

What Book or Resource on the Teaching of Writing Would You Recommend to Other English Teachers?

Sara Dalmas Jonsberg
Montclair State University, New Jersey
jonsbergs@mail.montclair.edu

More than twenty-five years old now, Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* (Oxford UP, 1973) is still the best. My copy is limp with rereadings, for I use it every semester in helping future teachers think about how they will "teach" writing. I use it myself in the continuing effort "to improve [my] ability to make [my] own judgment about which parts of [my] own writing to keep and which parts to throw away" (viii). This book never tells or advises. Rather, its goal is to put you, the writer, in charge of your own work, help you find the courage to trust your own wise and creative mind.

The text's formula for achieving "better writing" is simple enough: Write lots and lots and lots; then throw lots and lots away. Be prepared for confusion and struggle. Be prepared for the disorienting sense of not knowing where you are going. But also be prepared to come to a sense of confidence and strength. And be prepared for moments of startling illumination! Writing in this generously generative way, as Elbow recommends, trusting yourself just to begin, is an invitation to discovery. This delightful byproduct of writing in school can serve our students all their days, no matter what their various lifeworks may be. We would do well to make more of it, and Elbow's text offers thoughts on how.

The book is short and very readable. In helping us be confident writers ourselves, it helps us help our students *want* to improve their writing. And that, surely, is half the battle.

Meaghan Hanrahan Dobson
W. T. Woodson High School
Fairfax, Virginia
mdobson@fc.fcps.k12.va.us

Donald Murray's *Write to Learn* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1990) helped me survive my first job teaching writing as a graduate assistant fresh out of college. Although I no longer use it as a textbook in the high school classes I teach, *Write to Learn* continues to be the text that I return to most often for a fresh idea or some much needed inspiration.

Most recently, I relied on Murray's guide for writers as a resource in teaching an elective in composition for students in grades ten through twelve. Faced with an unexpectedly mixed group, I struggled to organize a course that would allow all students to stretch themselves, to think like writers, and to interact productively with other students no matter what their writing interests and achievements. Murray's myriad approaches to achieving a number of important writing goals helped me tailor the course to meet my students' needs. Here, Murray says, are twelve good ways to focus your ideas, five good ways to organize your information, ten good ways to think about revising and editing—no lock-step process for resistant students or endless repetition of the same old strategy for experienced writers. Most importantly, perhaps, Murray's book is permeated with his belief that teachers of writing must write with their students. I love to try out these many strategy suggestions with my students; doing so not only keeps me writing for at least a small part of the day, but also adds energy and a sense of common purpose to the class.

I firmly believe, with Murray, that the writers in a classroom—teacher and students—are a great resource for each other. Yet there are still times when I need to hear other voices on the subject of writing. *Write to Learn* has much to offer in this respect, too: students' accounts of their own experiences writing and revising their essays, instructors' comments on the students' pieces, and Murray's own essays and reflections on his composing process. All serve as reminders that my approach to writing is never the only one and provide a fresh perspective on various writing situations. Furthermore, Murray's no-nonsense, real-life writing advice helps me find the right voice in which to encourage a reluctant writer to keep plugging away or to help a perfectionist just get something, anything, down on paper. Plus, the epigraphs Murray has selected for each chapter are an additional treat—excellent starting points for discussions or brainstorming sessions.

In the day-in, day-out challenge of teaching writing, it's a hands-on text like Murray's that I wouldn't want to be without.

Katherine McCarthy
Henderson High School
West Chester, Pennsylvania
kmcCarthy@wcasd.k12.pa.us

The stated purpose of John Trimble's *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* (Prentice Hall, 1975) is to be a useful writing guide. "Books on writing tend to be windy, boring and impractical. I intend this one to be different—short, fun and genuinely useful," he says. He has also managed to write a genuinely helpful guide for writing instructors.

Trimble's premise is that writing well is a by-product of thinking well. While it's easy to *aspire* to this goal, Trimble gives techniques and strategies for how to accomplish it. He shows equal respect for how the novice and the veteran manage the composition process. He tells us that "good writing is good manners" (19), insisting that good writers don't waste their readers' time with pompous, unsupported, generalized ramblings.

Trimble's phrases and ideas to support his points are eminently quotable. For example, he establishes an analogy between the writer and reader's relationship and that of the prosecuting attorney and the jury. Both writer and attorney need to *convince* their audience of the veracity of their argu-

ment. My students test the strength of an argument by asking if it could be taken to a jury.

In addition to his memorable expressions, Trimble gives examples and brief quotes from professional writers. Quotations from movie critic, Pauline Kael, show how a veteran writer will make a point. Student writing on academic topics is also included. Trimble's opening for a paper written on *Hamlet* has driven many a student to ask, What's this all about? Their curiosity about a play they haven't seen has been sparked by the strength of this opening paragraph. Students are thus *shown* the power of an effective opening.

The roles of both writer and instructor are challenging ones. While Trimble inspires the writer, he also guides the instructor. It is for this reason that I recommend this book to English teachers.

Marilyn J. Campbell
Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Magnet High School for
the Health Sciences and Engineering
Nashville, Tennessee
mjcamp13@aol.com

It is one thing to try to teach our students the elements of a short story through lecture and example; it is another to immerse them in activities that allow them to create these elements. *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter (HarperCollins, 1990) is a handbook of activities that encourages students to think like writers. Over eighty exercises help the student writer to refine and develop the art of fiction writing. In short, concise exercises, the authors separate the various components of fiction such as characterization, point of view, dialogue, and plot. Bernays and Painter compartmentalize the writing of fiction and concentrate on dealing with issues individually—a description of a setting, an important dialogue, the attributes of a character. These focused exercises invite students to use their imaginations in the creation of their own stories.

An example of one exercise my students particularly enjoy is entitled "First Sentences." First the authors cite intriguing, humorous, or perplexing opening lines from stories and novels; the students then write five opening lines of their own for five different stories. The assignment asks students to write opening lines that immediately pull the reader into the story. Because students are not obligated to finish the stories, "this exercise lowers the emotional

stakes and helps to shake up and surprise the imagination” (6). Students concentrate solely on the task of preparing an opening line that will compel the reader to continue reading their story.

Bernays and Painter include examples from student writers, as well as examples from famous authors, thus lowering the risk factor for my students. Sharing and peer editing times become lively centers of discussion. After completing many of the exercises from this book as a scaffolding to the final assignment of drafting and then revising a short story, my students were delighted with their final products. Their stories were carefully crafted and included a wealth of details. They demonstrated their understanding of the elements of a short story through their own writing, and this demonstration and use of knowledge gave them proof that they, too, could be successful writers of fiction.

Cheryl L. N. Lovegreen

Polaris K-12 School

Anchorage, Alaska

lovegreen_cheryl@msmail.asd.k12.ak.us

There are many excellent resources on the teaching of writing. Linda Reif’s *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents* (Heinemann, 1992) is my writing bible. Rief is a seasoned teacher who combines theory and practice in a thoughtful, moving, and sometimes funny book. She shows us how her student-centered reading and writing workshops

lead students to write, and write well. Throughout the book, Rief explains how she organizes her classroom and creates a safe, comfortable learning environment. One thing that makes this book so powerful is the inclusion of student writing. Once I saw the development of Andy, Gillian, Jay, and other students as writers, I was eager to try these ideas with my own students.

Linda Rief builds on the ideas of Nancie Atwell (who wrote the foreword) and other leading writing experts. She ties their ideas together into a cohesive classroom structure that allows for student choice but also ensures that students get the guidance they need. Rief is a very organized, experienced teacher who shows us how it can be done. She doesn’t shy away from the nitty-gritty, either: With chapter titles like “Preparing for the Lesson: Organizing the Room, Materials, Expectations” and “Yes! Sometimes We All Read the Same Book,” she gives lots of details.

Rief provides many ideas for teachers, from unit themes to specific reading and writing materials. The appendices alone are priceless, including student portfolios, a book list, and a sample letter to parents, among other helpful things.

This is the perfect book for teachers refining their writing workshops, as well as for new teachers. Rief will not leave you thinking, “Cool, but how do I do this?” More likely you will finish this book thinking, “Cool, I’ll try this part Monday.”

answers for AFTERWORDS (page 23)

1. JINGLE ALL THE WAY
 2. TO BE OR NOT TO BE
 3. (TOOT, TOOT) TOOTSIE
 4. SOME LIKE IT HOT
 5. THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE
 6. IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER
 7. (I’M A) YANKEE DOODLE DANDY
 8. (I’M) SINGIN’ IN THE RAIN
 9. (MY) COUNTRY
 10. (LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN) MY FAIR LADY
 11. OKLAHOMA
 12. (HE THAT TROUBLETH HIS OWN HOUSE SHALL) INHERIT THE WIND
 13. STAND BY ME
 14. THE BIRDS
 15. MONA LISA
 16. ONLY YOU
 17. FOOTLOOSE
 18. (GLORY) GLORY
 19. LIAR LIAR
 20. BYE BYE BIRDIE
 21. (A REAL LIVE NEPHEW TO MY UNCLE SAM) BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY
 22. ALL THE KING’S MEN
 23. LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING
 24. (LITTLE BOY BLUE) COME BLOW YOUR HORN
 25. (THE BEST LAID PLANS) OF MICE AND MEN
 26. (GENESIS) EXODUS
 27. (I’M DREAMING OF A) WHITE CHRISTMAS
 28. (THERE’LL BE) PENNIES FROM HEAVEN
 29. (HELLO, DOLLY, WELL) HELLO DOLLY
 30. (BLUEBIRD, BLUEBIRD) IN AND OUT
 31. MICHAEL
 32. SHINE
 33. FOOLS RUSH IN
 34. WHERE THE BOYS ARE
 35. ONE FINE DAY
 36. FOR RICHER, FOR POORER
 37. MOTHER
 38. BORN FREE
 39. (WE) THREE KINGS
 40. KISS THE GIRLS
-