" is that the teacher of a composition course should be a teacher who writes. After relating a poignant anecdote of success with a group of "flunkies," one teacher remarks: "If backed against a wall and told to name the single factor that has accounted for what small success I have had as a teacher of writing on pain of attending a faculty meeting every day of the school year, I would be forced to say that my own experience as a writer of sorts was the contributing factor" ("Follow the Leader"). Still another, in "Listen to the Feel: A Composition Encounter," asks: "How many of us write poetry, keep a journal or publish articles?" The articles in this section attest to the existence of a number of teachers of English composition who are enthusiastic, who are often inventive and resourceful, who love working with students, and who write.

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## Dear Mr. Hardy

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One writing assignment, the results of which pleased both my twelfth grade Advanced Placement students and me, followed our seminar study of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. At the end of the trimester after several weeks of spirited discussion of *Jude*, I felt that little more could be said about the novel by the fifteen students and that any formal examination or theme topic would be a boring exercise: all ideas contributed in class would be merely reworked in the written assignment.

Having had students in junior classes write poems and essays for display to other students and remembering their pleasure and pride in their work, I finally devised an assignment for these seniors which would incorporate several features other than the standard expository, analytic papers the students had been writing for me. First, in this new assignment, all papers would be displayed for other class members to read; second, the form of the assignment would be an open letter to Thomas Hardy from each student; and third, the content might be any topic, concern, or response they had in relationship to the novel which they would like to discuss with Hardy, had they such an opportunity. Organizing the assignment in this format allowed the students to write for three audiences: Hardy, their fellow students, and their instructor. Such a format also gave them freedom to approach imaginatively a novel which already had been studied in depth. They were told, in addition, that no examination or theme would be required of them since I had sufficient evidence already of their skills in literary criticism and written composition.

The open letters, ranging in greeting from "Mr. Thomas Hardy, Most Honorable Sir" to "Dear Tom" and "Tommy baby," proved to be the most accomplished, inventive, and enjoyable group of papers written by this class the entire year. Topics were varied and developed with perceptive insight. Treatments were both serious and humorous. Serious concerns included the question of Sue Bridehead's return to Phillotson:

Why did Sue have to exit on such a dismal note?

Or the use of *obscurity* in the novel:

Jude is obscure; his life, hopes, love, work, and death.

Or the depressing nature of the novel:

Dear Mr. Hardy,

Yours is a most depressing book; not merely because of the tragedies that befall Jude and Sue, but because of the foreboding message you have for mankind. Your novel emerges as a powerful statement of determinism and fatalism. . . .

One student hypothesized about the life of the author:

*Jude* has a definite melancholic flavor which I'm sure has to be experienced to some extent.

Two students questioned Hardy's pessimistic view of marriage:

None of the marriages that you wrote of in the book included any real love.

I found that the marriages where no true love existed were respected by the people. However, Jude and Sue's non-marriage was filled with love, but the people were too hung up on tradition and accepted morality to accept this type of love. Maybe, Tom, some-day people will learn.

Other letters were in a somewhat lighter vein, but still directed toward basic issues in the novel—education and religion:

What I really would like to address you on, and have taken the better part of this letter to get around to, is your social comment on the Universities. You clearly point out the frustration of a man who is truly qualified for admittance into the Universities but due to social class and humble upbringing, not to mention the absence of wealth, is ignored and refused admittance. You will (or would) be very pleased to know that although the Victorian world of England may have ignored your comment, the world is a different place today.

You must have slept in church.

Two student writers assumed other personalities in their letters; one, the role of Phillotson (defending Sue against Hardy's ridicule), and the other, the role of a "radical" student:

Our free press has never been able to attack all that is wrong with society in just one publication like you have. Please let me show you how you are helping the movement. . . . First of all you really ripped the marriage bag. . . . Secondly I really dug the way you burned those colleges. They thought they could push us around too. . . . You were right-on when you showed that that Jude dude was smarter than those right-wing-freako profs. . . .

Even the "late" student had something to write. A note pushed under the classroom door bore a formal apology to Hardy and concluded:

We have, of late, completed the perusal of your latest work, *Jude*

*the Obscure.* We open-heartedly wish to express the satisfaction we experienced in the exploration of such a depressing and yet perhaps stimulating novel. We are excitedly anticipating your reply and your next novel, perhaps a sequel to, if you will forgive the abbreviation of your well thought and developed title, *Jude*. . . . Most respectfully and sincerely yours, until I join you, . . .

These brief excerpts from the students' letters give evidence of uncommon interest in such an assignment and the stimulation toward composing which it provided them. The success of this assignment depends on its spontaneity and uniqueness; consequently, it should be used infrequently and certain conditions should be observed. The source for ideas, in this case Hardy's novel, must provide a rewarding personal experience. Students must have opportunities for extensive discussion of a common work which all have read. Students must want to share their own ideas and read what others in the class have written. And while the assignment may be required, the removal of a conventional evaluation encourages the students to experiment with content and form.

The writing of open letters to an author provides a format in which students can respond more personally and imaginatively, yet also offers structure and security for those who are comfortable only with more standard critical papers. In reviewing the students' writing efforts for the year, I found this assignment their most uniformly successful.

*For kids who exhaust their ideas on any subject in one vague paragraph, the daily journal works. Reading journals costs more in back power to carry them than in eyestrain to read them. Writing at least a page a day for a semester will loosen most kids out of the rut of listing "what I did and when." They will begin to find meanings in their lives and feelings, or at least words to identify them.*

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## *Three to Make Ready*

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In addition to the regular writing assignments made for an analysis of a literary work after it has been studied, I have had some success with three other specific assignments that may be used for themes of a more creative and personal nature. Since all of these assignments prepare the students in some way to better express themselves, I shall for convenience refer to them as the "three to make ready" writing assignments.

The first of these assignments is short and may be done at the beginning of the term to determine if students really can distinguish between objective and subjective writing. Two paragraphs are assigned to be written about the same topic. The first paragraph is to be objective in its point of view. It is to be approximately one hundred words. The second paragraph is to be subjective, and is to be approximately two hundred words.

The difference between an objective view and a subjective view is discussed before the assignment is written. Usually, I illustrate this distinction with a discussion of the American flag. The students describe it objectively, telling its dimensions, its colors, the number of stars and stripes, and the way it is mounted on its holder. From here, we begin to discuss it subjectively. What does the flag represent to each of us personally? What do the colors symbolize? The stars? The stripes? What memories of history does the flag evoke? What does it symbolize as a representation of our country to others? By this time, students can easily see the difference between objective and subjective writing. I then give them other subjects about which they may choose to write. Some typical topics are a library, their own rooms at home, the family car, an old catcher's mitt, a family pet, a locker, a family Bible, and a family's favorite Christmas tree ornament.

When evaluating the students' paragraphs, it is necessary to note the inclusion of subjective elements in objective paragraphs and vice versa. This particular assignment also helps to prepare the students for analyzing the subjective ideas in poetry and prose works that are studied during the rest of the year.

The second of the "three to make ready" writing assignments is one which the students write after having read and discussed Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, a fictitious biography of Paul Gauguin. Rather than have the students do an ordinary paper of

analysis, in which a theme or characterization is discussed and passages from the novel are quoted to substantiate their discussion, I use the reading and discussion of the novel as a catalyst for them to write their ideas on any subject mentioned in class while the novel was being discussed. In other words, the novel becomes a provoker of their feelings through its theme, characterization, or plot.

When the assignment is made, I clearly state that no specific references to the novel, its characters or incidents, may be made in the themes. Only ideas stemming from the discussion of these specifics may be treated. The papers, therefore, become more personal and individual, since it is the opinion of the student that is being discussed rather than the author's opinion as expressed in the work.

I give students some topics from which they may choose, or let them choose their own. Some topics which have been used are "Conformity vs. Nonconformity," "Responsibility to Society: A Constant Variable," "The Psychological Island of Escape: A Necessity," "Hypocrisy: A Corrupting Force," "The Nature of Art," and "Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder."

One can readily see how this sort of assignment may be used after the study of any novel or play. The object of the assignment is to help each student relate to the study of literature as a two-world concept: the world of the author and the world of the student. These two worlds are successfully joined when the student can see that the author in the world of the novel raises and answers questions that are extremely relevant also in the world where the student exists.

The third composition assignment that has proved effective and rewarding to me through the years as a teacher of composition might not be called a composition assignment at all, but rather a class project. It is a mock newspaper based on a literary work studied in class. This assignment is easier for the teacher with some background in journalism, but I also used it during my first year of teaching, when I had no journalism experience or training, and still found it rewarding for the students and myself.

I have used this assignment after studying short stories, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*. I know of no other writing assignment which can elicit as much enthusiasm from the students; which can combine objectivity, subjectivity, and creativity in one activity; and which can actually involve the whole class in a united effort to reflect the "feel" and mood of a work that has been studied. The mock newspaper may be from one to four pages long, but whatever its length, it employs examples of a variety of different types of writing.

The first page of the newspaper, of course, should contain strictly objective writing, reporting on incidents and important happenings in the work previously studied. The second page should be of an editorial



nature; here, the writing is subjective, and personal opinions concerning the events, characters and concepts of a work may be discussed. The third page may be composed of imaginative news stories conceived from the plot of the work, and the fourth page usually is reserved for imaginative stories in the world of sports that may have been played during the time period of the work. In an assignment such as this, organization is the key factor. The teacher, with the class, should plan who is to be responsible for what pages and who is to be responsible for what stories. The variety of writing styles which must be required for the pages is obvious. Students can be as creative here as they wish, but the end result will be a reflection of how well they have reacted to the work studied and how they have adapted their knowledge of the work to create an interesting newspaper.

The beauty of this assignment is that it can be used on any class level. Last year I had four individual newspapers being prepared in four different honors-level classes at the same time. All of the papers were planned and written on *The Return of the Native*. The best of the four papers was printed in the school print shop so that each student could have his own copy. I have never found a writing assignment to parallel the mock newspaper for making a novel come to life, for generating student interest and for stimulating creativity.

All "three to make ready" compositions—the objective-subjective paragraphs, the idea-concentrated theme inspired by a work not referred to in the composition, and the mock newspaper created around the world and times of a particular novel or play—have worked for me as incentives for students to write more meaningful compositions, and have helped my students understand the literature they study.

## *Be Your Own Boswell*

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The assignment is a five-day diary or journal based on the careful observation of a relative or associate. The overall length is quite arbitrary, of course, but most students find they can drum up two hundred words a day quite easily. At the outset, students must be assured unequivocally that everything they write is completely confidential. Although students almost never write anything really intimate or embarrassing to the teacher, it is often quite personal and "top secret" from their own point of view, and their confidence must be respected.

The final work is evaluated on such points as abundance and precision of details, liveliness and vividness of presentation, keenness and freshness of observations, and vigor and ease of style. The student's basic aim is to bring his subject to life in the mind of his reader. The student should use a fictitious name if the person under observation is known to the teacher, since the subject should be clothed in anonymity for his own sake and that of the teacher, who should not bring any information or values of his own into the picture.

If students are taking a survey course in English literature, the first step in preparation for the assignment can be to read excerpts from Pepys' *Diary*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and *London Journal*, and Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, and discuss the purposes, uses of detail, styles, subject matter, etc., of the authors. If English literature is not part of the course, the teacher may read from such works or introduce suitable materials of his own choosing.

Then the student selects his subject. Normally I make this a two-week assignment, and the student does not have to present five consecutive days in his diary or journal. Such an arrangement allows for times when the author and the subject may not see each other and for days when not much happened. Students should be impressed, however, with the fact that careful observation will always reveal something new and different, just as watching a good film or reading a good story for a second or third time will reveal lodes unnoticed at the first exposure. Students should also be advised that the most interesting people to observe profitably are not always the colorful characters who attract attention easily. Quiet, more disciplined people often reveal deeper or more brilliant hues to the patient eye.

The third step is the observation process. Students should be ad-

vised that their work will probably be more fun, elicit more reliable responses, and make life for the subject much easier if they do not make him aware of the study. "How would you behave," I ask my students, "if you knew somebody was noting every time you burped, picked your ear, said something foolish, or wrote graffiti on your desk?" The trick is to concentrate and remember, to make surreptitious notes in your own shorthand whenever possible, and then get everything down on paper completely and accurately as soon as possible. Tips for the observer include:

1. Using all the senses (How does the subject sound when he eats? What fragrances does he affect? What do his fingernails look like?)
2. Noting mannerisms (How does the subject stand while talking? Does he say "you know" two or three times per sentence? How does he look at people?)
3. Quoting (Include chunks of dialogue that are typical or very revealing of the subject's attitudes, opinions, and speech patterns.)
4. Showing a variety of moods and situations (What does the subject say and how does he look and act before breakfast? How does he react to anger—his own and others? When is he at his best and how does he behave then?)

Next comes the selection of details and data. The student, if he has not already decided, must also determine the form and style of his study. Will it be the breathless diary of a Samuel Pepys, or the more standard biographical approach of a James Boswell? In this assignment students should be given ample opportunity, once they have collected the material, of presenting it in a "natural" style, one that stresses the writer's feeling and thinking about his subject, rather than the niceties of grammar and composition. In fact, one of the brightest fringe benefits of "Be Your Own Boswell" is that students often learn they can write quite well when they are concentrating completely on their subjects, oblivious to the nuts and bolts of sentence construction.

Finally, the student is advised to prepare a rough draft, allow a day or two for it to "cool," then revise it for submission. Details often overlooked include size, shape, coloring, and general appearance of the subject; data that can easily be included when the writer is reminded of the need for such information to help the reader get a clear picture of the person under observation.

Students should also be warned against being "cute" or clever. Let the subject do all the work. I tell my students. And finally, remind them again, that what they have written is strictly confidential.

In general, these papers are better written, more fun to read, easier to grade, more rewarding in terms of students' learning to write, and more packed with fringe benefits than any assignment in writing I have ever given.

## *Listen to the Feel: A Composition Encounter*

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I don't like when I write a answer to a question not on a test but other things. I feel [the teacher] only looks for mistakes not the meaning behind my writing. Maybe I'm wrong. . . . But that's how I feel. I know I don't have good sp) frag. ✕ are run on // what do you mean? frag) frag) frag run on —————>

—Eleventh Grader

Nowhere else does an individual stand so naked as in his writing. Nowhere else is he so vulnerable. Handwriting analysts suggest that even in the way the writer shapes his characters and the way he spaces, shortens or lengthens them, he reveals aspects of his inner strivings and apprehensions. Consequently, the student whose tiny, squeezed scratchings appear indiscernibly on his paper reveals his self-image—even before his ideas are revealed. Then his selection of topic, thesis, support, style, words all further fashion him vulnerable. His writing becomes an expression of self, naked before some critical audience—us, his teachers. Each red notation (“frag., run on, sp.”) becomes a symbolic bullet tearing at the gut of his idea. Like the artist in the film *Why Man Creates*, the student presents his creation not with the affirmative “I am here, I exist, I am (I have felt the success of communicating with another, and that success affirms my existence),” but with the quizzical “Have you discovered my meaning? Has my product any worth? Have I?” Perhaps the eleventh grader cited here is not so “wrong” as he thinks. Perhaps all those red “put downs” obliterate his idea wriggling around inarticulately on the page, striving to be. One is reminded now of John Holt’s student who, when asked whether he ever read composition corrections, answered, “. . . study the corrections the way you wanted us to? Never” (*What Do I Do Monday?*, p. 242). Perhaps as teachers of composition, we should strive to encounter with a student’s compositional idea—no matter how nebulous and embryonic. Begin with sensation, and listen to the feel.

It is important to interject here that as teachers of composition, we should offer better means of communicating an idea. No one would argue with that claim; however, it seems that in the fervor of our red markings, we often fail to offer a better way of saying the same idea to our students. Unless we struggle with ideas ourselves in writing, perhaps we have little to offer students in their own writing. How

many of us write poetry, keep a journal or publish articles? Perhaps if we learn to listen to the feel, talk to sensation—coaxing it to take form in idea, we can cultivate in each student his own self-conscious encounter with his writing.

So, how do we begin? First, begin with the "feel" of the classroom. Walker (1969) and Torrance (1962) have identified those teachers who seem successful in nurturing that classroom climate in which creative ideas find expression in writing. Walker characterizes them as "stereopathic," and Torrance identifies them as highly sensitive, resourceful, flexible and willing to "get off the beaten track"; such teachers form good relationships with students and are willing to make mistakes. Be prepared for noise and for a raised eyebrow or two from dubious colleagues.

Second, explore the sensation of the classroom itself: have students take a blind walk feeling their way around the classroom. A buddy system helps avoid embarrassing confrontations. Students will discover that although they cannot see, they can sense the presence of an oncoming object, experience light and temperature changes, hear shuffling of feet. This exercise works well with all ability levels—after rapport and respect have been established. If the classroom seems too confining (or too risky in terms of its acceptance by administration and colleagues), try a sensory walk outside. Pack a battery-operated cassette to record student perceptions of the sensory background. These sensory data can be transcribed on paper back in the classroom. A short story model employing a stream-of-consciousness approach to describe the insidiousness of mental illness, Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," could serve as demonstration for student writing: students could fit their sensory data into the stream-of-consciousness model (with advanced students, excerpts from James Joyce could be used).

Since students today seem weaned on television, a visual medium, two other blind activities help them get in tune with the rest of their senses. A sounds experiment—heads resting on desks, students shaking any object handy—introduces the concept of onomatopoeic words. Rip a sheet of paper slowly and have students attempt to write the sound phonetically. Another activity has students smell, touch, taste, feel various fruits and vegetables while they are blindfolded. A cassette would record responses. These two activities might culminate in one or both of the following composition assignments.

First, try this one, which involves sensory description of a pineapple. Have students list descriptive adjectives and comparisons (similes and metaphors) using all five senses. This lesson works quite well with younger students who love cutting up the pineapple and tasting it. Discuss student responses. Pose the question: It is relatively easy to describe the taste of a pineapple with adjectives, but how could a

writer describe the taste of excitement or of fear? Such a question lends itself to a discussion of literal and figurative language (and is also a cue for a discussion of poetry). Choosing one of the following suggested topics, students should create such an immediacy—through colorful usage of sensory detail—that the reader experiences what the writer does (the here and now):

The Grand Prix  
Thanksgiving Dinner  
Christmas Shopping  
A Funeral  
A Day at the Zoo

Bob Dylan in Concert  
A Subway Ride  
A Football Game  
A Parade  
A Day at the Flea Market

Suggest that using the first-person narrator and the present tense helps the reader feel the here-and-now immediacy. Such a suggestion introduces the concept of formal writing versus "creative" writing (a misnomer since all writing is creative).

Although students seem to understand the difference between a short story and a term paper, many have difficulty selecting a theme and composing a thesis statement. Having them bring to class both news and editorial articles, and having them use the news article lead as a theme to write an editorial thesis is often a valuable exercise.

An accompanying lesson might be to read a sentence from either the middle or the end of an article or a story, have students use it as their thesis and write an introductory paragraph for it. Then read them the original text from which the sentence was taken. Students become sensitive to the fluidity of language: they sense the relative strength or weakness of a sentence as it assumes various positions within the paper. What a sense of power, of uniqueness a student feels when he ultimately comprehends that he is the director, deciding how his sentences act in the drama which is his paper. Discuss "bit-part" positions of sentences as opposed to "star" positions by collecting samples from magazine essays and stories. As our eleventh grader testifies, a student wants his teacher to listen to ". . . the meaning behind [his] writing," that meaning which he senses is *his*. An exercise like the one described here suggests the *way* he *means* also makes him unique. Graffiti will never seem the same!

"Don't tell us; show us," says critic Dwight MacDonald of Hemingway's description of his Santiago as "strange." With that criticism, MacDonald focuses on a fundamental consideration in writing: does mere statement of an idea warrant its acceptance by the reader? A second composition approach suggests not only that demonstrating an idea is superior to stating it, but also that writing logically involves self-conscious questioning and associating ideas. In *Teaching English in High School*, Abraham Bernstein suggests a variation on word-association that works well as a warm-up and as a means of describing



transitions. Take an idea—like the desk at the front of the room. Using that as a starting point, what other ideas come to mind? Students should be able to explain how one idea led to the other, how the final idea was arrived at, and what the connection between ideas was (p. 91).

While students are primed for associating ideas, suggest the following fantasy trip: Heads down on desks, students are transported to a place of darkness. This place can be whatever they will it to be, whatever associates itself with darkness in their minds. They are to be keenly aware of all five senses while they blindly walk in the darkness. Stress the fact that the events presented will be sketchy, that they must complete the fantasy with their sensory perceptions and feelings about the place with which they have associated the darkness. Introduce a dime-sized circle of light into the fantasy. As students walk towards it, the light elongates. Remind them to mentally record their perceptions. As they walk closer, the light further elongates. The light emanates from a door left ajar. Voices leak from behind the door. The students' task is to finish the fantasy. They may begin their writing with their perceptions while walking or with their descriptions of what happens after opening the door. Incidentally, a trip to a haunted house or a climb up a mountain would work equally well.

Expect the unexpected. One eleventh grader saw herself as trapped inside a piggy bank; the light in the distance was, for her, the slit at the top of the bank. Another student wrote of his journey through Hades and of his meeting Lucifer behind the door. Ditto student writing samples and bring in similar ideas expressed by great writers—Dante's *Inferno*, for example. Students feel important when they discover that great minds had ideas like theirs. In an assignment like this, it is sometimes important to suggest accompanying questions, so students discover that paragraph organization consists of answering questions posed by some introductory idea. Some questions posed for this assignment follow: How did I feel as I was groping in the darkness? What did I expect to find—if anything? What did I believe the light in the distance to be? Whose voices were behind the door? What was the nature of the talking (sounds): volume, tone, gender? How did I feel when I opened the door? What was the reaction of those behind the door to me? What happened after I opened the door?

Probably one of the best means of improving writing is having students write often. With the initiation of an associate reader program, teachers are freed somewhat from the laborious task of feedback, and students begin to understand that, although they write for an audience, the audience is not merely "teacher." Such a program answers the student who laments: "The teacher doesn't like me or my idea. That's why I got this grade." Dittoed instructions with clearly delineated points for evaluation of students help make standards con-

sistent. Saved and referred to, these instructions become a communal sharing of ideas for teachers.

If no funds exist for such a program, try having students write in a notebook for the first ten to fifteen minutes of each class meeting. For those intimidated by writing for an entire period or for those not motivated to write at home, this journal technique appeals. Although students should feel free to write about whatever they wish, too many are frustrated in the face of such choice. Offer suggestions: 1. Ask them to write about some character in their assigned readings; 2. Write a provocative quote on the board and have students respond to it (If the quote comes from the assigned reading for that day, reading from journal entries becomes a personal interpretation and introduces the lesson.); 3. Play a piece of music and have students respond to how it makes them feel. These daily entries can be self-contained or continuous. Personal entries might be clipped—a Holtian “for my eyes only” approach. Perhaps two or three of the best entries could be graded for content. Again the journal is a valid means of discussing the difference between formal and informal writing. By sampling journals of famous people—Dag Hammarskjöld, Dr. Tom Dooley, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Genet, George Jackson—students find workable models and also discover that nonliterary people as well as literary ones keep journals.

The journal is the medium for sharing perceptions and feeling. Through it, teachers can strive to listen to the “meaning behind [student] writing”—listen to the feel from which the meaning exploded. As John Holt says,

There has to be more writing for love, if writing is to improve, and I don't see how this can be done unless at least a good part of each child's writing is wholly outside the area of corrections, approval, criticism, marks. Conversely, a child who writes something because he deeply wants to say something on his mind will want to express it clearly, and will probably be eager to hear anything you or I might say about parts that we could not understand. . . . the child who, like a true artist, writes for love, for the sake of what he is writing, cannot but help learning as he works, . . . (*What Do I Do Monday?* pp. 243-44).

It may be the “unkindest cut of all” for us to realize that those writings we assign for our students’ “own good” are done in a “There . . . I'm done” fashion—what Holt characterizes as a “kind of excreta” to be rid of. He continues to say: “Such is the injustice of the universe that corrections, while they seldom do good, seldom help children to write better, often do harm” (*What Do I Do Monday?* p. 242). It has taken this teacher a long time to discover the import of what Holt states. A student of mine—now in her freshman year of college—wrote recently to tell me how much she had benefited from writing in my



class because I gave her "the freedom to write." At that time, I thought: that is not such a special thing to do. And then, I was reminded of Buckminster Fuller when he said: "If you want to do something good for a child . . . give him an environment where he can touch things as he wants" (*Buckminster Fuller to Children of Earth*).

I have just begun to listen to the feel.

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*After writing personal journals for several weeks, most writers are able to go further and create a character. In the character journal, the writer must follow three criteria: First, he or she must be of the opposite sex from the writer. Second, there must be an age difference of at least ten years from that of the writer; and third, the character must come from a different station in life from that of the writer. . . . This assignment usually becomes the most imaginative of the semester. I have read the private imagined lives (with careful detail and research on the part of many students to make their works realistic) of Henry VIII, a young girl living in colonial times, a father in the year 2200, an astronaut living on Mars and many more.*

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## *The Chinese Box*

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While teaching high school students for several years, I have received a consistent initial reaction whenever composition is approached . . . rejection. I have also found that the majority of tenth to twelfth grade students do not write well. Small wonder, then, at their reaction. We do not like to do what we do not do well, and writing has an additional terrifying factor: it is permanent. When a student verbalizes orally, he can back up, change, explain, interpret and add to what he has said; but when he writes, he senses the fact that he cannot be there to defend the piece; it must speak for itself. That frightens him. Understanding this fear and helping my students become confident about their writing is the premise that underlies all of my teaching of composition. What is needed, then, are techniques the students can utilize in their own writing to lessen their dread of compositions.

One of the first concepts that I stress with the students is to simplify their writing. I ask them to deal with a subject they can logically handle within the scope of the composition. This simplification applies to paragraphs as well as essays. Given the freedom of topic choice, many students will attempt to discuss "The Origin of the Papacy and Its Political, Social and Economic Influences over the Past Five Hundred Years" in a five-paragraph paper.

The paragraph, then, is the place where I begin to review the fundamentals. Most students claim they have heard of the topic sentence idea in a paragraph. Several can recognize one, but seldom (unless reminded) do they use topic sentences in their own paragraphs. I provide the students with examples of paragraphs that contain topic sentences, and the students are asked to identify the sentence in the paragraph. We next discuss the logic of its placement and the relationship of the details in the paragraph to the topic sentence. It is at this point that I introduce my concept of the "Chinese box." After drawing on the board one box inside another for several layers, I explain the relationship of the words to the sentence; the sentence to the paragraph; the paragraph to the paper's thesis; and how, together, they make a complete entity with each phase (box) neatly fitting inside another to make the unit solid. I have found that this logic appeals to the students.

Once we have reviewed the paragraph and the topic sentence and the students have practiced with their own paragraphs, I move on to

the subject of the thesis statement. I put my greatest emphasis on the utilization of a thesis as a means of giving direction to writing not only in terms of compositions but also in the organization of essay-exam responses. I preface this study with an explanation of the thesis statement, examples and its relation to the "Chinese box." The next step is to help the students learn to compose a thesis statement that can be adequately defended in a limited space. Though I usually do not set lengths on paper assignments, in composition I do focus on the five-paragraph paper, as it includes the essentials of introductory paragraph (containing thesis), three interior paragraphs in which the main points are illustrated and defended, and the conclusion. I explain to the students that this pattern can be expanded (i.e., the number of interior paragraphs) to adjust to the complexity of the thesis, and I give them a few examples to illustrate this expansion.

In focusing on the thesis and its relation to the rest of the paper, I use a method of oral composition. The theory of this method is that students can better imitate writing techniques if they can see them develop; so the teacher, with the students, writes a composition on the board. I begin by asking the students to give me general subject or topic areas. Their contributions range from drugs to the writings of John Steinbeck. The class chooses one of the subjects with which to work. Once this choice is made, I ask for a thesis statement from the students. Inevitably, their initial responses are theses that are much too broad for a five-paragraph paper and usually by the time I have written them on the board, they see this. From the list the students choose a thesis statement they prefer, and following their suggestions, I edit the statement to the degree it is workable for the short paper. The students decide when they think the thesis is at a workable level. If they are satisfied, but I think it is still too broad, I carry on with the process anyway, because as we build the paragraphs, the students ultimately recognize they still have too general a thesis.

After we select the thesis statement, we begin to list the major points that will be used to defend the validity of the thesis. Here, I emphasize that each of the major points is to be formulated into a topic sentence for an interior paragraph. This gives the students some guidance in the selection of the major points. Once the points are chosen, students formulate each one into a topic sentence and under each of those they begin to list the details supporting that particular point. This process calls to mind the exercise they did earlier, in which they discussed the relevance of details to the topic sentence in sample paragraphs. At each of these stages on the board, I reinforce the concept of the "Chinese box."

After the details are in and students see the process as it has developed, we discuss the fine points of transitions between paragraphs, the introduction and placement of the thesis, and the conclusion and

what it should contain. The students' assignment after this rather exhausting class exercise is to reproduce the process as they have seen it develop on the board. For the next class period, they are to hand in an outline which illustrates how they went from their list of topics to the details of their individual paragraphs. The thesis and topic sentences are to be written out, but the rest of the paper may be in outline form as it appeared on the board. Once this has been approved, the students proceed to write their five-paragraph papers.

The results of the "Chinese box" exercise are always gratifying, because the improvement in the students' writing gives them positive reinforcement of their efforts. If, however, a student has not completely grasped the technique, he is given the option to rewrite his paper, without penalty, after having a conference with me to go over his errors. After completing the entire process, I find the students have more confidence in themselves and much less fear of the permanence of the written word. The next step for the teacher is to reinforce this technique in all phases of writing. Gradually, organization in composition becomes less of an isolated activity to the student and more of an innate characteristic of his writing ability.

## *One Approach to the Process*

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The usual reaction to the study of process as a form of advanced exposition is boredom accompanied by smugness. Most students have written process themes in their elementary and junior high school experiences. They know all about it: how to change a tire, how to bake a cake, how to apply make-up. The teacher's challenge is to motivate them by illustrating the deceptiveness and the sophistication of process. The former is accomplished through a series of group activities; the latter, through reading, analysis, and writing.

To introduce the unit, the class is divided into small groups of five to seven students. Each group selects two students to leave the room for twenty minutes. After their departure, the remaining students are given instructions and materials. They are to compile written instructions for the construction of a model airplane from computer cards. Each group has a model airplane, tape, scissors, pencil, paper, and several used computer cards.<sup>1</sup> Yes, there are a few catches: they cannot name the object in their instructions; they must compile their instructions in fifteen minutes; and they cannot communicate verbally with their teammates who will attempt to construct the object.

At the end of fifteen minutes, models and trial materials are removed from sight. Only scissors, tape, cards, pencils, and instructions remain. The other students return to the classroom and are told that they have fifteen minutes to construct an item according to the written instructions of their groups. They should keep their constructions secret; when they have completed their instructions, they should signal the teacher but should not display their models.

At this point, the fun (or bedlam) begins. Frustration, particularly among those who wrote the instructions, abounds. "How could anyone be so dense!" Unable to verbalize, they resort to facial expressions and gestures. The builders sometimes embellish the written instructions, allowing their inventiveness to interfere. To the instructor who is trying to demonstrate the complexities of the process, the results are very rewarding. Yes, some model airplanes are constructed but some very strange "things" also develop. Students enjoy the end products; they may even test them. The computer room gang is amazed that an

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<sup>1</sup>The use of computer card airplanes is an idea adapted from Dr. Jerry Bellon, head of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

English "teach" has found a use for computer cards. But the major objective of the day has also been accomplished: process is no longer a dull topic. The follow-up discussion provides a working definition of process, considers problems of organization, and reviews knowledge of the form.

The next class period requires a teacher with a strong stomach. And it demands extensive preparation: an ample supply of paper towels.

The assignment insults the class. "In ten minutes, write instructions for the preparation of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

"She's tricked us!" "One of those silly process assignments!" Meanwhile, they write. At the end of ten minutes the themes are collected. A table is prepared: lots of paper towels, a quart jar of the cheapest peanut butter, a pint jar of cheap, cheap grape jelly (that's the only jelly for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, isn't it?), a large loaf of bread, and knives. "Would anyone like to volunteer?" The selection of the first volunteer is important; his insight of the purpose of the session can establish the tone for the entire class.

As another student reads the instructions, our volunteer begins. Ah, the results! Students have made sandwiches that the hungriest member of the class would not eat. In fact, very few of the sandwiches look like sandwiches!

As the sandwich session continues, students are encouraged to comment on the problems. Point of view, verb tense and voice are considered. The excuse, "We all know what he meant," provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the importance of determining the intended audience. At the conclusion of the class, each student is instructed to compile a list of the steps of a process that he does not consider to be general knowledge. This list will be needed for the next class.

In the third class meeting, the students are led in a general analysis of a process (such as the study of Hayakawa's "How Dictionaries Are Made").<sup>2</sup> Order of development and transition are noted. A second activity of the session involves the assignment of the previous day. The students exchange their lists of the steps of a process. They are instructed to offer criticism in the expectation that their questions and comments will assist in the clarification of the process. The assignment for the fifth meeting is a 200-to-500-word process paper on their individual topics.

Small-group analysis of other processes is the activity of the fourth class. These processes are selected to appeal to the interests of the students. Individual copies of processes about science, mathematics, sports, crafts, and art are provided for each group member. The

<sup>2</sup> S. I. Hayakawa, "How Dictionaries Are Made," *Composition 11: Models and Exercises*, eds. Allan A. Glatthorn and Harold Fleming (Atlanta: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965, pp. 146-149).



analyses should lead to observations about audience, purpose, point of view, and tone. Each essay is accompanied by a series of questions to implement discussion. The teacher circulates from group to group, listening to comments, asking questions, providing necessary clarification.

At the next class meeting, the students are arranged in small groups for discussion of their first process themes. Each theme is read and analyzed. The student may or may not act on suggestions from his group. However, the session allows time for theme revision if the student wishes to follow the advice of the group. These themes are due at the end of the period.

Several student themes are discussed by the class at the next meeting. The emphasis of the discussion is on what is successful and why. (These themes have been typed and reproduced for individual copies. Students seem to recognize structural and mechanical weaknesses and strengths more easily when they appear on the printed page.) During this session, the class discusses the importance of tone and narrative in process. The focus of the discussion is Shaler's "How Agassiz Taught Me to See," Goodspeed's "Art of Being Outshone," and Franklin's "Receipt to Make a New England Funeral Elegy."<sup>3</sup> This discussion usually continues at the next class meeting. At the conclusion, the assignment is made: write a process theme in a particular tone (humorous, satiric, or melodramatic) and in a narrative frame. Since the assignment is due the next day, students are given twenty to thirty minutes at the end of the class to begin the writing. (Students in a composition class must be able to write in class and must be provided with the opportunity.)

Five of the second themes are read to the class. Based on past experience, the teacher can rely on students to volunteer essays. These may be their own or others that they have read in advance. (One important goal is that students not only read but desire to read their classmates' writing.) The students may read their own themes or may ask someone else to read for them. We discuss the tone and whether it is successfully sustained, and make suggestions for further development.

The final assignment is made the next day. Although autobiographical in nature, its development involves process. Each student is to select some concept (such as distance, height, intelligence, love) and illustrate how his view of the concept has changed. The topic may be

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, "How Agassiz Taught Me to See," *Readings for Liberal Education, I*, eds. I. G. Locke et al. (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1952, pp. 16-19). Edgar J. Goodspeed, "The Art of Being Outshone," *Great Narrative Essays*, ed. Joseph Mersand (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961, pp. 406-413). Benjamin Franklin, "A Receipt to Make a New England Funeral Elegy," *United States in Literature*, eds. Walter Blair et al. (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1963, p. 135).

discussed for the future as well as for the present and past. No limit is set on the length of the assignment. The next two days of class time are given to working on the assignment.

The success of this assignment has always amazed and humbled me. The themes can evoke tears of laughter, tears of compassion and empathy, tears of catharsis. Because the student is writing about himself, the theme has unusual vitality. The paper is read to the class only with the student's permission. We have had deep, searching papers on views of God and religion; philosophical comments on death, good, and education; and tender humorous definitions of love. One theme that will remain in my memory was accompanied by a paper written (printed) by the student when she was in the third grade. She had written "I hate boys! I hate boys! I hate . . ." To the class's amusement, many of those boys listed were sitting in this classroom with her. Obviously, she no longer hated them. I would hope that her concept of the process had changed as much as her concept of boys had changed.



## *An Exercise in Description*

*Robert D. Welch, Assistant Principal for Instruction,  
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One writing assignment of which I am especially fond is a simple exercise in spatial description. This particular assignment is by no means unusual or esoteric but it illustrates much of what I personally believe about teaching writing. Originally, it was designed as one in a series of projected exercises worked out for my students in a high school honors English literature class.

Early in that course, these students asked me to take them through a more structured and intense writing program than they had previously experienced. They came to me with the feeling that they were not good writers, even though they had been selected by their previous teachers as capable of honors work. They stated that they had all written much, mostly in a literary vein, and had had their writing assignments well explained and promptly corrected. Yet, they felt little real understanding of the writing process, had seldom spent classroom time writing or revising, and had only paid lip service to the act of revision. Occasionally, they had written "creative" pieces and had sometimes been honored for them. Though they loved literature and discussions related to it, they felt that an undue amount of time had been spent in literary discussions. The students expressed considerable insecurity about their writing.

Following several general classroom dialogues involving these and other feelings, we agreed to a different, more systematic, writing laboratory approach. At least, we agreed to give that approach a trial. The students heard my point of view during our discussions, and though I spent much more time listening to their feelings than I did expressing my own, they were aware of my belief in a more than casual approach to writing. (My views, they understood, were largely derived from my own personal experiences as a college student and master teacher.) Our basic agreement was that we would spend about a third of our classroom time writing, would use a systematic approach, would concentrate chiefly on short paragraphs, and would attempt a wide diversity of expository, descriptive, and narrative forms. An exercise in spatial description was our first assignment and required about two or three total days of class time. It was presented to students in the form outlined below:

### **An Exercise in Pure Spatial Description**

Write a *purely* descriptive paragraph picturing a real scene

which you are actually observing at the time of writing. You may choose a room, one wall of a room, a set table, a bed, a view of a house nearby (perhaps across the street), an intersection, a desk, or another similar subject for your description.

Attach a simple sketch or chart to your paragraph. Show the exact relationship of one object to another on this chart.

**Important Do's:**

1. *Describe a real scene which you actually can observe as you write.*
2. *Use a logical method of movement through space. (Move from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, obliquely across the room, etc.)*
3. *Use as many concrete nouns and active verbs as you feel to be effective. (With this type of assignment you can no doubt employ some "being" verbs and an occasional "passive voice" form to good effect.)*
4. *Show as exactly as possible the relationship of objects in space. (However, try to avoid being overly "pedestrian"; don't over-stress mathematical measurement.)*

**Important Don'ts:**

1. *Don't bring yourself into focus. Simply describe what you see. (Do not locate yourself in the scene. Do not indicate what your feelings are about the scene.)*
2. *Don't try to be "arty." (Simply try to be clear and informative.)*

Following our preparatory discussion, each student chose a specific setting and began by making a crude sketch to show the relationships of objects in that area. Then, everyone, including the instructor, wrote a rough draft. The concept of the instructor as an active classroom writer was established with this first assignment. At this time we all wrote on the same topic; though later, when more assignments had been worked out, instruction became individualized and students had a choice, assuming they had mastered the few basic, preliminary writing exercises.

For this static description, the class was divided into small groups which discussed our rough drafts and made suggestions for revision. Each group had a recorder who wrote group suggestions on sheets of paper and attached the appropriate sheet to each rough draft. That evening, I added my comments. Papers were returned to students the following day; polished, revised copies were due the next week. Revision was mandatory for all except "A" papers. A well-understood ground rule for this and all other composition assignments was that there was no deadline on revision. Any student could continue to revise his work until satisfied with it, and the writing grade was constantly updated in terms of progress. The entire emphasis in writing was on each student's success in achieving an effective product, in this

case, a specific kind of static description. The classroom was treated as workshop or laboratory with everyone writing and submitting his product for general criticism. Students were to aim at brevity and at quality rather than quantity.

Soon, students began to develop a sense of pride in craftsmanship. When most had achieved reasonably effective descriptive paragraphs, ditto sheets on which to type them were circulated to the students who had achieved the greatest success. A small booklet was then prepared which included both the assignment and the models written by the students. As the class reviewed these printed paragraphs, members observed that some students had not maintained the highly objective approach demanded by the assignment. They also noted that some of these papers were among the best. Students remarked, and the instructor agreed, that there is nothing wrong with deviating from the rigid guidelines of an assignment if it suits the needs of the writer, and if the end results are successful. It was established that students could make such deviations if they could defend them. An example such as the one below illustrates a sophisticated, creative variation on the original assignment:

#### Child's Bedroom

On the tufted beige rug in a corner of the small room, a mournful lion rests with his sad yellow muzzle buried in his forepaws. He is sad and mournful perhaps because he has lost his once beautiful mane along with his youth, and is left with only a few wisps of hair stuck in the seams of his stuffed head. Next to the wall, and close to the lion, a golden palomino mounted on a carriage of aluminum bars with four steel springs seems to have been frozen in mid-gallop, its straw-colored tail swishing in the air. Precariously astride the black and white saddle of the horse sits a furry, brown and white monkey, its wide red mouth directing an inane but silent taunt at the lion in the corner. Across the room, on the white spread of a small bed, obviously enjoying the scene as they survey it, sit Raggedy-Ann and Raggedy-Andy . . . she in her navy blue dress and white apron, he in his blue trousers and red-and-white checked shirt. These clothes are their only means of distinction, for they look strangely alike as they hold each other's hands, their red yarn hair disheveled, their black button eyes shining, and the thin, black line of each one's mouth frozen in a perpetual smirk as they watch the Lamenting Lion and Mocking Monkey.

Yet, students also saw how successful close adherence to the letter of the assignment could be:

#### The Garden in Winter

The garden lay still under the winter twilight. On one side was a driveway curving into the darkness, and on the other was a shoulder-high stone fence, its crevices and ledges covered with

snow. At the foot of the wall, a row of stiff shoots with dried frozen leaves jutted from the white earth. A birdbath, near the rear of the garden, not far from the wall, and filled with ice and dirt, stood regally among the dead clusters which dotted the ground. In the very center of the garden rose an island, barely discernible under the snow, from which arched a lone plant. An oval-shaped walk surrounded this island, continuing at each end straight through the garden. Beyond the walk drooped a weary maple tree, street-lights shone through the bare branches of the tree, illuminating the dead clumps of myrtle around its base, and revealing the tracks of a rabbit leading toward the wall. All about were scattered stems, frozen and bowed with heavy lifeless flowers, spectres which had returned from death at night and eerily hovered over the ground.

Now that time had been established for our writing laboratory, it was not uncommon to see various combinations of students at work on revision, or for me to have the luxury of working at some length with an individual during class time. Rather than generalizing about writing, we found ourselves working on those very real problems faced by writers who aim at a superior product. After two weeks, most of which remained devoted to the study of literature, we had a collection of short descriptive paragraphs worthy of our abilities and efforts.

A fringe benefit came later when we submitted our dittoed work to the school-literary magazine. Four of the pieces were printed as short creative sketches and were highlighted by impressive art work. We were delighted, and during the rest of the school year continued to work on many other short, largely expository paragraphs. These paragraphs included the usual traditional types, such as example, enumeration, comparison-contrast, analogy, reason, cause and effect, and definition. We attempted to keep our work focused, personal, specific, orderly, and detailed. Later, understandings often carried over into our writing about literature. Rather than pasting together a large assortment of literary ideas in a "catch-all" paper, students began writing tightly unified, short papers which focused on sharply limited topics. Typical titles might be "The Use of Topography in *Cry, the Beloved Country*," or "Contrasting Houses in *Wuthering Heights*," "Steps in the Moral Regeneration of Lord Jim," or "Graham Greene's Definition of Priest in *The Power and the Glory*." Such topics demanded the use of comparison-contrast, example, enumeration, and definition approaches, all of which students had first practiced in their personal paragraphs.

When members of this class had completed the year, they expressed pleasure with the literary selections we had studied but they also told me in many ways that they appreciated most the time we had spent in our writing laboratory. Several students had won awards in the Scholastic Writing Contest, and two had achieved distinction in the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program. The writing of this

class also dominated the school literary magazine, and I now had to cope with the problem of overconfidence.

More important than the recognition we received, however, was the changed attitude of the class toward writing. We had learned to write frequently, both in the classroom setting and at home. We were not "uptight" about grades since these could always be improved if we were willing to devote time and energy to revision. We were learning to do in our writing laboratory what art, industrial, homemaking, and science students, as well as school athletes and musicians, have been accustomed to doing for many years. We were developing a number of specific skills by practicing them frequently in a structured setting which nevertheless allowed us considerable creativity and individuality. We clearly saw that creative, expository, and literary forms cannot be separated, but are, in fact, intimately related. We were aware of what we could do with the familiar, and with personal experience, and were not afraid to use what we knew best in our writing. We were confident of our abilities to determine quickly an effective way in which a given subject could be developed.

I benefited personally as a teacher since I painlessly secured many excellent assignments, complete with models. My regular classes were later to profit from these and especially appreciated the very tangible and achievable student examples. The exercise in static description placed a high premium on order and clarity as well as upon exact and effective word choice. Over a period of several years, it has helped to produce a rich harvest of student writing.

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## *Students Walk Out*

*Frances Goldwater, Teacher, English Department  
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My mixed-abilities, mixed-grades, high school creative writing students found a freeing experience in succumbing to a fantasy of Stanley Plumly published in *The New Yorker*:\*

Walking Out

Stanley Plumly

I would walk out of this flesh.

*material deleted*

*leave to copyright*

*restrictions*

This intoxicating idea was minimally discussed for its simple sense before a vow of silence descended to prevent cross-fertilization or dilution of inspiration. Then the students followed a three-part assignment:

1. *Walk out of yourself.* Then do either 2 or 3 below in poetry or prose.
2. *Look at what you left behind.* Examine the clues you have abandoned to the casual passerby or to the intense student (you choose which). What would that person make of the storehouse

\* From *Graffiti* (Louisiana State University Press), © 1972 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

of habits, postures, clothes, fingerprints, memories, and words that either shielded or were you? Detail the fragments from which he must try to reconstruct the person you were. Weigh for yourself whether you want his judgments to be accurate or grossly wrong.

3. *You are free now.* Take us where you'd like to go, unseen, unfelt. What mysteries will you penetrate, what sensations will you explore? This is the journey that can take you in and out of place and time and mind. What is it like and what do you discover?

The responses speak for themselves. People really let go in ways that had previously been bottled up by self-imposed corsets of suitable form and content. Here are three:

I'm gonna eat toadstools until I get stuffed—  
 I'm gonna free all the frogs & let them fly away  
 I'm gonna drown every fish who will stand in my way.  
 I'm gonna jump in the water all alone.  
 I will converse with the clams,  
     and smuggle some seaweed to the surface—  
     naive stuff, seaweed, needs exposure.

And tomorrow  
 I will sleep late, talk to no one—  
 Ever again, and watch tv.

Then they'll be sorry—  
 I will make them all cry.  
 "Speak! Tell us what you've seen, what you  
 Know!"  
 I will only grin—  
 Like the cheshire cat,  
 Like the super-cheshire cat,  
 With omnipotent eyes,  
 a tantalizing nose,  
 an ultimate mouth—

And shake my head.

—Nanette Santoro

I have just walked out. Not out of a job or school, but out of my body (i.e., manifest corporeal form). The walk-out is a protest. Yes, I am on strike against my body. The following list of grievances has been submitted and deserves careful consideration:

- A. Hours too short. Mind requests twenty-four-hour wakefulness but receives only sixteen.
- B. Equipment defects and failures as outlined below:
  1. Torn cartilage in left knee, sprained ligaments in right. Periodic disfunctionality (they occasionally stop working).
  2. Lungs subject to bronchial spasms during post-illness periods (coughs a lot after colds).



3. Ralph Nader is conducting an inspection and entire body may be subject to recall.
- C. Food consumption too large. During periods of wakefulness the body consumes between three and five meals daily. Substantive reports and complaints available from Mother (who cooks meals) and Father (who pays for them).
- D. Flat feet. Minor. Acceptance and remedy of previous complaints will be enough satisfaction for me to walk back in.

—Ricky Kohn

**You Are Free Now**

A presence  
Joining the wind  
Scanning the oceans  
Taking a rest in the clouds  
While determining my  
Reason for being.  
Looking at everyone and  
Everything until I had its  
Secret.  
Eternity would be an  
Instant or a glance at the  
Creator  
Knowing I would be saved.

—Mark Haisley

Thank you, Mr. Plumly. My students walk out every year now.



## Leveling with Students

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Composition should be the most exciting part of an English program, channeling students in effective skill techniques, yet freeing students to create their own designs, whatever the framework: descriptive, narrative, expository, or poetic. Freeing students to express their fragmented ideas through the use of "levels" is a positive, effective, rewarding discipline, in the art of composition. This concept is not new, but it is a concept which requires, by its very nature, a structured approach. If the teacher doesn't know the destination, how can he free students to go there? This paper is a résumé of a structured approach to composition used with eleventh-grade students in a course titled "American Perspectives," a fused course in language, composition, and literature.

The backbone of this program is to use the classics to raise questions on style, so the classics must be used in an order that will fit the sequential thematic unit. In the first unit on Puritanism, students read:

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments, and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

This first paragraph from *The Scarlet Letter* is a good beginning for a discussion of Hawthorne's use of detail to make his description realistic and thereby "hook" his reader into the time, place, and tone of his narrative. No tags are given to structures at this time, but this and other selected passages make the students aware of Hawthorne's sophisticated style. No attempt is made yet to have students imitate this or any other style, but composition does proceed in terms of character sketches and expository analyses of the total novel.

And thus the work proceeds; the two tackles hoisting and lowering simultaneously; both whale and windlass heaving, the heavers singing, the blubber-room gentlemen coiling, the mates scarfing, the ship straining, and all hands swearing occasionally, by way of assuaging the general friction.

We're on the *Pequod* now and ready to let Melville show us the way with different levels of structure as well as different levels of

meaning. At this point the Christensen Rhetoric Program\* is introduced. Using a transparency of Melville's sentence on the overhead projector, I discuss the author's use of detail; then the questioning begins. "What would you call this kind of sentence?" ("Compound-complex" is the most popular answer, but usually one voice will venture, "Simple?") Now they are *all* looking. Simple? I am ready for the next stage. "If we all agree that there is only one subject/verb, what will we call these other structures? What is 'hoisting'? Verb? No, can't be—no helper. No way in our language for 'hoisting' in this sentence to be called a verb." A timid voice asks, "Participle?" Another says "Gerund?" Another "Verbal," and others in the room get upset. "Oh, that grammar stuff!" "I never understood that."

That's when I black out the overhead, place a clear transparency in readiness and begin my spiel. "If you have never understood the term verbal before, then today is the day. It takes two minutes; are you ready?" Then with wax pencil and transparency I explain a verbal. . . . "Now, back to Melville's sentence. If 'hoisting' is a verbal, what is 'tackles'?" They don't know. But two more minutes and the concept of an "absolute" is established.

Now we're ready for the introduction to Christensen's Rhetoric Program and the term "cumulative sentence." Throughout the week we examine Melville's style in ways not possible before. Students declare that "absolutes" just leap out, once you know them. We take a short chapter from *Moby Dick*, such as "Brit," and carefully examine the structures, noting the writer's pacing as well as his variety.

The next step is a natural. Students write. They write cumulative sentences, breaking down the base clause into levels of generality, each level serving an important function to the whole, and each level providing specificity, like a camera zooming in for the closest look desired. They write about the characters in the novel, but this time with a different framework: use addition (modifying elements); direction (logical arrangement); levels of generality (tell me all I need to know); and texture (find the words; borrow the words, create the words, any way but get rich in texture).

Throughout a semester, I use the Christensen Rhetoric Program and the classics we are studying in a combined effort to free students to write. When we study *Walden* we take up journal writing, putting to use the cumulative sentences which are so effective for cataloguing responses, as in Thoreau's chapter on "Sounds":

In the meanwhile all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian lake,—if the

\* Francis Christensen, *Christensen Rhetoric Program. One Hundred Ninety-Five Overhead Transparencies with Teaching Script and Teaching Manual* (Harper and Row) and *Christensen Rhetoric Program: Student Workbook* (Canfield Press).

Walden nymphs will pardon the comparison, for though there are almost no weeds, there are frogs there,—who would fain keep up the hilarious rules of their old festal tables, though their voices have waxed hoarse and solemnly grave, mocking at mirth, and the wine has lost its flavor, and become only liquor to distend their paunches, and sweet intoxication never comes to drown the memory of the past, but mere saturation and waterloggedness and distention.

With all this as background, students have no difficulty accepting the complex style of Dreiser in *An American Tragedy*. The opening paragraphs provide effective levels and appropriate pacing:

DUSK—of a summer night.

And the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city of perhaps 400,000 inhabitants—such walls as in time may linger as a mere fable.

And up the broad street, now comparatively hushed, a little band of six,—a man of about fifty, short, stout, with bushy hair protruding from under a round black felt hat, a most unimportant-looking person, who carried a small portable organ such as is customarily used by street preachers and singers . . .

By the time students have reached the stream-of-consciousness sections, they are excitedly recognizing that fragments of thought in a logical sequence are a form of "levels" and an effective writing tool. Students not only pity or detest Clyde, but also recognize the art form which has made them feel this way:

The dusk and silence of a closing day. A concealed spot in the depths of the same sheltering woods where alone and dripping, his dry bag near, Clyde stood, and by waiting, sought to dry himself. . . . But the repeated cry of that bird,—harsh, nerve shaking. And then the gloom, in spite of the summer stars. And a youth making his way through a dark, uninhabited wood, a dry straw hat upon his head, a bag in his hand, walking briskly and yet warily—south—south.

As we work into more contemporary literature we find all authors using "levels" and most of them utilizing the "absolute" structure. Let's free our students to write this way.

The final step in this structured approach involves total commitment from the student writer. He creates the story and makes real the characters, attending to each detail of story-writing in a professional way. And the stories are good. My favorite examples of the use of "levels" come from my own students' short stories:\*

\* I have quoted from the short stories of the following students: Sandy DeLozier, Beth Wheelis, Kathy Bennett, Rosamary Christmas, Lisa Logan, Kathy Kramer, and Ronnie Ash.

I remember times in Idaho when Melanie and I were best friends. Numbers and faces drifted by, and we grinned at each other. It was all so good. And we were friends. It was June and green and lazy. It was July and water and laughter. It was August and yellow and mellow. Then suddenly the wind blew and it was September. We ran together in the night, bare feet hitting the same sidewalk, jumping bushes. We ran in the warm air and felt summer go by.

My horse flew over the grassy earth, and with this speed I passed the wind—the wind endeavoring to catch me, pulling at my hair.

He had been walking for two hours in the red heat, sweat dripping down his face, into his eyes, off the tip of his nose, salty in his mouth.

The moon broke through the clouds a moment and I saw him clearly. Proudly, defiantly, the huge range stallion glared at me from white-rimmed eyes of fire, his blood-red nostrils distended as he testily sniffed the air, his shaggy bay coat matted with blood from a recent fight.

For a long while after her departure, I just sat, blinking stupidly at the darkness, wishing the heavy, langorous blackness would envelop me with a sweet veil of indifference, that I might never worry about "seeing a light" or "finding the right road."

When I was a little girl, I loved everything. The soft shadows of the afternoon. Dragonflies. Trees. Rain. And love. In the middle of a green-grass, butterfly day I would sit, eyes closed to preserve the memory of the moment, heart open to receive as much joy as possible.

The motorcycle was the first thing I saw, handlebars shining in the newly risen sun, metallic flanks glistening with morning dew. Not a sound issued from the long Texas highway by which I slept; there was only some happy prophecy of a contented sparrow singing near the roadside park.

And it never ends, composition, that is. I take an examination question, such as the "Brute Incident" question suggested in *End-of-Year Examinations in English for College-Bound Students, Grades 9-12* (CEEB) and change it, so that students not only write a description of an action remembered from their reading, they write the description using "levels." Can you recognize the incidents?

He lay puffing hard, his body heaving in his shell, his eyes bulging, the blood in his head pumping furiously.

His nose was pushed back into his face, the nostrils looking like two wide, gaping canyons. These canyons were peopled by ants, carrying their loads in and out.

The four men leaped from the boat, each attempting to survive the heavy waters around them.

And the peck-marked peasant exuded the liquid of life from five different places, the torn flesh revealing the naked muscles.

Then the rat seemed to leap backward. The strike was a dusky gray blur, a split second of perfectly timed speed and motion.

The sunlight streamed through the woods, shining upon the body of a soldier, his eyes cast upward as though he searched the skies for an answer.

And still it doesn't end, for students return to visit saying, "You know, I still think about leveling when I'm writing—well, I don't just think about it—I do it!"

## *Creative Writing: A Means and Not an End*

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When I began teaching, most of my convictions were cut on the familiar bias of an unrealistic ambition and a naive idealism. Nine years and a thousand students have shifted the pattern of my values. One certitude, however, was held: creative writing has little place in high school English classes.

This is *not* to say, however, that the bedrock of our teaching—solid expository writing—cannot be mined for such nuggets as metaphor, allusion, simile, alliteration, analogy, parallelism, and other rhetorical devices congenial to all forms of composition. For example, a sophomore's perfectly paced, tightly controlled comparison of Poe's raven to the IBM missile, closing with the heightened ominousness of Poe's own "Nevermore," still excites me. A junior's metaphor on the appearance of the sentimental novel toward the close of the Age of Reason, "Shyly weeping behind her dainty lace handkerchief, the sentimental novel was an intimate acquaintance of many educated ladies of this period," though forced, does communicate solid information. A beautifully balanced sentence in an essay on the eminently balanced classical era has both discipline and relevance.

It is the lack of one or both of these qualities in almost all the creative writing of high school students that I find ruinous. When I see sentimentalism dribbled haphazardly across the page and labeled free verse by students who cannot yet scan another poet's meter, much less erect the metaphorical net that most of us use to defend the genre against Frost's criticism, the moppet in me wants to confide that the emperor is quite naked. I find myself filled with the same aversion to short stories malodorous with melodrama or awash in bathos.

No, the job of the secondary English teacher is to demand structured writing, to insist that students learn to write Hemingway's "one good, true sentence" to provide endless practice in variety of sentence structure and length, to awaken an awareness of diction and idiom, to teach several basic essay forms so repetitiously that eventually the student can follow them by rote to produce copy with both coherence and clarity. In short, our job is to teach the same old truths about communication by the same old laborious method of making structured assignments, then spending the ten forevers it takes to grade each. The job is not glamorous; still, there are abundant rewards.

Occasionally, of course, an original writing assignment related to

other skills and insights one is teaching does suggest itself. Then one can encourage the student to be "creative" (and often he is, within and usually because of preestablished limits), confident that if the search for valid originality remains a fishing expedition, other values are being netted. From the Romantic period, for example, I have had good results with three such approaches, which I rotate according to the skills, perceptions, and needs of individual classes.

Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth" inspires an assignment that both students and I enjoy, though for somewhat different reasons. Giving each a copy of the poet's amorphous assemblage of molding influences, I ask him to duplicate Whitman's catalogue method by substituting his own strongest reminiscences. I assure students that their anonymity will be respected. Although most of their "poems" are predictably rambling and sentimental, an assignment seldom fails to contain at least one exquisitely framed, delicately suggested memory that is obviously very precious. And, more important, since self-discovery is the underlying goal of the assignment, seldom does a student turn in his paper without betraying a sense of quiet pride in having made his discovery.

Occasionally comes the paper produced with restraint, almost reticence, as if the author is awed at having applied the scalpel so close to the bone. One such paper, written by a loner about whom I had worried despite his seeming self-containment within his own apartness, was titled "The Human Spitwad Target." Here is an excerpt:

Fourteen years of quiet  
   solitude  
   timidness.  
   bashfulness and  
   loneliness

I was all of these things  
     like the classroom spitwad target  
       who is that  
     because he is the only one  
       who sits in the corner of the room  
       and doesn't talk much.

He just sits there,  
     his mouth sewn together,  
     his body frozen into a cute little  
       dainty position,  
     trying to ignore those spitwads and  
       other varieties of flying objects  
       coming at him from all directions.

He just sits there  
     trying to ignore the bullies'  
       evil laughter.



Being a spitwad target isn't any fun.  
I escaped.

I read the denouement with all the eagerness I had brought to my first perusal of Fitzgerald's "Freshest Boy." Like Basil Lee, my student had escaped through the magic of a human contact that came when the boy was still, barely, reachable.

Another student's approach veered sharply in both tone and form from Whitman's. One of his most memorable lines spoke of observing the heavens: "But my imagination delighted in exalting reverie over reason and wasted no time in spinning taffy-like threads of concentration to each little star, with hopes of conducting precious glimmers to my own dim light."

A visual complement goes with the assignment. Having set the students to work, I call some twenty-odd parents, cutting across as many artificial barriers as possible to reach a wide variety of students. Securing pledges of secrecy, I ask each for photographs of his child caught on the wing of a moment somewhat significant or characteristic. I then select a variety for the AV department to enlarge into 8-x-10's. The day before I return the papers, I arrange a bulletin board with Whitman's title across the top, his poem in the middle, and student photos and typed excerpts from their poems covering almost every other square inch. Their reaction is stunning. The blasé outer skin of the typical high school junior is sloughed off in a frenzy of eagerness, guesswork, and—yes, intense excitement. Looking on, I sense that a new awareness of the uniqueness of every other human being has, for a moment, anyway, penetrated the solipsism so typical of—and, I suppose, so ultimately essential to—adolescents.

Another assignment aims at increasing appreciation for Hawthorne while illustrating the basic differences between the well-made story favored by Poe and the moderns' slice-of-life approach. After reviewing students on the characteristics of the short story genre as we study Poe, then Hawthorne, I interrupt our chronological study to give them a Chekhov story, dwelling on the Russian master's well-known aversion to beginnings and ends and stressing his impressionism. Next, I reproduce six of the suggestions sketched in Hawthorne's *Journal* for stories he never wrote, label them "Never-Told Tales," and invite my students to expand one. Within the story they must use one allusion, simile, metaphor, alliterative phrase, balanced sentence, and parallel structure. Finally, each performs the autopsy on his own story, explaining after the fact of creation why it more closely resembles the classically-plotted or the "situation revealed" tale.

One of the finest descriptive passages I have received came from this assignment:

I walked through the oldest parts of the city, straying between



the once grand mansions of another year, now diseased and crumbling under the dark, ruinous ivy called Time. Here were the lost relics of a dead god of architecture, misplaced toys left in a ravine after dark. . . .

Students' self-critiques are endlessly fascinating. Most know what they have written, and why it is so. But even the most gifted are often caught in the web of subjectivity that spins itself around most human efforts: they have written one type of story and perceived it as another. Even so, their ingenious justifications usually demand respect for their knowledge of the genre. And thereafter even the self-beguiling have little trouble explicating other stories.

Finally, as our studies of Romanticism end, I sometimes combine experience with the closet drama with an overview and evaluation of the era called "Romanticism Revisited." I begin with the flat assertion that we must seriously consider the possibility that we are entering a new Age of Romanticism. Next, I point out trends suggesting the stirrings of a Neo-Romantic movement. These trends necessarily vary from year to year. This year we discussed the ramifications of the energy crisis that has dimmed our neon-lit skies, elaborating on the analogy of a well-lighted industrialized society that, paradoxically, provides little warmth. Finally, I invite them to join Whitman in washing the gum from their eyes and seeing America through the vision of five resurrected Romantics who, having just spent twenty-four hours in America, have assembled to measure the current age against the yardsticks of their own aspirations. I require that the five represent a cross-section of fields and philosophies: I would not want, for example, three musicians and two dark Romantics. An acceptable *dramatis personae* might consist of Rousseau, Holmes, Thoreau, Poe, and Melville.

Students have done remarkably able jobs of relating past to present to heighten their perceptions of both. They have presented Thoreau applauding Dr. King's application of his own method of resistance, Cooper remonstrating with himself for having created a Natty Bumppo who accelerated the vanishing of the frontier that both author and hero so loved, and Hawthorne pondering the Freudian tendency to consider guilt the greatest sin of them all. They have portrayed Beethoven raging that modern man is "a pigmy, not a Prometheus," Delacroix grieving that so many French republics have come and gone, and the Knickerbockers decriing the spoilage of the Hudson River. Allusions, double entendres, and puns abound. A student quoted Whitman after a visit to a high school: "I saw much loafing, but not many souls attended the event." Another attributed to Longfellow the observation that "I, too, saw the wanton waste of beauty in America; but, nevertheless, I saw a trace of romance in . . . the ship of outer space."

Gaining experience with closet drama, dealing with dialogue characteristic of the speaker (Holmes must be eternally ebullient; Melville, tragically ambivalent), reviewing themselves on the particular postures of five Romantics—all these values should be impressed upon the students. Especially gratifying, of course, is the perspective they display.

These types of assignments, then, typify my approach to creative writing in any secondary English course not specifically labeled "creative writing." On balance, I would rather have taught my students to write one good paragraph that will survive a close reading for unity, coherence, and a systematic arrangement of thought than to have had from them a dozen rhapsodies in egoism. I rail at them to resist with all their might the lure of an allusion or the pull of a pun if their virtuosity intervenes between them and the reader. I remind them repeatedly that their first job is to communicate, not to entertain, and, least of all, to bedazzle. If an occasional multi-purposed assignment satisfies their creative yearnings while justifying my even more urgent need to feel accountable to the tough demands of expository writing that their futures hold, then we are both well pleased. Meeting these demands occupies most of my time and energy, and teaches me considerable humility.

## *Technique and Tactics*

*Jayne Karsten, Chairman, English Department  
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I have become increasingly convinced through the years that the secret of helping students write effectively is locked into the seemingly paradoxical references "freedom" and "discipline." Freedom is vital to release a student author into integrity of expression, into provocative, fresh response in both idea and design. Discipline is vital to equip him with the skills and devices necessary to cull, order, and effectively communicate the raw response unleashed by the uninhibited experience.

For a teacher to achieve and sustain both elements of this paradox is difficult. Too much freedom waters down, fragments creative response; too much discipline cripples, breeds robot performance. The timing of when to close in and when to let go becomes a vital issue in the writing classroom. Hanging loose does not create freedom; this posture usually causes frustration and lack of productivity. Coming on too heavy with formal instruction can be equally frustrating and, also, end in lack of productivity. Imposing order on the soul-stuff, with which good writing begins, requires delicate balance.

One of the most recurringly successful techniques I have used in an attempt to achieve such balance is a device I label "concept structuring." This approach has brought many students to a new way of seeing writing, has helped them to tap resources of creativity and language they did not know existed within them, has served as the catalyst for the development of exciting manuscripts in all genres. The device has served, also, to make students aware that all of their writing is creative, that the expository essay, the poem, the one-act play, the novel, and the short story all build from a creative force, that form is not limited to the essay but is the property of all genres of literature.

Concept structuring is based on the realization that many ideas we experience, although they seem to be totally different on the surface, are bound together by the same basic underlying abstraction. Pieces of writing can be totally different in exposition, characterization, structural ordering, linguistics, genre, etc., but still share a common denominator of abstraction. To initiate the approach, I ask students to brainstorm a list of various abstractions, encouraging them to concentrate on those which emerge in pieces of literature they have read. I then ask for volunteers to explain one or two of the abstractions, such as "self-reliance," "justice," or "time," urging them to define the abstraction through examples, anecdotes, or analogies. To enable them

to grasp the idea better, I focus on the term "mousetrap," pointing out that Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and the play within the play in *Hamlet* reflect the mousetrap concept, and that many murder mysteries and TV shows they have read and seen are bound together by this intrinsic force. I encourage them to define mousetrap incidents in their experiences. After these preliminary steps, they are ready to move into various writing experiences.

In the first writing activity, I ask students to define a particular abstraction in any genre they wish: vignette, poem, brief expository essay, dramatic sketch, etc. One of the most provocative abstractions I have used is "circumscribe." I usually introduce the concept by reading Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "I Drew a Circle" and defining the term through the poem. Students quickly arrive at the conclusion that "circumscribe" can mean being closed out as well as being closed in by something. A discussion of how students' lives are circumscribed by family, school, interrelationships, and themselves usually follows. At a peak of interest, I give the writing assignment: construct in any genre a writing sample bound together in some way by the abstraction "circumscribe." The idea is to show, not tell; in the best papers the intrinsic statement will emerge subtly from the incident, the comment, the experience being described or dramatized.

The results have been exciting; the subjects covered in crystallizing the abstraction, legion. Manuscripts have come in reflecting how blacks are circumscribed by their color; closing themselves off from society, being closed off by society; how modern man is circumscribed by time and a distorted value system; youth by lack of purposiveness or by too much purposiveness; a young girl by blindness; a boy in going steady; another boy by his passion for a particular sport. The following is a sample written in response to the assignment. The student captures an incident involving her little brother. The manuscript was developed in class directly following the discussion of the concept.

#### The Tactician

*Hey Mom, look what I found—a frog, a real live croaking green frog. Look Mom, he's a beauty of a frog. I found him this morning when I was fishing. Can I keep him, Mom? Huh? But Mom, he needs me; look at him, poor guy. He'll die without me, lonely, starving frog. That's why he'll die Mom - that's why—so now can I keep him, huh? What do you mean he's dirty and slimy? I'll give him a bath - I'll even take a bath, then we'll both be clean. Right Mom, then I can keep him - alright? After all, how could you refuse to keep a clean, lonely starving frog? You could, huh! Don't you have a heart Mom? How would you like to be a frog all alone without a family or house? I know you're not a frog but how would you feel if you were? He doesn't have any other friends; he told me, I'm his only one.*

Look, he likes you too; he's hopping right towards you. Don't

step on him Mom, don't you want to be his friend? He can play with you while I'm at kindergarten. You don't want to play with him? Why? Why don't you like him Mom? You always said you liked my friends. You say he isn't what you meant. Why not Mom; he is my friend. Don't make me throw him out, please Mom; he'll be mad; maybe he'll get all his friends and attack the house. Then what would you do, huh, Mom? You wouldn't move, Mom, I know you're only kidding. Take him out! But Mom I just can't. He'll die, poor little Marvin will die. I bet when you found me on my birthday you wanted to throw me out too, huh Mom huh!

What did you say Mom—I can keep him? Oh boy—thanks Mom! And guess what, Mom, Charlie told me his frog looked just like Marvin. Charlie has six little frogs now, Mom. Isn't that good, Mom; aren't you glad you said I could keep him? Huh, Mom? Hey, Mom . . .

Other abstractions work equally well. Another one is "separate peace." Again, the subject's emerging are rich and varied: a short story about a young Jewish boy who finally decides to fight rather than take further abuse from his classmates, a vignette about a girl who decides to give up a black boy rather than be alienated from her family, and a spoof about whether or not a young man should stay up late before taking the SAT are a few examples. One of the finest examples is a short story that won the Columbia University Bronze Medal in 1970. It is about a boy turning seventeen who, deciding that he has become too sophisticated to play with his dog he found in the snow as a pup, deciding that the dog has now become too much trouble to take care of, gives him to a neighbor's boy.

A somewhat different activity which has worked well in concept structuring is designed around the abstraction "relate." To prepare for this activity, I announce that the class is going to be working with an abstract concept but that the concept will not be defined until several preliminary steps have been completed. I then initiate a series of writing experiences. First, I ask each student to record freely, reflecting both objective and subjective responses to his situation. I next ask him to move to another position in the room and write again, pointing out that he has placed himself in a new environment by moving. I ask him to move a third time to a position directly opposite someone in the room, to make eye contact and again record his reaction. I then ask him to return to his original position. I explain that up to now he has been asked to record experiences he has had in this room; in the next step, he will be asked to concentrate on something outside of the room. I ask him to think about a person or persons not in the present experience and record as before.

I then ask students to define the main abstraction which they have been building. After discussing the fact that they have been participating in several abstractions, such as "moving" and "reacting," I guide

them to a focus on the concept "relating" as the most encompassing of the several abstractions governing the experience. I call attention to the fact that what students have actually been recording in the above steps is how they relate at a certain period in time and space to various situations. I remind them that they are exercising the concept of relating constantly in their lives: when they talk to friends, have confrontations with their parents, apply for a job. I then ask them to construct a writing sample structured by the concept of relating, developing it in any genre they wish. Again, the results are rewarding.

The emphasis in concept structuring is not on designing this plot or that form; it is, instead, in capturing the many rich, vital observations embedded in a student's experience. In concentrating on the abstraction, the student becomes less conscious of plot, theme, character, and form as isolated factors; he, therefore, becomes less self-conscious in handling them. He becomes enmeshed in the total experience about which he is writing; parts seem to fall into place in a natural way to produce the whole. He will, of course, want to refine, perhaps redevelop his basic response in another genre or maybe several genres. But the essence of idea is captured, subtly and intimately bound together by the abstraction. Form and theme are synthesized; nothing is superimposed. He has his hands on something. He will be much more willing to listen to observations about strengthening syntax, extending development, manipulating structure, refining mechanics when he feels that these processes are operating to perfect a recognizable whole. The delicate balance has been achieved.



## *And Gladly Write*

*Rose Barth, Head, English Department  
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One impromptu writing assignment, which takes just fifty-three minutes from directions to finished composition, has produced some delightful stories with additional dividends for both my students and me—pleasure for the students in the composing process and pleasure for me in preparing materials, in watching students respond to the assignment, and in reading the results.

This assignment is based on something as mundane as the daily newspaper with its news stories, want ads, columns, cartoons, personals, and advertisements. Although I have used it for three years now, I am still delighted each year and even amazed at how clever students can be in just fifty-three minutes.

Preparing for this composition is time-consuming, but fun and worth all my efforts. Several weeks in advance, my approach to reading the daily paper undergoes a complete change. As I pick up the newspaper, I no longer mumble, "What are those rascallions in Washington—or Columbus—up to today?" Instead, as I leaf through the paper, perusing one story after another, I ponder, "What could Sue do with this one? Couldn't Nancy write a tear jerker about that incident? I'll bet Brian could really do a biting satire about old Senator Z. and his scummy payoffs."

Armed with a pair of scissors, I begin to snip at random—a funny story here; a tale of grief there; a stock market quotation; a note from the personal column which reads, "Ginnie, please come home. I can't find my favorite tie, and I still love you, Bill"; a headline giving a football or basketball score; a letter to Ann Landers from a teenager whose boyfriend is urging her to turn on with pot; a Dennis-the-Menace or a Marmaduke cartoon in which the little boy is stealing apples and saying to the orchard owner who apprehends him, "I can't read yet, and I thought the sign said, 'Help yourself'"; a want ad about a souped-up car for sale; an advertisement, with picture, of the new sanna in town; another advertisement by the local pet shop selling five fish for just one dollar with every aquarium purchased at \$9.98.

A week or two and fifty or sixty snippings later, I am ready for the next step. Xeroxing my treasures in what I call my "newspaper," with apologies to our journalism teacher, I arrange eight to ten clippings of various types on one page and then run them through the copy machine. One page might include a sports headline, a "Dear Abby"



letter, a cartoon, a news story, a want ad, a personal; variety is the key to a good page. I continue to arrange other pages in a similar fashion. By the time I have finished, I have a newspaper page for every student in my class—twenty-five separate pages in all. I place some of the same stories on more than one page, but very few pages are exactly alike. With the photocopying equipment, varied page make-up is possible, and when the principal asks me whether I have been individualizing assignments, my newspaper pages are living proof! I make sure that all fifty or sixty clippings appear somewhere in these twenty-five pages.

That task done, I am ready for the actual presentation to my class. As I have mentioned previously, this impromptu assignment is to be completed in a fifty-three-minute class period, from the distribution of my newspaper to the collection of the finished composition. When I distribute these pages to members of the class, I make sure that no two students sitting side by side receive identical pages; also, as I distribute the pages, I quickly glance at the stories and then fit a page or a given story to the individual at hand.

My only directions to them are that they focus on *one* item in the newspaper and write anything which that item suggests in whatever form they feel is suitable—short story, familiar essay, poem, diary entry, or anything else which they might dream up.

Their first response to the assignment is the old familiar groan, "Oh, no, how do you expect us to do this much in fifty-three minutes?" or, "Mrs. B., what do you have against us?" or, "I always knew all Eng'ish teachers were sadists." Groans subside as they begin to read their newspapers, compare notes with their neighbors, and think up possibilities. I even hear a few chuckles and some out-and-out guffaws. Occasionally, students decide to exchange papers for one reason or another.

Within ten minutes the room is silent except for the scratching of ballpoints, the snapping of notebooks to get more paper, the occasional grunts of satisfaction, glee, or disgust—those sounds of the composing process with which all teachers of English are familiar. As twenty-five students hand me their best efforts on their way to the next class, no one is indifferent. A "Gee, that was fun" coming from several of my sophisticated eleventh-graders is enough to brighten my day—and even my week—and send me scurrying to read the finished product, even hoping for a little hidden talent.

If one expects twenty-five manuscripts ready for immediate submission to the Scholastic or Atlantic contests, he may be a bit disappointed. However, from a class of this size, I am very likely to find five or six stories of a sufficiently good quality to submit to our literary magazine with very little revision. I am submitting one such essay, "Goldmine," with this article. It was based on the advertisement for

aquariums and needed almost no revision. Another good essay which I remember and which subsequently appeared in our literary magazine was based on the advertisement for the opening of the new sauna and focused on a conversation among five men sitting in the steam room. One boy wrote a fanciful but plausible story about a banana thief, based on a news item of one or two lines. Also, Ann Landers' advice is fertile ground for numerous familiar essays and short stories.

One word of caution about news stories per se: Rather than include an entire news story in my paper, I generally limit it to the lead and the following paragraph; otherwise, the story is too complete and does not allow the student enough creative imagination.

I enjoy this particular assignment because the students get much pleasure from it and because it is a change of pace from our usual expository writing. Yet the benefits are even greater. I recall an earlier creative writing assignment which I had prefaced with "Write anything you like." (Every English teacher can recall a similar experience with its resulting fiasco.) I returned Tom's painful efforts about his being the only survivor after a nuclear holocaust and about his attempts to set up interstellar communication with some intelligent beings on a planet twenty-million light years away, only to find out that these beings were vicious desperadoes who had escaped earth twenty-one million light years before. I placed this notation on his paper: "Tom, although this paper is interesting and your style has possibilities, you should be aware that the best writing is most often about ordinary happenings around us—those happenings with which we are most familiar." Tom wasn't convinced really, though I had sanctified my inscription by using red ink.

But after Tom, a brawny halfback on our football team, had written a spectacular account of a tense football game based on the sports page headline in his newspaper, the truth of my comment on the previous paper dawned: Drama is all around us.

Because this assignment elicited Gloria's comment, "Gee, this was a fun assignment," and Tom's realization that drama is to be found even on the playing field at Orange, and Sue's glorification of "seven goldfish, of the lovely common variety that required just one glass bowl, two marbles, and a lot of tender loving care . . ." I consider the fifty-three minutes as one of my better investments in students' time.

And, incidentally, students don't have to be of the eleventh-grade honors variety—as in the case of my class—to elicit the teacher comment, "I didn't know that students could be so clever in just fifty-three minutes!"

#### Goldmine\*

"Start a hobby!" the ad in the paper encouraged me. "Save on

\* For the assignment described above, this essay was written by Sue Botnick in the eleventh grade at Orange High School.

aquariums, only \$9.98 plus kit and fish, five for \$1.00 at the Aquarium Mart, this week only!"

I was off on what I thought was the world's greatest hobby. I went to the aquarium center and handed over my \$9.98, to receive one glass tank, naked save the price tag and guarantee. "Here's two dollars, give me ten fish, please," I said, blissfully innocent of the consequences of this one remark.

"Ten fish?" cried the clerk! "Ten fish she wants!" People began to stare. "Do you want fresh water or tropicals? Snails to clean up, or catfish? Snails are *my* favorite. And do you want kissing fish, Japanese fighting fish, or piranhas? Choose one above, please. Would you like a colorful assortment of guppies, or some fan-tail angels, or what about . . ."

"Please," I said, dazedly, "which ones are prettiest? May I buy ten of them?"

"Well, I think these orangy-green ones are nice, or how about the avocado and brown spotted rasboras?" I said that some angel fish would do, along with some pink and blue big fish.

"Oh, no, you can't mix the cichlids and the angels. They become fishbaitistic and can contract the Ick."

"Oh . . . Well, *you* pick some for me."

"Fine, fine," he said, promptly selecting fish of definitely clashing colors. I groaned.

"Now you will need some sand for the bottom of the tank . . ."

"We have sand in our sandbox."

"No, it must be special sand. Take this box, a bargain for you at \$1.98. And I'll figure in, of course, the filter, some snails . . . Hey, stop admiring the goldfish. You have *tropical* fish now, no more little kid stuff for you. Let's see. You want some Ick medicine, some fungus killer, and surely a mineral block. And an air pump . . ."

I gave him a pleading look. "Do I have to get all that now? I promised my brother to bring home fish tonight . . ."

"Tonight?" He was astonished. "Why, you can't take these fish home until I know you can take care of them and until you have your equipment ready for the poor darlings. You can't just treat them like fish, you know. You must see that they get good care. . . . I'll throw in a book on fish care too."

"How much will all this run me?" My voice shook a little; all I wanted was an aquarium full of fish as I'd seen in the picture.

"If you use our easy payment plan, it's only ten dollars per month for seven months. If you choose to pay now, I'd have to work out the exact cost."

I sat down quickly. Seventy dollars was a lot of money to take care of ten fish. I glanced at his Jewish calendar. Suddenly I had an idea.

"I don't think I'm ready for the fish just yet," I quavered to the man behind my prospective equipment. "Maybe I'll come back in a month."

The clerk gave me a look that would have sent his piranhas quavering, but I knew what I wanted.

The next Sunday, I went to the Purim Carnival at Temple and invested two dollars in ping-pong balls at my friend's booth. I was lucky that day and won seven goldfish, of the lovely common variety that required just one glass bowl, two marbles, and a lot of tender loving care to keep them happy for a long time.

*The wall newspaper is a continuous project. This year the students involved named the paper The Messenger. Each issue has a theme which the students decide as the topics of current interest or the time of the year dictates. Simple cutouts and art work decorate the designated hallway so the entire student body can read the publication. Students decide the topics, the deadlines, and the means by which they will produce each issue. Articles written for this publication may be signed or unsigned unless the writing is an editorial or a column which could be controversial; then, the columnist must sign his name. No editor is permanently designated. Different students assume the leadership for each issue.*

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# *The Community Documentary: An Alternative to the Library Research Paper*

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When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself, and curse my fate, . . .

—Sonnet 29

William Shakespeare

Sounds like the annual lament of the typical college prep English teacher who has just scanned the most recent batch of library term papers, and is already counting the number of hours it will take to comment constructively (perhaps reluctantly) on all of them. But how many will contain traces of imaginative original thinking to brighten the teacher's tedium?

If you can be counted in the ranks of such teachers, then take heart. Here is an alternative project that has provided for me lively and exciting papers, yet with the skills and attendant values originally associated with the annual research papers—and even some added surprise bonuses.

According to Henry B. Slotnick ("On The Teaching of Writing: Some Implications from National Assessment," *English Journal*, December 1973, p. 1253),

. . . if you want students to write well, they must be given topics they regard as important or diverting. . . . Otherwise, the writing is likely to be dull and, what is worse, not reflective of what students think, feel, or can do.

While the library research paper (or term paper) has many intrinsic and extrinsic values from a teacher's point of view, I must admit that frequently it is difficult to convince the students that such writing need not be stuffily academic.

Currently, instead of the research paper in our English Orientation for College classes (senior-level elective), we have initiated the "community documentary" writing project with some encouraging results. We determined that we wished to retain the basic skills and study habits designed and developed to accompany the preparation of the research papers, but we wanted to take into consideration topics which had the potential for more student interest and more firsthand student involvement in the development of research and ideas.

Initially, we developed a list of basic skills and attitudes we wanted to stress. The student should accomplish the following assignments leading to the final paper.

1. Select a subject which can meet three criteria.
  - a. He or she should be sufficiently interested in the subject to deal with it in an interesting and intelligent fashion.
  - b. He or she should be able to secure sufficient research from local resources.
  - c. He or she should be able to deal with the subject in a paper of approximately 1,500 to 2,000 words.
2. Formulate a proposed thesis or controlling idea and a "working" outline which can serve to organize the preliminary research. (To begin, the use of lead or guide questions is suggested; eventually, these can possibly be altered to form assertions for the major headings of the outline.)
3. Develop an adequate and workable note-taking system.
4. Become familiar with basic forms of research and the accounting for such study through standard bibliographic technique.
5. Arrange notes in the order of the finalized outline.
6. Develop a final thesis and submit both thesis and outline in a consultation with the teacher before proceeding to write the paper.
7. Present a formal research paper, complete with standard documentation.

The procedure went like this. Instead of the library term paper (a name whose connotation has become legendary), we called the project a "documentary." Students seemed to react more favorably to this label, possibly because of their familiarity with television programs of this type, such as *CBS Reports* or *60 Minutes*.

Several guidelines were furnished as aids to get students underway:

1. The topic should first and foremost be one that could be analyzed locally--within the Fort Wayne area; research was to be derived primarily from firsthand, experiential observations. Readings were discussed as being necessary but of secondary importance to the value of seeing and "being" a part of the activity discussed. Naturally, the importance of honest and accurate recording and reporting was duly stressed.
2. Local professional, vocational, and technical persons were to become key resource persons, along with public officials, housewives, and all others who might be familiar with a particular process or activity involved in the documentaries.
3. Released time from class was available to those who obtained parental permission to miss a part of the school day. Supportive



administrative participation allowed such a procedure, enabling students to visit sites and locations where they could observe the problems and practices they were researching—or to conduct interviews, or to sample public opinion.

4. Prior to being granted released time, the students were asked to submit carefully worded preliminary thesis sentences and lists of questions or problems they wished to have resolved in order to support the ideas of their theses. (This practice helped to reduce any problems of students attending interviews and being unprepared. As a result we found no students who "took advantage" of the released time in the community because they evidently responded with responsible activity when trust and confidence were placed in them. The need for interviews also gave us an opportunity to discuss protocol of arranging and conducting productive visits and meetings. Students usually tape-recorded the visits for more accuracy in their research.)

And what exciting and stimulating projects the students produced. Note some of these examples of documentaries:

- An examination of vocational rehabilitation opportunities for mentally handicapped persons
- A follow-up evaluation of the mayor's campaign promises to integrate racially the city's police and fire departments
- A study of local medical uses of atomic energy in the treatment of cancer patients
- A step-by-step procedure to be followed by parents with crippled children should they need help from the United Way agencies
- A child's eye view of Head Start
- A comparison of an "open" classroom with a traditional "lecture-learn" class in two of the city's high schools
- A look at the future mass transit needs of Fort Wayne
- A plan for urban renewal in the center city
- An examination of recreational possibilities afforded by the city's river and water systems
- A recruiting film made by ROTC officers to be shown to prospective cadets now in the junior-high grades

Note the *human* element in all of these. When the students sensed the vital and relevant quality of the projects, they found their interests being served and consequently allowed the documentary to come alive for them.

As an alternative to the written documentary, the classes were allowed to opt for media presentations (five minutes minimum) using 8mm movies or slides and tape-recording the narrated script. (The ROTC boys found a local source who loaned them 16mm equipment, and favorably impressed local benefactors who funded the film costs and processing expenses.)



What did we accomplish? A research paper, but one replete with all the hoped-for skills and study traits attendant to systematic research. But more than that, Students became excited about their work and were confident that their efforts might eventually be instrumental in furthering the causes of worthwhile community programs, or at least be instrumental in the process of productive change.

Teenagers sometimes have the tendency to become cynical about a world filled with deception and subterfuge. But when they have the opportunity to find truth and reality which they can separate from cynicism and hypocrisy, then the schools and the English classes have become instruments in producing young people whose values and goals are indeed positive.

In addition, we found added fringe benefits in the development of meaningful communication between teenagers and members of the community, and between parents and their teenagers. Surprisingly, a significant number of young people chose to examine community or extra-vocational roles of one or both of their parents. For teens who often care to have little or nothing to do with their parents' life styles, they impressed us by their wishes to become familiar with and informed about what their families were doing outside the home—and often with a sense of commendable pride in what they found.

The reading research requirements were fortunately met by our local public library which has, in addition to the standard research resources, a fairly comprehensive clipping file on subjects covered by the two local newspapers. And the librarians were gratified that their efforts in collecting over the past years were being utilized by these young researchers. The files helped immensely in providing necessary background information upon which students could build their personal findings.

On the days when the students were scheduled to discuss or present their documentaries to their classmates, we began to realize fully the many benefits such a project held for the members of the classes. Not only was genuine and deserved pride evident in the manner in which the projects were presented, but the sense of support and encouragement shown by the students for each others' presentations was truly gratifying. Parents asked to come and sit in on the classes; local city officials who had supplied valuable assistance arranged to see the presentations, as did various trade and professional persons who had helped.

Thus our school had one of its finest experiences with students "going beyond its walls" for their education. Students discovered what resources their community really holds for them; they gained respect for true achievement; and possibly most important, the community discovered the valuable potential of its future leaders.

## *In League with MacLeish*

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Refurbishing old plots is an honorable tradition. Chaucer did it. Shakespeare did it. Shaw did it. More recently Anouilh and MacLeish have done it. And whether the Preacher was entirely right or not, it is a practical truth that there is nothing new under the sun. Although each generation discovers life for itself, one of its most valuable discoveries is that modern life is largely a revision of the past, a set of variations on a well-worn theme.

The current wave of retrospection need not be a simple sentimental romp through nostalgia-land. There is more durable stuff than Glenn Miller, Superman, Big-Little Books, and *No, No, Nanette*; and students of today are not averse to discovering and using the cyclical nature of history as a basis for their own imaginative writing efforts. Old plots can become new—at least they can be refurbished. Adapting an old story to fit the present is an appropriate means of helping young writers realize their capabilities.

In one of my courses we read the Book of Job, ploughing through the endless discussion of Job's alleged guilt and his definite repentance for uttering what he understood not. Its formal dialogue—more symposium than drama—seems hardly a likely source for a twentieth-century theatrical success, but when my students read *J. B.*, Archibald MacLeish's version of Job, they see first the possibilities of updating an old story and then, more importantly, the way in which MacLeish employs the Job situation as a metaphor for the unexplained suffering of our time. As we approach the study of *J. B.*, I offer it as a model which ought to be quite helpful when they write their own modern adaptation of some literary work later in the term. With this responsibility in mind they carry a half-defined goal before them and varying degrees of anticipation ranging from fear to delight. But whatever their personal response may be, they are involved in a long-term reading and writing project in league with MacLeish, who becomes, in effect, their teacher of imaginative writing for several weeks.

The actual reading of *J. B.* is done aloud in class. It makes excellent closet drama, and the classroom reading allows for immediate discussion of themes, purposes, and techniques of characterization, dialogue, setting, selection, emphasis, and plotting. We explore the reasons why MacLeish introduces God and Satan on stage as characters in the play—broken-down actors reduced by circumstances to

selling balloons and popcorn in a circus. We note the shifting of emphasis from lengthy poetical discussions of human guilt and divine retribution to the relentless blows of misfortune which wipe out J. B.'s family and possessions and cause his wife to leave him. We follow the modernization of characters—from patriarch to financier, from "comforters" to priest, psychiatrist, and soap-box sociologist, each with a contemporary solution to the problem of J. B.'s suffering. We ponder the altered conclusion in MacLeish's work in an attempt to discover why a humanistic love replaces the older resolution: Job's penitent acceptance of God's supreme power. We refer to critical reviews in *The Voice out of the Whirlwind: The Book of Job*, edited by Ralph E. Hone. And finally, we inquire somewhat incredulously into Carl Jung's *Answer to Job* for a modern psychiatric interpretation of the Old Testament work.

At that point, having ploughed and seeded, we await the sprouts while attending to other work. A new unit may come and go before we reach the most fruitful time to try our own adaptations. At the height of civil unrest during the late 1960s *Antigone* made a timely source for a contemporary tragedy involving high-handed executive decisions of questionable morality in conflict with the consciences of the people. As they discovered the roots of civil disobedience in classical antiquity, the students produced stories showing that they were aware of the hazards of both tyranny and defiance. The *hamartia* of Creon, who insists on law and order even when the law is unjust, and of Antigone, who is willing to die rather than disobey the higher laws of the gods, became very real in the heat of the Vietnam controversy. I like to think, in fact, that this awareness produced not only mature stories but also mature behavior at a time when the impatience of many bright young people produced irrational radicalism.

At almost any time *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can become the basis for a current rite-of-passage story complete with the possibilities of human brotherhood in a small counter-society free of the prejudice, ignorance, vanity, gullibility, and oneriness that abound on all sides. With this kind of tale the student writer has the bonus possibility of reproducing current dialects, often so dear to high school students. Of course, the teacher who encourages this process should not be shocked to discover profanity unless he has first insisted that Mark Twain's avoidance of four-letter words be the model. Also the teacher is obliged to confront his young adapter with black objections to the portrayal of him as an object of humor and to the often misunderstood exchange between Huck (as Tom Sawyer) and Aunt Sally:

"It warn't the grounding—that didn't keep us back but a little.

We blowed out a cylinder head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt . . ."

The student must decide whether to risk offending black sensitivity by retaining these features of the original or to play it safe by excising them in order to concentrate on other matters. In either case, what Lionel Trilling calls "the community of saints" should transcend other considerations as one essential ingredient without which any adaptation of this novel ceases to be authentic, the other being Huck's passage from innocence to experience without abandoning his determination to flee civilization because he has "been there before."

No matter what classics are read—American, English, Russian, Greek, or any other—the teacher can help his students abstract upward to find the elemental qualities of a narrative—plot, characters, setting, intention—free them from their original source, then abstract downward to fit them to a new tale. The process is gratifying both semantically and artistically. It produces plausible stories without frustrating the novice writer, who can hardly be expected to turn out a completely original piece of work in any case, much less on schedule. It demonstrates a legitimate way to avoid the plagiarism which frequently results from an inexperienced writer's trying to cope with what to him appear to be impossible demands. And it offers a virtually endless variety of materials with which to work. How would a twentieth-century *Scarlet Letter* take shape? A twentieth-century *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *Richard II*? *Oedipus Rex* or *Odyssey*? The only practical limitation is one of time: first, there should be a significant time lag between the adaptation and its source to avoid simply retelling the old story, and second, the assignment must be made a month or two before it is due to allow the imaginative process time to develop. Questions, class discussions, conferences, and occasional work periods all become a part of this development.

An imaginative teacher can apply the process of adaptation to many standard works of literature in almost any genre. Although the novel appears to offer the most possibilities, drama may prove an equally abundant source, and nothing prohibits the use of short stories, narrative poems, and even biography. It is, of course, unnecessary to require an adaptation to remain in the same genre as its original. High school students are hardly in a position to practice the eighteenth-century art of literary imitation or to write a novel in a few short weeks. Ordinarily they reduce as well as adapt. A novel becomes a short story; a full-length drama becomes a one-act play; an epic becomes a ballad—unless the writer reasonably decides to cross types and so increase the options exponentially. MacLeish's example of making a drama of the Book of Job has stimulated some students to try the same technique but with their own approach. The primary

factor in every instance is to make a valid abstraction of an established work and apply it to a newly imagined story in a way that the informed reader can recognize its source with appreciation of the artistry found in both the original and the adaptation.

Several of my students who have been winners of National Council of Teachers of English Achievement Awards have submitted short stories or plays adapted from various well-known works, but the most exciting one, and most memorable too, is a story of industrial espionage derived from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." In the adaptation, a young, idealistic electronics engineer attends a secret meeting of manufacturers, congressmen, and high-ranking military officers. Dillon Griffith Brown, Jr., son of a U.S. Army general, has been persuaded, as a result of several convincing telephone calls, to meet with a few leaders of the military-industrial complex in violation of the strict ethical upbringing he received from his father and of the tight security imposed by his employer, Datanetics, Inc. Met at a prearranged rendezvous site by the anonymous caller, Brown is whisked to the night-time meeting at a secluded lodge in a wooded canyon. There he hears the rationale of selling industrial secrets:

At length, Smith spoke: "Dillon Griffith Brown, Junior, you are about to become a member of our organization. Some final clarifications are in order. We are in the business of marketing; our product is information. We do not believe in technological secrets; so we put jealously guarded information on the open market. Our customers are quite anxious to benefit from our services, for the stakes in their little games are high—billions of dollars in defense contracts.

"You, Dillon Brown, like most Dillon Browns we confront, were doubtful and uneasy at first. But you yielded to the logic of dollars and cents, of security and material pleasure. We offer a unique opportunity of working for high wages in our firm, while still holding your present job and enjoying its benefits, social and economic."

Brown was becoming uneasy, and his eyes burned from the foul atmosphere. Smith continued: "Perhaps you worry about selling secrets—you may feel our enterprise smacks of espionage. But we keep it all in the family, so to speak; we rob from Americans and give to Americans, taking a nominal fee in the transaction. All in the family, correct, Mr. Congressman?" The voice of a seasoned politician heartily agreed.

"And the military, why they get a better deal, as well. They have more sophisticated hardware because we keep an engineering dialogue going between companies that would normally work independently, in secrecy. The costs, too, are lowered, because research expenses are spread around and contract competition is increased. Nothing but the best for our Army, hey, General?" A very familiar voice agreed. By this time, the younger Brown's mind was reeling.

"So you see, Mr. Brown, that is, Mr. Brown, Junior, you are to become a part of a large, efficient organization. Very efficient. We look into every aspect of industrial practice to acquire our product, even social practice. Am I correct in my description of our thoroughness, Mrs. Brown?"

Next morning his wife greeted him cheerfully as if she knew nothing of the affair. She asked when he had gotten in.

Brown was about to ask, "In from where?" when the previous night's ordeal came roaring back at him like a Pacific wave. The swell broke at his front door, churned through the apartment covering both Faith and himself, thundered on to flood Datanetics, and still further to his father's base in Texas. His whole world was engulfed and left in ruin, dripping with the acrid fluid of undiluted evil.

"Dillon!" screamed Faith, as she watched her husband's loving face harden to stone.

And on that chilling note, without Hawthorne's moralizing, young Dan De Hainant, now a senior at M.I.T. like young Dillon Brown before him, completed a memorable adaptation.

Refurbishing old plots, as MacLeish has done with the Book of Job, is a valuable means of producing successful "new" literature. It provides material with which students can work, without eliminating their imaginations, and enhances their own self-concepts by placing them under the vicarious tutelage of an acknowledged master.



## *Drama as the Springboard To Successful Student Writing*

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Meeting a new class each fall has always been an occasion replete with both pleasant anticipation and trepidation for me. On the one hand, there are always those students who have little choice but to be in school and who seem to care little for the teacher or the subject. We sometimes call them "unmotivated." There are, also, those who seem to say: "I'm here; you're there. I dare you to teach me something." We often refer to them as "challenges." On the other hand, we meet students who want to learn, who are interested in going where we lead them—a relationship which one of my former eleventh graders saw in the image of a "Trust Company":

... To you I will trust pieces of me  
Like smaller companies to the large.  
I know that you hold a lot of others too,  
But I believe in you.  
I respect your opinions and your mind  
And can only gain by the interest I get,  
No matter how you use the pieces.

We often say that such young people are "motivated."

We are, by the nature of our being teachers, entrusted with all of the various types of teenagers and are obliged to create situations in our classes that will lead to meaningful experiences for each, in the use of his mind, in some clarification of his attitudes toward life, and in his ability to communicate with reasonable clarity and confidence. While this is no small task, I have been fortunate to have witnessed students meeting these objectives on a number of occasions, especially during the course of their completing a few particularly effective assignments. It is my intention in this paper to describe one of these projects and much of the background necessary to make it work: the writing of a play, which was the culmination of ten weeks of study relating to the theme "The American Dream in Our Century."

It has been my experience that one does not simply "assign" the writing of a play if he has hopes of anything approaching reasonable standards. Neither does he make such an assignment unless he believes that the project should be enjoyed by the writers and the audience. The steps leading to the final assignment are all-important. They include the establishment of a class environment that is conducive to talking and thinking as well as writing creatively. They also include,



all along the way, a confidence by the teacher that what he is doing will be worth the investment of time and effort. I was quite pleased, consequently, when I came upon four sources which provided me with a base in theory and practice for what I had been doing with my classes to a limited degree in the past and what I would come to rely on more, for successful experience in student writing.

The first of these discoveries was a handbook on creativity by Sidney Parnes.<sup>1</sup> From this summary of research I found that the classroom which is low on anxiety and high in the teacher's respect for students and their ideas is the one most likely to produce creativity among its members. Next, I heard a talk by David Madden,<sup>2</sup> author of *Cassandra Singing* and other popular fiction, advocating cross-writing from genre to genre in order for students or prospective professional writers to sharpen up their characterization, plot, and point-of-view. I saw it, also, as a means for getting prose into drama form while allowing students to follow professional models for possible improvement of their own sense of sentence construction and flow. The final two sources of special importance in revealing to me the significance of the assignment were James Hoetker's *Dramatics and the Teaching of Literature*<sup>3</sup> and James Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*.<sup>4</sup> These works presented strong cases for the centrality of drama to the language curriculum and, consequently, the variety of writing and reading which could result from using drama as, in Moffett's words, "the matrix of all language activities, subsuming speech and engendering the varieties of writing and reading."<sup>5</sup>

To complement these ideas, I had already established student talking and writing as regular class activities. Writing was both encouraged and required. The encouragement came by way of suggestions—written and oral—to my students to follow up on or develop ideas that they would mention during a class discussion or in their journals. The requirements included weekly entries in each student's personal writing journal; reviews of plays, movies, and books as they related to our theme under consideration; and a few special model-following assignments.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sidney J. Parnes, *Creative Behavior Handbook* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> At the First National Meeting of the Popular Culture Association, East Lansing, Michigan, April 9, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> James Hoetker, *Dramatics and the Teaching of Literature* (Champaign, Illinois: NCTE/ERIC, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> My students have often surprised me by their abilities to capture mood and style as they imitate a professional author. The most success has come with the assignment to write another chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio* (by Sherwood Anderson) after having read and discussed most of the stories.

One other procedure I like to use when students are writing creatively, which is of some importance to the success of the writing and presenting of the plays, is a writers' workshop. Each student duplicates his composition for his small group to read for comments and suggestions before submitting the final draft of his work to the teacher. Students are usually more interested in impressing their peers than their teachers, and so they often present a rather carefully written paper to their classmates. Furthermore, they often find portions that they wish to revise, simply by having read their works aloud to each other. With the aforementioned practices established and the classes functioning under relatively little tension, I have found my students generally willing to meet the challenges that I set before them.

The final play was to be no exception. There would be, however, much to consider beyond simply the ability to write. Students would communicate some concept related to the "American Dream" unit. They would be writing for the stage. They would, furthermore, participate in the presentation of one of the plays from the class—their own or a classmate's.

Discussions about stories—both those chosen for personal reading by individual students and those assigned to the entire class—were especially important as we reflected upon what various authors thought relative to the theme under consideration. More than just provoking thought and stimulating discussion, however, these works provided our first class experiences with drama, leading ultimately to the writing of the play.

The class read the novel *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis and three plays: *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Idiot's Delight* by Robert Sherwood, and *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice. We studied the plays as genre, as well as for their content. We noted various differences between a play and a work of fiction (differences which students who had read Steinbeck's work in short novel form could see quite readily), including the limitations which the playwright places on himself by writing with stage, actors, and audience in mind.

The first writing in play form came after reading and discussing *Babbitt*. Each student selected a scene from the novel that he considered significant to the development of the protagonist. Then he wrote it as the scene of a play. Upon completion of this assignment, the students had their scenes duplicated for the number of parts necessary and met in their workshop groups to read their scripts, to see if they "worked" as drama. As problems were uncovered, the students rewrote their scenes before turning them in for my approval and before selecting from each group one or two of the one-acts to be presented to the entire class.

With this background established in cross-writing, play reading, and acting, the students seemed to gain confidence about undertaking

the culminating activity of the unit—the writing of a play relating to the “American Dream” theme. They worked both independently and in groups as they wrote their final plays, then developed their casts. The festival of drama which occurred throughout the classes for a week as a result of the assignment was well worth the preparation that it required, both by the teacher and, judging from the enthusiasm, by the students too.

There had been no requirement to memorize lines; reading would be sufficient. Most of the students, nevertheless, memorized their parts and, thereby, were freer to act. Often, sets and costumes were employed and, as we had access to the auditorium, special lighting and sound effects were utilized in some of the plays.

The scripts were interesting for a variety of reasons. They represented, generally, optimum efforts by their creators. They dealt, often thoughtfully, with subjects ranging from problems at home (in one student play, an element of hope precedes the final curtain when the son, Dan, challenges his father: “I don’t see why we all can’t start being decent to one another. You see, we have already started, you are actually listening to me. In the future, maybe I’ll even listen to you once in a while.”) to situations in the community (one play used a PTA meeting as its scene) to problems in the larger society (the problems faced by black Americans in overcoming prejudice was a popular topic). They also often revealed an interesting use of literature encountered in class. Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem about a man’s over-concern for money and his fall, “Bewick Finzer,” was rewritten as a play called “The Fall of Finzer.” Another student production, “A Pillar of Our Community,” was an interesting blend of George Babbitt and Elmer Gantry in a style remarkably like that of the expressionist *Adding Machine*.

How does this assignment compare with others that I have used? Predictably, the final papers have run the gamut of quality, if one compares the work of the most capable students in written expression with that of the least capable and all those who fall between. Nevertheless, students have enjoyed this undertaking and most of the projects leading to the final play more than any other that I have assigned. As a teacher, I find this attitude toward an assignment to be quite significant. In addition, though, is my awareness that the writing of such plays requires from the student self-discipline and application of what he has previously learned if his final product is to be successful as communication and entertainment. The writer’s mind must be continually operating as he manipulates characters and situations toward logical conclusions which will allow the audience to share in the theme of the play.

That the writing itself is enjoyable—recreational—though, seems of major importance for the students. Perhaps it should be for us, too.

As Stephen Dunning commented recently, with the real world as it is—job applications being check sheets, the telephone being used in preference to writing letters, etc.—there are hardly any reasons for writing which are not school-related. The ultimate conclusion becomes that the most important reason for writing at this time in history is for pleasure.<sup>7</sup> This assignment has certainly provided pleasure—and, I suspect, quite a lot more.

<sup>7</sup> From "Three Keys to Involvement: Stories, Poems, Student Writing," Address at the Twenty-Sixth Annual English Conference, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, Sept. 22, 1973.

# *A Rationale for Teaching Composition*

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When I consider the way I taught writing in 1964 and the way I teach it today, the differences seem startling and dramatic. Then, I geared my teaching to the logical structure of the "subject," as I and many others thought of composition. First came the sentence, then the paragraph, then the three-paragraph theme, ultimately the research paper. A step at a time—that seemed such an appropriate and efficient way for students to progress in writing skills and knowledge.

This bit of nostalgia is not altogether accurate, however. I personally did not put much faith in the formal research paper and avoided it whenever I could. I also had an abiding interest in creative writing. Above all, I was really much more interested in my students and their development than I was in the subject matter of composition. Although I did not seem to be an ineffective teacher back in 1964, I labored in doubt and confusion. My teaching was not based on strong and clear principles.

So much has happened since then and so many influences have worked on me that I may seem a different teacher today. The humanistic impulses that unconsciously guided me in 1964 have finally been clarified into a set of genuine principles that provide a meaningful rationale for my teaching in 1974. The old ambivalence between subject and student is gone. My teaching is now clearly student-centered, and I seek always to avoid those negative devices which cripple student interest and initiative.

My guiding principles are briefly explained in the following paragraphs. Perhaps they can help others who are likewise engaged in a continuing effort to improve the teaching of English.

## **I. Individualize instruction.**

There it is—the grandest of educational clichés. But can someone who is serious about child-centered education begin anywhere else? This is obviously a crucial principle, and a difficult one to achieve. Still, it is not so remote or unattainable as many teachers believe. There are several forms of individualization on the continuum of instruction. At its simplest, perhaps, individualization occurs when a teacher responds empathetically to each student's personal piece of writing following a class assignment. As this concern grows, the teacher may move to differentiated assignments and perhaps ultimately to a

large measure of student determination about means and ends in writing.

In my own teaching, the principle of individualizing instruction has led to an important subordinate point: avoid putting grades on papers. Although at first this is uncomfortable for many students and I frequently need to adjust to past traditions, eventually I have been able to practice nongrading with all my classes. Since I have never taught in a school which has dispensed with grades, a day of reckoning comes, of course. Through a system of individual conferences, I have satisfactorily, if not ideally, approached the grading issue, which often seems more a problem for teachers than for students. The conference method has also led to the development of student contracts. For those students and teachers who are strongly tuned to results, particularly in a quantitative way, the contract method is a good entry into individualization.

Whatever combination of approaches I use, I always try to be a sympathetic and encouraging reader. Thus I comment copiously on papers, continuing a practice I have always followed. Today my emphasis is decidedly more on the positive, however. No longer an error-hunter, I aim to build on a student's strength. The burden of reading is initially great, but when students come to realize that they can write for their peers and receive meaningful responses from them, I can read more selectively, confident that my students do not expect a close reading of every paper.

Another problem associated with individualized instruction is misconstruing it as isolated learning. For the shy, uninvolved student with a weak self-concept, we do not want to perpetuate the condition, in contemporary terms, of "I'm not OK—you're OK." Nor, on the other hand, do we wish to promote the "I'm OK—you're not OK" stance of the strong, fierce competitor. The life position we seek to establish, certainly with difficulty and with uneven results, is "I'm OK—you're OK." If we can assist students to know and respect themselves and others, we have achieved the spirit of individualization.

## 2. Use active methods.

The person with whom this principle is most often associated is Jean Piaget, but a host of others, including John Dewey, have strongly recommended that we shift from the traditional "tell'm, drill'm, and test'm" approach to learning by doing. Certainly no more pertinent advice can be given to those who teach writing.

To many, however, this seems inefficient. "Why let students flounder toward discovery?" the argument goes. "Instruct them in the correct ways from the beginning. Save all that time wasted on inquiry and exploration." But is such time actually wasted? Will a student really know how to write unless he learns for himself through practice and



through feedback from others? I think not, and in this way I agree with many teachers who have found the clearest expression of this principle in James Moffett's *Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1973).

In my classes the application of this principle has meant that I do not distribute textbooks (they are for teachers, not students); I do not lecture about rhetorical principles; and I do not teach grammar or sentence structure as preliminary essentials. In other words, I do not provide explanations or theories which students must follow or apply. Such a highly deductive and abstract methodology should be restricted to the mature and advanced student-specialist, not to the young and uninitiated school boy or girl. My students receive feedback from me and their peers about their success. In this way they gradually learn what moves another person, what makes him understand, and what may impede the communication of thought and feeling.

### 3. Develop meaningful writing tasks.

This is another difficult principle—one far easier to state than to accomplish. Among the more obvious examples of “real writing” are letters and contributions to school publications. As good as they are, and I use them regularly, they are too limiting for a complete writing program. Fortunately, NCTE and many textbook publishers offer numerous guides and other aids that can help teachers develop meaningful writing tasks.

In my judgment the key to this problem is helping students move to the point where they genuinely write for one another. When they know that through their writing they are sharing experience, then that writing has meaning for them. The classroom becomes a social unit in which writing has a functional, not artificial, purpose. As that occurs, almost any form of human discourse can be meaningful.

Admittedly, this is a difficult principle to maintain. Some writing tasks may not work; they may appear to be mere “classroom exercises” to many students. Even when students participate in selecting and developing the tasks, the writing may fall flat. If the writing goals seem important and the artificiality is difficult to erase, one approach I have used is to make the writing task a game. This procedure is an application of an important aspect of human development—learning through play.

With seniors in honors classes I have sometimes used a game approach to research. For one small problem, I give each student a line or two of verse, which I somehow try to associate with the individual. Then, in a nonthreatening game setting, each is asked to find the poem and the name of the author. No rewards are given, but my students and I have enjoyed their race to find this information quickly and without further help from me. Many students do not easily discover



such useful resources as *Bartlett's* or the librarian; yet all get through the exercise (some with a little help and others after tedious combing through books). Then they share their poems and their reactions.

#### 4. Integrate the language arts.

The little game just mentioned would not be successful if it were a mere research and writing task. Through reading, speaking, and listening, as well as through writing, students develop their language skills. In fact, given the individual quality of the assignment, students frequently communicate with one another about the poems through dramatic reading and such nonverbal means as slide-tape and film presentations.

It is unnatural to teach any of the language arts in isolation. Writing is meant to be read—and not only by the teacher. But it can also be spoken and listened to. If these ordinary extensions of language use are not made, one result may be increased compartmentalization of English as a subject, a potential weakness, incidentally, of the current trend toward elective courses. Dwelling on the parts does not produce wholeness.

An eighteen-week course in writing is not complete without using the other language arts to help achieve writing growth. And surely courses in poetry, fiction, and drama should include writing in these forms—not in the sense of using the masters as models but in the sense of playing around in the same genres, like rewriting a short story from another point of view or expressing ideas through dialogue. In developing electives, teachers might consider those arrangements which impede integration, like survey courses, and those which enhance it, like thematically-oriented courses.

Most English teachers are also interested in those linguistic effects that range from the mechanically acceptable to the stylistically appropriate. Too long, perhaps, we have depended on rules and handbooks to pass on these effects through methods that are definitely more passive than active. Maybe we ought to shift to the more natural means of helping students develop an eye and an ear for punctuation accuracy, structural discrimination, and semantic variation. Recognizing that reading, listening, speaking, and writing are all modes of a unitary process is a good beginning point.

#### 5. Get feedback from students.

Some teachers spend much time deploring the great number of students who come to their classes poorly prepared and then recalcitrantly refuse to learn. We teachers need to do more than judge results on papers and tests and then wring our hands in self-righteous anguish. We need to listen—and we need to respond to what we hear. Students may not be infallible in their judgments, but neither are we,

and we are remiss if we fail to take advantage of all the information we can obtain about the effectiveness of our instruction.

In a student-centered classroom a teacher can gather much information informally. In addition, he can seek out helpful remarks through individual conferences and small-group discussion. Even an evaluative discussion with the whole class can be useful. Because the information gained from these methods can be slanted by dominant personalities, a teacher should also make use of written surveys.

As part of the evaluation of a three-person team approach to composition (a technique adapted from an article in *College Composition and Communication*), I used a combination of questionnaire and freely written response. I was surprised by the polarization in attitude toward the technique; about half the students were in favor of it and about half were against it. The free responses and subsequent discussion not only focused on strengths and weaknesses as students saw them but also reinforced for me the problems inherent in an undifferentiated assignment. I will use the technique again, but because of this feedback, I will use it more judiciously with only some students.

Although these principles have been useful to me as a teacher of writing, I do not consider them final. They require continuing examination and development. Furthermore, they are not easy to live up to. As Piaget has noted, the best methods are the most difficult ones. Still, the promise of the results makes them worth the effort.

*At the senior high school level there are several desirable goals to be sought. A separate course in composition alone would, of course, be the optimum. . . .*

*Failing to sell my administration on a separate composition course, I might opt for an extra period or two per week. In our school, science classes have long met six periods per week under the guise that the extra period is needed for experiments. I can find equal justification for a sixth English period for composition. Conferences with students both before and after they write are most helpful. There are just no substitutes for a steady diet of preparation, writing, rewriting, and then writing some more.*

*H. Robert Barrett  
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## *The Humanities and Better Writing*

*George Lavenda, Retired Head, English Department  
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In an Advanced Placement class for seniors, writing is, naturally, one of the major activities, but not any kind of writing, only serious discursive prose writing. This paper describes one method that I have found suitable for improving the quality of the writing of my students.

First comes an introductory period in which students write weekly essays on the literature being studied in class, largely tragedy, with a detailed study of *Hamlet*. Then, about Thanksgiving time, a major new unit in writing is introduced. This unit is based on a study of art forms other than literature, and is tied in with a class study of what is called "humanities."

Each student is expected to write twelve essays over a thirteen-week period. Four are to be on music, four on painting, four on other forms. Each student is expected to write the essays on what he has personally experienced in the art forms. Thus, after viewing a painting he describes as well as he can what he saw. Following the description, he writes his reaction to what he has described—his feelings, ideas, generalizations.

For painting, each student is asked to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Frick Museum or another great museum (fortunately we are near New York City). Rather arbitrarily, but based on my experience, I ask students to look at a Renaissance or early painting, one Rembrandt painting, one impressionist or postimpressionist, and one free choice, preferably a modern painting. The requirements are that an original painting must be examined for about thirty minutes, that no background reading on the painter or painting is to be done, and that the description should be as detailed as possible, with a reaction to the work following the description.

For music, students are asked to listen to good recordings on a hi-fi system. They are directed to major works by Bach or earlier, by Mozart, by Beethoven, and by composers of their own choice. After repeated listenings they write their observations and reactions.

Other arts are dealt with in a similar manner. For instance, in architecture they have to examine both the exterior and interior of a previously unfamiliar building and one familiar building. Compositional activities similar to those for painting and music follow the same pattern, in sculpture and in whatever other art forms each student wishes to examine.

What are the advantages of this method? First, students are led to examine major art forms closely, more closely than many people do. This may or may not lead to an interest in these forms of man's creativity, but close examination does lead to an awareness of some of the elements that go into the making of a work of art. More than that, for the teacher of composition, is the sharpening of the ability of capable students to observe meticulously, to note significant details, to try to capture in words what they experience in the various arts. Naturally, it is impossible to translate one art form into another, and no words can do justice to a complex work of painting or music, but the effort is all-important. The assumption that we do not really know something until we can say it in words is basic to this process. It is in the effort to express one's actual experience and reaction to that experience that learning and growth take place.

To sharpen ways of examining detail in painting, as an example, we utilize some class exercises in observing and describing small objects like coins, stamps, keys, and trinkets. For music, some recordings are played in class and the instructor emphasizes certain features to be noted. It has not been possible because of scheduling difficulties and lack of time to call in the school experts in fine arts and in music, but this could profitably be arranged. Also, a few reading selections on art, music, sculpture, and architecture are assigned for class study, while those students really interested are directed to longer readings on art criticism and esthetics.

The results are frequently gratifying. Many—not all—of the students engaged in this process seem to gain a great deal. Some are at first baffled by their inability to follow the course of what occurs in classical music, for instance, having had no experience in this field. But insistence on repeated, directed listening results in greater ability to express what one hears. Of course, papers that are written are returned fully corrected, not for grammar or rhetoric so much as for meaningful expression of what is intended. Soon there is improvement and, in a good number of cases, the results are excellent by any objective standards. These gains in writing and in thinking continue to be applied to later writing activities.

Some disadvantages are apparent. This method is suitable only for unusual students. Not all students profit fully. (What method does lead to complete success?) A few students try to bluff, but they soon realize that it is useless. Modern forms, of greater interest to many contemporary students, are scanted, but the feeling is that the foundation in the classics is basic to any understanding of the arts.

At the same time these writings on art forms are being done, the students are studying prose fiction in class—reading short stories, for class discussion and analysis, as well as important novels selected from a list prepared by the instructor for weekly and biweekly reports.

Effort is made to deal with underlying structure and esthetic values in the prose fiction while the students are exploring these same elements in the other art forms.

## *Advanced Composition: Another Approach*

Mary Tom Colonos Hoffer, Cochairman, English Department  
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At Grimsley Senior High School, "Advanced Composition"—a one-semester elective course recommended for college-bound students—is open to students in the eleventh and twelfth grades and, with teacher approval, to superior second-semester sophomores. Basically, our course comprises the study of expository writing, with students submitting a minimum of six major essays (definition, process, comparison/contrast, analogy, persuasion, argumentation) and a research paper as an independent project. To the list of six major essays, I add one more, the critical analysis of a novel.

Emphasis throughout the semester concerns content, organization, diction, rhetoric, and the techniques of expository writing. Specifically, my emphasis focuses first on eliminating those deficiencies which, through diagnosis, appear in the students' writing samples. Inevitably, the first two weeks are spent in a "crash program" in which we plunge headlong into a review of punctuation, sentence structure, English usage, and the elements of diction. For years, I had compiled student errors and made perfunctory comments to the class in general. By mid-semester, students and teacher despaired of blotched essays, bleeding from red pencil stabs. Something had to be done.

The answer appears to be the "crash program" approach. We arm ourselves with the compact paperback edition of *The Elements of Style* by William S. Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White (The Macmillan Co.); with Richard D. Altick's *Preface to Critical Reading* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), chapters entitled "Denotation and Connotation," "Diction," and "Sentences and Paragraphs: The Significance of Form"; and with a basic grammar textbook. We rearrange sentences for clarity and variety, eradicate most errors in usage, and polish our diction. With the use of Harold F. Graves and Bernard S. Oldsey's *From Fact to Judgment* (The Macmillan Co., 1963) and the chapter "Clear Thinking" in *Preface to Critical Reading*, students understand the method of logic and the common fallacies so necessary to organization and communication. Having added, to the dictionary and thesaurus, these new tools for effective writing early in the semester, students become more attentive to their writing, striving to communicate to a particular audience both a controlling purpose and an organized discussion.

In the seventh week, we meet in the library where the class begins



research for independent study. During the remainder of the semester, students follow their independent study, with the paper due the seventeenth week.

For the bulk of the semester, we are involved in the classroom, continuing the reinforcement of writing skills, pursuing regular vocabulary study, and for two consecutive days, engaging in a clinical-writing-laboratory situation: one week, preparing a major writing assignment; the next week, attacking writing problems in open discussion and/or student-teacher conferences.

To improve his writing skills, a student benefits from weekly evaluation of the folder which contains his corrected and revised assignments. He has discussed these in teacher conferences and in frequent student-group activities. These latter activities feature three students who edit the same three essays and then present their combined findings to the class. Further evaluation benefits a student when he reads aloud his papers for class criticism. His themes are the basic texts dealing with his writing problems.

To build a foundation for clear writing, we devote one class period weekly to systematic vocabulary study, using Joseph Orgel's *Building World Power* (1955).<sup>1</sup> A schedule is set up so that two students, working together and acting as teachers, will know when they are to teach the lesson. No conventional test is administered. Instead, by class agreement, the teachers-of-the-week receive a grade of 100 as reward for their preparation and creative approach to the lesson, while the class members accept a grade of 90. This arrangement satisfies those students who have to have a grade. Moreover, this student-as-teacher procedure gives students (and me!) greater insight into vocabulary study. Their ideas include exciting word games, original crossword puzzles, and even playlets composed from the vocabulary list—a far cry from my dull, pedagogical tests.

To arouse interest in good writing, we study good models, indispensable to good learning. The focus is on practice, not theory, and on types of writing that everyone is likely to use frequently. For texts, we use Gerald Levin's *Prose Models: An Inductive Approach to Writing* (Harcourt-Brace Jovanovich, 1970) and *Advanced Composition: A Book of Models for Writing* by John E. Warriner, Richard M. Ludwig, and Francis X. Connolly (1968).<sup>2</sup> As a basis for all writing of an expository nature, I teach the importance of outlining, the necessity for establishing a controlling purpose, and the development of the

<sup>1</sup> The revised edition currently available is titled *New Building Word Power* (New York: Oxford Book Co., 1970).

<sup>2</sup> The currently available revised edition of the latter work is titled *Review Course: Advanced Composition: Book of Models for Writing*. English Grammar and Composition Series (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).



five-paragraph theme, from which pattern the student can expand his writing to longer essays.

Through constant writing practice, systematic attention to vocabulary study, weekly student-teacher conferences, and a sequence of building writing skills, all enjoyed in a relaxed classroom, one may show the student another way to confront the problems in advanced composition.

## *How to Run an Obstacle Course: Teaching Composition, Grade 10*

*Meri Wiggenhorn, Teacher, English Department  
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It is safe to say that among high school English teachers no subject receives more public lip service, or inspires more private guilt, than the teaching of composition. The importance of writing and the necessity of teaching it are articles of faith, but somehow the job rarely gets done to anyone's satisfaction. When his conscience clamors loudly enough, the teacher assigns a composition, urging the students to develop their topics logically and to take care with detail—knowing full well that such vague admonitions are as out of place in the English class as they would be in a math natics class.

Ideally, training in composition should begin early enough for a student entering high school to be able to develop a paragraph from a topic sentence, devise smooth transitions and, in short, produce a respectable, if elementary, piece of work. Alas, that is not the situation. The English teacher soon discovers that, with rare exceptions, the real, live student in grade 9 or 10 composition class neither knows how to do any of these things nor desires an initiation into the mysteries.

There are other difficulties. Almost all English teachers have received instruction in essay writing, but few have been trained to teach it. This sphere of duty is largely unknown country which each must explore for himself. Something else to be taken into account is the kind of teaching indispensable for proficiency in writing: no composition program will achieve its aim without one-to-one instruction. It is not the volume of writing produced by a class that insures progress, but the amount that is criticized by the teacher and revised by the students. For purposes of instruction, this is the only writing that counts.

And, as if all this were not enough, there is the formidable problem of numbers. The prospect of acting as tutor to a hundred or more individual students is enough to give pause to the courageous and to demoralize the faint-hearted. The usual outcome is a radical reassessment of the possibility of thoroughgoing instruction in composition, and a private resolution to work something out before next year.

If the teacher is conscientious, and has nothing better to do in the summer vacation, he will cast about for a solution to the problem looming ahead; and he will find any number of attractive methods for the teaching of composition to small, homogeneous classes of comparatively well-prepared students. But what he needs is a method,

attractive or not, for the teaching of composition to large, heterogeneous classes of ill-prepared students.

What follows is not so much a method for tackling the job as a series of maneuvers around the obstacles in the way.

Since the teacher can do nothing to reduce the size of his classes, he must do what he can to minimize the difficulties of teaching them. Two ways to do it: first, spread the work over the entire school year, all preliminary work to be done in the first semester, all actual composition to be done in the next; second, do three-quarters of the work with the entire class participating, and reserve individual instruction for those phases that can be taught effectively in no other way.

Teaching pupils to write is really teaching them to think. A practical step toward effective thinking is efficient reading. Exercises in abstracting and précis writing will teach students to recognize significant ideas in a passage of prose. Abstracting requires nothing more than the underlining of important skeletal sentences in any given selection, omitting any single modifiers, phrases, or sentences that do nothing to expedite the movement of ideas within the passage. Précis writing, not to be attempted until the class is proficient in abstracting, trains the student not only to recognize salient points, but to rank them in their proper order. The importance of these disciplines cannot be overemphasized. They are the essential preliminary steps.

The class can now proceed to the development of paragraphs and the use of transitional sentences. Paragraph writing need not be limited to the deadly business of expanding a topic sentence; the procedure can be varied by presenting to the class an introductory paragraph, asking the students to supply a following paragraph. The teacher may give the students an entire essay with the summary omitted, leaving it to them to work out a conclusion; or he may give them a short essay with the introduction omitted, requiring them to devise a suitable opening paragraph. Another valuable exercise is the scrambled essay, which the student must reassemble in logical order. All such paragraph work should be either read aloud or projected onto a screen for scrutiny by the class, not only to engage their attention but to give them experience in criticism. Students soon become shrewd critics of other people's efforts, especially when they run no risk of having to work out the revisions themselves.

When these preliminary steps take up the entire semester, as they usually do, the mid-year examination should be realistic, demanding of the students only what they have been trained to do—one or two paragraphs with transitional sentences, an abstract or a précis, and perhaps a short scrambled essay to unravel.

The second semester should be devoted to the five-paragraph composition. (Perhaps it is just as well to anticipate objections by saying at once that there is nothing sacred about the five-paragraph composi-

tion and that the student should be allowed to expand his essay if his material fails to fit comfortably into this scheme. The five-paragraph essay is simply the smallest convenient model. However elaborate a piece of expository writing may be, or to whatever length it may expand, its proportions will roughly resemble those of the five-paragraph essay, the introduction and summary forming approximately two-fifths, the body three-fifths, of the whole.)

The cardinal rule for teaching composition in the average grade 10 public school class is *think small!* Reduce the work to the smallest effective unit, in this case the paragraph. Allow five weeks for the first full composition, *to be undertaken one paragraph at a time*. Working with such small units has decided advantages. It reduces the teacher's load and allows for close scrutiny of each student's work. It relieves the student of the threat of having to revise an entire essay and encourages him to take a proprietary interest in his work. In large units of writing, the student's interest operates against revision; in small units, his interest operates in favor of it. Each successfully completed paragraph increases the writer's desire to save his investment, so that his proprietary interest operates to the teacher's advantage, as well as to his own. By the time he has finished the composition, the student has experienced one of life's solid pleasures—satisfaction in a job well done.

**Step One:** Engage the entire class in the first round of the composition project. Class discussion and criticism will not only relieve the teacher of a great deal of labor, but will do the job far more effectively than he can do it alone. Each student brings to class a topic in which he is genuinely interested, with three things he wants to say about it. (These three items will form the body of his composition.) The time spent in class discussion of these topics is perhaps the most important step in the entire procedure, and one that the teacher should never gloss over, no matter how guilty he may feel about time fleeting. When these proposed subjects and three items are read aloud or projected on a screen, it may soon be apparent that the apprentice writer has only one thing to say, with two repetitions; two things to say with one repetition, or, indeed, nothing of importance to say at all. The class soon learns to offer suggestions for enlarging or narrowing the subject, or perhaps for exchanging it for another offering more scope. This is the first lesson in learning to distinguish a fruitful from a barren topic.

The teacher should do what he can to guide the student's choice away from those subjects that can be treated chronologically, or that require the mere setting down of information, and toward those that force him to think. (For slow students, however, the simple chronology is often a face-saver, if not a life-saver, so that the use of it should not be altogether ruled out.) If, as it frequently happens, a student turns up with a topic as bald as *Baseball*: (1) Its past, (2) Its present, (3)

Its future (or, more likely, it's past, it's present, and it's future), don't despair. The reluctant essayist can be led into a discussion of some controversial aspects of the sport—the reserve clause, for example—which will stimulate other fans in the class to make their contributions. At the right moment, the teacher should suggest that the composition be devoted to the question under discussion. The student is usually so fired up by this time that he is only too willing to demolish, in writing, the arguments of his opponents. It is even possible to endure two baseball essays if someone else in the class wants to express an opposing viewpoint. Any routine topic can be enlivened if the teacher becomes adept at posing provocative questions or making stimulating remarks.

Needless to say, going through the topics in this way takes a great deal of time, but it is time very profitably spent. The students learn how to think around not only their own, but everybody else's topics. This mode of instruction also proves the teacher's claim (which he should make pointedly and often) that writing a composition is 75 percent thinking and 25 percent writing.

**Step Two:** When all the topics have been approved, the students begin work on the introductory paragraph, usually the most difficult phase of the composition. The same process is gone through again, with the full class participating in discussion and criticism. The most valuable phase of the training—it cannot be too often emphasized—lies in the class participation. Many students profit so speedily from class criticism that they revise their work before it comes up for scrutiny. No attempt should be made to treat all paragraphs at equal length, and, if time is pressing, a few carefully chosen paragraphs will do the job.

One welcome result of this class activity is the development of a certain critical authority among the students; they visibly prosper. By this stage, the teacher's role becomes secondary, or advisory, and sometimes he is altogether ignored.

Once the obstacle of the introductory paragraph has been surmounted, each student is on his own, and the work goes much more expeditiously. The teacher takes each student at the desk for individual instruction and criticism, until every composition has been finished to his satisfaction. Nobody would claim that this stage of the procedure is light work. It is rigorous for everyone, especially for the teacher. But it has to be done only once. No student who has gone through this experience will ever again be at a loss in organizing a composition, nor will the teacher ever again be faced with a mass of writing so formless that he doesn't know where to begin making corrections.

One of the difficulties of the method here described, a problem by no means peculiar to the teaching of composition, is that of keeping

very proficient students occupied while the rest are being individually helped. It is unavoidable that some people will finish their work long before the others, and this difference in speed of performance must be taken into account. A task of some magnitude, preferably in literature, should be undertaken in conjunction with the work in composition, with assignment sheets spanning two weeks or more, to serve as guides. These study guides should be designed to set the students thinking analytically about the novel or play they have been assigned, with a view to the writing of a second composition later on.

If the teaching of composition is a departmental effort, as it should be, this training in grade 9 or 10 can serve as a point of departure for more sophisticated instruction in grades 11 and 12.

The chief criticism to which this method may appear vulnerable is that it is too highly structured to allow for originality. In practice this does not prove to be the case. For the student blessed with originality, the five-paragraph scheme serves as mere scaffolding for the building of a solid piece of work; for the student whose ideas are nebulous and diffuse, it provides a framework for their orderly expression.

As for the shibboleths of "creativity" and "self-expression," discard them! All honest writing is in a sense creative, and training in the technique of exposition in no way precludes the exercise of the imagination. It is strange that we readily concede the importance of training in any other craft or discipline, but in the desperately important craft of writing, we are willing to leave all to chance and fortune.



## *Writing Experiences*

*Nora Wagener, Teacher, English Department  
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Since I teach in a small parochial school (325 students in grades 9-12), perhaps I have a bit more freedom in setting up my elective writing class than an instructor in a large public school has. At any rate, I have an elective which I choose to call "Writing Experiences," a one-semester course. It is open to all junior or senior students. We do exactly what the title implies—a great variety of kinds of writing. The students are assigned two major projects during the semester: writing children's books and keeping notebooks/scrapbooks of what they consider examples of good writing.

The subject matter for a children's book may be directed toward any age child between three and twelve years. To motivate the students, I bring a variety of books to class from the children's library. We look at characters, vocabulary, illustrations, and cover designs. The students' books must be illustrated but they may call on friends to help them (giving them due credit) or use magazine cut-outs. The results have been delightful. A follow-up activity asks the "authors" to share their creations with the preschool children in our Child Care class so that they see firsthand the success of their books.

The examples of good writing for the students' notebooks/scrapbooks can come from any and every source available (e.g., newspapers, books, magazines, ads). These may be as short as a single phrase or they may be complete articles. The students simply clip out the excerpts, or copy them, and list the sources.

The rest of our time is spent in shorter, daily assignments which are always shared in class. This enables the class members to become good listeners and good critics. They also think twice before being satisfied with a slipshod piece of work. I would like to share a few of these ideas:

1. To develop a good fictional character we do a joint effort assignment. (a) The first step is for each student to introduce a character by name on a sheet of paper, giving him or her an identity in one sentence. (b) Each student then passes his or her paper to the student on the right and that person adds to the new paper one sentence describing the appearance of the character (movement, expression, or apparel). (c) The papers are passed on to the next students who add sentences giving the characters



- personalities. (d) On the fourth move, the students add sentences which introduce the characters into situations. (e) The papers are passed one more time, whereupon the students read aloud the descriptions of the complete characters that have been built. The results are fascinating. A good follow-up for this exercise is to have each student write an episode in the life of one of the characters.
2. Students write an original "Dear Ann" or "Dear Abby" letter. These may be serious or light-hearted. Without reading them aloud, the letters are randomly passed out to students in the class who then write a suitable answer, trying to maintain the same mood as the letter.
  3. An exercise which proved to be a good pre-Christmas assignment was to clip pictures of unique gifts from a catalog (a puppet, a model sailing ship, a beautiful hand-carved pipe, for examples). Each student selected one of these and described the kind of person for whom such a gift would be perfect. This assignment stimulated enthusiasm and good imaginative writing.
  4. Slips of paper with names of one half of the class members are put into a box. The other half of the students draw names, and the subsequent pairs go to various areas in the room where they conduct interviews of each other from previously-thought-out questions. This information is then used in a paper entitled "Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about \_\_\_\_\_ But Were Afraid to Ask." The papers resulting from this have been excellent, and a fringe benefit is that the students working together really become acquainted!

Perhaps the examples I have given show in a small measure that the inspirations for our "writing experiences" come from a myriad of sources. I feel especially pleased that next year I will be offering a "Writing Experiences II" course by popular demand from the junior members of this year's class who wish to continue writing.

## Twelfth Grade Expository Writing

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Many teachers feel an unbridgeable gulf between their own ideas about how language should be used and the way their students use language. Teacher's language is viewed suspiciously as the duplicitous voice of the establishment or humorously as the utterance of an isolated and insensitive pedant. The students' language—sometimes appearing in prominent places so as to call attention to itself, as often bland as it is strident—is regarded superciliously by the teacher as confirming all suspicions about the eventual downfall of the Republic. I view this opposition as a minor skirmish on a much larger front. The greater battle is for the very survival of language as a medium of discourse for civilized people, who seem to be increasingly unable to use language to solve their problems or even to describe them.

The general cultural revolution we have witnessed over the last ten years in America has heightened our understanding of the devitalization of language (a process that has been going on for more than ten years) at all levels. The anthropoid "Like, man, she really knows where it's at, like, you know" is no worse than the criminal "Yesterday's statement is inoperative." The language of advertising is equally lacking in discrimination, richness, and the plain ability to tell the truth (an automobile is described as "something to believe in"). As Jean Stafford puts it in a recent article called "The Plight of the American Language" (*Saturday Review World*, December 4, 1973), "The prognosis for the ailing language is not good. I predict that it will not die in my lifetime, but I fear that it will be assailed by countless cerebral accidents and massive strokes and gross insults to the brain and finally will no longer be able to sit up in bed and take nourishment by mouth." She puts the blame at the doorstep of public language (principally of the media and government), whose watering down and desensitizing of the language have "hoodwinked the public into talking falderal." By what alchemy will this dross of words become material for a richer coinage? For the teacher, the answer is not easy. Before students can be expected to explore the full resources of language, they have to have an interest. This interest is best fostered by encouraging students to achieve a heightened self-consciousness of the quality of language they actually use.

The first step is to talk with classes about the differences between speech and writing. Many students do not discriminate between the

two. They write the way they talk, and many of their speech patterns are picked up from television as well as from their own culture. There was a time when the language of youth culture was championed because it told it like it was (whatever the referents of the pronouns might be). It cut through the gobbledygook of ratiocination and dealt with basics. You know, like feeling. During the sixties, when the whole society became weary of the capacity of language not to tell it like it is, the sharp, uncomplicated language of youth culture seemed a relief to some, in that it left no doubt, no ambiguities. My quibble here is that it also left no room for nuance and for delicate shades of meaning.

The purposes of language are many, and the street language of popular culture is not to be uniformly condemned. One has only to read Joyce's *Ulysses* to see such language rendered powerfully in one of the richest linguistic excursions of our century. Public language, of which that of youth culture is only a part, has to be understood by teachers as the principal source of their students' language and by the students as only one source among many. There are other sources that need exploring. Language, like anything else, needs exercise to stay healthy.

The teacher plays a most important role at this point in providing a class with alternatives which show contemporary language at work in vital, discriminating, imaginative ways. It is precisely to this end that I offer a course in expository writing based on currently published models taken from such magazines as *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Review/World*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, or any publication that offers a variety of lively writing. The contemporaneity of such models combined with the possibility that a piece of writing based on them could end up on an editor's desk (and even in print) adds excitement that is often lacking in an expository writing course.

This course uses models published in the current week or month as a basis for the discussion of particular writing skills that inhere in an article. One of the first problems to be dealt with is the discrepancy between professional writing and student writing. If the student understands concretely the limitations of the models he has been using in the past, he will shudder when he sees his own writing beside a professionally written piece. It is out of that shudder that I hope to find a new awareness of language developing.

First in the long list of dissimilarities is that professionals have a larger working vocabulary than most students. We often begin our first discussion of a model by having students circle the words they are not likely to use themselves (many of which they know). We talk about why students don't use words in their writing that they already know accurately. Many students shy away from using their entire vocabularies because they think it will make them sound unnatural. To see professional writers using these words in a currently published

article designed for this week's reading audience helps students understand that many words are not as remote as they had originally thought. The course puts a high priority on enlarging the working vocabulary, and students are expected to keep their own dictionaries, made up of words taken from the articles we read. Many students enjoy playing around with new words. Many make mistakes, but more important, they start testing out possibilities rather than continue to seek refuge in old, safe words.

Second, students find that the sentence structure of professional writers is more sophisticated than their own. As with the vocabulary, students read through an essay and underline sentences that seem to use patterns they would not use themselves. We isolate those patterns, discuss them, and imitate them. Any discussion of sentences requires a basic vocabulary of grammar. Grammatical terms are invoked as the need calls for it to help the class describe what they see. Students often imitate sentence patterns in class and are surprised to find out what is possible. Another exercise is to compare two paragraphs, one from a student essay and the other from a model. We look for variety in the length and grammatical type of sentences. We look at how the two paragraphs begin sentences. We pay attention to how concise or wordy the sentences are and to whether or not they repeat themselves. Discussion and analysis of this sort do as much to sharpen a student's perception of his own writing as anything else we do.

Third, students (many for the first time) begin to discover how writers establish tone. Some writers do it by selecting volatile or outrageous words, others by invoking a particular brand of rhetoric (biblical, professorial, satiric, lyrical, journalistic). The writer's consciousness of the sound of his own voice, of the persona implied by what he says and how he says it, is too often ignored in a writing course. In discussing this subject, students often read aloud from models and their own work. Their reading provides the material for lively discussion about tone.

Fourth, we discuss the general level of abstractness or concreteness of the model. A common student writing error is to be too abstract, too general, and either too sparse or inaccurate in using detail. Good professional writing is almost always concrete. A careful examination of exactly how the professional writer keeps his reader in touch with the world of the senses opens students' eyes to the variety of ways in which they can avoid writing papers full of generalities. We also discuss the detail used in the model. What are its uses? To give information? For decoration? To help establish tone? These questions can be directed to the student writing as well.

Any discussion of concreteness and detail inevitably leads to some talk about the use of allusion. Students notice fairly quickly that professional writers often establish a texture of allusion. Some writers

look to history, while others go in for literature, art, philosophy, anthropology, rock music, or geography. We often have heated discussions about what such a tactic adds to a piece. One possible answer to this question may be found by writing an author and asking him about it. Many students like to play around with allusion as a way of enriching their own writing. At the outset this exploration is often cumbersome, but (as with vocabulary) it is that restlessness to explore that gets students in touch with the essential vitality of language.

Fifth, we discuss the beginnings of essays. By what means does the writer establish a context for his remarks? What special words does he use (and define)? How clear is he in defining and limiting his subject? To what extent are the seeds of organization for the whole essay to be found in the opening? We discover wide differences in essay openings, and these differences lead to much experimentation on the part of the students.

The question of beginnings leads directly to organization. Often, organization is more carefully handled in professionally written papers than in student writing. We discuss the logic that holds an essay together, the extent to which the writer is true to his design, the extent to which he makes smooth transitions from one idea to another or one paragraph to the next. The class sometimes reads through a page, or a whole essay, underlining all transitional elements. Then they do the same with their own writing. They have at least one assignment in which they imitate the general design of a model.

The five general areas discussed above are not chosen as definite topics prior to the class discussions themselves. Attention to a variety of published models insures that many writing skills come under discussion. The amount of time given to discussion of any one subject depends on the particular writing problems and interests of the class.

This expository writing course was offered to fifteen twelfth graders for ten weeks. The class met twice a week for fifty minutes and wrote two essays a week, each based on a model we considered in class. From time to time I would duplicate a student essay and use it either alone or with a professionally written model, as the basis for class discussion. The essays were shorter at the beginning of the course (400-600 words) and longer toward the end (800-1000 words). The feedback on each paper was crucial to providing the motivation to get through the grueling process. Therefore, I would adjust the assignment schedule if I got as much as two papers behind in correcting.

Each assignment had a particular focus. On one essay, for example, the students would strive to incorporate innovative sentence patterns based on what we had seen in class. On another they would self-consciously use a variety of techniques to establish tone. The technique to be imitated was the subject for our discussion of that week's model. Of course, each student's work was criticized for other qualities as

well (particularly mechanics), but if he or she did a successful job on the particular quality in question, the paper was considered a success.

There was never a problem as to what topics students should write about. The essays suggested endless possibilities. The variety of both subject matter and style in the models made it possible for the students to churn out two essays a week without getting stale. Frequently an essay would be sent off as a letter to the editor of the magazine or newspaper in which the model appeared. In some cases, portions of these essays were published. In one case, the letter was published and also led to a correspondence with the author! The prospect of either one of these happenings added considerable excitement and energy to the project. The idea that students were writing for a potential audience larger than the teacher turned the essays into something more than laboratory specimens.



## *Follow the Leader*

*Rosanne S. Soffer, Head, English Department  
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Tolstoy once said when someone complimented him on his writing that one might as well compliment him on his ability to waltz. This remark has always somewhat puzzled me. Why then did he find it necessary to rewrite *War and Peace* seven times, to say nothing of poor old Sonia's recopying it seven times? His remark, however, certainly leads one to believe that he considered the ability to write an innate gift. Tolstoys, like visible comets, are rare occurrences. My own experience as a writer and as a teacher has led me to conclude that writers come in three distinct varieties: the very few who have a profound gift (perhaps two or three in a teaching career, with luck), a palace guard of seraphim who have a natural flair, and the great unblest majority for whom learning to write is an arduous task like struggling with geometry or income tax returns. Needless to say there is another benighted group for whom writing in their lifetimes will be a matter of grocery lists and painstakingly filling out the forms that are prerequisites of a computerized society.

For those rare few who are writers born, perhaps the most beneficial role a teacher can play is that of appreciative but critical audience. At best one can provide them with short cuts. One can discover for them what they will eventually discover for themselves: the virtues of economy, the magic formula for the problem of transitions (never mind tracing the route from his house to hers—just smack him down at the door), and the difference between sentimentality and sentiment. One can warn this nascent writer of the tempting danger of talking out an idea before writing it, in the case of fiction, and tell the writer the benefits of allowing a piece of writing to ripen like soft cheese before beginning the anguishing task of rewriting. But above all, read and enjoy. Let him know that he or she is one of the chosen.

For those who have a natural facility with words, perhaps the greatest problem is that very facility. These are the wordslingers. They bounce their luscious vocabulary around like a great golden ball, saying little largely. The teacher's role with these second violinists can be much more pragmatic if more difficult, for it is in this group that one runs into the most sensitive of adolescent egos. I always try to emphasize to such writers that what we are judging is not their immortal souls but a series of interconnecting words on a piece of paper. The discipline of expository writing is a good antidote for the sheer facility



of these writers, and the teacher can do yeoman service as exacting taskmaster, insisting on tight organization and a logical development of subject content. For these able students who form the core of my classes in Advanced Junior English and Advanced Placement English, I have found that a biweekly analytical paper ("A Comparison of Two Fools: *As You Like It* and *King Lear*" or "The Role of the Gams in *Moby Dick*," for example), monthly book reports with individual questions for each student dealing with literary techniques rather than mere content, and a capstone independent critical paper, assigned in December and due the day before spring vacation, which calls upon them to handle a large body of material, are excellent vehicles for developing these natural writing talents as precision tools.

In the case of the long, independent critical papers, which the writers are cautioned to write without any access to critical sources, I have had some stunning papers on such subjects as comparisons of *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad), *The Bear* (Faulkner), and *Deliverance* (James Dickey); or *The Death of Ivan Illyich* (Tolstoy), *The Dead* (Joyce), and *Death in Venice* (Mann); or *In Hazard: A Novel* (Richard Hughes), *Williwaw* (Gore Vidal), and *Typhoon* (Conrad); the "Role of the Negro in Selected Faulkner Novels"; "Conrad's View of Society in *Nostromo*"; "Stephen Hero and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: A Metamorphosis"; "The Roots of Greek Tragedy in the Theater of the Absurd." Needless to say one tailors such topics to the specific ability level of the student, all the way down to such less demanding projects as a comparison of *Mr. Bridge* (Evan S. Connell, Jr.) and *Mrs. Bridge* (Connell). If these topics sound pretentious or above the ken of the high school student, I can only cite such known factors as the value of high teacher expectation and the need of the more gifted student to work to the top of his capacity. In any case, I have had college-level performances on these topics and many others, and the end product is far from stuffy.

But all this is caviar for the general. What does one do five days out of six in a class called "Writing for Today" (which might better be designated "Writing for Nowhere, Nohow") with average and remedial level students from whom each writing assignment calls forth groans and moans worthy of a Niobe? Let us put aside the argument as to whether or not writing can be taught to these students as a luxury we as high school teachers cannot afford, and settle for a simple formula: the only way anyone learns to write is by writing.

But we will have to note that often the greatest difficulty with writing classes is that the teacher isn't much of a writer—or an editor for that matter. Publishers have striven to overcome such deficiencies with specialized books to give the teacher some direction and serve as stimuli to student writing. Examples include the excellent Moffett and Murray books and those pictures which worked just great with the

boys at Exeter and Andover. Unfortunately, here the problem arises that applies also to the whole realm of the English curriculum: the teacher—not so much the student—becomes bored or tepid from over-exposure to the same material and ideas semester after semester. In addition, the teacher is giving assignments which are the fruit of someone else's imagination, and he has no concrete expectation about what the student might write about the topic. Consider for an ungodly moment what would happen if most teachers were asked to write in answer to some of their own assignments.

The really inspiring and successful teacher of writing succeeds because he works with material and ideas which he evokes himself and finds exciting, or which he has worked out in response to the interests of his own particular students. Such a teacher takes a constructive stance, because he can demonstrate to his students what they might have said and what they might have seen by sharing with them his own imaginative responses. This sharing results in a viable communication between the teacher and his students, as the students find they have something they want to say and someone whom they can trust to say it to.

Such *ex cathedra* conclusions call for specific illustrations. Many times when I talk with despondent teachers of so-called reluctant writers, I am reproached with the fact that I teach brighter students; so several years ago I undertook to teach a six-week summer school course called "English for Students Who Hate English" to a group of twenty-eight flunkies. We met for four long, searing hours every morning. My goal was to get these recalcitrants to write with at least a minimum of facility and without any malarkey about writing being fun. Writing isn't fun—at least until you've finished writing—just as painless dentistry is still something of an ordeal without the pain.

Fortunately, I had the aid of several bright teaching interns, so we could break such a large class into groups. Our tools were films, slides of paintings, television, advertisements, poems, short stories, field trips, and our own heads. We decided that our approach would be one of approval: we would try to find something good to say about what each student wrote and to hell with spelling, grammar, and punctuation for the nonce. We also determined that in the case of the visual stimuli, the students would write *before* we had any discussion no matter how much they wheedled with questions and pleas for hints. We started out with slides of paintings and had great luck with "Christina," "Double Hamburgers," "Doctor's Office," "The Miners," and any number of Hopper roadside scenes. Students read books they picked up from a long table of juicy items and wrote advertisements for the books. TV commercials and magazine ads were discussed, and puns began to fly around the room. Robert Frost's poem "Out—Out" was a mild sensation, as was Rupert Brooke's "These things I have loved"

with each student writing his own personal version, an exercise that works beautifully on all ability levels.

By this time we had established an element of trust between the students and ourselves. We began to move slowly toward the writing of short stories. Students wrote descriptions of other students and of us. Amid cries of "Nothing's ever happened to me" and "I can't think of nothing to say," we employed the time-honored device of the autobiography to find possible springboards for short stories. One boy told me that the high point of his week was spending Saturdays with a group of friends who called themselves "The Boys." "Pick a typical Saturday," I told him, "and write about what you do from morning to night." He stared at me in disbelief and the corner of his mouth tilted a little and he picked up his pencil. Another group had shared an automobile accident with one student who was the bellwether of our group. They got together with their particularly simpatico intern and dictated a short story to her about the accident, complete with digging up someone's front lawn to bury the six-packs they had with them.

At the end of the summer session, prizes were given for stories entered in a contest for all summer school classes. First prize went to our "inarticulate" boy who had written about the Saturday exploits of "The Boys." The story was one of the most evocative pieces of student writing I have ever read, with something of the poignancy of *Marty*, and it ended late Saturday night with "The Boys" sitting in a parked car on a lonely, dark street, listening to the faint sound of footsteps in the distance. When the second prize was announced, four burly boys got up to share the two and a half dollars they had earned with their story about Jimmy's accident.

We published our own magazine that last week, and each student was represented by at least one piece of writing about which he felt a sense of accomplishment. Recognition is a great persuader. Occasionally a student will write something he finds too private to want to publish, but it is something that he will read himself again and again. Even the writers of coded diaries and journals seem to write with some eventual reader or readers in mind, as we have learned from Samuel Pepys and V. Sackville-West.

If backed against a wall and told to name the single factor that has accounted for what small success I have had as a teacher of writing on pain of attending a faculty meeting every day of the school year, I would be forced to say that my own experience as a writer of sorts was the contributing factor.\* My own writing experience has given me an understanding of the creative process and the throes the beginning writer goes through. To the beginning teacher I would say get involved in your writing, write in answer to some of your own assign-

\* Mrs. Soffer has written articles and short stories published in *Look*, *Coronet*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, and other magazines—Ed.

ments. If you can't do it any other way, take a writing course and then another so you also learn what it's like to be on the other end. Then stand in front of your classes as a fellow sufferer. Your understanding as a writer will help build the climate of sharing and empathy that leads the student to want to communicate with you and with himself, through those strange squiggles that can bring so much more meaning into all of our lives. If you don't believe this, why should he?

*Part Three:*  
*The Student Has Written*

*In conclusion, the teacher concerned with teaching students to write needs four qualities: imagination, perseverance, patience, and an enormous capacity for spending days upon days and nights upon nights wandering Death Valley in search of the century plant blossom.*

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## *Introduction*

The student has written. And the teacher of composition is now responsible for evaluating the written work in some fashion. The traditional evaluation process requires writing numerous marginalia which may not result in any significant improvement in the student's next composition or (worse yet) may be ignored. What is to be done? The selections in Part III present some answers to the question, for they contain approaches that diverge from the traditional evaluation process yet converge in the expectation of high performance. All selections emphasize maximum attention to both the writer and his composition; all present approaches adaptable—in part or in total—to the teaching and evaluating of composition.

That the student can be made aware of his weaknesses in composition without the damaging discouragement caused by pedantic commentary and required rewriting is the position taken by David Hill. He places more emphasis on the student's avoidance of previously demonstrated weaknesses in subsequent compositions than he does on revision. To create awareness of what the student is to attend to in the future, Hill describes a one-week process. The success of the process is partially dependent upon the ability of the student to transfer what he discovers from reading and discussing the compositions of fellow students in a group situation and partially (perhaps largely) dependent upon the ability of the teacher to structure and manipulate the ostensible informality of the becoming-aware process.

Unlike Hill, Herbert Safran insists upon revision in "One High School Writing Class." He tells his advanced composition students that all of them will receive A's. However, he quickly states six performance standards to which they must adhere; and in addition to these specified and demanding contingencies is revision, very possibly multiple revisions. His objective is to develop tomorrow's writers. To accomplish his objective, he challenges students to meet performance standards through sequential, varied, and highly motivational writing activities.

Search out and destroy the enemies of readability is Gloria Crum's command to students. Dullness, vagueness, and deadwood comprise



the list of adversaries to be eliminated systematically and completely. Her tactics for their destruction are presented with the verve and confidence of a determined, seasoned, and successful veteran who insists that only one criterion exists for evaluating a composition: "Do I want to finish reading this?"

A tack taken by Rosemary Kennedy is to approach the evaluation of compositions more as an editor than as a teacher, to "become the Maxwell Perkins to incipient Thomas Wolfes." While recognizing and encouraging personal styles, she insists upon the need to teach structure. Both inexperienced and experienced teachers will appreciate her discussion of the dangers inherent in disregarding the teaching of structure and the means by which she incorporates it with the development of personal style.

The advantages of the student-teacher conference in evaluating compositions are extolled convincingly and amply by Michael Blenski, Jr. He considers the conference evaluation an integral portion of a composition program in which student-teacher collaboration occurs in the process of writing the composition and continues after submission of the final draft. Warning that the conference evaluation is time-consuming, he emphasizes the need for having carefully planned activities for the rest of the class and presents a practical solution.

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## Awareness

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Sometimes the task of teaching a student strong writing habits seems just as futile as trying to do pushups on quicksand. Frustration abounds. Teachers can, however, successfully guide students to more solid ground in composition skills. In working with academically-oriented high school students, the key word is "awareness."

The instructor must make the student "aware" of his or her responsibility. Frequently the student has knowledge of basic skills but fails to apply them. Too many high-schoolers sit back and wait, hoping to absorb composition skills by osmosis, as though composition were a fact that could be remembered or forgotten. Perhaps, the composition teachers of America permit them to retain this outlook. As long as students wait for a magic formula or for the teacher to "teach" them composition, their writing will stagnate. While normally we insist on avoiding clichés, too many aspiring writers have not heard that writing is "1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." I like to allude to Hemingway's supposed rewriting of the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. Or to Salinger's requiring ten years to complete *A Catcher in the Rye*. I want the students to realize—to be "aware"—that the only secret, the only magic formula is hard work, the willingness to labor painstakingly and ceaselessly in pursuit of that elusive perfection that they will never attain. Until this awareness materializes my job is incredibly difficult, if not impossible.

Awareness now becomes more personal. Each student must eventually realize his own weaknesses (please don't call them mistakes) in order to overcome them. The modern antipathy to the heavily marked paper, the "bleeding" paper in the vernacular, is probably based on the psychological impact of so much negative criticism. Too often damaging discouragement results. But before the student can overcome personal weaknesses, he must be "aware" of them. There's that word again. Still essential.

Yes, that bleeding paper could be damaging if the teacher does not handle its return with care. However, if the student receives that red ink with the proper understanding, he has the scouting reports that will enable him to plan an effective attack against his writing problems. I try to preface the return of papers with a few comments. Each teacher must vary his comments according to his personality in the classroom. I try to avoid a preachy tone. If I can be humorous, yet re-

tain a serious quality, I can relax the class. I want the student to realize that I am not mounting a personal vendetta, that I am attempting to help him. My criticism is intended to be constructive. Hopefully I have been able to include positive as well as negative observations. I am available to discuss compositions on an individual basis. I encourage each student to study comments I have made on his paper and try to understand what might have been a more effective way of relating his thoughts.

Too often a student simply fails to apply the writing skills he already possesses. The point is not that his method of expression is necessarily wrong but that another may be better. I also suggest that each student make a brief list of things that trouble him and strive to give these extra attention in his next writing assignment. As long as a student understands how his expression might have been improved, I do not require rewriting. I prefer that he attend primarily to the future. Improving a weakness in a particular thesis is not the issue; avoiding that problem in the next writing assignment is the issue.

One method of creating awareness requires approximately one school week. Have each student write a composition, about a page long or slightly less, that can be duplicated so that all class members will have a copy. The student's composition can be identified by a number that only the teacher knows. Each student acquires a copy of everyone else's product as well as his own. Ask the students to review all of the compositions, making positive as well as negative comments. Allotting one or two days of class time might help those students unaccustomed to such a task, a formidable one as composition teachers know. The teacher should also review each composition. Teacher and students should then evaluate the composition in one large group or several smaller groups. It is vital that the atmosphere be informal and friendly. Dispense with rigid format as much as possible without losing control. Encourage students to vocalize their observations diplomatically. The goal is *helping* each other. The teacher acts mainly as discussion monitor and guide. (I have been amazed how concerned students become about writing.) By offering suggestions and alternatives to others, they usually make applications to their own writing. The student learns how others, his friends, view his writing. They often reveal things he does not realize. The skill he used in searching for mistakes in others' papers can now be applied to his own writing, often with renewed insight.

Primarily, then, this technique helps the aspiring writer become "aware" of his own weaknesses and the need to be critical of his own writing—to revise and review. With this awareness he realizes that success results not from some secret formula, but from his own efforts in applying fundamental writing skills. His composition teacher can help him, can guide him, can encourage him, but that 99 percent

perspiration is the reason his writing improves. Furthermore, he can be proud of his progress because *he* earned it. And, of course, he is "aware" of that, too.

*... as an attempt to make students aware of themselves and their world, we asked students to "react" on paper to something that happened that week. Whatever made them sad, mad, glad, or aware should be the topic. Also, it was possible for students to have "No Reaction" any number of times without criticism. Usually this did not happen often. This relatively minor assignment had many benefits. Students became more aware of life in general, and most seemed to enjoy having a sounding board—especially since there was no penalty.*

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## One High School Writing Class

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and editor of *The Humanities Journal*

"You don't have to worry about grades in this twenty-week class. Everybody gets an 'A,'" I glibly announced to the nineteen high school juniors and seniors sitting expectantly in my advanced composition class the first day of the school year. "Of course," I added quickly, "you need to hand in a minimum number of papers (usually nine) for the first ten weeks, to get this 'A.'"

Realizing that this preselected college-bound group of aspiring writers was most grade-conscious, I tried to alleviate the pressure of "getting a good grade" by assuring them, that first day, that they could forget about competing with their peers . . . in this class, at least. Continuing, I added, "I don't put a grade on any of your papers, but I do ask many questions on these drafts—questions which could lead you to be more effective in this craft of writing. By the way, with reference to the craft, Hemingway defined writing in these words: 'Writing is re-writing.' And that's what each of you will be doing: rewriting a draft which you, as the author, might consider a work of art but, which I, as the reader, might consider on certain points to be of, uh . . . questionable merit. You may very well be redoing a paper three, four or even five times."

There were incredulous looks and some sideways glances as they heard this last point.

These first-day comments are probably the longest I give to the class *as a class*, for, from this point on, it's more of an individual undertaking for them.

Students soon learn the following performance standards set for them in this advanced composition class:

1. Basic-error-free drafts
2. Perceptive analysis of an event in their lives
3. Concise language via haiku poetry
4. Moderation of tone vis à vis reaction essays (Students react to a topic under discussion in an expository manner.)

Their class assignments include entering local and/or national writing contests and compiling a student literary anthology.

The first activity is the distribution of copies of an essay of childhood reminiscences entitled "The Silver Horn" by Thomas Sancton, found in Harcourt Brace's *Advanced Composition: A Book of Models*

*For Writing.* From Part II of his work, I have students point out some elements of the author's style. I then lead them to note, especially, the effective use of the meditative, philosophical approach when writing from the personal perspective. Their first paper, therefore, is a backward glance at an incident from their early years. More importantly, however, they are to perceive this episode with the advantage of the insight gathered in the intervening years. By posing the right questions, by forcing them to be shadowy figures of their former selves, I enable them, for the most part, to grasp the deeper allusions in these reminiscences.

Proofreading is an essential skill to be learned by the young writer. I tolerate no sloppy use of the basic tools of language arts. I will not be bothered correcting basic sentence structure errors or spelling mistakes. These the students must take care of in their first drafts. When on the few occasions I have returned a paper because of these shortcomings early in the quarter and have not given credit, there is no argument from the student. He rewrites the paper and he does it during that class period or types it that evening.

Students always have their papers returned the following day and an individual review between teacher and student takes place. It is important to show responsibility in getting the drafts back to the students while the material is fresh. They ought to begin the next draft without delay, while both the give-and-take of our discussion and the questions on their papers have more meaning for the rewriting.

I do strongly urge the teacher of composition to return his students' papers the day after they've been submitted. It may not be as difficult as it first appears. You will recall that earlier I said this was an individualized class. This is so because I do not require writings to be turned in to me on any given day. Thus, the daily number of papers given the teacher averages only a half-dozen or so. And this is great, since it takes about fifteen to twenty minutes of reading and writing comments and questions to do a responsible job for each paper.

I've used the word "responsible" more than once as a criterion for both student and teacher. It is especially imperative for the instructor to be closely allied with this concept, because he can by his attitude motivate his students to exact that incisive piece of writing, to attain that sense of personal fulfillment, and to wrest those key words from their "teeming brains." He, alone, is in a position to offer this encouragement.

In a short time, students begin to realize that a fair piece of writing takes a good deal of revising. Once they appreciate this inevitable fact of a writer's life, they have taken one step in the writer's maturation process.

Initially, the teacher may find students handing in essays some two pages in length. The students feel they've done a tremendous job and



that they've taken the paper as far as it can go. Well, they certainly have not taken it deeply enough. And it is in this area that the instructor of composition ought to direct his students toward a greater depth of perception. An awareness of life around them, of their role in this life and reflection on their role are some points that ought to be emphasized. When the carefully phrased question relating to these aspects of writing is asked on a paper, the students soon learn the need for more careful study and preparation of a paper, and the short draft becomes a multi-page essay that shows improved perspicacity.

Too often young writers seem to think they have concrete answers to the universal questions. I have them examine their theses. I try (with some success after ten weeks of writing) to have them gain the concept, perhaps, of not being so damn sure when drawing conclusions on paper. This acquisition of humility is one of my major objectives in the course.

This last, I find, is one of the most difficult behavioral changes to effect with above-average, motivated students in an advanced composition class. I try to achieve it by questioning their hypotheses, by using analogies, by appealing to logic. The realization that there may be other viewpoints, equally sound, plays an important part in the young writer's development.

I've already mentioned the first unit in the course. Others include 150-word essays to teach suitable diction and elimination of verbosity; poetry based on student haiku; a single short story; and a series of some half-dozen reaction essays. The twenty weeks of the course can include some twenty to twenty-five writings and rewritings.

It's endless and demanding work; it's drudgery; and, as one student so aptly put it: "It's hell on earth when nothing seems to be coming." It requires a commitment of self-discipline, but the students themselves see quite an improvement in their writing habits and in their final products.

I require each of my students to enter at least one of the numerous writing contests. These include Voice of Democracy, Scholastic Magazines, *Focus*, and a variety of local essay competitions. And when a couple of them do place in the local or national writing contests as has been the case these past few years, they are ecstatic. What a boost this is to all our egos!

The concluding activity brings committees together for selection of class works to be included in the *Epitaph*, our literary anthology. It is illustrated by two of the talented artists in the class. (I select students for the class. Skill in drawing was one major criterion for two of the students.)

Laying out the book, final typing and proofing, collating the pages from the printer, spiraling the completed work and selling the product to the student body—all give responsibility to the individuals for the



benefit of the class. It is when they see the finished product that many of them appreciate the many hours of rewriting they've done and the many private discussion sessions we've had about their writing. They have even come to me after the course has ended and offered an appreciative comment. These factors and their personal realizations are, indeed, steps in the development of tomorrow's writers.

## *Enemies List*

*Gloria C. Crum, Teacher, English Department  
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Every year, on the Wednesday following Labor Day, I valiantly yank on a girdle (for me every bit as much of a symbol of my return to battle as a knight's cuirass), sheath my sun-dried legs in pantyhose, and sally forth to the classroom, ever hopeful that the likes of Ernest Hemingway will be sitting front row center. Every year on the following Wednesday, having surrendered the girdle to September's heat and my pantyhose to the rungs of schoolroom moderne, I return my first set of papers, having satisfied myself that Ernest is not in *my* classroom again this year. Instead, facing me in various degrees of disarray are a couple of dozen adolescents, all of whom express a throbbing interest (I know, because I ask them) in physics and POD [Problems of Democracy] and Alice Cooper and the Dolphins. Not one of them has ever expressed so much as a smidgen of enthusiasm for mixed metaphors and dangling modifiers.

So I say to myself, "No doubt this is because they have yet to be introduced to the power of the English language, to the richness of its vocabulary, to the grace of its cadences." I say this to myself, but I know better. I know that every year since they've been old enough to sit up and swallow the peanut butter on the cafeteria apples, they've been introduced to, courted by, divorced from, but never married to, the English language. Indeed, many of them give every indication of living in syntactical sin.

Finally, that lingering September afternoon the question becomes, "What can I do?"—I and all the unwilling warriors forced to spend a school year mastering a subject which is inimical to everybody but the most unpopular person in the room. There are, I think, a number of things I can do. None of them alone will produce a work of art, or even a grade of "C," but they are the things that matter to me as a reader. Along with a little clarity and sense, they may help to make the English teacher's evening pulsate, if not with the lifeblood of literature, at least not with the tedium of embalming fluid.

For me the number one enemy in a theme (as in the classroom, as in a friendship, as in life . . .) is dullness. High school students who wouldn't be caught dead boring a friend in a face-to-face conversation will stupefy their English teacher with impunity. But maybe we ask for it. I encourage my students to write the way they speak, and if they can get the vitality of their best conversation onto paper, I'll put up

with the misplaced modifiers and dangling participles. These are matters that can be dealt with once the student begins to care about communicating on paper. This means, in heretical terms, soft-pedaling the mechanics (Let next year's teacher worry with the semicolons!) and rewarding substance more than spelling, wit more than punctuation.

Sometimes it helps to let a group take the dullest subject they can think of (patriotic essay contests are ideal for this) and then concentrate on breathing a little life into it. More often than not, artificial respiration is merely that, artificial. But given a number of opportunities—"Nature Imagery in Nathaniel Hawthorne," "How to Build a Rabbit Hutch," "The Energy Crisis at My House"—students will begin to get the idea. Using as their only criterion "Do I want to finish reading this?" they can evaluate each other's anecdotes and rhetorical calisthenics. Eventually they realize there are other ways to begin a paper on "The Responsibilities of a Citizen in a Democracy" than "In this paper I am going to tell you about the responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy."

Next on my enemies list is vagueness. Writing that is coherent and correct can be so vague that it fails to convince (and all writing is persuasive, if only in that it has to persuade the reader to keep on reading). English teachers may not have in their bags of tricks ideas and inspirations enough to go 'round, but they can teach elements of the writer's craft. Unlike originality and creativity, concreteness can be taught. Most student writing will benefit by moving to a more concrete level. A "vehicle" becomes "a shiny sedan," which in turn becomes "rain beads on the hood of the newly-waxed Volkswagen." One caution here: the English teacher's nights, instead of being dull, may never end. Modifiers will engorge student sentences, causing them to run into each other and all over the next ten pages. I usually head this contingency off at the pass by insisting that students drastically limit their subjects. If a student is writing about one minute, or the first time his dad handed him the keys to the car, or how the sauerkraut smelled last night when he opened his front door after football practice, he's not so likely to break the outer limits of his teacher's endurance.

A third enemy—this one is a pushover for any teacher armed with a red Flair—is the deadwood which litters the average high school paper. I know of no way of ridding my students' sentences of inconsiderate clutter other than radical surgery. Fortunately, once they realize that "A" doesn't stand for "anesthetize," they do my job for me and begin excising even more mercilessly than I could hope for. Early in the year I pass around copies of themes I've collected over the years—shining examples of redundancy, of gobbledygook, and, yes, of dullness. Next I have them examine each other's papers to see

whether they can agree on what's bone and muscle and what is merely flab to be sliced away.

No doubt my enemies list could be extended to White House proportions. I recognize that lack of unity and organization, the use of clichés, the tendency to befuddle with vocabulary-stretching, all can subvert a theme. Indeed, all have their places in a composition program. But for me it all comes down to getting students to say what they mean in as interesting a way, in as vivid language, and in as few words as they can. If they fail to do this, not much else matters, because they may fail in the ultimate purpose of their writing. For whatever they eventually write—fund-raising appeals, church bulletins, love letters—not much else matters, because the recipient (unless he or she is an English teacher) may not ever finish reading them.

## *The Teacher as Editor*

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What in heaven's name produces winners of NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing? I've asked myself that for eight years while nine utterly different student writers won awards. Because I obviously had no one model—particularly when two quite disparate writers would win in the same year—the answer was slow to emerge. But last year while trying to explain to new teachers how to teach writing, I finally found the simple key: I work directly with what the students write.

Isn't that what every teacher does? No, I don't think so. More often in the process of straight instruction—which I also use when I have to—the teacher insists that certain devices be used as evidence of the effectiveness of what he has been illustrating. These devices, whether they be the proper placing of a thesis statement or the use of a transitional phrase, become the main focus of the lesson and all too often of writing itself.

Traditionally, instruction in methods comes first and emphasis on personal ideas and style follows—if at all. I seem to reverse this procedure, for I deal first with *what* is written and then proceed on to *how*, but in terms of what the student has already expressed. My method probably comes from an editorial background where, in jobs ranging from country newspapers to industrial publications, I had to take what country correspondents or engineers or corporation vice-presidents wrote and then improve the work itself.

The approach then is more that of an editor than of a teacher. I become the Maxwell Perkins to incipient Thomas Wolfes. What results, when students begin to accept my attitude that they have something of consequence to say, are valid, personal styles. My comments in turn have to be personal. I may write on a student essay "lack of parallelism," but I am more liable to write, "If you want to put beans and poinsettias in the same sentence, you'll have to show me the connection."

I do a great deal of sentence-by-sentence commenting, even if it is in a shorthand form. As points are made I run down the margin with checks of "Yes" or "Good" or "Excellent." Or I say "No" or "Ugh!" or "So what else is new?" But the positives outrun the negatives because I am committed to respecting student ideas, even if I have to occasionally jerk a student back to reality with a final comment, such as "When you stop playing the background music for *The Green*

"Berets, come in and we'll talk about your work." (This student was eventually an NCTE contestant.) Admittedly at the eleventh-grade level, I am heir to students with considerable instruction behind them. I don't discuss this background for a minute. It is particularly valuable—and necessary—to develop a basic sense of organized thought. But by the junior year a point of maturity seems to have arrived where, as I have put it ever since my first year in teaching, "I can free the slaves." What real writer puts "doing a five-paragraph theme" before "saying something he wants to say very much the very best he can"? At sixteen or seventeen, students are ready to become real writers, not just technicians.

Even in the sophomore year, when as department chairman I insist that structure be pounded into the kids' heads, we have found that formal essays drastically improve after such personal assignments as "Convey the feelings of sound, smell, and sight that you experienced in a recent crowd encounter," or "If the book you just read were to turn into an animal, what would it be? Express your answer in any form: poetry, sketch, or essay." The writing that results is automatically forced into highly personal styles. In turn, the teacher must deal directly with student content and often with new forms, for the student must make his work hang together in terms of results, not in terms of a teacher-conceived set of structure qualifications.

To a degree in that sophomore year and decidedly in the junior one, we, as a department, move into essay questions that enlarge the students' reactions to ideas in great books. We say, "How does Hawthorne's concept of evil form the direction of growth in two of his characters in *The Scarlet Letter*?" rather than ask for a consideration of Pearl as a symbolic device. We provide some direction, some setting of intellectual levels, but not enough "help" to fence the student in. He travels in thought and in depth just as far as we can entice him. And because the junior year in our school is devoted to going beyond simple proof of ideas to development of some depth, the student agonizingly struggles through to thinking points of which he may not have thought himself capable earlier.

Possibly a set of devices does help in this growth. I sit with a group of six students for an hour, taking notes, and not saying a word. Almost always, despite "oh-ah's" and moments of silence, a thinking breakthrough occurs shortly after Minute 35. Or I ask for a twenty-minute tape recording of a five-man discussion which its members themselves review in order to decide whether any real intellectual growth has occurred. Often they agree to do the tape again.

Successful as this criterion of personal-writing norms can be—and we as a department have gradually proven it so in terms of college success stories from all kinds of students—it is also a dangerous method. The teacher who appears to discard actual teaching of struc-

ture must also not forget it for a minute. Sometimes the beginning teacher, reeling from the cultural shock of simply terrible high school essays, grasps at the magic solution of "do your own thing." Student writing can never be left at this point. Until the new teacher can quickly run down a student essay and say, "Here's your thesis in the middle of page two; now cut all the paragraphs apart and paste them back together in new order; then throw out page three and rewrite the conclusion," we cannot flirt with "student freedom." For freedom must allow the student to grow, to actually wean himself from the teacher in terms of writing adulthood, not intellectual confusion. Better to continue to deliberately instruct in writing devices first, and once *that* is habitual, then put the emphasis on student ideas.

Possibly the clinching reason for working so directly and specifically with student writing is that, as the student approaches independence from the five-day-a-week classroom, what he himself does becomes the only work context that makes sense to him. Style, ideas, correctness, logic, creativity, when dealt with in terms of the student's own product, make writing worth struggle and growth.



## *The Conference Evaluation: A Renewal*

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We spend countless hours at it. We devote our evenings and many of our weekends to it—writing endless marginalia; scrupulously correcting or indicating mechanical errors; composing terminal summaries (in our best prose style!); and then reading everything over again as we ponder a final grade. Surely no English teacher would deny that evaluating student papers is the most time-consuming and exacting aspect of his work. Not that we begrudge the time. What depresses us is that too often our students seem more interested in the grade than in the comments, corrections, and summaries. If only they gave more than cursory attention to all that red ink we lavish on their pages.

But our depression may be partly our own fault. Perhaps we rely too heavily on one unvarying evaluative procedure. Maybe we've grown tired of it—and our students sense this. Or perhaps, though we use some variety of methods, we haven't renewed them with those deliberate changes that could keep us alert and enthusiastic. Methods that are continually updated and renewed can benefit everyone, making our students more receptive of our criticism and suggestions and making us more satisfied with our accomplishments in this critical phase of our teaching responsibilities. One such renewal, simply a form of the written evaluation, is the student-teacher conference.

For three semesters now at Nicolet High the teachers of Intermediate Composition (a one-semester elective course in expository writing) have used this type of evaluation of student papers with good results. It is hardly a revolutionary teaching device. English teachers repeatedly confer with individual students as multi-paragraph compositions are being written. Such collaboration helps students to solve major problems of organization, supporting detail, wording, etc., before they submit the final copy. But why not also employ conferences for the final evaluation? Not that this method need be used for every composition assignment. How often a teacher uses it will depend on how much time he can set aside for the purpose. Even two such conference sessions during a semester (possibly reserved for just major assignments) will be beneficial. Furthermore, these conferences need not be employed just in composition courses; they could be used in any English course that involves some writing. However they are used, they can

make English composition a more satisfying experience for both student and teacher.

Admittedly, the conference evaluation is not usually a time-saver for the teacher. Although he can read a short composition of one or two paragraphs as the student sits beside him at the conference, he will still have to preview longer papers and note the errors. Otherwise each conference will take too long and will lack direction. But since the teacher will now have the opportunity to speak to the student about the composition, marginal notations can be reduced to mere reminders so the teacher will be able to quickly find those sentences and paragraphs where errors have been made when he confers with the student.

Seemingly, a more serious problem—indeed, the one that may have prevented many teachers from trying the conference method—is that even for a rather small class (twenty or so students) five or more days are needed before the teacher has completed all conferences. What, then, does the rest of the class accomplish while these conferences are going on? The solution is careful planning. If student-teacher writing conferences are an integral part of a course, the seeming impediments of the time necessary for conferences and student activity during the conference days should not prevent the use of this evaluation method. Students can be engaged in meaningful work so that no time is lost or wasted. The Intermediate Composition course at Nicolet High, for example, is so designed that during conferences for one end-of-unit composition, students are beginning work on the next unit. For the new unit they are given a packet of material consisting of explanation and exercises. They discuss the material in assigned small groups or work on it individually, realizing that the success of their next major writing assignment will be directly dependent on their understanding the concepts explained in the unit packet. What students work on during these days when the teacher is involved in conferences has been carefully planned so that they can accomplish it on their own and with each other's assistance. Thus the conference method of evaluation is practicable.

The advantages of this method are numerous, especially the value of direct exchange between the student and teacher. The student is involved; he is part of the process. He can explain what he meant to say, but didn't—or couldn't. The teacher points to those sentences that don't come off: "This is what your words say, but—and correct me if I'm wrong—I don't think that's what you meant to say." Other problems of imprecise diction are also easily solved. How often, for example, students fall back on such adjectives as "nice," "great," and "tremendous." And we dutifully put the abbreviation *w. w.*—wrong word—in the margin. At a conference, however, we can be more explicit by offering alternative precision words and letting the student select the one that best fits his intention. Furthermore, as we offer these

suggestions, we know instantly whether we are getting through to the student sitting beside us. This we cannot really be sure of when we simply write our criticisms and suggestions—no matter how carefully we phrase them. With the written evaluation we can only trust that our student will question us about comments we have made that they do not understand. How seldom they come to us with such questions!

Early in the semester, before they are fully aware of the importance I give to directness and simplicity of expression, a few of my students always try the pompous approach, the ten-dollar words, in an attempt to be impressive. Here, too, the conference facilitates correction, for when I encounter these windy passages, I simply ask, "What's the essential meaning here? Can you state it more directly?" Invariably the student restates the idea in a less abstract manner, and he realizes that he could have written it that way in the first place. Here is a lesson in language directness that goes much further than any written marginal comment identifying a passage as "wordy" or "gobbledygook" or "needs simplification." The revision can be made immediately, usually by the student himself.

His involvement in the evaluation process has further implications that are even more far-reaching. Students are often motivated to do more careful work because they see for themselves the attention their teacher gives to the details of their writing, especially when at the conference the teacher reads for the first time something they have written. They see his confusion when a "mere" comma has been omitted, and they realize that other readers would be similarly confused. They see how a word with a connotation they weren't aware of can destroy the desired meaning because it suggests what they never intended (and henceforth they might be more discriminating in their selection when they turn to the thesaurus). But if, after hearing his teacher's comments, a student still insists he is correct, still defends his choice of language, his paragraph order, his supporting detail, at least the conference allows him this defense. The importance of this opportunity for student-teacher exchange, and, whenever possible, for the working out of differences, cannot be overestimated.

Some of the differences students and teachers encounter are the result of students never actually hearing their sentences and paragraphs. Whenever time permits, the nature of a student's syntax necessitates it, and the student is ready for such instruction. I read aloud a paragraph or more of his paper. He hears the sound of his words: the choppiness of too many consecutively short sentences; the monotony of the same sentence pattern repeated over and over. Hearing this—usually for the first time—he acknowledges that my objections to his style are valid and wants to be shown the means for improvement. Often he himself will interrupt my reading to suggest the necessary

alterations or at least to signal dissatisfaction with what he hears. The first step toward improvement is, of course, the desire to improve. I have found the conference a means of stimulating this desire.

Again, this oral reading will not take place at every student's conference. No single procedure should be employed at every conference, if only for the sake of the variety needed to keep both student and teacher alert. For example, the student should not always be told initially what the strengths and weaknesses of his composition are; he often can be asked to identify them himself, to specify those elements of his work with which he was most satisfied and those areas he still was skeptical about when he submitted the assignment. This technique helps to involve the student in the evaluation process even more fully and prevents the conference from being the one-sided affair it could tend to be. (And we all know our propensity: to talk too much!) The student should also gradually improve in his ability at self-evaluation when the teacher uses this method of initiating the conference.

Regardless of the procedure for a particular conference, the teacher must put down a written summary of the major strengths and weaknesses of the composition before the conference is completed. This summary is brief but very important because it will serve both the student and the teacher as future assignments are written and evaluated. For this reason the sheets on which these summaries are written should be readily accessible to student and teacher alike. If students do not turn back to review the major accomplishments and inadequacies of past assignments, their writing will fail to progress. And if teachers do not maintain specific awareness of their students' past work, they cannot effectively help their students to improve; each composition will be a separate entity, with little or no relationship between one assignment and the next.

As the student leaves the conference, then, he should have specific knowledge of his work. Any effective evaluation—whether written or oral—should indicate the following:

1. The major strengths of the composition, especially those that can be applied to future assignments, and those the student may not be particularly aware of but may just have happened on
2. The major weaknesses (especially those of organization and support) that seriously detract from the overall quality of the composition
3. The specific means by which weaknesses can be remedied (a positive emphasis: improvement is possible)
4. The degree of improvement represented by this latest assignment over earlier assignments
5. The general quality of the assignment (as represented by a letter grade or words like "excellent," "good," "fair," etc.) to indicate,

at least approximately, how this latest assignment has affected a student's standing in the course

A sixth area, one that implicitly accompanies each of the above items—and that overrides all of the others in significance—is the teacher's demonstration of his interest in the individual student's work. No method of evaluation shows this interest better than the conference. The emphasis, of course, must be on the work, since a good evaluation never indicts the student ("Well, you took the lazy way out again!" or "How much time did you spend whipping *this* one together?"). If the quality of the work is poor, the student can easily conclude for himself what personal deficiencies (carelessness, indifference, or procrastination) are responsible. If the teacher assesses the work and not the student—and that may at times be a rather fine-line separation, requiring no little diplomatic skill—a conference over even the most miserably inept writing can still end amiably.

Here again, however, a teacher will discover that the conference evaluation will help in obtaining better student writing since the students are less likely to submit shoddy work when they know a personal conference with their teacher will be the culminating activity for a written assignment. And for those students who cannot be won over to the realization that writing is important and improvement possible, that only their best efforts are worth submitting, for those individuals the teacher at least can demonstrate his interest and his desire to help, when they are ready to take advantage of this help.

The conference evaluation, then, embodies advantages that can have significant effect on our students' writing and their attitude toward writing. In a conference students have the opportunity to participate in the assessment of something most of them worked hard to produce. And when the teacher handles the conference skillfully and tactfully, students no longer feel that decisions on their work are simply being peremptorily handed down to them. At times the conference facilitates teaching that is not possible with other types of individual evaluation, as when a student hears his own sentences read aloud. At other times, though a teacher could as easily have written everything out and perhaps have saved time doing so, students are just more satisfied that at last someone had enough interest in their work to sit down to talk to them about it. Someone was concerned enough about their writing and enthusiastic enough about helping young people to better express themselves that he gave them personal attention.