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ABSTRACT

While the roots of students' fear of writing go deep, students fear most the surface of writing. They fear that a person's language indicates the state not only of the mind but of the soul--thus their writing can make them look stupid and morally depraved. This fear of error and lack of confidence prevent students from developing a command of the written language and results in superficial treatment of superficial ideas. Using an inductive approach to analyzing writing can help students conquer the fear of surface errors that prevents them from tackling complex ideas in their work. An inductive approach which involves class discussion that analyzes samples of strong and weak writing has several benefits: (1) disagreement about which revision the class prefers undermines the notion that writing is "right" or "wrong," good" or "bad"; (2) students get reinforcement of the idea that writing involves choices among multiple alternatives, not a binary choice between "right" and "wrong"; (3) describing differences among alternative revisions and the original dispells the notions that the mysteries of writing are inaccessible to students; (4) discussion and description of the paragraphs make it necessary to get concepts like subject, verb, dependent clause under control; (5) the frequency of surface errors in student writing decreases; and (6) students begin to do more substantive stylistic revision to their own writing with the result that the content of their essays also improves. (Handouts intended to aid students in analyzing their own own and others' writing are presented in four attached appendixes.) (SAM)

# The Dark and Bloody Mystery: Building Basic Writers' Confidence

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We all know the scene: a student writes a few words and stops to rummage around in her dictionary. Another student writes a line, scratches it out, and starts over. Writes half a line, scratches it out. When asked to revise, a student conducts an uncertain error patrol and resubmits essentially the same piece. When asked to work collaboratively, students sit in groups of pained silence, confronting in shared isolation the frightening and radically subjective mystery of writing.

And we all know the writing that often results: Dick and Jane prose, deadly to read and certainly much more deadly to have written.

And we all know at least some of the causes of these sad scenes and the deadly results: fear of surface error, accompanied by the conviction that writing is a dark and bloody mystery, the secrets of which the gods reveal to some but never to Basic Writers. The roots of fear of surface error run deep, tapping into the notion that one's language indicates the state not only of one's mind but also of one's soul, and long before Basic Writers meet us in class, many have become convinced that surface errors in their writing not only make them look stupid and morally depraved, but occur because they are stupid and wicked. Furthermore, no matter how we change course labels -- from "remedial" to "developmental" to "basic writing," our students, most of whom are certainly not

stupid, know that bonehead English is bonehead English. They are in bonehead English; therefore, they are boneheads.

While the roots of students' fear of writing go deep, students fear most the surface of writing, for the surface reveals their vileness and depravity. Teachers see the effects of students' fear most clearly on the surface, so that's where I concentrate, on the surface. I hope my approach is not superficial; certainly the effects of the fear aren't. The fear leads Basic Writers to take the safest route they can find and to avoid as much risk as possible, resulting in the Dick and Jane prose we know well. But, much more significantly, the fear and the Dick and Jane prose lead to superficial treatment of superficial ideas. Thus the fear of error and a profound lack of confidence impede development not only of command of the written language, but in the development of ideas worth having or insights worth writing about. And that's hardly superficial.

In suggesting a fairly simple way of addressing this paralyzing fear, I have little startling new to suggest. What I have to say is not new and may, I fear, seem to fly in the face of more than 20 years of composition studies, to disregard utterly matters theoretical,and to commit a foul heresy by ignoring the sacred processes of composing. But in spite of such nasty appearances, the approach I sketch here does, I believe, get students to address the processes of writing. Whether or not what I suggest here conforms to current orthodoxy, I have found the approach modestly useful in reducing Basic Writers' fears of putting words on paper.

My procedure starts with the simple -- perhaps even simple-minded -- premise that Basic Writers know much more about writing than they know they know, a point I repeat in class throughout a semester. As a first step in trying to prove

that members of the class know much more than they know or believe they know, we begin with a highly artificial exercise, illustrated on the first page of this little essay's appendix, which presents two ways of writing up the same information: the original -- in this case lifted from Paul Fussell's Wartime (270) -- and a mangled version recast as kernel-like sentences. After I ask which of the two versions they'd prefer to claim as their own, the students' predictable responses provide a center from which subsequent work radiates.

The fact that the class unanimously -- or almost unanimously, except for the lout in the back row who wants to yank the teacher's chain the first day -- prefers the original over the mangled version, even though both present the same information and both are all "correct," serves to show that they already know a great deal about very sophisticated differences between stronger and weaker writing, more effective and less effective writing. (I insist that we do not use "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong," "correct" and "incorrect" to talk about our writing. This may seem a trivial or even dishonest matter, but since fear of being "wrong" or writing "bad" English causes so many difficulties, and since my goal is to help students gain greater control over the choices writers must make, I believe banning "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," "correct" and "incorrect" makes sense.)

As the first written assignment stemming from this initial exercise, we try to figure out why we responded differently to the two versions, and what we responded to. I ask the students to write down at least three objective statements distinguishing the two passages from one another and/or distinguishing the authors of the two passages from one another. Of course, responses are again predictable. Students denounce the mangled version as boring and its author as dumb. As we look at their responses, I emphasize two points. First, their responses are very

subjective. Second, their responses were quite predictable but extraordinarily odd when we consider the horrid nature of the information both versions deliver. How, I ask, can we call "boring" a passage that reports a man getting blown into a bloody paste roped with guts?

As we go on puzzling over the fact that 20 or 25 different people had very similar subjective responses but nobody said much of anything objective about the writing itself, I finally insist that we can explain the results of the exercise only in terms of very objective features of the writing's how, since the what, the information, is at least in gross terms the same. Then our job becomes figuring out what objective features distinguish the original from the mangled version.

The handout illustrated on the second page of this essay's appendix shows some of the features we find. When I distribute this sheet to the class, I like to report that luminaries of the composition world agree that the features we identified are important characteristics of stronger writing. One may object that this is a cheap appeal, and I suppose it is, but I have found that students get a kick out of having done by themselves what poohbahs of writing do, and this I think is no small matter in addressing their lack of confidence and in beginning to dispell the notion that the dark and bloody mysteries of writing will never be revealed to them. Then, to get the students' hands dirty, at this stage of the assignment I have them do a sentence-combining exercise such as illustrated on the bottom of the second page of this essay's appendix.

(Two points of aside here. First, I believe -- obviously -- that sentence-combining, though out of fashion, is extremely valuable in addressing the most obvious effect of fear of writing, the Dick and Jane syndrome. Second, exercises need to be amusing or interesting, not to entertain but to reinforce the point

that style is as important as content -- or even more important than content -- in shaping a reader's response to our writing. Again and again throughout the term I remind students that style and content ultimately are inseparable.)

Having identified some of the objective differences between stronger and weaker writing in the samples, we write our own paragraph and then use a checklist such as illustrated on the third page of the appendix to evaluate drafts to see to what extent our writing shares the characteristics we liked or disliked in the samples we've played around with. When individuals have run a check on their own work -- and it's hard, of course, for many students to identify such strange creatures as subjects and verbs -- we form into groups and work revising passages the checklist showed to be weak. As I bumble around the room from group to group, I refuse to give authoritative "answers" when I am asked which revision is "right." Instead, I repeat my admonition that we won't be using "right" and "wrong," and I leave the students to wrestle with the writing themselves. They hate it and often think, I suspect, that I'm trying in some devious way to set them up for humiliation.

Since students at first have a rough time looking at writing as I ask them to, I supplement the first checklist with exercises, such as illustrated on the fourth page of the appendix, drawn from students' writing. When I sense we've reached a point of diminishing returns working on revising in small groups -- or when open rebellion threatens -- I conscript a group to present their work for the consideration of the whole class. (And I do conscript, and the more resistant the draftees, the better, I believe, to drive home the point that we all can gain more control over the mysteries, and that nobody is going to avoid confronting the work we have to do.) The conscripts present -- with a handout if time permits

or on the board if time didn't permit advanced preparation -- a passage they thought needed a fair amount of work and at least two revisions they think improved the original. We repeat a variant of the first step in the whole procedure: given the original and the two revisions, we decide which we like best, and why. Of course, this is a sloppy process, for we generally lack the vocabulary to describe what we saw in the original or what we did in revising, and we seldom agree completely on which revision we prefer. The sloppiness of the procedure and the frequent disagreement I find valuable for several reasons.

First, the disagreement about which revision we prefer undermines the notion that writing is "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad." In spite of objections to my refusal to declare one version the victor, I think my refusal important in realizing a second value of our sloppiness and disagreement, reinforcement of the idea that writing involves choices among multiple alternatives, not a binary choice between "right" and "wrong," and that as writers they must face their own choices on their own.

Third, in spite of our sloppiness, we usually manage at least to describe some of the objective differences among the alternative revisions and the original, and this I find useful in doing a bit more to dispell the notion that the mysteries are inaccessible to the students' understanding and beyond their conscious control. At some point in our wrangling I seize the podium and stress the point that while a great deal of what we do when we write is intuitive, the fact that we can describe, no matter how clumsily, what we did demonstrates that we can gain more conscious control over what we do when we write.

A fourth value arising from our sloppiness is the students' recognition that some of the difficulties we have in describing the differences that we saw or at least felt come from our lack of vocabulary to talk about what we can see, so pretty

quickly we have to learn to identify subjects and verbs and to distinguish dependent from independent clauses. Once we get a few such concepts and terms under control, when the time comes, as it must, to address matters of correctness, students express a little less loathing of proofreading, and at least a few people in every class actually seem to see some value in knowing the words they need to talk with less difficulty about choices in writing. That is no small gain.

And so we stumble along. For each writing assignment we do out of class, I provide another checklist reflecting as much as possible the objective features the class has identified as significant in strengthening or weakening a piece of writing we monkeyed with in class. Page 5 of the appendix illustrates one such checklist and shows that the approach I sketch here is expandable and flexible. It's no panacea, and using it effectively -- or using it at all -- requires a lot of preparation and fast footwork from the teacher, and given our loads that's no small concern. Still, I think the effort pays off in helping students change their prose is directions they themselves have agreed improve a piece of writing, not just in directions a teacher has decreed ex cathedra improve writing. Generally, the weaker students make the most and the most rapid progress -- hardly surprising, I suppose, since they have the greatest room for improvement, but gratifying to the students and to my teacherly ego.

As I look back over a semester, I expect to see half a dozen related benefits from the inductive approach to writing as a way of building students' confidence in their ability to control language rather than be controlled by it.

First, while my inductive approach does not make a big fuss about grammatical and mechanical errors, the frequency of such errors falls. I think some of the reduction in errors results simply from getting students to read what they have

in fact written rather than reading on the screen of their minds what they intended to write. Not really astonishing that they are more likely to see errors if they can bear to look at what they wrote rather than give in to their desperate eagerness to get the dangerous paper out of their hands and into the red-pen-wielding hands of a teacher, an initiate into the mysteries, who can yet again point out the students' wickedness and depravity.

Second, substantive stylistic revisions become more common. This happens, I think, because the inductive approach combined with checklists reduces global fear of writing by offering something, or some things, very objective and easy to look for in a draft, and since looking is prerequisite for seeing, reVISION is impossible without seeing what has in fact been written. The inductive approach helps students see writing as making choices, choices they can at least partially control, and so encourages them to try making affirmative risky choices rather than in fear of error making only negative, protective non-choices.

Third, content improves, probably for similar reasons. Since style and content are inseparable, looking at style leads to seeing more about content. Students find that if they can't make the kinds of stylistic revisions the inductive approach stresses, if they can't combine their Dick and Jane sentences, it may well be that their ideas are disjointed. Similarly, when a draft paragraph of 100 words gets boiled down to 50 words, they are likely to see the need for more substance, more information. And playing around with choices of style, tinkering with different ways of presenting their draft information, occasionally helps them see new relations among their original ideas and may lead to new ideas.

These first three benefits are fairly easy to observe in students' writing, and I am always delighted to see them occur. However, I also think I often see three other less tangible benefits of the inductive approach, benefits that go

beyond students' writing. Before I began relying heavily on the kind of procedure I've sketched here, I never was able to get Basic Writing classes to do much of anything useful in small groups. Now I find that students who know what they are looking for and at can, at least sometimes, work with each other in useful and even pleasant ways on the difficulties of writing, and doing in public what we dread doing at all helps allay the fear. Since fear of errors, fear of appearing wicked and stupid,so often haunts Basic Writing students, virtually anything that reduces their fear of writing is worth doing.

A second intangible benefit of the inductive approach to writing as a matter of making objective choices helps at least some students see writing as opportunity, not just threat. If students come to see writing as choosing, they may see that, as is the case with any choosing, they are responsible for the choices they make. This effect is no small matter, for Basic Writing students often adopt the protective role of helpless victim, and anything that denies them the victim defense is valuable to their education as human beings.

Finally, when students see that writing is not entirely mysterious, that they can control the choices they make as writers and that they are responsible for the choices they make, some students begin to work harder. (Of course, only a fool or Sisyphus would work hard at an impossible job.) An increased willingness to work is another important gain, another important step in denying Basic Writing students their refuge in victimhood and the helpless victim's passivity.

The approach I have sketched is no panacea, but it does shine a little light on the darkness of the mystery, and it does mop up some of the blood from the floor of a Basic Writing classroom.

Appendix A

Which of these paragraphs would you prefer to claim as your own work?

A. 1. Captain Peter Royle, an artillery forward observer, moved up a hill in a night attack in North Africa. 2. "I followed about 20 paces behind the squad leader," he says, "when a blinding flash went off a few yards in front of me. 3. I had no idea what had happened and fell flat on my face. 4. I found out soon enough: a number of infantrymen carried mines strapped to the small of their backs, and either a rifle or a machine-gun bullet struck one, exploding it and blowing the man into three pieces -- two legs, and head, and chest. 5. His guts were strewn on the hillside, and I crawled into them in the darkness.

B. 1. Captain Peter Royle was an artillery forward observer. 2. Capt. Royle moved up a hill. 3. He was in an attack. 4. The attack was at night. 5. The attack was in North Africa. 6. "I followed somebody else. 7. I followed the squad leader. 8. I followed about 20 paces behind." 9. That is what Capt. Royle says. 10. He also says something else. 11. "A flash went off. 12. It was in front of me. 13. The flash was blinding. 14. The flash was a few yards away. 15. Something had happened. 16. I had no idea what it was. 17. I fell down. 18. I fell flat on my face. 19. I found out what had happened. 20. I found out soon. 21. Some infantrymen carried mines. 22. They strapped the mines to the small of their backs. 23. A rifle bullet may have hit one. 24. A machine-gun bullet may have hit one. 25. The mine exploded. 26. It blew the man into pieces. 27. There were three pieces. 28. One piece was his legs. 29. One piece was his head. 30. One piece was his chest. 31. His guts were blown out. 32. His guts were all over the hillside. 33. It was dark. 34. I crawled into the guts."

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ASSIGNMENT: For our next meeting, identify or describe in as much detail as you can the objective differences between Paragraph A and Paragraph B.

Appendix B

By contrasting the two paragraphs about Captain Royle, we saw at least some of the following objective differences between the two.

1. Sentence length, including
   a. Average sentence length
   b. Range of sentence length
   c. Variety in sentence length

2. Sentence patterns, including
   a. Variety in sentence type
   b. Subordination rather than just coordination
      i. Independent clauses reduced to dependent clauses
      ii. Dependent clauses reduced to phrases
      iii. Phrases reduced to single words

3. Repetition, including
   a. Of subjects
   b. Of verbs
   c. Of "stuff" at the end of one sentence and the start of the next

4. Verb choice, especially excessive reliance on TO BE (am, is, are, was, were. been, being)

THIS BRIEF LIST BY NO MEANS COVERS ALL THE OBJECTIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRONGER AND WEAKER WRITING THAT WE WILL BE PLAYING AROUND WITH THIS TERM, BUT IT COVERS A LOT AND GIVES US A GOOD PLACE TO START SYSTEMATICALLY APPROACHING OUR WORK FOR THE TERM.

ASSIGNMENT: For our next meeting, revise the following weak writing. (Obviously, I did to this passage what I did to Paragraph B about Captain Royle. At our next meeting we'll compare our revisions, and then we'll look at the original version to see what we can see.)

1. Something happened once. 2. It happened on an airfield. 3. The airfield was misty. 4. The airfield was in Scotland. 5. An airman was changing a part. 6. The part was a magneto. 7. The magneto was for an airplane engine. 8. The airplane was a Wellington bomber. 9. Something happened. 10. It happened suddenly. 11. His tool slipped. 12. His tool was a wrench. 13. He did something. 14. He flung his wrench down. 15. He flung it on the grass. 16. He did something else. 17. He snarled. 18. "F---! The f---ing f---er is f---ed!"

Appendix C

This checklist should help you start developing a systematic way of reading your own writing and thus help you gain greater control over the choices writers have to make. REMEMBER, HOWEVER, WHAT I SAID IN CLASS: DON'T WORRY ABOUT THESE FEATURES WHEN YOU ARE WRITING PRELIMINARY DRAFTS.

1. My paragraph is _____ words long and consists of _____ sentences.

2. The average sentence length (number of words in paragraph divided by the number of sentences in the paragraph) is _____ words.

3. The range of sentence length (the difference between the number of words in the longest sentence and the number of words in the shortest sentence) is _____ words.

4. On your paper, underline subjects and circle verbs, remembering that AM, IS, ARE, WAS, and WERE are always verbs, and I, SHE, HE, WE, and THEY are always subjects. In the space below on this page, list subjects and verbs from each sentence in your paragraph.

| Sent. # | Subject(s) | Verb(s) |
|---|---|---|

5. Of the verbs, _____ are forms of TO BE.

ASSIGNMENT: Revise your original paragraph, making any changes or additions you think will strengthen your writing, particularly in the areas we have so far identified as characteristic of stronger writing.

Appendix D

This handout supplements Checklist 1 and should help you see some of the objective features we decided distinguish weaker from stronger writing.

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1. A place I hate the most is Brownsville.
2. It is a boring and over-populated city.
3. Brownsville is like a hole where you are trapped and can't get out.
4. Brownsville is a boring city because there is nothing to do.
5. People already have their routines of what they do.
6. They go from here to there and from there to here.
7. It is like every day is the same for everyone.
8. Brownsville's population is over 100,000 which is a high population for a small city.
9. The more population there is, the more people are unemployed.
10. Unemployment is a problem here in Brownsville.
11. If only there were more job opportunities, Brownsville would be a better place to live.
12. Last but not least, I mentioned that Brownsville is like a hole.
13. It really is because when you are trapped in a hole, you just can't get out.
14. This is Brownsville alright.

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IN YOUR GROUPS, DECIDE WHAT OBJECTIVE FEATURES OF THIS PARAGRAPH SHOW IT NEEDS STYLISTIC REVISION. (IF YOU SEE PROBLEMS WITH THE CONTENT, PLEASE TRY TO DESCRIBE THE PROBLEMS AS OBJECTIVELY AS YOU CAN.)

AFTER YOU HAVE FOUND PARTICULAR INDIVIDUAL FEATURES THAT YOUR GROUP AGREES WEAKEN THE PARAGRAPH, INDIVIDUALLY REVISE TO ELIMINATE THE WEAKNESSES. WHEN EACH OF YOU HAS COMPLETED YOUR INDIVIDUAL REVISION, RECONVENE AS A GROUP AND EVALUATE EACH INDIVIDUAL REVISION IN OUR OBJECTIVE TERMS. AT OUR NEXT CLASS MEETING, GROUPS WILL PRESENT THEIR STRONGEST REVISIONS AND WE WILL SEE WHAT WE CAN SEE.

Assignment: As preparation for our next meeting, evaluate and revise your first revision of this speciment paragraph, and bring your first and second revisions to class.

Works Cited

Fussell, Paul. Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in tne Second World War. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.