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ABSTRACT

Three installments of "Writing Assignment of the Month," a regular feature of the National Council of Teachers of English publication, "Notes Plus," are presented in this compilation. The articles describe writing exercises which have proven to be successful in the classroom. The first article gives suggestions for introducing students to mapping, a prewriting technique which uses graphic representations of information as an aid in organizing ideas for written and oral compositions. An example of mapping and a student essay derived from a map are included. The second article offers detailed instructions for a two-week writing unit which uses comparisons of film critiques from a variety of publications to teach writing and research skills. The guidelines include objectives and day-by-day instructions. The final article describes two methods of using writing as a means of enhancing learning across the curriculum. The methods, speculative and double-entry journal writing, involve stopping frequently while reading in order to write down observations and thoughts. It is stressed that this type of writing is a process rather than product. (DC)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills
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WRITING ASSIGNMENT OF THE MONTH

Mapping: A Prewriting Technique that Works

Every writer begins by facing a blank page, waiting for ideas and words. Some writers make lists before writing, some work out ideas in their minds, some outline, some doodle—but all writers develop techniques for beginning. Mapping is one such technique. Because it helps writers generate ideas, because it allows them to add or delete material readily, and because it is easily learned, mapping is an extremely useful skill.

What Is a Map?

A map is a graphic representation of a written or oral composition; often it includes only key words. It adds a visual dimension that helps students gain greater control of and fluency in thinking and writing. A map helps students produce and receive information, organize that information, and go on to create a product uniquely their own. Because it teaches students to differentiate among primary, secondary, and tertiary ideas, a map aids composing and comprehending. Mapping can be a prewriting, revising, or postwriting activity, enabling students to organize, compose, and evaluate their writing.

Introducing Mapping

Introduce mapping to students with an everyday topic that allows them to work together to generate an extensive list of related words and ideas. This step does not differ significantly from what is often called brainstorming. With junior high students I have used such topics as sports or soap; with high school students such topics as advertising or the troubles of being seventeen. Writing about a best friend or what-if topics (What if no adults came to school today?) are also good choices.

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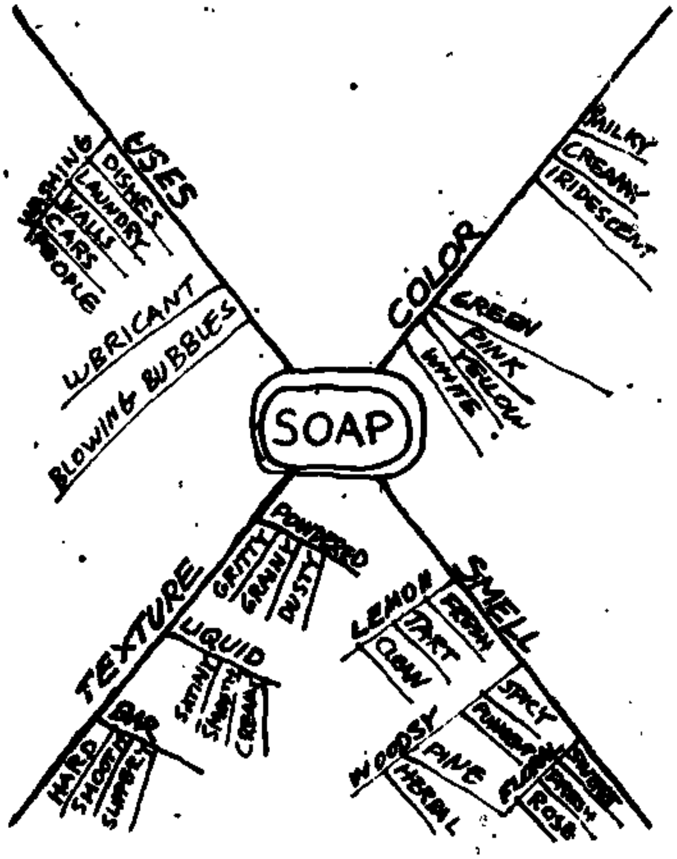
When students seem to have run out of ideas, we organize the words into categories. At this step students frequently get new ideas and insights as they begin to perceive a structure that can be expanded or contracted depending upon the writer's purpose and intent. The topic *soap*, for example, yielded the following terms and categories:

type	*use*	*color*	*smell*	*texture*
liquid	shower	white	fresh	gritty
powdered	bath	green	lemon	granule
bar	dishes	pink	clean	slippery
	clothes	yellow	herbal	bubbly
	laundry	creamy	bayberry	sudsy
	cleaning	milky	spicy	satiny
	cars	iridescent	outdoorsy	creamy
	lubricant		pine	fluffy
	blowing bubbles		floral	smooth

Next, students arrange these categories and words on a map like the one shown below, with the controlling topic or idea in a dominant position and the supporting ideas as extensions. A pinwheel shape, however, is only one of the many configurations that will develop. Again, new ideas often emerge during mapping and additions and deletions should be encouraged. At this step, mapping encourages interaction among students, and these interchanges help to prepare students to write their own essays later on.



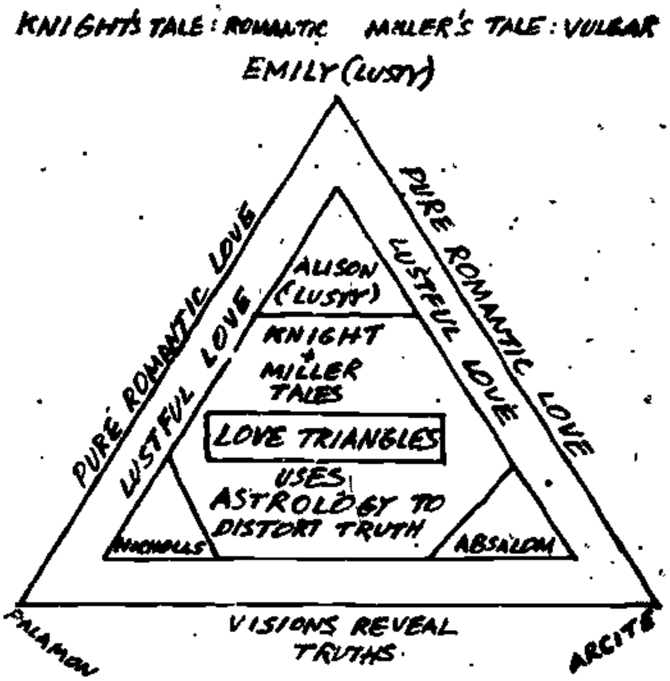
SOAP
USES
WASHING
DISHES
LAUNDRY
WALLS
CARS
PEOPLE
LUBRICANT
BLOWING BUBBLES
COLOR
MILKY
CREAMY
IRIDESCENT
GREEN
PINK
YELLOW
WHITE
POWDERED
GRITTY
GRANULE
DUSTY
TEXTURE
LIQUID
SATINY
SMOOTH
CREAMY
BAR
HARD
SMOOTH
SLIPPERY
SMELL
LEMON
FRESH
TART
CLEAN
SPICY
WOODSY
PINE
HERBAL
ROSE

Based on our map, we work out a topic sentence as a group and draft a first paragraph together before students take off on their own to complete their drafts. We revise these in small groups, and read some to the class and show others on the overhead projector.

After an introduction to mapping, students typically go on to create more individualistic maps. Older students develop relatively sophisticated ones (interlocking triangles, concentric circles, ladders) that help them structure their writing and shape it for special purposes and audiences. Mapping in a sense provides its own outline—each category inviting development with explanation, definition, classification, example, narration, comparison.

Mapping a More Complicated Assignment

Mapping a short story or essay before writing about it helps students discern how an author has structured ideas. The example below illustrates how a fifteen-year-old sophomore was able to show parallels between Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and his "Miller's Tale"—first by mapping, then in writing a first draft of a comparison paper. Clearly, the mapping technique assisted this student in writing a draft that both analyzes and synthesizes the structures of the two tales.



KNIGHT'S TALE: ROMANTIC
MILLER'S TALE: VULGAR
EMILY (LUSTY)
PURE ROMANTIC LOVE
LUSTFUL LOVE
PURE ROMANTIC LOVE
LUSTFUL LOVE
ALISON (LUSTY)
KNIGHT + MILLER TALES
LOVE TRIANGLES
USES ASTROLOGY TO DISTORT TRUTH
NICHOLAS
ABSALOM
VISIONS REVEAL TRUTHS
PALAMON
ARCITE

A Comparison of the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale

After the knight finished his beautiful (and overlong) tale, everyone agreed it was noble. The drunken miller, however, thought he could match any tale of the knight's. At first, the two tales seem to be totally opposite, but after a closer look one can find many similarities.

Both tales involve a love triangle, where two men seek the love of the same woman and fight for her. In "The Knight's Tale" the characters are Palamon, Arcite, and Emily. In "The Miller's Tale" the characters are Absalom, Nicholas, and Alison. The knight's triangle is very pure and romantic. The miller's triangle is somewhat raunchier; Nicholas, for example, had already won Alison while Absalom was still begging for her love.

Visions are used in both tales. Palamon, Arcite, and Emily pray to the gods in an effort to guide their destiny, and Emily sees a vision of the goddess *Diana*. In the miller's tale visions are mocked. Nicholas also uses visions in an effort to guide his destiny—or his and Alison's. He pretends to have seen a vision from the gods, telling him a great flood is coming, to trick the carpenter into hiding in a barrel.

Destiny solved the differences between Palamon and Arcite. Both men won, even though Arcite died. He won Emily's hand in marriage and then had an accident. As he lay dying, he gave Emily to Palamon. So it was in the miller's tale; everyone was "rewarded" so to speak: foolish Absalom with a misplaced kiss, over-confident Nicholas with a severely burned bottom, and the anxious carpenter with a broken arm.

The miller took almost every detail of the knight's tale and twisted it into something vulgar so that the stories seem to be very dissimilar. However, after careful scrutiny, many likenesses can be found. As a matter of fact, both stories parallel each other.

Conclusion

Mapping enhances verbal thinking because it provides a visual/spatial perspective, allowing poorer writers to generate and shape ideas with greater ease and assisting more sophisticated writers with analysis and synthesis. Mapping seems to be effective because it combines what Susanne Langer called the discursive (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) with the presentational (art, music, dance, and sculpture)—two basic ways we symbolize experience. By using both the verbal and the spatial modes of thinking, mapping takes full advantage of the symbolic process

If we want students to generate words easily, if we want them to organize their essays or stories efficiently, if we want them to write coherently, then mapping is one of the skills we will teach. As a prewriting activity it helps students begin, as a shaping activity it helps them form their ideas, as a holistic activity it helps them to synthesize ideas. Because mapping takes advantage of our verbal and visual abilities, it adds a new dimension and power to all language activities, especially writing.

Owen Boyle, Assistant Director, Bay Area Writing Project

WRITING ASSIGNMENT OF THE MONTH

Comparative Film Criticism

My packet of never-fail food recipes is slim and treasured, though worn and smudged around the edges. So with my tried-and-true classroom recipes, those rare, repeatable assignments that, year after year, are preserved because they always manage to ignite interest, engender enthusiastic effort, and yield results satisfying to students and teacher. Welcome to a favorite—Comparative Film Criticism—pedagogically sound and offering a gourmet mix of spicy critics, lively discussion, contemporary periodicals, and dandy papers. At first glance, the objectives may appear imposing, but they can be achieved within a fortnight.

Objectives

1. Acquaint students with leading film critics, their styles and biases.
2. Get students reading in a variety of publications not previously explored (*The New Yorker, Saturday Review, Commentary, New Republic, Nation*).
3. Teach research skills on a *limited and controlled scale:*
   a. Finding movie reviews in *The Readers' Guide*
   b. Preparing bibliography cards and a final bibliography
   c. Taking notes with only three "slugs": pro, con, other opinion
   d. Incorporating opinion—paraphrased and directly quoted
   e. Footnoting quoted and paraphrased opinions
4. Enable enthusiastic sharing of information through brief oral reports.
5. Develop skill in organizing and writing the paper of comparison/contrast.

Preliminary discussion, instruction in research skills, and lab days require six or seven days. A final day or two are needed for brief oral reports and the reading of one another's papers. The work load for each day generally follows the plan that I've outlined here.

Day One

1. Discuss film critics and their role.
   a. How many of you read movie reviews? Where do you find them? Do they influence what movies you see and how you feel about them?
   b. How influential are movie critics anyhow? Can they doom a film? (Try to think of films critics have hated but the public has still supported. Also try to think of films and actors the critics have destroyed.)
   c. What is the reviewer's function and moral responsibility to artists and to the public?
   d. Who are the major film critics today? (Gather your list by going through current newspapers, magazines, and books on the media.) What are their preferences, biases, and degree of public influence?
2. What magazines and newspapers regularly feature film reviews? (Have available a cart with magazines and newspapers that regularly print film reviews and introduce students to periodicals new to them. For example, point out that *The New Yorker* offers film summaries as well as reviews. Suggest sources of magazine bias—religious, liberal, conservative, special interest—and possible effects on the way films are reviewed.)
3. Distribute a list of films from the past two years along with the assignment shown below.

The Assignment

a. Select a film from the list or one of your own choosing.
b. Find and read five to eight reviews of this film, drawing on both liberal and conservative periodicals.
c. Make bibliography cards for each review following the form given in your handbook.
d. Take notes on what the critics like (pro), dislike (con), and separately emphasize (other opinion).
e. When reading is concluded, list points of agreement and disagreement and other opinions worth noting.
f. Organize findings into a paper according to the following design.
   (1) Formulate a generalization about the overall merit of the film based on the reviews you have read and write a first paragraph that summarizes what you have discovered. For example:

   The Love Journey is clearly a (superior/mediocre/deplorable) work, according to most reviewers. While most critics concur that ________ is its strongest feature, they differ considerably in their judgment of its ________ and ________. What is most apparent is that *Love Journey* (excels/succeeds) in ________ but is less than successful in its ________.

   (2) Give a brief plot summary of the film.
   (3) Present areas on which the reviewers are in agreement, utilizing appropriate quotes to support your discussion.
   (4) Tell in what ways the reviewers disagree.
   (5) Include other opinions that seem worth mentioning.
   (6) Offer an overall assessment, adding up all you have read and deduced. Is the film worth seeing? If you have seen the film and strongly disagree with the critics, explain why.

Day Two

1. Check bibliography cards for form and number of reviews.
2. Teach form of notecards, asking students to use three kinds of slugs: pro, con, other opinion.
3. Distribute a duplicated film review and have students prepare pro, con, and other opinion cards for it.
4. Help students determine which information is best paraphrased, which directly quoted.

Days Three and Four

1. Create lab hours for reading and notetaking in the library or classroom.
2. Check student progress and handle problems.

Day Five

1. Discuss how to organize a comparison/contrast paper, using the specifications in the assignment.
2. Review the concept of plagiarism, creating examples of proper and improper attribution from the film review distributed previously.
3. Teach students how to incorporate paraphrased and directly quoted material, including the name of the critic cited. For example:
   a. Pauline Kael was especially critical of the camera work in *Death Song*: "(documenting quote)."
   b. The collapse of the second half of the film, according to Stanley Kauffman, accounts for its loss of suspense and continuity.
4. Discuss with students the use of transition words and phrases to move from "pro" to "con."
   a. Transition words: *in contrast, unlike ________, on the other hand.*
   b. Transitional phrases and clauses: "A lone voice of dissent, John Simon contends that *Swift Assassin* is ________." or "While most critics applaud the acting, Richard Schickel has reservations about ________."
5. Review footnoting techniques and the required format of the completed paper.

Days Six to Ten

1. Provide a day or two for working on rough drafts and for consultation, as needed.
2. Go on to other work with no outside assignments except to complete the paper.

Day Eleven

1. Form a circle and ask students to share what they have discovered in a brief oral report.
2. If time remains, form small groups and have students read one another's papers and write comments.

By now you have discovered that this assignment calls for a "baby" research paper, but one so carefully structured that the objectives can be accomplished in a short period while teaching students the skills needed for longer, more involved research. In addition, the assignment combines reading, writing, and speaking in a lively mix that students find challenging but not overwhelming. It has proven successful with capable sophomores, average juniors, and honors-level seniors. The underlying philosophy of the assignment derives from a professor who sagely urged that either form or subject be prescribed, not both left open to student choice. In this instance, students may choose the subject, but must conform to a controlled process and prescribed design. They enjoy the freedom of choice, but they also find security "in harness."

Any teacher who follows these directions carefully will want to buy red licorice braids or frosted doughnuts for "Due Day." It is a day to celebrate.

Gladys V. Veidemanis, North High School, Oshkosh, Wisconsin

WRITING ASSIGNMENT OF THE MONTH

Writing to Learn Across the Curriculum

One of the most promising movements in education today is "writing across the curriculum" or, more recently and more accurately, "writing to learn." An outgrowth of the focus on writing as process rather than product, it restores to writing a function it naturally has in life and in education. Rather than a mere school exercise, or even an act of communication, writing becomes an instrument of thinking and learning in itself. Youngsters who are taught how to use writing to make sense of new material, to sort out and classify what they are learning *as they are learning it*, to speculate and react, to integrate the new language of the subject matter with their own language, are being taught—not *what* to think but *how* to go about thinking.

Using writing to learn is not a complicated matter for teachers or students. Neither is it an expensive innovation; it is as cheap as paper and pen. Teachers who wish to use writing as a means of learning in their disciplines need not be writing teachers or authorities on grammar. What is needed is a subtle turning around by the teacher to look in another direction—toward the process of thinking and learning rather than at the products.

Practice on Yourself

How can a teacher begin to use writing to learn? First, try it yourself with a speculative journal. Choose something to read; whether you know it well or not at all is immaterial. Find at least an hour to read, paper and pen in hand. As you read, stop frequently to write. Do not take notes or copy down the text. Rather, write what comes to mind: questions, reactions, problems, memories.

After a half hour, look back over what you have written. You will discover that you have noted more details, made more associations, observed more about the thought of the selection, and done more real thinking than you ordinarily do when you read. If the material was new, maybe even difficult, you will see a gradual figuring-out of how to go about reading this material and perhaps a good many questions. Gradually you will observe increasing commitment to and involvement with the material as you are drawn into it through the active process of writing.

Go on with your reading and writing, observing what your mind is doing with the material as it integrates it with your personal store of knowledge, feelings, and ideas. This is exactly what will happen with your students. Although you will not be concerned with syntax, spelling, or other details of finished compositions since this writing is for you alone, you will discover ideas that could be expanded and elaborated into more formal composition later. So will your students. When they write to learn, writing falls into its place as a tool for learning first and as a means of communication second. You could even go back through your speculative journal and underline the best ideas for future writing or discussion.

This approach can be refined further with a double-entry technique. Draw a line down the center of your page. As you read, jot down in the left column phrases, words, sentences that catch your attention. Just after you have written something on the left, move to the right column and write your responses, questions, comments. As you move through the text, you will notice that this technique causes you to focus on specifics, draws you in close to the text, produces analytical and critical thinking on your part, and draws your attention to matters of style and arrangement. This approach is ideal for math, physics, chemistry, poetry, for any text that calls for close reading and attention to specifics.

Classroom Application

When you introduce writing to learn to students, expect some resistance. "It slows me down," is the common complaint. Yes, it does. That is partly its purpose. Slow down and think about what you are reading. Develop some ideas of your own rather than merely digesting the ideas in the text to be returned to the teacher on the test. I have found that the most capable students are most likely to object, at first, simply because they already know how to make A's and see no need to do anything differently. But it is these students who benefit most from the approach and who, in the end, appreciate it most deeply. Less capable students often accept the approach more readily, for it means they will always have something to contribute to class—their questions and their reactions.

Now, how are you to use the writing students have done in speculative or double-entry notebooks? If too much emphasis is put upon grading or evaluating the writing itself, it will soon turn into a product rather than a process, and we will be back in the same dead end. Better that it be looked at first for quantity and commitment and then integrated into classroom activities through conversation in small groups. Ask at the beginning of class for a half-sheet of paper on which students record how many pages they have written on the assigned reading, how many pages they have read, and at least one good question or insight from their writing. I group students who are at the same point in their reading, and they discuss the questions and ideas they have recorded. I circulate among the groups, listening to the discussion and adding information or comments from time to time. Talking about what one has read and written is absolutely vital; it means that every student makes the language of the subject at hand a part of his or her personal language—something that seldom happens in teacher lectures or large-class "discussions" where a few students dominate. Later, when the small groups summarize their discussion for the whole class, other gains are made: restatement of ideas, selection and ordering, and the act of speaking to a larger group in a nonthreatening situation.

What other uses can be made of the writing? Last semester I asked advanced placement students to find in their speculative writing from the unit on medieval literature five questions that interested them, to rank those five, and to take the top question as a personal I-search (Macrorie's term—a rebuttal to *research*) to be presented as a paper and a class report telling where they looked, what they found, and what they thought of what they found. The assignment resulted in twenty-four lively, thoughtful searches into psychology, social history, theology, philosophy, and even historiography—fields that most of my students had not known existed—and into interviews with an assortment of people and reading in several large libraries. I have never before had students listen with such interest to the presentations of their peers, and the method was much closer to that of true research rather than the patchwork that often goes by the name. And, of course, students wrote speculative and double-entry logs as they did their research, the double-entry technique being especially suited since it records passage and response at the same time and in the same place. I ask younger or less capable students to talk in groups from their writing-to-learn notebooks and then to write informal summaries of their impressions. These are shared in writing groups, revised and edited, and put into a class anthology of commentary on a story or book or unit of study.

Finally, most students reread their logs before tests or in-class essays. Of course, they also enjoy looking back later to see how they responded to a book when first meeting it. One junior buys a notebook the same size as the book she is reading "so I can put it right beside the book on my shelf." She likes to think about her grandchildren reading her notebook some day and wonders if they will read the same books and what they will think of her 1980's ideas.

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Student Reactions

What happens when a student uses writing to learn about new subject matter? Let a few high school juniors respond to that question.

> At first I didn't know how to begin . . . but after I experimented with the process I found that I understood what I read much better and . . . could respond . . . much better and in more detail.
>
> I asked a lot of questions—the unanswerable type.
>
> I doubt that I would have understood [the book] without the benefit of writing.
>
> I don't think I could have done without a journal. There were just too many things that had to come out of myself and not necessarily out of the book.

Dixie Dellinger, Burns Senior High School,
Lawndale, North Carolina