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Teaching Composition: A Position Statement

From the Commission on Composition, National Council of Teachers of English

The NCTE Commission on Composition has prepared this position paper to state essential principles in the teaching of writing. We hope that this statement will guide teachers, parents, and administrators in understanding the power of writing and in teaching it effectively.

The Act of Writing

Writing is a powerful instrument of thought. In the act of composing, writers learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insights to others. Writing confers the power to grow personally and to effect change in the world.

The act of writing is accomplished through a process in which the writer imagines the audience, sets goals, develops ideas, produces notes, drafts, and a revised text, and edits to meet the audience's expectations. As the process unfolds, the writer may turn to any one of these activities at any time. We can teach students to write more effectively by encouraging them to make full use of the many activities that comprise the act of writing, not by focusing only on the final written product and its strengths and weaknesses.

The Purposes for Writing

In composing, the writer uses language to help an audience understand something the writer knows about the world. The specific purposes for writing vary widely, from discovering the writer's own feelings, to persuading others to a course of action, recreating experience imaginatively, reporting the results of observation, and more.

Writing assignments should reflect this range of purposes. Student writers should have the opportunity to define and pursue writing aims that are important to them. Student writers should also have the opportunity to use writing as an instrument of thought and learning across the curriculum and in the world beyond school.

The Scenes for Writing

In the classroom where writing is especially valued, students should be guided through the writing process; encouraged to write for themselves and for other students, as well as for the teacher; and urged to make use of writing as a mode of learning, as well as a means of reporting on what has been learned. The classroom where writing is especially valued should be a place where students will develop the full range of their composing powers. This classroom can also be the scene for learning in many academic areas, not only English.

Because frequent writing assignments and frequent individual attention from the teacher are essential to the writing classroom, writing classes should not be larger than twenty students.

Teachers in all academic areas who have not been trained to teach writing may need help in transforming their classrooms into scenes for writing. The writing teacher should provide leadership in explaining the importance of this transformation and in supplying resources to help bring it about.

The Teachers of Writing

Writing teachers should themselves be writers. Through experiencing the struggles and joys of writing, teachers learn that their students will need guidance and support throughout the writing process, not merely comments on the written product. Furthermore, writing teachers who write know that effective comments do not focus on pointing out errors, but go on to the more productive task of encouraging revision, which will help student writers to develop their ideas and to achieve greater clarity and honesty.

"Teaching Composition: A Position Statement." The Commission on Composition, National Council of Teachers of English. (as appearing on <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/107690.htm>)

Assigned Reading: Workshop 1

Writing teachers should be familiar with the current state of our knowledge about composition. They should know about the nature of the composing process; the relationship between reading and writing; the functions of writing in the world of work; the value of the classical rhetorical tradition; and more. Writing teachers should use this knowledge in their teaching, contribute to it in their scholarly activities, and participate in the professional organizations that are important sources of this knowledge.

The knowledgeable writing teacher can more persuasively lead colleagues in other academic areas to increased attention to writing in their classes. The knowledgeable teacher can also work more effectively with parents and administrators to promote good writing instruction.

The Means of Writing Instruction

Students learn to write by writing. Guidance in the writing process and discussion of the students' own work should be the central means of writing instruction. Students should be encouraged to comment on each other's writing, as well as receiving frequent, prompt, individualized attention from the teacher. Reading what others have written, speaking about one's responses to their writing, and listening to the responses of others are important activities in the writing classroom. Textbooks and other instructional resources should be of secondary importance.

The evaluation of students' progress in writing should begin with the students' own written work. Writing ability cannot be adequately assessed by tests and other formal evaluation alone. Students should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their writing ability in work aimed at various purposes. Students should also be encouraged to develop the critical ability to evaluate their own work, so they can become effective, independent writers in the world beyond school.

Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams

[From the hard-copy book *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis; Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1993.]

Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Researchers report that, regardless of the subject matter, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. Students who work in collaborative groups also appear more satisfied with their classes. (Sources: Beckman, 1990; Chickering and Gamson, 1991; Collier, 1980; Cooper and Associates, 1990; Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, and Associates, 1992; Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Kohn, 1986; McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith, 1986; Slavin, 1980, 1983; Whitman, 1988)

Various names have been given to this form of teaching, and there are some distinctions among these: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, collective learning, learning communities, peer teaching, peer learning, reciprocal learning, team learning, study circles, study groups, and work groups. But all in all, there are three general types of group work: informal learning groups, formal learning groups, and study teams (adapted from Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991).

Informal learning groups are ad hoc temporary clusterings of students within a single class session. Informal learning groups can be initiated, for example, by asking students to turn to a neighbor and spend two minutes discussing a question you have posed. You can also form groups of three to five to solve a problem or pose a question. You can organize informal groups at any time in a class of any size to check on students' understanding of the material, to give students an opportunity to apply what they are learning, or to provide a change of pace.

Formal learning groups are teams established to complete a specific task, such as perform a lab experiment, write a report, carry out a project, or prepare a position paper. These groups may complete their work in a single class session or over several weeks. Typically, students work together until the task is finished, and their project is graded.

Study teams are long-term groups (usually existing over the course of a semester) with stable membership whose primary responsibility is to provide members with support, encouragement, and assistance in completing course requirements and assignments. Study teams also inform their members about lectures and assignments when someone has missed a session. The larger the class and the more complex the subject matter, the more valuable study teams can be.

The suggestions below are designed to help you set up formal learning groups and study teams. If you have never done group work in your classes, you might want to experiment first with informal learning groups. Two other tools, "Leading a Discussion" and "Supplements and Alternatives to Lecturing: Encouraging Student Participation," describe a variety of easy ways to incorporate informal learning groups into your courses. "Helping Students Write Better in All Courses" discusses informal collaborative writing activities.

General Strategies

Plan for each stage of group work. When you are writing your syllabus for the course, decide which topics, themes, or projects might lend themselves to formal group work. Think about how you will organize students into groups, help groups negotiate among themselves, provide feedback to the groups, and evaluate the products of group work.

Barbara Gross Davis. "Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams." *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. (as appearing on <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>)

Carefully explain to your class how the groups will operate and how students will be graded. As you would when making any assignment, explain the objectives of the group task and define any relevant concepts. In addition to a well-defined task, every group needs a way of getting started, a way of knowing when its task is done, and some guidance about the participation of members. Also explain how students will be graded. Keep in mind that group work is more successful when students are graded against a set standard than when they are graded against each other (on a curve). See “Grading Practices.” (Source: Smith, 1986)

Give students the skills they need to succeed in groups. Many students have never worked in collaborative learning groups and may need practice in such skills as active and tolerant listening, helping one another in mastering content, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and managing disagreements. Discuss these skills with your students and model and reinforce them during class. Some faculty use various exercises that help students gain skills in working in groups (Fiechtner and Davis, 1992). See “Leading a Discussion” for examples of guidelines for participating in small groups. (Sources: Cooper, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991)

Consider written contracts. Some faculty give students written contracts that list members’ obligations to their group and deadlines for tasks (Connery, 1988).

Designing Group Work

Create group tasks that require interdependence. The students in a group must perceive that they “sink or swim” together, that each member is responsible to and dependent on all the others, and that one cannot succeed unless all in the group succeed. Knowing that peers are relying on you is a powerful motivator for group work (Kohn, 1986). Strategies for promoting interdependence include specifying common rewards for the group, encouraging students to divide up the labor, and formulating tasks that compel students to reach a consensus. (Source: Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991)

Make the group work relevant. Students must perceive the group tasks as integral to the course objectives, not just busywork. Some faculty believe that groups succeed best with tasks involving judgment. As reported by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991), for example, in an engineering class, a faculty member gives groups a problem to solve: Determine whether the city should purchase twenty-five or fifty buses. Each group prepares a report, and a representative

from each group is randomly selected to present the group’s solution. The approaches used by the various groups are compared and discussed by the entire class. Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, and Associates (1992, pp. 75-79) have compiled a detailed bibliography of discipline-specific efforts in collaborative learning that can be useful for developing tasks and activities.

Create assignments that fit the students’ skills and abilities. Early in the term, assign relatively easy tasks. As students become more knowledgeable, increase the difficulty level. For example, a faculty member teaching research methods begins by having students simply recognize various research designs and sampling procedures. Later, team members generate their own research designs. At the end of the term, each team prepares a proposal for a research project and submits it to another team for evaluation. (Source: Cooper and Associates, 1990)

Assign group tasks that allow for a fair division of labor. Try to structure the tasks so that each group member can make an equal contribution. For example, one faculty member asks groups to write a report on alternative energy sources. Each member of the group is responsible for research on one source, and then all the members work together to incorporate the individual contributions into the final report. Another faculty member asks groups to prepare a “medieval newspaper.” Students research aspects of life in the Middle Ages, and each student contributes one major article for the newspaper, which includes news stories, feature stories, and editorials. Students conduct their research independently and use group meetings to share information, edit articles, proofread, and design the pages. (Sources: Smith, 1986; Tiberius, 1990)

Set up “competitions” among groups. A faculty member in engineering turns laboratory exercises into competitions. Students, working in groups, design and build a small-scale model of a structure such as a bridge or column. They predict how their model will behave when loaded, and then each model is loaded to failure. Prizes are awarded to the groups in various categories: best predictions of behavior, most efficient structure, best aesthetics. (Source: Sansalone, 1989)

Assigned Reading: Workshop 2

Consider offering group test taking. On a group test, either an in-class or take-home exam, each student receives the score of the group. Faculty who have used group exams report that groups consistently achieve higher scores than individuals and that students enjoy collaborative test taking (Hendrickson, 1990; Toppins, 1989). Faculty who use this technique recommend the following steps for in-class exams:

- Assign group work at the beginning of the term so that students develop skills for working in groups.
- Use multiple-choice tests that include higher-level questions. To allow time for discussion, present about twenty-five items for a fifty-minute in-class exam.
- Divide students into groups of five.
- Have students take the test individually and turn in their responses before they meet with their group. Then ask the groups to arrange themselves in the room and arrive at a group consensus answer for each question. Score the individual and group responses and prepare a chart showing the average individual score of each group's members, the highest individual score in each group, and the group's consensus score. Ninety-five percent of the time, the group consensus scores will be higher than the average individual scores (Toppins, 1989).

For more information on group exams, see "Quizzes, Tests, and Exams."

Organizing Learning Groups

Decide how the groups will be formed. Some faculty prefer randomly assigning students to groups to maximize their heterogeneity: a mix of males and females, verbal and quiet students, the cynical and the optimistic (Fiechtner and Davis, 1992; Smith, 1986). Some faculty let students choose with whom they want to work, although this runs the risk that groups will socialize too much and that students will self-segregate (Cooper, 1990). Self-selected groups seem to work best in small classes, for classes of majors who already know one another, or in small residential colleges (Walvoord, 1986). Still other instructors prefer to form the groups themselves, taking into account students' prior achievement, levels of preparation, work habits, ethnicity, and gender (Connery, 1988). They argue for making sure that members of each group are exclusively graded students or exclusively pass/ not pass students and that well-prepared students be placed in groups with other well-prepared students.

Other faculty, however, try to sprinkle the more able students evenly among the groups (Walvoord, 1986). A middle ground, proposed by Walvoord (1986), is to ask students to express a preference, if they wish, then make the assignments yourself. You could, for example, ask students to write down the names of three students with whom they would most like to work.

Be conscious of group size. In general, groups of four or five members work best. Larger groups decrease each member's opportunity to participate actively. The less skillful the group members, the smaller the groups should be. The shorter amount of time available, the smaller the groups should be. (Sources: Cooper, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Smith, 1986)

Keep groups together. When a group is not working well, avoid breaking it up, even if the group requests it. The addition of the floundering group's members to ongoing groups may throw off their group process, and the bailed-out troubled group does not learn to cope with its unproductive interactions. (Source: Walvoord, 1986)

Help groups plan how to proceed. Ask each group to devise a plan of action: who will be doing what and when. Review the groups' written plans or meet with each group to discuss its plan.

Regularly check in with the groups. If the task spans several weeks, you will want to establish checkpoints with the groups. Ask groups to turn in outlines or drafts or to meet with you.

Provide mechanisms for groups to deal with uncooperative members. Walvoord (1986) recommends telling the class that after the group task is completed, each student will submit to the instructor an anonymous assessment of the participation of the other group members: who did extra work and who shirked work. If several people indicate that an individual did less than a fair share, that person could receive a lower grade than the rest of the group. This system works, says Walvoord, if groups have a chance in the middle of the project to discuss whether any members are not doing their share. Members who are perceived as shirkers then have an opportunity to make amends. Here are some other options for dealing with shirkers:

- Keep the groups at three students: it is hard to be a shirker in a small group.

- Make it clear that each group must find its own way to handle unproductive group behavior.
- Allow the groups, by majority vote, to dismiss a member who is not carrying a fair share. Students who are dropped from a group must persuade the group to reconsider, find acceptance in another group, or take a failing grade for the project.

Perhaps the best way to assure comparable effort among all group members is to design activities in which there is a clear division of labor and each student must contribute if the group is to reach its goal. (Sources: Connery, 1988; Walvoord, 1986)

Evaluating Group Work

Ensure that individual student performance is assessed and that the groups know how their members are doing. Groups need to know who needs more assistance in completing the assignment, and members need to know they cannot let others do all the work while they sit back. Ways to ensure that students are held accountable include giving spot quizzes to be completed individually and calling on individual students to present their group's progress. (Source: Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991)

Give students an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their group. Once or twice during the group work task, ask group members to discuss two questions: What action has each member taken that was helpful for the group? What action could each member take to make the group even better? At the end of the project, ask students to complete a brief evaluation form on the effectiveness of the group and its members. The form could include items about the group's overall accomplishments, the student's own role, and suggestions for changes in future group work. Rau and Heyl (1990) have developed a form that can be used for an interim or final evaluation. (Sources: Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Walvoord, 1986)

Decide how to grade members of the group. Some faculty assign all students in the group the same grade on the group task. Grading students individually, they argue, inevitably leads to competition within the group and thus subverts the benefits of group work. Other faculty grade the contribution of each student on the basis of individual test scores or the group's evaluation of each member's work. If you assign the same grade to the entire group, the grade should not account for more than a small part of a student's grade in the class (perhaps a few bonus points that would raise a test score from a B - to a B). (Sources: Cooper, 1990; Johnson,

Johnson, and Smith, 1991)

Dealing With Student and Faculty Concerns About Group Work

"I paid my tuition to learn from a professor, not to have to work with my classmates, who don't know as much." Let students know at the beginning of the term that you will be using some group techniques. Students who are strongly antagonistic can drop your class and select another. Inform students about the research studies on the effectiveness of collaborative learning and describe the role it will play in your course. Invite students to try it before deciding whether to drop the class. (Source: Cooper and Associates, 1990)

"Our group just isn't working out." Encourage students to stick with it. Changing group membership should really be a last resort. Help your students learn how to be effective group members by summarizing for them some of the information in "Leading a Discussion" and "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion."

"Students won't want to work in groups." Some students may object, in part because most of their education has been based on individual effort, and they may feel uncomfortable helping others or seeking help. The best advice is to explain your rationale, design well-structured meaningful tasks, give students clear directions, set expectations for how team members are to contribute and interact, and invite students to try it. (Source: Cooper and Associates, 1990)

"Students won't work well in groups." Most students can work well in groups if you set strong expectations at the beginning of the term, informally check in with groups to see how things are going, offer assistance as needed, and provide time for groups to assess their own effectiveness. Some groups may indeed have problems, but usually these can be resolved. See "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion" for suggestions on how to minimize monopolizers, draw out quiet students, and generally engage all students in active participation.

"If I do group work, I won't be able to cover as much material during the semester as I do when I lecture." Yes, adding group work may mean covering fewer topics. But research shows that students who work in groups develop an increased ability to solve problems and evidence greater understanding of the material. Some instructors assign additional homework or readings or distribute lecture notes to compensate for less material "covered" in class. (Source: Cooper and Associates, 1990)

Setting Up Study Teams

Tell students about the benefits of study teams.

Study teams meet regularly outside of class to study together, read and review course material, complete course assignments, comment on each other's written work, prepare for tests and exams, and help each other with difficulties that are encountered in class. Study teams are guided by the notions that students can often do as a group what they cannot do by themselves and that students can benefit from peer teaching-explanations, comments, and instruction from their classmates.

Explain how study teams work. Study teams can work in a number of ways. In one model, all students read the assignments but each member agrees to provide to the group in-depth coverage of a particular segment of the material and to answer as fully as possible whatever questions other members of the study team might raise. In this model, then, each member agrees to study all the material yet each also tries to become an "expert" in a certain area of the material.

In another model, the teams' activities vary from meeting to meeting. For example, at one meeting, teams might review class notes to see whether there is agreement on the most important points of the lecture or discussion. In another session, teams might go over a class quiz or test to ensure that all team members clearly understand each of the questions, especially those that were answered incorrectly by one or more members. Another session might be devoted to reviewing problem sets or exchanging drafts of written papers for peer editing.

In a third model, the main agenda for each study team session is a set of study questions. Early in the term, the study questions are provided by the professor or graduate student instructors. After three or four weeks, each team member must bring a study question related to the week's lecture material to the team meeting. The questions structure the discussion and are modified, discarded, or replaced by the group as the session proceeds. At the session's end, the study questions that the group chooses as the most valuable are turned in for review by the instructor. You can let students decide for themselves how to structure their study teams, or you can offer advice and suggestions. (Sources: Gushy, 1988; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Light, 1992; "Study Groups Pay Off," 1991)

If study teams are optional, offer students extra credit for participation. For example, students who are members of an official study team might get bonus points for each assignment, based on the

average grade received by the individual group members. (Source: "Study Groups Pay Off," 1991)

Let students know what their responsibilities are as a study team member. Students who participate in study teams agree to do the following:

- Prepare before the study team meeting (for example, do all the required reading or problem sets)
- Complete any tasks that the group assigns to its members
- Attend all meetings and arrive on time
- Actively participate during the sessions in ways that further the work of the group
- Help promote one another's learning and success
- Provide assistance, support, and encouragement to group members
- Be involved in periodic self-assessments to determine whether the study team is working successfully (Is too much work being required? Is the time in study team meetings well spent?)

In addition, let students know that they can improve the effectiveness of their study teams by making sure each session has a clearly articulated agenda and purpose. They can also work more efficiently if all logistical arrangements are set for the semester: meeting time, length, location.

Help students locate meeting rooms. Arrange with your department or campus room scheduler to make available small meeting rooms for study teams. If appropriate, consider using group rooms in the residence halls.

Limit groups to no more than six students. Groups larger than six have several drawbacks: it is too easy for students to become passive observers rather than active participants; students may not get the opportunity to speak frequently since there are so many people; students' sense of community and responsibility may be less intense in larger groups.

Let students select their own study teams unless you have a large class. Since the groups are designed to last the term and will meet outside of class, give students the opportunity to form groups of three to six members. Arrange one or two open groups for students who do not know others in the class. If students will be selecting their own groups, offer several small group activities during the first three weeks of class

Assigned Reading: Workshop 2

and rotate the membership of these ad hoc groups so that students can get to know one another's interests and capabilities before forming study teams. See "Personalizing the Large Lecture," "Supplements and Alternatives to Lecturing," "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion," and "The First Day of Class" for ideas on small group activities and how to help students get to know one another.

If your class is very large and letting students select their own groups seems too difficult, have students sign up for teams scheduled to meet at particular times. This means that students will form groups based solely on when they can regularly attend a study team meeting. Try to form the groups by sections rather than for the large lecture class overall. Students in the same section are more likely to know each other and feel a sense of responsibility for their study team. (Source: Walvoord, 1986)

Use a portion of class time for arranging study groups. Announce that study groups will be set up during the third or fourth week of the course. At that time, hand out a description of study teams and students' responsibilities, and let students talk among themselves to form groups or to sign up for scheduled time slots. Suggest that all members of the study team exchange phone numbers. Encourage the study teams to select one person as the convener who will let all members know where the group is to meet.

Devote a class session to study teams. Ask students to meet in their study teams to review course material or prepare for an upcoming exam or assignment. Use the time to check in with the groups to see how well they are operating. Some faculty regularly substitute study team meetings for lectures. To the extent possible, meet with a study team during an office hour or review the work of a study team sometime during the semester.

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Assigned Reading: Workshop 2

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Examining High School and College Writing Expectations: A Teacher Sees Both Sides, and Educators Look Beyond the U.S.

Essentially prepared yet inescapably clueless. They are spring's graduating high school seniors who will quickly and quietly become fall's first-year college students.

So many new experiences ahead—among them different expectations about writing: its purposes and possibilities. Why do some students fit themselves effortlessly into this new current while others flounder?

There is no easy answer, but editors of two recent NCTE books that examine the high school/college juncture have some insights to share.

Start Talking

"I think teachers have well-intentioned but sometimes misinformed ideas on the high school side about what college teachers want. And then on the college side, we don't know what [high school students] have done, so we have unrealistic expectations."

This is how Tom Thompson characterizes the intersection between high school and college writing instruction. Thompson is associate professor of English at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, and directs the Low-country Writing Project. He also is editor of *Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations*, an NCTE book on this subject.

Thompson and the book's other contributors make the case that getting outside one's own teaching experience and starting conversations with other educators are the keys to better understanding. They stress that teachers need to talk with each other within grades and across grade levels, disciplines, and even institutions.

The collection begins with the stories and recurring dreams of Don Daiker, a college professor who chose to spend a semester teaching high school English. Inspired by Daiker and answering a desire to return to high school teaching, Thompson recently spent a semester of his own teaching high school.

He learned that many of his students didn't think writing belonged in an English class, which experience had taught them should focus mainly on literature. In an effort to capture their interest, Thompson invited guest speakers for a "Writing in the Real World" series that he says was successful in showing students how various professionals use writing.

He stresses that, in one sense, making a distinction between high school writing and college writing creates an artificial divide, and this wasn't among his high school teaching goals. "I tried to impress upon my high school students that they needed to get away from formula writing—the five-paragraph theme, an artifact to be graded—and learn to write for an audience in a context.

"I simply wanted my ninth graders to write complete sentences and paragraphs that made sense—that was challenge enough. With my seniors, however, I tried to give them practice writing in different genres, for different audiences, and for different purposes. That's not 'high school writing' or 'college writing'—it's just 'writing.'"

Both Daiker and Thompson came away from their high school teaching experiences with newfound respect for the professionals who do this work. Thompson concludes that many issues can influence writing expectations, such as location in the country, the specific schools involved, and the differences in work requirements and resources at the high school and college levels.

What it comes down to for the writer and the writing instructor, Thompson says, is being able to recognize and negotiate these various expectations and to respond accordingly. "[With writing] it's hard to hit an invisible target, but the reality is that there are lots of different 'good writing' targets out there; we need to let students know that

"Examining High School and College Writing Expectations." *The Council Chronicle*, May 2003, National Council of Teachers of English. (as appearing on <http://archive.ncte.org/chronicle/may2003/books.shtml>)

different situations have different targets, and we need to give them practice ‘shooting’ at those different targets.”

Expanding Our Vision

What happens if we look beyond U.S. borders to see how other countries address writing expectations in high school and in college? We’ll see that all education systems can learn something from others.

That’s the picture presented in *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education*, a title co-published by NCTE and Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and edited by David Foster and David R. Russell.

Russell, professor of English at Iowa State University in Ames, explains some of this give-and-take. “In almost all other countries, admission to higher education is largely based on students’ written, and often oral, communication. There are very few multiple-choice exams. And that writing is done in the specific disciplines—very few general composition courses exist. We can learn a lot from the ways many nations have learned over the years to develop and assess students’ writing in the disciplines.

“And other nations are learning from the U.S. as they increasingly admit larger numbers of students into higher education. There are writing centers and Writing Across the Curriculum programs developing in many countries.”

Russell highlights the essential connection between writing and learning and also supports more conversation among teachers.

“Writing is a way of learning, as well as showing learning. And this is true in all disciplines—even mathematics. When we help students learn to write, in high school or college, we are potentially helping them to learn.”

He’d like to see the United States focus more attention on this issue. “States like Kentucky, which have K-12 portfolios that include writing-across-the-content areas, are doing what many other nations have been doing for many years—getting teachers together to discuss student writing. These conversations among teachers can be a very effective way of improving teaching and learning—as well as students’ writing.”

Different Systems

Foster, professor of English at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, notes that the U.S. system doesn’t “differentiate in students’ lives” as early as do the education systems represented in the book—China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, and South Africa. In these countries, students are tracked into specialized fields of study and work much sooner than students at U.S. schools are expected to decide their focus.

Overall, Foster says, this means that students in many other countries enter into the academic discourse of their subjects earlier—although they also struggle to master material and employ new writing conventions, just as U.S. students do.

Because there is more focus on generalized writing courses, he says teachers in the U.S. typically train students to be “short-burst composers,” who can respond quickly and efficiently to a writing project and then move on to the next assignment.

Foster, who is working on a book about his long-term study of the composing processes of U.S. and German students, also makes some general comparisons between the two education systems.

The German system allows students more time to think and write, he says, with a less-strict sense of semesters. As a result, German students come to see themselves as knowledge-makers within a specific area.

Because the U.S. education system is more product-and-deadline oriented, Foster says, the definition of a “successful writer” is someone who can bring a project to completion, but not necessarily someone whose main task is to contribute to the knowledge of a field.

This is one instance where each system could learn a little from the other’s approach, Foster says, because both have value.

Muddying Boundaries: Mixing Genres with Five Paragraphs

DEBORAH M. DEAN

U *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch is a charming children's picture book. Part of its charm lies in its ability to anticipate the conventions of the fairy tale genre, creating expectations for readers, then pushing the boundaries of the genre in novel ways. As the story moves outside traditional expectations with its unexpected reversals (the princess fights the dragon to save the prince, and the fight is more mental trickery than physical battle), the boundaries of the genre are muddied, making my secondary students smile when I read to them. But it is the ending that surprises them most. In fairy tales,

the happily-ever-after ending is so strongly expected that it becomes a cliché. The students expect it, even as they don't want it, which is why they are so tickled at the nontraditional ending. The story not only doesn't end the way they expect, but the ending is so totally like their lives, tiptoeing as it does over the appearance-versus-reality conflict they see all around them, that they laugh out loud. "You look like a real prince, but you are a bum." The ending truly delights them.

For many of our students, writing for school is a dry, formulaic process. *The Paper Bag Princess* demonstrates a strategy we can teach students to help them engage in academic writing more personally and inventively.

Genre Theory

It has been suggested that one way to make writing interesting is to create the expectations of the genre in the mind of the reader and then tweak one or two of these aspects or boundaries a little, just enough to surprise and delight. Genre theory provides a way to do that, even with genres as tired as the five-paragraph essay. Underlying the theory is the concept that types of writing develop in response to particular social contexts, "that genres are basically

social actions and only incidentally textual forms" (Cooper 26). This theory itself is controversial; it could, if applied without thought, mean a return to a focus on forms and product over process. Opponents say it is a return to the traditional methods and interests of writing, a movement away from empowering the individual. Supporters claim it is just the opposite—a more logical way to empower our students, to give them the ability to write in ways that will help them be successful in the social situations in which they'll find themselves. The application of genre theory is a process because it asks students to analyze the social context and the needs that must be addressed by writing within that social context. I'm proposing a way to approach with a new eye what we often must do as teachers, a way to bridge the present and the future needs of our students through mixing genres.

The Five Paragraph Essay

The five paragraph essay form has an unsavory reputation in some corners of the profession, but, quite frankly, it still lives on in classrooms—and probably for good reasons—one being that, in some states, students need to know this form to score well on state writing assessments. Additionally, teachers in other content areas expect our students to understand and

use the five paragraph format when they write for their courses. Why does the form persist in so many areas? Because it is easy to teach—it's a formula. And it's easy to grade. It's fast. It's predictable. The problem is that it's also often boring, both to write and to read. Enter genre theory. Enter the lesson of *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Those of us who are obliged to teach five paragraph essays (for whatever reasons) can learn to see beyond the limitations of the form to what else it could be.

My students understand the concept of dressing to fit the occasion. They wouldn't consider wearing pajamas or a yellow rain slicker to the prom. Neither would they wear a formal dress or a tuxedo to play soccer. In a similar way, I teach them, they will encounter academic situations where five paragraph essays are the expected form. Hopefully, they'll also encounter situations where other forms are possible—and I try to expose them to those forms as well so the students are prepared to make the appropriate choice for each situation. Understanding various contexts and how to write within them really gives our students more options, as Devitt points out: "Only when we understand genres as both constraint and choice, both regularity and chaos, both inhibiting and enabling will we be able to help students use the power of genres critically and effectively. In such power is individual freedom" (54). Those of us who are obliged to teach five paragraph essays (for whatever reasons) can learn to see beyond the limitations of the form to what else it could be.

Muddying Boundaries

To begin, students must be familiar with the characteristics of the five paragraph essay, just as they

must know the characteristics of a fairy tale in order to be intrigued by the interesting ways Munsch plays with those characteristics in his book. They need to comprehend the inverted triangle introduction with the thesis statement at the end. They need to understand body paragraphs, with topic sentences linking the idea of the paragraph to the thesis, followed by (at least) three objective examples/facts/quotes and their explanatory commentary. Finally, they need to know the summary conclusion.

Once students know how to create the expectations of a genre, how can they play with those expectations a little to create lively writing that reveals more individual voice? One way is to start off with mixed genres, keeping the form generally intact. For instance, we often suggest an anecdote as a possible beginning to the introductory paragraph. Why not make it a personal narrative? Does it have to be short? Can students begin the paper with a poem? How about a news brief or memo? What about supporting evidence? Does it always have to be objective? Can it be creative? Can it be another genre altogether? Tobin says, "Essays should reflect the way we think and experience the world. And the fact is, we often think and experience the world in a multidimensional, multivoiced way" (47). Using one of my student's five paragraph essays, I showed how students could mix genres, stretching the boundaries of what is expected. The essay was written in response to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The student compared Stamps to San Francisco, concluding that San Francisco was a better place for Maya to live as a teenager, despite what happened to her there. To begin the first body paragraph, I inserted lists of characteristics of the two places to intensify the contrast the student intended. The first paragraph also discussed the fact that Maya could get jobs in California that she wouldn't have been able to get in Stamps. At that point, I added a want ad for a trolley car ticket person, emphasizing the student's point specifically. This is the paragraph now (italicized parts are added; plain text is the student's):

San Francisco: cable cars, the Golden Gate Bridge, winding roads down steep hills, Ghirardelli Square, fog, Chinatown, mimes and musicians on the sidewalk, the wax museum, Fisherman's Wharf. San Francisco was very open to new ideas, which resulted in a less segregated community. Because of the intermixing of races, the inhabitants were accustomed to different types of people and respected different beliefs and customs. *Stamps:*

Black Stamps and White Stamps, cotton pickers, dust, baskets full of white people's laundry, segregated schools, the Sheriff on his horse, hiding, fear. Stamps was a small town and set in its ways. In many respects, when compared to San Francisco, it was behind the times. There were major divisions between races, and as a result, they rarely interacted with one [another]. During Maya's eighth grade graduation a white man spoke to the graduates and their families. He spoke of all the wonderful new equipment the "white" school would be receiving. He assured them that they wouldn't be left out. He promised them new sports and home economics equipment. This is one example of how the different races in Stamps were expected to pursue different occupations. The whites were able to choose from numerous careers and had many more chances to succeed in life. On the other hand, the best job a black could obtain was a cotton-picker, washwoman, butler or maid. In San Francisco because of the little segregation, many jobs were open to all races and more opportunities were present. *Wanted: Trolley ticket taker. Training provided. Some high school required. All eligible applicants apply at 443 Southern Ave.*

Because of the changes, the paragraph doesn't begin with a traditional topic sentence. Lists aren't even complete sentences (horrors!). But the contrasting lists do serve a purposeful function in the text and, additionally, provide an interesting rhythm to the fluency of the paper. Despite the additions, the paper still has the kind of unity that Alexander Hill and Barrett Wendell idolized as essential in current-traditional rhetoric. Neither does the paragraph end with a "clincher" or concluding sentence, but the point is still made, and, I would argue, more interestingly.

This mixing of genres can help
our students push the boundaries
of what is expected of them
in five-paragraph essays.

In another paragraph, the student wanted to show that, since we often learn most from our mistakes, Stamps would not have been a good place for Maya to make mistakes, since everyone watched her

too closely. In San Francisco, she had the freedom to learn to deal with the mistakes she made. The student was making the point in a traditionally expected (and accepted) way, citing evidence from the text and commenting on it. I wanted to show students another, less obvious way to make the same point. I inserted an imaginary dialogue into the paragraph:

While living in San Francisco, she became pregnant. She felt very guilty and felt she had to hide it from everyone. Being watched over constantly in Stamps, big mistakes, like Maya's, were very hard to come by. Can you imagine the gossip that would have followed discovery of her pregnancy in Stamps?

Mrs. Goodman: Did you hear about Maya? No? Well she is in the family way.

Mrs. Taylor: Who is the snake? Is he from 'round here?

Mrs. Goodman: Well, I don't rightly know. Maybe one of that bunch of pickers that came through last summer. But you'd a thought that Mrs. Henderson would a kept better track of her comin' and goin'. Ever since she quit workin' at Mz. Cullinan's, she's been thinkin' she's pretty high and mighty, able to come and go as she pleases.

Mrs. Taylor: You think Maya will go live with her mama now?

Mrs. Goodman: I don't know about that. Don't know how she'll stay around here in this condition, though.

Mrs. Taylor: Well, you know we got to keep our mind on the Book. We'll just pray for them.

Because of being self-reliant in San Francisco, she was able to make important mistakes that taught her important lessons.

In this case, I had to know the text well in order to anticipate the reactions, language, and context of such a conversation. So would students. In fact, nontraditional responses to literature often encourage students to dig more deeply into a text, to see it differently than they might with more traditional responses. And anyway, isn't the purpose of the paragraph achieved? Isn't the point still made clearly?

This mixing of genres can help our students push the boundaries of what is expected of them in five-paragraph essays. Who says we can't have creative writing mixed in, that we can't mix in other genres like lists, want ads, dialogues, short stories, or diaries as evidence of the point we are trying to make? We are seeing more and more of this mixing of genres, even in academic journals on composition, in the writings of Wendy Bishop, Kim Korn,

and Lad Tobin, for example. I can envision pushing boundaries further. What if students used existing forms for support instead of creating their own—forms such as comic strips (if the punch line supported the point of the paragraph) or art? Couldn't they be considered legitimate support?

Don't Expect a "Happily Ever After"

Generally, genres change through time as the situations that initiated the genres change. Those of us who teach in the secondary schools see a form that has remained relatively unchanged for almost a century. Statewide assessments and textbooks pretty much ensure that the five paragraph form will not change appreciably in the near future, despite journal articles and conference presentations. However, perhaps teachers can help students incorporate into the necessary form other genres, a combining that gives students a chance to make writing decisions. It is not easy to know what genre will best fit a particular point as support. It requires more of an investment in the text and in the content. It can lead to more in-depth revision and thinking. Lemke, in a discussion of genre as resource rather than as rule, explains that features of genre are flexible. When we incorporate unusual features into text, "they will be noticed as unusual features and they will have to prove themselves, to justify themselves, or we may judge the text to be inappropriately written or somehow unsatisfactory" (2). Students can't churn these mixed-genre essays out as quickly—and teachers will probably enjoy reading them more.

Furthermore, such practices also move us to a point of discussing contexts for writing. Will the readers of state tests want dialogue or poetry in the middle of a persuasive essay on extending the school year? Will the social studies teacher want a dream sequence in the middle of a description of the effects of nuclear bombs on Japan? Will a science teacher appreciate a paragraph on the care and treatment of a hybrid plant in the middle of a report on the effects of pollution on jungles? Our students will have to decide. And in making such decisions, they begin to make the choices writers make—at the same time working with the accepted form for these

situations. Students will need to consider the social context of their writing even more because of the choices they have open to them.

Students tend to like the five paragraph form. It's safe—and they can use it almost without thinking once they understand it. By gradually introducing other genres into a form they feel comfortable with, students may become risk-takers in their writing. Eventually, they may push the boundaries of our expectations beyond what we anticipate in creative and individual ways. They will learn to make writer's choices and see beyond the expectations of the five paragraph form. Then, as we read their writing, expecting one thing, they will have the tools to surprise us with something else altogether, like the prince and the princess in the story who don't get married and live happily forever after all.

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Why Revitalize Grammar?

PATRICIA A. DUNN AND KENNETH LINDBLOM

Most conversations about grammar would probably benefit from that word being barred from discussion altogether, which would force people to define exactly what they mean and what they think should be added, deleted, or changed in English classes. By avoiding the word entirely, people might find that they are arguing about different issues altogether, or that they actually agree with one another after all. If we must use that word, we should probably follow Martha Kolln's advice in her 1996 *English Journal* article and avoid using what she calls "the unmodified *grammar*" (26); that is, the word used by

itself without some clue as to whether we mean formal grammar, school grammar, linguistic descriptions of grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, grammar worksheets, grammar in context (Constance Weaver's phrase), error avoidance, or memorization of the parts of speech. However, in this article, we deliberately use the word *grammar* in its unmodified form because that is the way most people who complain about student writing still employ that word.

We must add, however, that there are undoubtedly other things people mean by "grammar" that are not explicit in the above list and perhaps not even recognized consciously by users of the word. As James Zebroski suggests, the grammar debate is really about conflicting social forces people would rather not discuss: race and ethnicity, power and privilege, oppression and marginalization (318–19). Rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee are even more direct in their view that "usage rules are the conventions of written English that allow Americans to discriminate against one another" (283). The ongoing grammar issue is a patina for a more complex, serious debate we all need to have about power and opportunity in this culture. In light of these important problems, why do so many hand-

wringing arguments about grammar circle back to the same tired question of how to make grammar interesting to students? We want to move important issues in the teaching of writing off the dime about grammar. The question in our title is meant to change the conversation and explode simplistic answers regarding writing pedagogy.

We know there are many effective writing teachers who understand that grammar is a tool for making meaning and not an end in itself. However, even those teachers are under increasing pressure to teach handbook rules in traditional fashion to address the "quick fix" requirements of pundits and politicians and increasingly more urgent standardized exams.

In the following section we don't pull any punches in our attempts to challenge some problematic issues of grammar instruction. Our purpose is to transform inconsequential discussion of nouns, adverbs, and past participles to more significant discussion about writing, access, and improving the world.

Why Revitalize Grammar?

The call for this issue of *English Journal* was entitled "Revitalizing Grammar," a title we believe reflects a

problematic approach. If “grammar” simply describes sets of conventions that result from actual language use, why would anyone want to—or need to—revitalize *grammar*? Wouldn’t we be better off revitalizing writing and reading or—even better—revitalizing *writers* and *readers*? After all, we believe our role as English teachers is not to popularize one particular form of study, but rather to educate young citizens in the complex skills of literacy—that is, effective use of language across contexts and purposes, as outlined in the NCTE Standards. Indeed many of us enjoy the study of grammar, but that in and of itself is simply not enough to justify it as a necessary part of English, particularly in the absence of any evidence that direct grammar instruction does anything to improve our students’ literacy skills. To make matters worse, if we teach standardized, handbook grammar as if it is the only “correct” form of grammar, we are teaching in cooperation with a discriminatory power system, one that arbitrarily advocates some language-use conventions as inherently better than others. And this is simple social indoctrination.

Grammar has a revered place in the world. If you ask any adult who is not an English teacher what should be taught in English class, high on the list will be grammar. Most parents believe the keys to career success come from knowing proper grammar. Some English teachers also consider grammar instruction, especially handbook rules, an important part of English education. Why does grammar enjoy such popularity among professionals and nonprofessionals alike? We believe there are many reasons, but they boil down to these two:

- The identification of one set of rules as *the correct way* to write allows all of us to pretend that there is one pathway to success that anyone in our democracy has equal access to.
- Approaching complex skills of writing as one set of grammar conventions gives teachers an easy, one-size-fits-all way to respond to student writing. This approach preserves authority in the classroom and gives teachers a quick, easy, and generally unquestioned method for ranking and grading their students’ writing.

Although many English teachers provide engaged responses to student drafts, others may feel perfectly justified in simply “correcting” student papers. We

intend this essay as an indelicate corrective to those teachers’ feelings of self-righteousness when they do so. There are appropriate ways to teach our students effective language use, but to get to those ways we must challenge some questionable views that support direct grammar instruction.

Challenging Views

Some might say: Students who make grammar errors are lazy.

We say: Teachers who mark grammar errors are lazy.

As Donald Daiker points out, Paul Diederich’s thirty-year-old research has suggested that students’ writing improved more from praise than it did from correction (105). Daiker further points out that errors are “more readily recognized” and named by instructors than are the sophisticated syntactical or word patterns used occasionally by writers. In other words, it is easy to circle a spelling error or misplaced comma. Almost anyone can “correct” a draft. Not everyone can respond to it in a comprehensive, sophisticated manner. Daiker also points out that we are much less used to analyzing and articulating what it is exactly that “works” in an essay. Effective writing is not effective due to an absence of error. Effective writing works because it achieves its purposes with the particular audience for whom it was intended to work.

Some might say: Students need to know grammar rules before they can break them.

We say: Grammar rules should be the last thing on student-writers’ minds.

In defense of direct grammar instruction, we have often heard something like, “Babies have to learn to crawl before they can walk.” We believe this misses the point. Babies are not out to learn to walk or to crawl. They are out to get something they want—a bottle on a table, for example. They do what they need to do to get the bottle, and as time goes by they learn better and better ways of getting the bottle. But their goal was always the bottle, not the walk. And good parents applaud the attempt. They don’t lecture their babies on bad crawling form or make them perform leg exercises before they start across the room. Communicating effectively is the road to success. Knowing the rules is largely irrelevant to communication. Writers learn to communicate by communicating, not by memorizing rules.

Rather than writing with the goal of “following the rules,” students should genuinely experience what it means to write for others. Student writers should come to understand how their writing is interpreted by those to whom they wish to speak. In addition, and although this can get very complicated, students should also be let in on what Joseph Williams calls “the phenomenology of error.” Williams demonstrates that “error” is not a stable, observable departure from fixed rules, but rather a phenomenon of who is reading whose texts for what purposes. Typically, we teachers read student texts expecting to find errors. And so we do. We read handbooks and professional articles not expecting

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to find error, so we literally do not notice in these handbooks exactly the same “errors” we so easily pounce on when we read students’ papers. Error, then, is not a simple “right or wrong” usage we can point to once and for all. Rather, error and its perception is a confusing crossroads of expectation, genre, and the perceived roles of reader and writer. This crossroads might be frustrating for both students and teachers, but confronting it—and all its unfairness—is infinitely more dramatic and interesting than whether *effect* or *affect* is right or wrong in a particular sentence.

Some might say: Teachers tell student writers what they’re doing wrong so that the students will write better in the future.

We say: Teachers tell student writers what they are doing wrong because they don’t know what else to tell them.

Too many student writers are armed with misinformed or not-quite-true commands about style and grammar, which are inevitably stated in the negative: “Never start a sentence with ‘because.’” “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” “Don’t use ‘I.’” In fact, student peer editors seem so desperate to

point out the negative in their classmates’ drafts that they literally *invent* errors. For example, we had one student chastise another for “misspelling” the phrase *a lot*, which the responder thought should be spelled *alot*. Other students will mark any short sentence as a fragment or any long sentence as a run-on. The problem here is not that writers don’t know grammar; it’s that some responders are obsessed with it! When grammar problems aren’t in the writing, sometimes respondents will make them up just to have something to say.

Some might say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing may come across as more educated.

We say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing may come across as stilted and pompous.

Prioritizing “the rules” of grammar is not the path to success in the world. For some students, “grammar rules” will rarely matter. Students are not all judged equally and their access to upward mobility is not equal. Some students have advantages because of their socioeconomic status (not to mention race, gender, and other factors). We need only look at some of our most prominent politicians to see how butchered language does not hinder their access to power; in fact, some say it’s a positive feature that makes old-money millionaires appear “folksy.” For others, new grammar rules will always be created to prevent them from achieving success in their writing. To combat these barriers to upward mobility, students do not need to know “the rules” for writing successfully. What they need is the ability to communicate effectively with people in all kinds of contexts for all kinds of purposes. This requires flexible writing skills and years of experience writing about real things for real people. Pretending that grammar rules provide a smooth, toll-free road to economic success is a harmful myth, one that smart students no longer really believe anyway.

Some might say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing will be clearer.

We say: If students are taught to write according to the rules, they will appear to have higher moral standards than others.

There have been a number of studies that investigate the “grammar errors” to which readers react most strongly. In a recent one, Larry Beason summarizes previous error studies and points out that readers often *say* that they detest error in writing

because it interferes with “clarity.” However, the reasons readers give for their negative reactions do not always match up with the kinds of errors that would exemplify those reasons. As Beason shows, the business people he studied seemed more upset about the writer’s character regarding such things as perceived hastiness, carelessness, or disrespect—all moral judgments—than they did about whether the error interfered with meaning.

Beason’s study was published in the academic journal *College Composition and Communication*, but we notice similar attitudes lurking in a recent “Dear Abby” column (April 9, 2002): “. . . I am amazed at the number of people who use ‘got’ when they should say ‘have.’” writes a woman from Levittown, Pennsylvania. Abby writes back with her own list of pet peeves, among them some fairly common confusions: *lie/lay*; *between you and I/between you and me*; and *irregardless*—the latter word, Abby notes with irritation, having “nosed its way into the dictionary” as a synonym for *regardless*. Not one of these examples interferes with clarity or communication, unless, of course, readers have put themselves into such a state over the offense that they cannot concentrate on what the writer or speaker is trying to communicate. We submit that the problems here are largely those of the readers/listeners, who seem to delight in judging the education of the users or in rehearsing a rule dutifully memorized many decades ago. What is most disturbing about the column is the supercilious moralizing about, and ridiculing of, people who do not speak or write like Abby and her ilk.

It may well be that readers sincerely believe their pet peeves have to do with “clarity,” a righteous, socially-acceptable reason for hating “grammar errors.” A closer look at their reasons, however, might help us be more honest with ourselves and our students. Surely there is more involved here than an innocent plea for clarity. Because young people can smell hypocrisy like no one else, perhaps they would respond more positively to analyzing, facing, and then dealing with the reasons people give for their horror regarding perceived errors in “grammar.”

*Some may say: Effective writers follow the rules.
We say: Effective writers have something to say
and follow or break the rules to say it.*

Published contemporary writers do all sorts of things students are taught to avoid. Pulitzer Prize-winning

writer E. Annie Proulx’s novel *The Shipping News* is chock full of what any grammar handbook would label as “fragments,” and Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle never uses quotations around his characters’ dialogue. Conventional wisdom has it that “people must know the rules before they can break them,” but we think more interesting phenomena are involved. We think students should read more contemporary published genres of all kinds—novels, essays, opinion pieces, humor columns, etc.—and discuss, among other things, of course, the deliberate departures from handbook dictums that they find in these works.

*Some may say: Students need grammar rules
to learn standard English.
We say: Teachers need to learn the rule-bound
grammars of students’ home languages.*

We are going to set aside for now the problems with trying to define what is sometimes called “Standard English,” “Standard Edited English,” or—our preference—“Standardized English.” These phrasings, and the debates regarding them, could by themselves be the focus of an interesting English class unit. Instead, we want to explain our view about what teachers need to learn. As Geneva Smitherman explains, studies show that when students who speak African American Vernacular English discuss in class the rule-bound, systematic nature of their own language, they are more amenable to learning “Standard English”—and they do learn it. On the other hand, if they are simply drilled on handbook English, with their own language implicitly dismissed as rule-breaking slang, they tend not to learn what their teachers want them to (160).

Published contemporary writers

do all sorts of things students

are taught to avoid.

As Smitherman points out, traditional grammar instruction may be hurting these students: the longer these students stayed in school, the worse their writing in “Standard English” became (161). The point seems to be that when students see that teachers (and the society teachers represent) re-

spect students' home language (see it as just as rule-bound and systematic as "Standard English"), they can then view themselves as code-switching, sophisticated users of two languages, not as "bad speakers." If students feel insulted, they are probably going to tune out, increase their use of their home language, or leave.

We think the lesson here is that student writers should be respected for the language use they have *at the same time* as they learn the tools for another language to use in other rhetorical situations. This is not a simple binary but a challenging both/and situation. Therefore, as Noma LeMoine also argues, it is "teachers' views" and *teacher* knowledge (our emphasis) that are critical in student learning (170, 177). Teachers do not need a degree in linguistics to deduce the rule-bound nature of students' home languages. As Rebecca Wheeler suggested at the 2001 NCTE convention, teachers need only be a bit more curious about those languages.

So What Else Can We Do in the Writing Classroom?

We've spent a great deal of time in this essay identifying and clearing away problematic views regarding student writers and grammar instruction. Now we'd like to suggest better alternatives. In fact, we believe that perhaps the greatest motivating factor behind some English teachers' desire to teach grammar is that they harbor a secret fear: if they don't grade grammar, they don't know what else to do with student writing. Here are some suggestions.

- *Teach Issues of Grammar in the Teaching of Writing.* Go ahead and immerse your students in the controversies surrounding grammar, as James Sledd suggested several years ago: "If they [students] are ready for abstractions like subjects and predicates, they are ready for the abstractions of race and class" (62). If grammar is distinctly uninteresting as a standardized set of conventions, it is fascinating as shifting sets of agreements among communities of people attempting to communicate.
- *Build and Make Use of a Grammar-Controversy Archive.* There is no shortage of arguments about the value, purpose, and need for teaching grammar from journalists, politicians, school board members, administrators, English teachers, and teachers of other subjects. You and your

students can collect as many pieces as possible and identify the issues at stake in controversies about teaching grammar.

- *Hold Public Grammar Debates.* Grammar instruction is a hot issue even in the general public. Take advantage of this by engaging your students in oral and written debates or even mock trials about what is at stake in particular controversies. Have the students make their arguments in public so they can employ varieties of writing and argument appropriate for different audiences.
- *Assign Descriptive Grammar Studies.* Students could use work from "descriptive linguistics" to examine the grammars used by real people in a variety of real contexts. For example, students could record, transcribe, and analyze conversations around their dinner table, at their job, in different classes, at formal meetings, among groups of friends and groups of their parents' friends. Descriptive grammars demonstrate how equally effective but different kinds of grammars operate in different cultures and different contexts; anyone wishing to make a moral judgment of any of these contexts would be quickly proven wrong by much professional work in linguistics. (See Bryson, Gilyard, and Wolfram.)

Teach Students How to Use Style Manuals

One of the major difficulties in teaching writing is that so many students have been taught that there is one set of grammar rules that apply to all forms of writing. If there were only one correct set of rules, we would not have so many different sets of professional grammar and style rules available—e.g., *MLA Handbook*, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The Gregg Reference Manual*, *The Elements of Style*.

Teaching students to use manuals to "stylize" their writing appropriately for whatever context is a skill they can take with them to college or wherever else they will write in the future. But style manuals can be far more than a writing tool for students. They can also open the doors to sophisticated understanding of communication.

Student writers benefit from experiencing that *what counts as* correct is different, depending upon where they expect their writing to be read. Instead of teaching one set of correct rules, English teachers could have their students find and examine

many different grammar and style manuals, which could be starting places for interesting and sophisticated discussion of language and language use. Students could use the manuals to discuss answers to the following questions: How do these rules differ from other style manual rules? What is valuable to this community? Who are the members of this community and what are the purposes for their writing? Which classes in school would this style manual be suitable for? What do these rules privilege? What do these rules deemphasize? Involving students in such discussions of language use encourages them to develop sophisticated, evolving perspectives on conventions in writing. It is also more likely to help them learn to negotiate different contexts for their writing once they are out of school.

Create Assignments that Require Students to Write for Real Audiences

Many school writing assignments are not written for real audiences. Instead, the students write texts assigned *by* teachers *for* those same teachers. From the beginning the teacher knows what the text should look like and the students simply create their best approximation. After several years, some students get good at approximating and are given high grades. These high grades are attributable to effective listening and effective use of school-writing rules, but they have little to do with effective writing and rarely encourage sophisticated writing or risk-taking. Anyone who reads texts written for any purpose other than to fulfill a school assignment knows that originality and risk-taking are important parts of writing. But *what counts as* original and enjoyable depends upon the audience for whom the writing is intended. One struggle for teachers and students is finding audiences outside of the class. The standard outside audiences—parents, friends, local newspapers—can run dry quickly. As many effective teachers have already discovered, other audiences can include local businesses, community organizations, Internet publications, print publications for teens and children, hobbyist magazines, retail corporations, employers, fellow employees. We've found a great resource in other writing classes, either in the same school or at different schools. We have had our college writing students create magazines about writing tailored for high school and middle school English students in our local community. Students and teachers together can invent ideas for new audiences.

Instead of teaching one set of correct rules, English teachers could have their students find and examine many different grammar and style manuals, which could be starting places for interesting and sophisticated discussion of language and language use.

Once students are given writing assignments that require them to address a real audience, they will need to investigate that audience closely enough to be able to be effective in communicating with it. If students really do want to engage those audiences, they will do what is necessary to make their writing effective, including making sure it counts as grammatically correct with their audience.

Create Assignments that Require Students to Write for Real Purposes in Which They Are Truly Invested

The most important lesson we have learned in our combined thirty-plus years of writing instruction is that students write more effectively when they are motivated by the message they are communicating. Students who are bored by circling subjects and predicates on grammar worksheets (and who could blame them?) become genuinely enthused about issues of style, clarity, and appropriateness when they *care* about the purposes for their writing. Students may not be enthralled with yet another five paragraph essay on the meaning of the conch in *Lord of the Flies*, but there are things they do care about. It is our duty as teachers to help those students find topics that will engage them. Like finding real audiences, composing something worth asserting is sophisticated and important communications work. If teachers find that their students are not motivated to find topics of interest or truly can't find something

to say, that's a problem worth acknowledging. Let's identify and deal with it, rather than cover it up with reams of grammar quizzes.

If students are able through their English classes to write something *they really care about*, and if they write to several audiences to whom *they really do wish to speak*, then we teachers would be hard pressed to hold them back from achieving their aims. With motivated writers, teachers become coaches and resources, not judges and rule-bearers. The greatest side benefit of this kind of writing instruction is that it is so much more interesting for the teachers!

Juxtapose Rants about Grammar

One sure way to revitalize writing, and writers, would be to juxtapose, for example, Dear Abby's overreaction to *irregardless* with Crowley and Hawhee's view that usage conflicts are really about prejudice and power. Such an examination would do two things. First, it would teach students what they need to know about grammar and usage to avoid condemnation by the grammar harumphers, thus helping them negotiate linguistically in the business and professional worlds. Second, it would help them alter and improve the world a bit. In other words, attention to writing effectiveness and grammar savviness, rather than to grammar "correctness," would review the cherished rules while putting them in critical perspective.

A related project would be to have students take note of when and how people use the word "grammar" in our society—in conversations, newspaper syndicated columns, and letters to the editor. In class students might analyze what they think the writers or speakers mean by "grammar," or why they are so disproportionately outraged over someone using *irregardless*. Students could examine handbooks from twenty or thirty years ago to discover how usage "rules" change or how words get added to dictionaries.

This archeological dig into how society uses and gets upset about language would also do two things. First, by giving students so much exposure to dictionaries, handbooks, and pundit rants about precise language use, this activity would incidentally teach the very "linguistic etiquette" savvy writers and speakers still need to know if they are going to be using language in our sometimes neurotic society. Second, and more importantly, it would drama-

tize the power and passion surrounding issues of grammar, showing clearly the stakes involved. It would teach "grammar" at the same time that it would question grammar's use as a measure of things that have nothing to do with grammar. It would put the spotlight on language use at the same time as it puts the spotlight back on the *judges* of language use. Can students handle the confusions, the contradictions, the challenges such an approach would engender? We believe so. In fact, we think students and teachers would be *energized* by a sophisticated analysis of language and language users.

A Final Note, and What We're Not Saying

We're not saying that attention to careful language use is not important. In fact, we are saying that attention to careful language is *so important* that students must be taught the complex, higher order tasks of analyzing each rhetorical situation in which they write. They need to practice writing for different purposes and for readers with different expectations, so that they can make sophisticated decisions about audience, purpose, and voice. They need to make difficult but informed choices regarding each rhetorical situation: level and type of formality needed, possibilities for changes in active or passive voice, point of view, vocabulary, sentence structure, formatting, copy editing conventions, etc. These decisions are so important to effective writing that we need to help students learn how to make them. All this takes time—time we can no longer waste trying to revitalize grammar. It's time we revitalize writers.

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Balancing Content and Form in the Writing Workshop

JULIE ANN HAGEMANN

From handbooks and grammar drills to hands-off writing workshops. From a focus on forms and mechanics to a focus on content and meaning. From written product to writing process. From teacher-directed classrooms to student-centered learning. It seems that in the past several decades, in mainstream English language arts and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms alike, the pendulum of language pedagogy has swung from one extreme to another. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, language study centered around traditional grammar and translation drills. In the 1970s and 1980s, grammar was

pushed to the margins, so that communication could take center stage.

These large swings of the pendulum are inevitable—in order to effect change in language learning, teachers had to develop approaches that were radically different. But, as Nancie Atwell points out, the danger in such large swings of the pendulum is that we risk trading in one set of orthodoxies for another. In our efforts to promote more content-centered pedagogy, we had to paint grammar in the most negative light possible, and in doing so, we lost sight of what was valuable about studying it (Kolln). We forgot how much grammar and other forms contribute to meaning, how much they aid communication. We went from giving students one lopsided version of language to giving them another.

It's important that we bring the swing of that mythical pendulum back to the center. It's important that we aim for a more balanced approach, one that seeks mastery of both content *and* form, requires attention to both process *and* product, and succeeds with the active engagement of both student *and* teacher. Why? Because adolescents and adults in the process of learning academic English need both content and form. They need access to a well-rounded version of English.

This more balanced approach is beneficial for *all* students, because all adolescents need to develop their linguistic repertoires so that they're comfortable with informal, spoken home discourse *and* formal, written school discourse. If they want a chance at success in today's society, *all* students must learn to shift easily from "home talk" to "school talk" to "workplace talk" whenever the situation arises. But a balanced approach is especially beneficial to language minority students whose home dialect or home language is not Standard American English, *and who struggle in school as a result* (Baugh; Hagemann). For mainstream speakers of Standard English and for avid readers, learning "school talk" is relatively easy because it overlaps a great deal with their "home talk" or with the version of English they absorb from texts. But for language minority students and for nonreaders, learning "school talk" is a monumental task. Whether they're speakers of a vernacular variety of English, bilingual speakers of English and another language, or simply students not used to seeing print versions of English, these students must learn "school talk" as a second language or a second dialect. We can support these students with a balanced understanding of English form and content.

More and more, second language teachers are adopting a pedagogy that balances form and content, called “focus on form,” with their English language learners (Long and Robinson; Williams). But I use a similar approach in my mainstream basic writing class as well. I’m not advocating a return to teaching discrete elements of grammar. Rather, I’m suggesting that we continue to emphasize the writing process with tasks that encourage genuine communication but strategically interrupt that process to call attention to forms student writers might find useful. At different points in the process I may focus on form on the global level in terms of overall essay structure, on the sentence level in terms of syntax and stylistic devices, or on the word level in terms of grammar and mechanics—never in isolation, but always with the aim of giving students tools to communicate more effectively. These are all forms students might eventually learn on their own, but by calling attention to them, I can speed up the process.

If they want a chance at success in today’s society, *all* students must learn to shift easily from “home talk” to “school talk” to “workplace talk” whenever the situation arises.

In this article I describe the “focus on form” approach as well as some typical form-focused lessons I use. But I must first pause to ask whether form—more specifically academic, Standard English form—really matters. In the meaning-centered pedagogy that most of us use, we emphasize fluency and tend not to worry much about form-based elements like spelling, grammar, and punctuation. We assume that students will eventually control those elements once they’re comfortable with the writing process. I agree that most students master many formal elements on their own, but I’m concerned about the ones they don’t master, resulting in errors they can’t see on their own. I also acknowledge that there are many contexts in which academic or Standard

English form isn’t appropriate. But I’m concerned about the contexts in which it is. I don’t believe that it’s enough for writers to simply get their points across. They must be able to do so credibly and persuasively. And for many readers, especially those in the business world, that means using conventional grammar. In a recent study, Larry Beason interviewed business people to learn their responses to different kinds of errors. He reported that, although some errors distracted readers more than others, respondents found all errors bothersome. They felt writers who were careless in their writing would be careless in conducting business as well. He concluded that teachers must impress upon student writers that errors matter because they influence how readers view them and what they have to say. Beason’s study tells me that form isn’t an added-on feature of writing, but an integral part of communicating; thus, attention to form belongs in our language arts curriculum.

Writing Workshops and the Natural Approach

The history of English language arts pedagogy in mainstream classrooms parallels that of ESL pedagogy, though perhaps at different times. In the 1980s, the translation exercises and grammar drills common in ESL classrooms gave way to more communicative, “natural” approaches, largely due to the influence of second language acquisition researcher Stephen Krashen. Krashen argued that second languages are learned like first languages: through lots of exposure to language and with a motivation to learn. He pointed out that children acquire their native language by absorbing the rules of the language(s) they hear because they’re highly motivated to communicate with those around them. They develop sophisticated language abilities with virtually no direct instruction. Likewise, he argued, second language teachers should create a positive atmosphere for learning and expose students to a great deal of authentic language, but there’s no need for, or benefit to, direct instruction. Under Krashen’s influence, syllabi structured on the basis of grammatical elements (e.g., present tense before past tense, simple sentences before complex ones) gave way to syllabi based on communication tasks (e.g., how to ask questions, how to tell stories, how to apologize). According to Williams, communication-based language teach-

ing is currently the most common pedagogical approach in ESL classrooms.

Similarly, in mainstream language arts classrooms, instructional time spent on isolated grammar study (e.g., parts of speech, kinds of sentences) gave way to writing workshops where students were given a great deal of freedom to choose their own topics and genres, set their own purposes, and identify their own audiences (Atwell; Weaver). Again, the goal was to create a more holistic, natural environment for learning written language, more like the one that fosters oral language development in babies. Thus, mainstream writing workshops share important characteristics with communicative ESL classrooms. In both kinds of classrooms, teachers

- assume that students learn to write the same way they learn to talk, and they learn a second language the same way they learn a first.
- emphasize tasks that encourage students to express themselves and make meaning, rather than learning the language by memorizing the grammar.
- emphasize taking risks in using language. In order to create this kind of atmosphere, teachers downplay explicit, direct grammar instruction, as well as correcting grammar errors.
- use authentic language models—what “real” speakers say and what “real” writers write, rather than arbitrary handbook rules or stilted textbook dialogues.

These new approaches did much to change students’ experience with language in school. Rather than analyzing it, students were busy applying it, using it to achieve their own purposes.

However, in recent years, ESL teachers have grown increasingly frustrated by Krashen’s “natural approach” and have called for more focus on form in the curriculum. Perhaps the most important reason for their reform is that students don’t make efficient enough—and sufficient enough—progress in learning the grammatical forms and sentence structures of English, in spite of years of exposure to the language (Williams). Studies of communicative classrooms in Canada and elsewhere have shown that when formal instruction and error corrections are downplayed, when students discover they won’t be held accountable for being grammatical, they have little motivation to learn standard grammar. Al-

though they’re fluent in the language and can get their message across, their language is full of grammatical errors. ESL teachers, Williams laments, have sacrificed accuracy for fluency, meaning, and self-esteem. “In focusing exclusively on meaning and the overall success of communication, we have overlooked the issue of accuracy,” she points out (13).

Similarly, it may be difficult to motivate vernacular English speakers and fluent bilingual immigrant students to make the effort to learn and use more Standard English because they can already be understood by English speakers (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes). They may be highly articulate, but their language may diverge significantly from Standard English. Moreover, it may be easier for students to learn Standard English as a second language than it is to learn it as a second dialect because the task of sorting out two languages is easier than the task of sorting out two dialects. Two languages share little in terms of grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, but two dialects of English overlap a great deal. Adolescent vernacular speakers may have a general sense that there’s a difference between their “home talk” and the “school talk” that they’re expected to learn, but they may not notice which specific features are different. Or they may not be aware of when they’ve used language inappropriately for the context. In contrast, the differences between English and another language are generally quite clear.

However, it’s essential for students to sort out the differences if they want to learn Standard English as a second language or dialect. Successful language learners sort their two languages into separate linguistic subsystems and store them at least partially in different places in their brain. With a different mental representation for each system, they draw on either language whenever they wish (Hagemann; Siegel).

A second reason that more ESL teachers are calling for an increased focus on form is that communicative syllabi may be based on a faulty model of language learning. Psycholinguists aren’t sure to what extent adolescents and adults (especially second language learners) “have access (or complete access) to the same” language learning mechanisms young children use (Ellis, et al. 408). Older learners may have to rely more on general learning strategies than on the language faculties many believe are hardwired into infant brains. Because they may not learn languages as “naturally” as once believed, adolescents and adults would no doubt benefit from

some explicit instruction in grammar and other formal elements (Ellis, et al.).

A Focus on Form

A focus on form approach provides that explicit instruction, yet balances it with a concern about content. The curriculum is structured around meaning-centered activities, but work on the tasks is stopped for a few minutes when a focus on language would facilitate students' abilities to communicate. Teachers intervene to "draw learners' attention to or provid[e] opportunities for them to practice specific linguistic features" (Ellis, et al. 407). Focus on form lessons can be preemptive—the teacher can say in essence, "You're likely to have trouble with this, so let's look at it first"—or reactive—"I can see you're struggling with this as you draft or revise; here's a suggestion about what to do." This approach doesn't represent a return to isolated grammar drills. Rather, it encourages direct instruction in some of the key language learning strategies that adolescents—especially language minority students—may not be able to use very well on their own. According to Williams, form-focused knowledge enables writers to do the following:

- *notice salient features* in the language around them
- *develop hypotheses* about those salient features—mental pictures, as it were, about what form they take and how and why they're used
- *monitor and adjust their own language*

Each of these strategies maintains its communicative focus, but it also shows how form can enhance that focus. Writers who are better able to address the needs and expectations of their readers, in part by drawing on formal or grammatical conventions, are more successful communicators.

More importantly, however, each strategy represents an important step in the language learning process. Let's look at each of these strategies more fully. In order to learn a particular form, students must first *notice* it (Long and Robinson; Ray). Students may eventually notice and learn a form on their own, but teacher intervention can speed up the learning process by making students aware of a feature that has immediate relevance to the writing task at hand. Teachers can anticipate problems in the writing prompt and call students'

attention to features before they begin to write. Or they can interrupt students in the drafting or revising process to point out a grammatical, syntactic, or semantic element they might find beneficial. Students, too, may interrupt the process to ask for help on a feature.

For example, after a unit on description, a fourth grade teacher asked her students to describe their kitchens. Before they began to write, the teacher called all students' attention to spelling difficult words they were likely to use, such as *refrigerator*. She wrote these words on the board so students could look at them if they needed to as they were writing. Then, as she moved around the writing workshop, she was stopped by one of her Spanish-speaking students. He wasn't sure how to spell the word *cabinets* (a word that wasn't on the board) because he confused *b*'s and *v*'s. In Spanish, they're pronounced essentially the same, and he couldn't remember which letter he needed in English, so he asked for help. Since his attention and interest were focused on an aspect of spelling he was struggling to master, the teacher was willing to sacrifice some of his drafting fluency for a spelling minilesson.

Given what we know about how
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pedagogical approaches that
encourage language minority
students—indeed *all* students—
to notice, understand, compare,
test out, and integrate new formal
features into their writing
facilitate their overall success
in learning “school talk.”

Second, students must understand the *feature*, by developing a theory about how it works to promote the meaning they want to convey and in what contexts it works most effectively (Long and Robinson; Ray). In order to facilitate understanding, the teacher directs students' attention to the connection between meaning and form and to the particular rhetorical and stylistic effects achieved by using that element. Ray says she wants her students to see that writing is a process of making decisions about what they want to say and about how they can shape their ideas to achieve their goals and meet their readers' needs.

For example, an eighth grade teacher noticed a sentence fragment in the draft of a movie review of *Little Women*. The student had written, "Jo is my favorite character. She's like me. Always writing." The teacher admired the effective use of a deliberate fragment, but she was also a little bit leery of unconventional punctuation. She decided to praise the student *and* show her how to use dashes, because a dash would work equally well in this context. Both the fragment and the dash cause the reader to pause and to emphasize the writer's main point, which appears in that final phrase: namely, that the two have in common an obsession with writing.

Another technique teachers can use to help students understand a feature is to *compare it* to information or texts students already know or to various uses of the same strategy (Ray; Siegel). For example, in a twelfth grade creative writing class just after Labor Day, the teacher brought in a newspaper feature that used a variety of ways to list items in a series. They looked in particular at the opening paragraphs:

Talk about labor.

Back in the days before labor-saving devices, a fancy Chicago home needed a laundress to deal with heavy clothes, cooks and maids and butlers to handle the food and dusting, plus a stableman or two to cool down the horses.

Help was needed to drive the carriages and keep them in shape. To lay out evening clothes in the upstairs bedrooms. To set the fireplaces. To clean the silver. To wash the porcelain and the crystal. To look after the children. (Anderson 3)

First, they compared the list in the second paragraph with the list in the third, and then they compared both lists to conventional list forms. What rhetorical and stylistic effects did using a long sentence have on the list? What effects did using frag-

ments have? Why did the author use an *and* between each item in the phrase *cooks and maids and butlers*? What effects do unconventional ways of expressing lists have? When is it good to use a conventional expression? When is it more effective to use unconventional expressions? Through these various comparisons, students were able to see how form shapes meaning. The comparisons made visible effects that students might not have seen otherwise. After the discussion, they returned to drafts of descriptions they had written the previous day to consider using unconventional list structures.

Finally, students *test out their new hypotheses* by actively using them. In order to judge whether our hypotheses "work," we have to be able to identify if and where there's a gap between what we've produced and what's expected or needed. These questions have to be asked at both the global and local levels. Suppose, for example, that we wanted to convey a sense of plenty, so we chose, like the newspaper model above, to add a connecting word between the items in our list: *I couldn't resist digging into the bowl of M & M's; the reds and greens and yellows and browns and blues, and the new purples called out to be eaten*. Do we in fact convey a sense of abundance? Does our list serve the needs of our readers? Have we used appropriate grammatical forms?

This strategy requires us to distance ourselves from our text enough to see it critically, to see it as our readers would. The goal in making this critical judgment is to create what writing researcher Linda Flower calls *reader-based prose*. This kind of text both expresses a writer's ideas and meets a reader's needs. It typically starts out as *writer-based prose*, as a record of the writer's thoughts that only the writer can easily understand. Good writers work to transform—to organize and develop—this string of ideas into a text that's meaningful to a reader as well.

Beginning writers often have a difficult time identifying gaps in their text, so at first they need the feedback of readers to give them a sense that their writing choices were credible and persuasive. This feedback helps them develop an ability to monitor and adjust their own language (Williams).

Given what we know about how languages/dialects are learned, pedagogical approaches that encourage language minority students—indeed *all* students—to notice, understand, compare, test out, and integrate new formal features into their writing facilitate their overall success in learning "school

talk.” Here are some of the ways I use this kind of approach with my students, many of whom are in my basic writing classes because they’re language minority students.

Reading for Overall Structure

I adapt Ray’s “reading like a writer” approach to help students analyze and learn from student models I hand out when I give a major writing assignment. I always include models because I want to assure students that they can do the assignment, even though it’s challenging, and that they can take any number of approaches to it. One semester, I handed out an analysis assignment to my basic writers: they were to use the ideas in the text to analyze an experience of their own. I could see immediately the overwhelmed look on their faces, so I quickly handed out several papers from students who had done the same assignment the year before. Together, we read and discussed the content of the papers, and then we turned our attention to their structure. How had last year’s students approached the writing task? How had they structured their essays?

To help students focus their attention on the structure of the essays, I showed them how to do a do/say outline. It’s a technique I learned from my own teachers to help me revise my drafts, but I’ve discovered it’s a useful prewriting technique as well. Students can use it to analyze model essays, and, for example, to discover which parts they need to generate for their own essay. In a do/say outline, students read each paragraph and write down what it says—that is, they briefly summarize its contents—and what it does—that is, they identify its purpose (e.g., to introduce, to conclude, to give background information).

By the end of the period, we had several outlines on the board representing the structure of the various model papers. We also talked about why the authors had chosen these overall structures and why they were effective. Finally, the students began to relax. “You mean,” asked a skeptical James—a student who hid out in the far corner and hadn’t voluntarily said anything in class before—“that’s all we have to do? That’s what this assignment is?” “Well,” I said, “you don’t *have* to do it exactly like these different authors did, but they did write successful papers.” “Oh,” he said, “I can do that!” echoing the thoughts of his classmates as they filed out the door. Sure enough, when they

came to class the next day, James and most of his classmates had strong first drafts.

The assignment was to interpret a reading, and I had already emphasized the intellectual move of analyzing difficult texts in several write-to-learn activities. At the same time, taking time to scrutinize the form of an analyzing essay opened up several possibilities to my students, who hadn’t been able to envision themselves writing the assignment until then.

Making Form Fit Meaning

For several weeks one semester, my basic writers had been researching and discussing the problem of violence in the schools, learning from government statistics that the rate of single-victim murders had gone down between 1994 and 1999, but the number of incidents in which there were multiple victims went up (Stevens, et al.). But as the students were writing a position paper recommending ways to make schools safe, they soon discovered they didn’t know how to reconcile what seemed to be two conflicting ideas—some aspects of the problem were going away, while others were getting worse, and they wanted school officials to do more. I interrupted their writing so we could discuss how to subordinate one idea to the other, acknowledging one but emphasizing the other. I directed them to places in our source texts where our authors had written similar kinds of sentences, using words like *although*, *even though*, and *while*. I supplied the label *subordinating connectors* and took a few minutes to explain what they were, why they were useful, and how to punctuate sentences containing them. After this spontaneous minilesson, the students went back to work with a new understanding of sentence structures that enabled them to take a more nuanced stand.

Focus on Form in Proofreading

I want my basic writers to concentrate on effectively developing what they want to say in their papers, but I also know that it won’t serve them well if I don’t call their attention to conventional grammar. So on the first version of papers they hand in, I comment on their content, pointing out places where they can further develop their ideas. In their second version, however, I use the minimal marking technique of underlining words that violate standard grammatical or mechanical conventions. Most of the time, my stu-

dents can “translate” what they’ve written into more conventional forms on their own. All they need is some help in focusing on their language as language. I talk to them individually about whatever errors are left uncorrected (Ferris and Roberts; Haswell).

In the meantime, we talk about why proofreading is so hard to do well. As Madraso says, it’s hard in part because it requires a different kind of reading than the one we typically do. We also practice our editing skills with a modified version of exercises from Vail and Papenfuss’s *Daily Oral Language*, using passages from the students’ papers. At the beginning of class almost every day we look at a passage of two or three sentences. Students can usually identify the mistakes and explain the rule, but not always. It sometimes helps to compare “what you hear people say” to “what you have to write in a formal, school paper.” Sometimes it helps to compare two easily confused grammar elements, such as plurals and possessives. Sometimes, especially with ESL students, it helps to compare how a specific grammatical or mechanical element works in their “home talk” with how it works in “school talk.”

The best writing curriculum for language minority—indeed, all—students is one that balances content *and* form, that calls for an attention to writing process *and* to written product, that draws on knowledge from both teacher *and* student. There’s a need for both form and content in the writing workshop.

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Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

Prepared by the Conference on College Composition and Communication

Background

In 1993, the CCCC Executive Committee charged the CCCC Committee on Assessment with developing an official position statement on assessment. Prior to that time, members of CCCC had expressed keen interest in having a document available that would help them explain writing assessment to colleagues and administrators and secure the best assessment options for students.

Beginning in 1990 at NCTE in Atlanta, Georgia, open forums were held at both NCTE and CCCC conventions to discuss the possibility of a position statement: its nature, forms, and the philosophies and practices it might espouse. At these forums, at regular meetings, and through correspondence, over one hundred people helped develop the current document.

An initial draft of the statement was submitted to the CCCC Executive Committee at its March 1994 meeting, where it was approved in substance. The Executive Committee also reviewed a revised statement at its November 1994 meeting. An announcement in the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication* invited all CCCC members to obtain a draft of the statement and to submit their responses to the Assessment Committee. Copies of the draft statement were mailed to all 1995 CCCC convention preregistrants, and the final draft was presented in a forum at the 1995 CCCC Convention in Washington, DC. Changes based on discussions at that session, and at a later workshop, were incorporated into the position statement, which was subsequently approved for publication by the CCCC Executive Committee.

Introduction

More than many issues within the field of composition studies, writing assessment evokes strong passions. It can be used for a variety of appropriate purposes, both inside the classroom and outside: providing assistance to students; awarding a grade; placing students in appropriate courses; allowing them to exit a course or sequence of courses; and certifying proficiency, to name some of the more obvious. But writing assessment can be abused as well: used to exploit graduate students, for instance, or to reward or punish faculty members. We begin our position statement, therefore, with a foundational claim upon which all else is built: it is axiomatic that in all situations calling for writing assessment in both two-year and four-year institutions, the primary purpose of the specific assessment should govern its design, its implementation, and the generation and dissemination of its results.

It is also axiomatic that in spite of the diverse uses to which writing assessment is put, the general principles undergirding writing assessment are similar:

Assessments of written literacy should be designed and evaluated by well-informed current or future teachers of the students being assessed, for purposes clearly understood by all the participants; should elicit from student writers a variety of pieces, preferably over a period of time; should encourage and reinforce good teaching practices; and should be solidly grounded in the latest research on language learning.

These assumptions are explained fully in the first section below; after that, we list the rights and responsibilities generated by these assumptions; and in the third section we provide selected references that furnish a point of departure for literature in the discipline.

Assumptions

All writing assessments—and thus all policy statements about writing assessment—make assumptions about the nature of what is being assessed. Our assumptions include the following.

FIRST, language is always learned and used most effectively in environments where it accomplishes something the user wants to accomplish for particular listeners or readers within that environment. The assessment of written literacy must strive to set up writing tasks, therefore, that identify purposes appropriate to and appealing to the particular students being tested. Additionally, assessment must be contextualized in terms of why, where, and for what purpose it is being undertaken; this context must also be clear to the students being assessed and to all others (i.e., stakeholders/participants) involved.

Accordingly, there is no test which can be used in all environments for all purposes, and the best “test” for any group of students may well be locally designed. The definition of “local” is also contextual; schools with common goals and similar student populations and teaching philosophies and outcomes might well form consortia for the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment instruments even though the schools themselves are geographically separated from each other.

SECOND, language by definition is social. Assessment which isolates students and forbids discussion and feedback from others conflicts with current cognitive and psychological research about language use and the benefits of social interaction during the writing process; it also is out of step with much classroom practice.

THIRD, reading—and thus, evaluation, since it is a variety of reading—is as socially contextualized as all other forms of language use. What any reader draws out of a particular text and uses as a basis of evaluation is dependent upon how that reader’s own language use has been shaped and what his or her specific purpose for reading is. It seems appropriate, therefore, to recognize the individual writing program, institution, consortium, and so forth as a community of interpreters who can function fairly—that is, assess fairly—with knowledge of that community.

FOURTH, any individual’s writing “ability” is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions. Ideally, such literacy must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and evaluated by multiple readers. This realization has led many institutions and programs across the country to use portfolio assessment.

FIFTH, writing assessment is useful primarily as a means of improving learning. Both teachers and students must have access to the results in order to be able to use them to revise existing curricula and/or plan programs for individual students. And, obviously, if results are to be used to improve the teaching-learning environment, human and financial resources for the implementation of improvements must be in place in advance of the assessment. If resources are not available, institutions should postpone these types of assessment until they are. Furthermore, when assessment is being conducted solely for program evaluation, all students should not be tested, since a representative group can provide the desired results. Neither should faculty merit increases hinge on their students’ performance on any test.

SIXTH, assessment tends to drive pedagogy. Assessment thus must demonstrate “systemic validity”: it must encourage classroom practices that harmonize with what practice and research have demonstrated to be effective ways of teaching writing and of becoming a writer. What is easiest to measure—often by means of a multiple choice test—may correspond least to good writing, and that in part is an important point: choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing. As important, just because students are asked to write does not mean that the “assessment instrument” is a “good” one. Essay tests that ask students to form and articulate opinions about some important issue, for instance, without time to reflect, to talk to others, to read on the subject, to revise and so forth—that is, without taking into account through either appropriate classroom practice or the assessment process itself—encourage distorted notions of what writing is. They also encourage poor teaching and little learning. Even teachers who recognize and employ the methods used by real writers in working with students can find their best efforts undercut by assessments such as these.

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SEVENTH, standardized tests, usually developed by large testing organizations, tend to be for accountability purposes, and when used to make statements about student learning, misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color. This imbalance tends to decrease when tests are directly related to specific contexts and purposes, in contrast to tests that purport to differentiate between “good” and “bad” writing in a general sense. Furthermore, standardized tests tend to focus on readily accessed features of the language—on grammatical correctness and stylistic choice—and on error, on what is wrong rather than on the appropriate rhetorical choices that have been made. Consequently, the outcome of such assessments is negative: students are said to demonstrate what they do “wrong” with language rather than what they do well.

EIGHTH, the means used to test students’ writing ability shapes what they, too, consider writing to be. If students are asked to produce “good” writing within a given period of time, they often conclude that all good writing is generated within those constraints. If students are asked to select—in a multiple choice format—the best grammatical and stylistic choices, they will conclude that good writing is “correct” writing. They will see writing erroneously, as the avoidance of error; they will think that grammar and style exist apart from overall purpose and discourse design.

NINTH, financial resources available for designing and implementing assessment instruments should be used for that purpose and not to pay for assessment instruments outside the context within which they are used. Large amounts of money are currently spent on assessments that have little pedagogical value for students or teachers. However, money spent to compensate teachers for involvement in assessment is also money spent on faculty development and curriculum reform since inevitably both occur when teachers begin to discuss assessment which relates directly to their classrooms and to their students.

TENTH, and finally, there is a large and growing body of research on language learning, language use, and language assessment that must be used to improve assessment on a systematic and regular basis. Our assumptions are based on this scholarship. Anyone charged with the responsibility of designing an assessment program must be cognizant of this body of research and must stay abreast of developments in the field. Thus, assessment programs must always be under review and subject to change by well-informed faculty, administrators, and legislators.

Rights and Responsibilities

Students should:

1. demonstrate their accomplishment and/or development in writing by means of composing, preferably in more than one sample written on more than one occasion, with sufficient time to plan, draft, rewrite, and edit each product or performance;
2. write on prompts developed from the curriculum and grounded in “real-world” practice;
3. be informed about the purposes of the assessment they are writing for, the ways the results will be used, and avenues of appeal;
4. have their writing evaluated by more than one reader, particularly in “high stakes” situations (e.g., involving major institutional consequences such as getting credit for a course, moving from one context to another, or graduating from college); and
5. receive response, from readers, intended to help them improve as writers attempting to reach multiple kinds of audiences.

Faculty should:

1. play key roles in the design of writing assessments, including creating writing tasks and scoring guides, for which they should receive support in honoraria and/or release time; and should appreciate and be responsive to the idea that assessment tasks and procedures must be sensitive to cultural, racial, class, and gender differences, and to disabilities, and must be valid for and not penalize any group of students;
2. participate in the readings and evaluations of student work, supported by honoraria and/or release time;
3. assure that assessment measures and supports what is taught in the classroom;

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4. make themselves aware of the difficulty of constructing fair and motivating prompts for writing, the need for field testing and revising of prompts, the range of appropriate and inappropriate uses of various kinds of writing assessments, and the norming, reliability, and validity standards employed by internal and external test-makers, as well as share their understanding of these issues with administrators and legislators;
5. help students to prepare for writing assessments and to interpret assessment results in ways that are meaningful to students;
6. use results from writing assessments to review and (when necessary) to revise curriculum;
7. encourage policymakers to take a more qualitative view toward assessment, encouraging the use of multiple measures, infrequent large-scale assessment, and large-scale assessment by sampling of a population rather than by individual work whenever appropriate; and
8. continue conducting research on writing assessment, particularly as it is used to help students learn and to understand what they have achieved.

Administrators and higher education governing boards should:

1. educate themselves and consult with rhetoricians and composition specialists teaching at their own institutions, about the most recent research on teaching and assessing writing and how they relate to their particular environment and to already established programs and procedures, understanding that generally student learning is best demonstrated by performances assessed over time and sponsored by all faculty members, not just those in English;
2. announce to stakeholders the purposes of all assessments, the results to be obtained, and the ways that results will be used;
3. assure that the assessments serve the needs of students, not just the needs of an institution, and that resources for necessary courses linked to the assessments are therefore available before the assessments are mandated;
4. assure opportunities for teachers to come together to discuss all aspects of assessments: the design of the instruments; the standards to be employed; the interpretation of the results; possible changes in curriculum suggested by the process and results;
5. assure that all decisions are made by more than one reader; and
6. not use any assessment results as the primary basis for evaluating the performance of or rewards due a teacher; they should recognize that student learning is influenced by many factors such as cognitive development, personality type, personal motivation, physical and psychological health, emotional upheavals, socioeconomic background, family successes and difficulties which are neither taught in the classroom nor appropriately measured by writing assessment.

Legislators should:

1. not mandate a specific instrument (test) for use in any assessment; although they may choose to answer their responsibility to the public by mandating assessment in general or at specific points in student careers, they should allow professional educators to choose the types and ranges of assessments that reflect the educational goals of their curricula and the nature of the student populations they serve;
2. understand that mandating assessments also means providing funding to underwrite those assessments, including resources to assist students and to bring teachers together to design and implement assessments, to review curriculum, and to amend the assessment and/or curriculum when necessary;
3. become knowledgeable about writing assessment issues, particularly by consulting with rhetoricians and composition specialists engaged in teaching, on the most recent research on the teaching of writing and assessment;

4. understand that different purposes require different assessments and that qualitative forms of assessment can be more powerful and meaningful for some purposes than quantitative measures are, and that assessment is a means to help students learn better, not a way of unfairly comparing student populations, teachers, or schools;
5. include teachers in the drafting of legislation concerning assessments; and
6. recognize that legislation needs to be reviewed continually for possible improvement in light of actual results and ongoing developments in writing assessment theory and research.

Assessment of Writing

Assessment of writing is a legitimate undertaking. But by its very nature it is a complex task, involving two competing tendencies: first, the impulse to measure writing as a general construct; and second, the impulse to measure writing as a contextualized, site- and genre-specific ability. There are times when re-creating or simulating a context (as in the case of assessment for placement, for instance) is limited. Even in this case, however, assessment—when conducted sensitively and purposefully—can have a positive impact on teaching, learning, curricular design, and student attitudes. Writing assessment can serve to inform both the individual and the public about the achievements of students and the effectiveness of teaching. On the other hand, poorly designed assessments, and poorly implemented assessments, can be enormously harmful because of the power of language: personally, for our students as human beings; and academically, for our students as learners, since learning is mediated through language.

Students who take pleasure and pride in using written language effectively are increasingly valuable in a world in which communication across space and a variety of cultures has become routine.

Writing assessment that alienates students from writing is counterproductive, and writing assessment that fails to take an accurate and valid measure of their writing even more so. But writing assessment that encourages students to improve their facility with the written word, to appreciate their power with that word and the responsibilities that accompany such power, and that salutes students' achievements as well as guides them, should serve as a crucially important educational force.

Making the Connection: Reading and Writing Together

LORI MAYO

Whe bell rings, signifying the beginning of our first class. We size each other up like opponents in a boxing ring. In my head, Frank Sinatra sings “New York, New York . . . If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere . . .” I’m playing to a tough crowd, trying to sell reading and writing to a group of inner city high school kids. After a short spiel on what they really want to know—how to get the bathroom pass—I tell them that, in my class, they will write like writers and read like writers. A few quiet groans, and Luther says, “Whatta ya mean? We’re not writers.” *You’ll see*, I think. *You’ll see*.

Apprenticeships and Genre Studies

I can still remember learning the word *apprentice*. 1972. My family took an educational vacation to Williamsburg, Virginia. The blacksmith, I learned, had an *apprentice*. I immediately thought that made sense. How else, after all, would someone learn how to do something? Our classroom structures need to offer opportunities for students to apprentice themselves as makers of literature to the literary artists whose work they admire (Bomer 107). It is not enough to tell students that reading more will make them better writers; the reading/writing connection needs to be made explicit.

A genre study is one way to bring reading and writing together in the classroom. Reading and writing in one particular genre allows students to understand its conventions and use that understanding in their own writing. After students have responded to a text as readers, they can look at the writer’s craft and figure out how that craft helps to evoke the reader’s response.

For each genre that we study, I provide examples that we all look at together. I also ask students to find examples of the genre on their own. Ideally, students should find their own texts to use as models. Nonfiction articles seem to be the easi-

est for my students to find, and the ones they choose are about areas that interest them from magazines that they usually read.

From my own writing experience, I know that it is useful to find a piece that I admire, try to figure out what the writer did that makes me admire that piece, and try to do the same in my own work. Indoctrinated with the fear of plagiarism, some students need to be assured that it is acceptable to imitate another writer’s style. I model this by showing them a piece that I’ve written and the article that I used as a model for my writing. I point out what attracted me to the article, such as a lead that brought me into the scene in a you-are-here kind of way, and the conventions, such as subheadings, that I learned about from reading the article.

Upping the Ante: Reading Critically

In a memoir genre study, we read Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*. Wolff ends a chapter with the following paragraph:

Dwight drove us down to Seattle early the next morning. He stopped on the bridge leading out of camp so we could see the salmon in the water below. He pointed them out to us, dark shapes among the rocks. They had come all the way from

the ocean to spawn here, Dwight said, and then they would die. They were already dying. The change from salt to fresh water had turned their flesh rotten. Long strips of it hung off their bodies, waving in the current. (75)

My students and I look very carefully at this paragraph. We question this paragraph. Why would Wolff mention the salmon? On the surface, it seems to have little to do with the flow of the story. We discuss one aspect of memoir: Although, for the most part, it is nonfiction, it reads like fiction. In the context of the story, we can see this paragraph as representative detail—as symbolism or foreshadowing. Wolff and his mom, initially hopeful that their new life with Dwight is going to be the answer to their problems, are starting to sense that other problems will arise. As readers, we can see that the writer trusts our intelligence enough to assume we can understand his intention.

The move from a surface reading of the text to reading on a deeper level is a sophisticated move for a reader to make. It is one I assumed my students made automatically, one I didn't think I had to teach them. When I repeatedly felt frustrated by their surface reading of texts, I realized that I needed to teach them how to do closer readings. Looking at the writer's craft was the first step to critical reading. Trying this type of writing ourselves was the next step.

Writing Like Writers: Whole Class Inquiry and Individual Models

I asked my students to use the paragraph from *This Boy's Life* as a model for the short memoir pieces they were writing. I wanted them to try to end their pieces with a paragraph like Wolff's. Candice, in a piece about sneaking out of her house to visit her boyfriend, ended this way:

I walked out of the house, and I felt the sun shining down on me. The warm breeze felt good on my arms, swinging at my sides. As I turned the corner, the weather changed suddenly. The clouds came out and it started to get cold. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Nadja, in the final paragraph of a piece about leaving home for her first interview at a college campus, writes:

The rain stopped and the sun appeared. Walking across campus, I saw a bird's nest in the tree. A

sparrow was nudging her babies out of the tree. The young birds flew to the ground, and seemed wobbly on their feet. Looking up to the tree as if for encouragement, the birds skittered around on the grass. Finally, they found what they were after: plump, juicy worms. Success at last.

Becoming makers of complex texts may help students become more capable readers of complex texts.

A writing teacher needs to have easy access to literature that students can turn to for help in their writing. If I am familiar with a few texts in a particular genre we are studying, I can easily have photocopies on hand and make suggestions from those texts. Often, especially in a study of memoir, what we read will influence what my students want to write about.

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Leela, in her memoir piece, wanted to describe her disappointment about the fact that her mother didn't attend her junior high school graduation. I reminded her of the way Maya Angelou built up the anticipation of graduation in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. That anticipation, I explained to her, was what made us feel how letdown she was at the outcome. After rereading Angelou's chapter, she backed up to the beginning of her piece and described in great detail the process of getting ready for her big day:

One day I was sitting in the lunchroom and the principal called out my name along with the names of ten other people. All of a sudden, thoughts started rushing through my head. What did I do? Was I in trouble? But when he brought me into the auditorium, he told me that I would be receiving the Principal's Achievement Award at graduation. I was so excited. I felt like I was walking on air.

My father took me to pick out the perfect dress. It was pale yellow, covered with sunflowers.

The day before graduation, my grandmother took me to the beauty parlor. I had my hair done in curls all over my head. I could hardly stop looking at myself in the mirror, picturing myself accepting the award.

My father and I left the house to go to the graduation ceremony. I walked to my seat and waited. When the principal called my name, I hurried across the stage. I looked into the audience and I didn't see my mother. I had to fight back the tears.

Leela was able to achieve her purpose by recognizing that readers would be more likely to feel her pain if we first felt her excitement. Studying the structure that Angelou used helped her to understand this concept.

Learning to Listen to the Music

Georgia Heard, in a keynote address at the 1997 Nassau Reading Council Conference at Hofstra University, talked about poetry as the foundation of all writing. She suggested listening to the music of all words and applying tools from poetry to prose. Heard's message made sense to me. I'd spent time during poetry genre studies pointing out techniques such as metaphor; why not do the same in prose?

As part of an independent reading project, Natasha read James McBride's *The Color of Water*. In response to the assignment, which required the students to pay close attention to the writer's craft, Natasha wrote:

There are many examples of the author's craft in this book. McBride uses imagery, metaphors, and similes. I recognize the author's use of sensory images when he back-tracked to his mother's hometown in Suffolk, Virginia. McBride wrote that "the smell of azaleas and the creeping loneliness that climbed over me as I poked around Suffolk had begun to suffocate me." (223)

Natasha discussed six or seven other examples from the book that she felt were representative of the author's craft. Reading with an eye toward craft and being aware of poetic writing in prose affected Natasha's writing. In her piece, "Drowned By Death," she wrote:

"Tasha, your mother died this morning," my father said. At that very moment, a sudden anger, rising like steam, poured out of my broken heart. All my father could do was hold me as I wept. There was such a sinking feeling that came over me; I felt as if I was going down into the darkness.

Part of me died when my mother died. I must admit, I was angry with my mother for a long while afterwards. I was angry, but more than that I missed her. I was angry, but more than that I felt like I lost my best friend.

Many of my students incorporated repetition and other poetic techniques into their prose after looking for it in published writing. While I was reading Karen's piece, about growing up in an unsafe neighborhood, I had a sudden feeling of *déjà vu*. Karen ended her piece by writing, "For the first time in my life I understood what it meant to be sick and tired of being sick and tired." This sounded familiar to me, so I asked her if we'd read something like this together. Karen said no. I couldn't stop thinking about it; the line haunted me for days. Finally, I found the source. While reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we looked carefully at one sentence toward the end of the book. Angelou writes, "Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware." (230) While I discussed this sentence in terms of its meaning to Angelou's life, the structure of the sentence stuck with Karen. Without even realizing it, she was able to use the rhythm in her own writing.

Getting Started and Reaping Rewards

The key to success in bringing writing and reading together in the classroom may be as simple as reading shorter texts, using texts that students can imagine themselves writing, looking closely at writing, and talking about writers' decisions. I can't expect to give my students *Pride and Prejudice* in the hopes that it will affect their writing. Like most teachers, when I read a magazine article, a short story, an essay, or a newspaper article that seems like it would interest my students, I clip it, copy it, file it, and use it in class. These become my greatest resources.

One Sunday I came across one of my best finds in the *New York Times Magazine*: a piece called "Underground Dads" by Wil Haygood. The author described growing up without a father and the "good black men" that were there to fill in for him. As soon as I read it, I knew this piece would speak to many of my students. It triggered countless numbers of essays on similar topics. Juan, a student who constantly complained of having "nothing to write about," wrote a piece he called "Substi-

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tutes: The Real Life Actors,” about the three uncles who helped his mother raise him. Each paragraph, like Haygood’s, described the ways in which each of his uncles taught him life lessons. Juan graduated, joined the navy, and returned to visit last year, still talking with pride about that piece. His reading of Haygood’s piece informed his writing, in both content and style.

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in published writing.

When we look at literature together, I have my students choose one sentence in a text that seems to hold a significant chunk of its overall meaning. We share these sentences, usually in small groups, and talk about the way they represent a theme in the text or seem to communicate the author’s attitude toward a particular character, an action, or the setting. This close, sentence-by-sentence analysis serves as a reminder that a writer makes careful decisions about every word and that each sentence contributes to the whole. This is an important thing to remember as both readers and writers.

After completing each writing assignment, my students write reflective papers that include a self-assessment component, their reflections on the writing process, and plans for the next writing assignment. In her first reflective paper, Leela wrote:

Soon I will be writing my second piece. I’m thinking of writing about my life and adding some fictional stories that represent who I am. Kind of like *This Boy’s Life*. If you think about it, the book is really not something that a lot of people would actually want to read, but I love reading the little stories that he tells. I want to do something similar in my memoir so that when it is read, people can

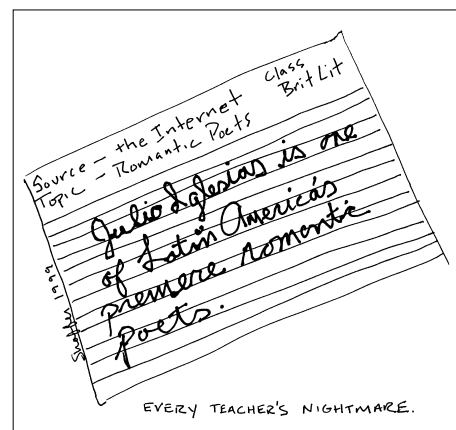
get an understanding of who I am and where I came from. Using foreshadowing in the beginning of a memoir sounds like a good idea. The literature we read helped me get a feel for how a memoir piece is written. Next time I’d like to use more metaphors to make the writing better.

Encouraging students to experience reading like writers allows them to internalize the sound and structure of good writing. In turn, they will be able to craft better pieces and read with a better understanding of the author’s purpose. Nobody is more pleased or surprised by the results of their efforts than the students. “Check it out,” Luther says, pointing to his piece in our class magazine, “I’m a writer.”

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Composition for the Twenty-First Century

GREGORY SHAFER

In Western literacy instruction, our knowledge, research, and practices have expanded and changed dramatically during the past several years. We have shifted from a behaviorist view toward a focus on the individual's development, learning, and cognition.

—Lisbeth Dixon-Krauss 17

Each year, in too many language arts classrooms across America, teachers routinely stifle their students' voices, creativity, and passion by becoming transmitters of academic prescription. In virtually every case, it is done with altruistic motives and a belief that all of the prescriptions will only make composing easier. Implicit in this practice is the early twentieth century theory that students are linguistically deprived, that they can't organize, and that they must learn to write in a decidedly behavioristic way—one that attributes no linguistic ability to the writer. And each year, these same teachers bemoan the clichés, the trite

writing, the lack of critical thinking skills. It is an ironic scenario that imposes authoritarian mandates while secretly hoping for the spirit of the subversive. We shouldn't wonder why it never works.

The problem begins, I believe, with a series of misconceptions about writing that represent a vision of literacy during the time of Skinner and the behavioristic revolution—the first being that writing must be taught from part to whole, in a bottom-up approach that focuses on skills in isolation. It was Skinner, we must remember, who argued that children learn language through the imitation of utterances and the use of positive reinforcement. The theory tended to equate children with birds pecking at levers in a black box, carefully controlled by external sources. At the same time, it saw learning as mechanical and removed from relevance; thus, behaviorism was quick to promote a method of composition that virtually expelled the student from the scenario. In the world of the behaviorist, children were to be approached and manipulated as one would

an animal in a cage, beginning with small skills in isolation and moving gradually to bigger ones. Each discrete skill was to be assiduously reinforced with positive conditioning, so that faceless learners would respond appropriately to these external controls. "Behaviorists," suggests Betty Jo McCarthy, "perceive knowledge as an entity separate from the knower . . . as something that exists outside of the self" (73).

Then came Noam Chomsky, arguing that Skinner's behaviorism could not account for the generative and highly unique character of language learning. All children, for example, create unique utterances rather than simply imitating what they have been taught. Indeed, Chomsky contended, children are able to produce an infinite array of original sentences, displaying a creative spirit that belies the teacher-to-student scenario that typified the behavioristic method.

In truth, the behavioristic approach invariably becomes teacher-centered and devoid of meaning. Students find the class emphasizing certain

skills rather than fostering autonomy over their work. In her book *Understanding Whole Language*, Connie Weaver refers to this as the transmission model of learning because of its tendency to emphasize bits of information that are transmitted from teacher to students. In this model, she adds, “emphasis is on direct teaching, which is controlled first by the program and second by the teacher” (9). Such a paradigm eventually makes the learner irrelevant because individual voices and goals become ancillary to those skills, those topic sentences, that are supposedly paramount to a “correctly” done essay.

Teaching composition using an
early twentieth century skills
approach also removes students
from the act of critical thinking
because many of the decisions
are made by the teacher and
the model being imposed.

In the case of many of our students, we can quickly understand the feelings of alienation they often exhibit. Where they once wrote with a spirit of invention and inquiry, they now find themselves controlled and limited by the whims of a prearranged format. Of course, we could argue that forms and styles must be taught, but my experience with prescriptive writing suggests that it goes well beyond simple guidance, often hindering the generative process. Those teachers who provide discreet, required components in their students’ writing make the writer a superfluous transcriber, a direction-follower rather than an imaginative voice. “Restricting students’ control over their learning limits their right to express their personal and cultural identities,” contends Curt Dudley-Marling in *Who Owns Learning*. Indeed, our students lose their will to write when their words are controlled and limited by the whims of their teachers.

Teaching composition using an early twentieth century skills approach also removes students

from the act of critical thinking because many of the decisions are made by the teacher and the model being imposed. Of course, each model lies on a continuum and varies in the amount of freedom and cognition it allows. The five paragraph essay—that often lampooned part of English teaching—represents just one of many ways to make writing teacher-centered. However, with each caveat from above, a little more freedom to think and invent is taken away. Do we, as teachers, believe that composition is as simple and impersonal as our little recipes portray it to be?

Fostering Creativity over Uniformity

As prescription supplants student initiative, risk-taking is reduced and sometimes eliminated. In this scenario, writers become obsessed with figuring out the teacher’s plan, not unlike the behavioristic bird who pecks the right button to receive a reward. Competence becomes equated with knowing what the teacher wants—not what lies inside the writer’s head. In the process, students become conditioned to see education as a place where people are socialized and molded. Instead of being the bastion of debate and contention, schooling assumes the climate of a military training ground—where everyone marches in time and follows orders. This “[n]arrow learning,” as Marcia Dickson labels it, creates an environment where “[s]tudents expend a great deal of effort on ‘writing the right way’” rather than on solving problems and perceiving composition as an artistic act of expression. “The students tend to define competence,” Dickson continues, “in its lowest possible term—correctness” (34).

Paulo Freire, who, like Chomsky, represents a spirit for the twenty-first century, has spoken eloquently about the difference between an education that humanizes and liberates and that which simply oppresses and homogenizes. Only when we engage in authentic dialogue, when we see students as active, capable agents who can and should think for themselves, will we nurture a class of writers who are capable of invention and change, rather than obedience and deference.

Of course, as Freire also suggests, there are political reasons for wanting to keep students controlled. A student—or an adult—who thinks and questions the state of his/her existential life is a necessary threat to those who want to perpetuate the status quo. Freire argues that “every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon

Assigned Reading: Workshop 8

another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (31). Thus, we are not surprised to see teachers who are threatened by alternative ways of writing, finding an autocratic friend in the five paragraph mentality. Rather than forging a democratic dialogue that fosters innovation and change, they find it easier and safer to teach allegiance and conformity.

The Evidence of Linguistic Ability

Perhaps the most insidious and erroneous of the arguments for a prescriptive pedagogy lies in the early twentieth century belief that certain students are too "disadvantaged" to write successfully without careful, didactic prescription. Implicit in this condescending premise is the contention that certain cultures are "deprived" or too far removed from academic expectations to succeed. "Our population is different. It needs more assistance," argued a teacher who taught predominately African American students. "This isn't the suburbs, where everyone comes prepared," she later added. "Some people simply don't understand the unique problems we face when trying to help these students to become literate."



Students bring a rich and varied linguistic ability to their writing.

Unfortunately, what many fail to understand is the amazingly rich and varied linguistic ability that all students bring to the learning context.

Mike Rose, in his book *Lives on the Boundary*, contends that the pedagogy of the developmental writer is undermined by metaphors that tend to equate the struggling writer with sickness or disability—metaphors that pervade our early twentieth century view of composition. "One of the 1930's nicknames for remedial sections," he reminds us, "was sick sections. During the next decade," Rose continues, "they would be tagged 'hospital sections'" (210). Thus, before the work of Chomsky, and before our better understanding of language's generative character, we viewed writing as analogous to healing the sick—a cure that must begin with and be administered by the teacher.

Unfortunately, what many fail to understand is the amazingly rich and varied linguistic ability that all students bring to the learning context. Indeed, as Bill Harp suggests in *Assessment and Evaluation in Whole Language Programs*, "Literacy learning is self generated. From the time children first scribble a line and read it to themselves or someone else, we see the self-generating nature of literacy development" (6). Throughout a person's life, literacy is forever flowering. It is an active, holistic process that involves problem solving and the making of meaning. Anyone who has watched young children learn how to speak—and then later begin experimenting with written prose—knows the inherent ability that they possess. Few of us who have reared young children can point to a time when we taught them to talk, and most parents simply don't understand language well enough to teach their children the various structures that exist. The fact is that children don't need to be taught language. Simply being around literate people and being given a risk free climate in which to commit errors is all that children need to acquire speech. Clearly, adds Stephen

Tchudi, “babies are born with tools that let them figure out the language in astonishing ways” (337).

Later, when these same children examine words in books, on signs, and in the magazines their parents read, they begin the process of extending their literacy beyond orality. Again research suggests that it is a rather fluid, constructive process that has more to do with active learning than being taught. “Language is learned through use in meaningful contexts, not through talking about it or analyzing it,” adds Harp (4).

This idea—that written language does not require explicit teaching—is further supported by the ethnographic research of Denny Taylor in her three-year study of six families. At the time of the study, each of the families Taylor observed had children who were at various stages in literacy development. Some were not yet literate in the academic sense, while others were adults and literate professionals. For each, however, Taylor found the acquisition and development of language to be a rather organic outgrowth of daily life. Everyone learned to speak and progress to reading and writing as a natural stage of evolution. None was subjected to formal instruction or skills exercises. In fact, concluded Taylor toward the end of her work, “The emphasis on specific didactic approaches to teaching reading and writing may unwittingly undermine any opportunity for reading and writing to become socially significant in the lives of those we teach” (94).

For many of our students, the didactic approaches Taylor refers to impede the idiosyncratic and idealistic plan they bring to class. Instead of acting as a bridge to greater, more sophisticated literacy, the directives tend to encumber and subvert. The acts of generating and constructing are transformed into antithetical acts of listening and duplicating. Students become servants, glorified extensions of their teachers and the school as a whole. In many ways, they become effaced as individuals, and the idea of the burgeoning artists becomes implausible. No one wants to engage in any artistic act to please others. It must come from within, which is why many of our writers feel such consternation.

The Politics of Prescriptive Writing

Education is always political. If there is a single lesson that should be carried into twenty-first century instruction, it should be the realization that when

we walk into a classroom we nurture a context of democracy or authoritarianism. The question is not *if* but *how* we will politicize our teaching and the impact these decisions will have on our students. History reveals our time-honored tendency to treat students as subjects that need to be processed—thus, the recent popularity of comparing schools to factories and trying to emulate business.

Within this mentality is a vision of students as appendages of society. Their purpose in school is not to develop as persons but rather to perpetuate a common societal goal. This is why it has been customary to teach children uniformly and with little attention to the person. The Puritans felt no compunction about including religion and political propaganda in their lessons because the idea of divergent thought seemed anathema if not sacrilegious. Throughout the later centuries, school was considered a place for molding character and aiding children in fulfilling their social and economic role in society. Women, as a sad example, were never considered for genuine academic rigor because their cultural place called for domesticity.

The goal of every informed, twenty-first century teacher should be to forge a truly democratic, collaborative environment—one in which learning emanates from various voices and is always in flux. This kind of power sharing frightens many but, in the end, represents the only true way to cultivate lifelong, active learners. Paulo Freire is one of many intrepid writers who has called for a paradigm of liberation. From his inspirational words come the works of people like Ira Shor and bell hooks. Each has articulated the paramount importance of what hooks calls “teaching to transgress.” In particular, hooks devotes an entire chapter of her book to “engaged pedagogy” and the way one makes it a reality. “Throughout my years as student and professor,” she writes, “I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning” (13).

Ira Shor, in *Empowering Education*, echoes this premise in his discussion of what he calls “teacher talk” and the way it silences students and enervates resistance. In particular, Shor contends that the authoritarian teacher, the lecturer who delivers truth from on high, is a stark example of educational despotism. “Through this passive, authoritarian discourse,” Shor argues, “students gradually lose their childhood joy of learning” (93).

Assigned Reading: Workshop 8

All of us have taught precocious, poetic writers—writers who seem to relish the thought of crafting new responses to the world around them. We have been invigorated by their energy, their use of language, their intrinsic desire to write essays that transcend the perfunctory. How often, we must ask ourselves, have we allowed scholastic pettiness to alienate these students and blunt their sense of wonder? I challenge any teacher to provide genuine examples of prescriptive writing that led to new visions, to more empowered prose. The fact is, it never does.

The distinction might best be articulated by progressive educator John Dewey, who distinguished between giving students “something to do, not something to learn” (154). When form controls art, and when the teacher refuses—either through fear or ignorance—to share power and learning, students are relegated to performing tasks, to simply completing assignments. Perhaps the most cogent alternative for progressive twenty-first century teachers comes from Robert Probst, when he suggests that “as teachers, we should strive not to keep our students out but to help them get in, and we do that by participating with them in the transactional processes of making meaning linguistically” (77). The anachronistic alternative is a pedagogy that is safe but also barren and stifling—one that has been made student-proof by a prescriptive approach to composition.

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EJ 20 YEARS AGO

Writing to Make Sense of the World

“The function of writing applies at the individual level as well as the social one. If the tales we exchange about our experiences have an evaluation function, then we can see that writing is a way of making sense of the world. This works two ways: we write to see how others respond to the values we place on experience. We also read the writing of others in order to widen our experience. One feeds upon the other. Writing not only contributes to the development of self but contributes to the development of the values of a community and a culture. Discovery of self, therefore, is natural and essential. Writing plays an important role in our Age of Narcissism. We move inward in order to make sense of the world.”

William W. Wright Jr. “Teaching Writing in the Age of Narcissism.” *EJ* 69.8 (1980): 26–29.

Teacher Tool: Workshop 1

Standards and Planning

The following NCTE/IRA standards for English Language Arts, excerpted from the full document, relate to the writing experiences these groups envision for all students. Specifically, they say:

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

In the chart below, list and briefly describe five activities that you would like to try with student writers this semester/year. Then consult the list above to note which specific NCTE/IRA standard(s) these activities address. Add the standard to your chart. Using the local or state standards you are expected to meet, annotate the chart in the fourth column to include the local or state standard the activities also address.

Name of Activity	Brief Description	NCTE/IRA Standard Addressed	Local/State Standard Addressed

Planning for a Major Project in the Writing Classroom

Most high school writing classrooms have a culminating project such as a research or term paper or multigenre piece (see Workshop 4 materials in this guide for more information on multigenre projects) that showcases a student's progress in writing. You can use this sheet to help you plan for this experience, making sure your students have adequate time to master this kind of assignment.

1. Describe the culminating activity you want your students to complete.

2. Select a date students will deliver the final project.

3. List the steps they will need to complete to be successful in this assignment, and indicate how much time you feel they will need to complete each. For example, if you are assigning a research or term paper, your students will need time to:

- a. Select an appropriate topic.
- b. Narrow the focus of their topic.
- c. Gather resources to explore their topic.
- d. Understand how to present resources in their paper.
- e. Organize their ideas.
- f. Draft their paper.
- g. Get reactions to their paper.
- h. Revise their paper.
- i. Edit their paper.
- j. Present a final draft.

You will also need to plan for time to react to their work as it progresses.

Steps:

Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

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Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

Estimated time to complete: _____

4. Use the above information to fill in this school-year calendar. Start by indicating the due date, and then chart interim steps needed to give students the information, practice, and responses they need to complete the assignment.

Project

Month	Major Steps	Specific Activities	Interim Due Dates
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Getting Acquainted: Some Suggestions

The first few days and weeks of a new course are important for community building. In some schools, many of the students will know one another. In others, they may be meeting for the first time. Time spent learning names and discovering commonalities is an important first step in developing a trustful community of writers. The following activities are all useful icebreakers.

Name Tags

Give each student a sheet of plain paper and pass out crayons or colored markers. Ask everybody to fold the paper in half lengthwise so it will hang over the front of their desk. Give them a few moments to print first and last names in letters large enough to be read from across the room. Then ask them to spend 2-3 minutes adding a graphic that symbolizes something about their lives and/or their interests. When they have finished, ask them to introduce themselves to the class in turn, clearly pronouncing full names and describing and explaining their graphics. It is helpful if the teacher participates in this activity as well.

Peer Introductions

Group students in pairs (you may wish to group them so they are paired with somebody they were not sitting next to). Students are to interview their partners, learning 1) their full names and how to pronounce them, and 2) three bits of information about their lives and/or interests. When the interviews are complete, each student introduces his or her partner to the class.

Fun Facts

Create a scavenger hunt list of "Fun Facts" and give a copy to each student. Give them five minutes to circulate around the room finding people who match each fact by asking specific questions (e.g., "Were you born in another state or country?" or "Are you an only child?"). When they have identified a match, they ask the person to print his or her full name on the line next to the fact. At the end of five minutes, ask students to return to their seats for a debriefing. Create list items to suit the population in your school. You may wish to include some of the following items on the list:

1. Someone born in another state or country.
2. Someone who likes to write (poetry, drama, interactive adventures, blogs, music lyrics, etc.).
3. An only child.
4. Someone who likes to read (J.R.R. Tolkein, William Dean Myers, Toni Morrison, J.K. Rowling, Ernest Hemingway, Sharon Draper, Faulkner, Sandra Cisneros, Stephen King, James Joyce, etc.).
5. Someone who likes to write with (paper and pencil, a computer, a typewriter, etc.).
6. Someone fluent in a language other than English.
7. Someone who can play an instrument.
8. Someone with an April birthday.
9. Someone who has published a piece of their writing.
10. Someone who can knit or crochet.
11. Someone with four or more siblings.
12. Someone who has created their own Web site.
13. Someone who can name all the states adjacent to the one where they live.
14. Someone who has a pet.
15. Someone who is passionate about (soccer, football, basketball, etc.).

Teacher Tool: Workshop 2

Sharing Expectations

One way to show that you respect the members of your writing community is to involve them in tailoring some of the assignments that you want them to complete during their time with you. Consider the chart of typical activities of the writing classroom. Add any additional genres you plan on addressing. Then, add any specific assignments that you have decided to use during the year. Present the completed chart to your students. Do they have any suggestions for amending the assignments to reflect their own interests while meeting the same academic goals?

Writing Experience	Specific Assignments	Student Suggestions
Personal/ narrative writing		
Journals		
Poems		
Fiction		
Dramas		
Expository writing or writing to inform		
Informational essays		
Research reports		
News articles		
Letters and other professional communications		
Writing to persuade		
Persuasive essays		
Advertisements		
Letters to the editor		

Mixing It Up: Suggestions for Putting Students in Groups

Affinity groups present an opportunity to group like-minded writers together. Post three or more examples of a specific kind of writing (such as essays, news articles, selections from short stories or novels, or poems). Ask students to pick their favorite example. Use their selections to form groups who indicated a preference for the same work. You might also want to form groups based on the genres in which the members like to write or the ways they prewrite (by talking out their ideas, by thinking, by outlining, etc.).

Another way to help students get to know everybody in the class is to mix up the groupings now and then. Of course, you can simply ask students to count off, grouping similar numbers together. At other times you may wish to be inventive (and perhaps a little silly) in order to place students with those they may not usually work with. Experiment with using some of the following modes of classification:

- Alphabetic divisions based on first names or last names
- Birthday months
- Colors of clothes they are wearing
- Birth order (for four groups—only children, first born, middle children, and last born)
- Sports fans (by sport or by team, depending on your area)

You could also assign groups as each student enters the classroom by handing out a series of cards numbered one through five (or more, according to the number of groups you want to form). All of the people with a 1 on their card would work together, all the number 2s would work together, etc.

Building Trust: Teaching Respectful Response

Students may need help learning how to respond to each other's writing in ways that are productive and helpful without being hurtful. The following strategies come from Peter Elbow's classic book, *Writing Without Teachers*.

1. Ask students to write a one- or two-sentence summary of the piece that they are reviewing. This helps the writer know that his or her key points are clear to readers. A variation on this strategy for more experienced writers is to have them exchange papers and write a one- or two-word summary of each paragraph in the margin. This helps writers see how their ideas unfold for readers and can be a helpful guide for revision.
2. Ask students to point to words or phrases that resonated for them. If they have heard the piece read aloud, they can do this by making a list and reading it back to the writer. If they have read a draft of the piece, they can do this by highlighting passages or putting check marks in the margin. If they can explain why a section resonated, fine. If not, just pointing to it can be helpful. Students can also point to parts of the text that "bother their ears"—signaling a need for possible editing.
3. Ask students to give the writer a "movie of my mind" in which they simply tell the writer what they saw, heard, and felt while they read a piece. No kind of reaction is wrong, but some can be insufficient. Encourage readers not to filter too heavily; an unusual response may help a writer in surprising ways.
4. Ask students to talk about the writing as if they were hearing different voices—shouting, whining, whispering, etc. Ask them to describe what they hear.
5. Suggest that students pretend to be someone else—someone who might have a very different response to the writing—and give that person's response to the writing.

As a class, make a list of descriptive words that students might use when responding to another's writing, in whole or in part. Post the list in the classroom where students can refer to it easily. You might wish to expand their vocabularies with words such as:

academic	facetious	radical
accomplished	galling	rambling
accurate	galvanizing	rational
baffling	halting	smooth
barbed	harmonious	startling
biased	impassioned	stereotypical
bleak	jaded	stern
clear	jaunty	subtle
complex	lively	theoretical
dark	loose	tight
decisive	magical	vague
down-to-earth	majestic	valid
eager	objective	voiced
earnest	opinionated	warm
energetic	passive	zealous
fabricated	personal	
fabulous	pointed	

Audiences Near and Far

Composition theorist James Moffett reminds us that the easiest audience to write for is ourselves, and the more remote our audience—and the less we know about them—the harder it is to write for them. Use the following activity to help students understand this.

1. Choose a location you know well, such as an area of your home, your neighborhood, or your school. Spend five minutes in that location writing a description that you plan to put into a time capsule to open when you are 40 years old.
2. Rewrite your description for a relative or friend who lives in another part of the country and who is coming for a visit. You want him or her to recognize the location from your description because you are planning to meet there.
3. Somebody in power wants to make dramatic changes to your location. For example, an adult plans to combine the space you have described with another and completely change how it is used. The neighborhood council is going to turn your location into a park or a parking garage. The school board is going to close your school. Rewrite your description for the head decision-maker in such a way that he or she will become less interested in making the planned changes.

Analyzing Audience

Use this group of questions to help your students think about their audience. Post them in your classroom and review them with students prior to several assignments.

- Who is the audience for this piece of writing?
- Why will they read this?
- Where will they read this?
- What kind of tone does this audience expect me to use?
- What kind of style does this audience expect me to use?
- What kind of format does this audience expect me to use?
- How long does this audience expect my writing will be?
- What kind of usage and mechanics does this audience expect me to use?
- How are these factors going to shape my writing?

What Would You Tell Them?:

Different Details for Different Audiences

Your students may find the following activity helpful in understanding the choices writers make when selecting material to include for different audiences.

- Imagine that you have just witnessed or participated in an event that was very important to you.
- Make a list of as many concrete details about the event as you can (include specifics about location, time, participants, what happened, and your thoughts and feelings at the time and afterward).
- Identify a relative or close friend that you would have liked to be there with you. Put an asterisk (*) next to all the items on your list that you would probably include if you were writing or telling him or her about the event.
- Identify a neighbor or a casual friend who might be interested in hearing about the event. Put a check mark (✓) next to the items on your list that you would probably include if you were writing or telling him or her about the event.
- Compare your lists. Discuss why you included or omitted certain details when writing or speaking to your different audiences.

Using Print Ads To Identify Audiences

Collect a series of full-page advertisements from a number of magazines targeting different audiences and different age groups. (Making color copies or overheads of advertisements from magazines no longer in print such as *Life* or *The Saturday Evening Post* adds a further dimension to this activity.)

Display two or three for the whole class, modeling how information such as language use, arrangement, and graphics create an appeal to a very specific audience.

Divide the class into groups. Give each group an advertisement (or several that appeal to a similar audience) and ask them to identify the audience the ad targets and the concrete details it uses to do so.

Have the groups share their findings with the entire class.

In their journals, ask students to consider the implications of the day's lesson for themselves as writers. Have them share what they have written, either in groups or with the whole class.

As a variation on this activity, ask students to choose several television programs and analyze the commercials shown during them. Ask them to consider how the audience for the commercials matches the audience for the program.

To extend this activity, talk about what students have learned from this experience, and how the information they learned can be useful to them as they write.

Foregrounding the Connections

Try the following class activity to increase student awareness of different purposes for writing and the ways in which those purposes might suggest the use of different genres.

1. Ask students to individually brainstorm lists of different reasons (purposes) people have for writing. Suggest they think about both formal and informal writing, and writing both in and out of school settings.
2. Divide a sheet of chart paper into two columns. Label the left column "Purposes" and the right column "Genres/Forms." Ask students to contribute items from their brainstormed lists to the "Purposes" column. Some purposes they might identify include the following:
 - a. to describe,
 - b. to entertain,
 - c. to persuade,
 - d. to demonstrate knowledge or understanding,
 - e. to clarify, or
 - f. to problem-solve.
3. When you feel that the "Purposes" list is complete, ask students to turn their attention to the "Genre" column by asking them, "What kind of writing might a writer choose for this purpose?" Encourage multiple answers for each purpose as the group discusses their various choices.

Key Words and Purpose

In helping students respond to writing prompts in your class and on high-stakes testing, they should carefully examine directions for the assignment to determine the purpose for their writing.

Several key words they might find in these instructions include the following:

- Describe
- Explain
- Define
- Identify
- Persuade
- Discuss
- Defend
- Argue

These key words signal student writers that they need to adapt this particular purpose for their writing. For example, if the key word says *Define* and students write an essay trying to persuade someone to adapt one particular idea or the other, their writing would be considered unresponsive and evaluated as such. Discuss these key words with your class, asking them to think about their task when presented with these key words in a writing prompt.

To see some key words in context, examine the following prompts. Key words are bolded.

- **Identify** Othello's tragic flaw and **discuss**, with close reference to the text, how Iago manipulates Othello by understanding this flaw in Othello's character.
- **Explain** the concept of "Megalo Idea" and how it inspired Greek nationalists to reestablish the grand Hellenistic Empire. Pay particular attention to the role of the Orthodox Church in promoting "Megalo Idea." Your paper must include a minimum of 10 source documents.

Review these and the other prompts below with your students. What is the purpose students are expected to use in their writing? How can they best shape their writing to make sure they are responsive to the prompts?

- All communities, no matter how pleasant, have some problems. Think of a town or community you know well and its problems. Singling out ONE problem of this community, write an essay in which you describe the problem and explain a possible solution.
- Creative people state that taking risks often promotes important discoveries in their lives or work. Discuss a risk that has led to a significant change (positive or negative) in your personal or intellectual life.
- Choose a significant book, piece of writing, or research article that you have read in the past year. Explain the author's thesis and discuss how she or he proves or argues that thesis. Explain why you think the work is significant.
- Write a story, play, or dialogue that meets all the following requirements:
 - Begin with the sentence, "Many years later he remembered his first experience with ice."
 - All five senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—have to figure in the plot.
 - These items must be included: a new pair of socks, a historical landmark, a spork, a domesticated animal, and the complete works of William Shakespeare.
- Choose a work of art to represent a specific time, such as the year 2000, the 1990s, or the 1900s. Explain and defend your choice.

Teacher Tool: Workshop 4

Talk about prompts where key words are implied but not used explicitly. For what purposes are the following prompts asking the students to write?

- If you were given the opportunity to visit and converse with any historical figure, whom would you choose? Why?
- In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge that your generation will face? What ideas do you have for dealing with the issue?
- Who do you feel is the strongest African American role model in this century and why?
- If you were given money to start your own business, what business would you choose and why?
- How do you feel about Wednesdays?

“It Bothers My Ears”

Students whose oral language typically follows the conventional patterns of standard American English can use their oral sentence sense to help one another improve their use of written conventions. When they have completed self-edited drafts, have them get together in groups to share their work aloud. (Some teachers determine the make-up of such groups in an effort to balance students who are strong users of written conventions with those in need of additional support; others allow students to self-select their groups.) As each student reads his or her piece aloud, group members listen and make notes about places in the text that “bother their ears”—where the language sounds “funny” or awkward in some way. When the writer has finished reading, each member shares his or her notes in turn. The writer receives all the comments, marking the draft in order to review troubling segments later.

After reviewing and correcting their work with the help of a handbook, students find a partner, exchange papers, and share their revised drafts for further comment. You may wish to circulate among the groups at this point, helping those students who need adult expertise.

Grammar in Perspective

Exactly What Is Grammar?

Many students feel that grammar is an arcane set of rules hanging over their heads as they write. To them grammar is something that they don't know. It's something for which points will be taken off their grade on a writing assignment or test. It's something external and fearsome, characterized by papers bristling with red marks and bold, thundering comments.

But there is another, more intrinsic definition of grammar. Grammar is the internalized structure we all use to speak and write. For example, in English we learn through practice that adjectives precede the nouns to which they refer. In Spanish, the placement of adjectives depends on many factors, including the form of speech used (colloquial or formal), whether there are single or multiple adjectives, whether they are parallel or nonparallel adjectives, and other factors, including context, courtesy, and even the length of the adjectives themselves. So they can be placed before *or* after the noun to which they refer. Obviously both structures (grammars) are appropriate for their respective languages. If an English speaker talks about "a night dark," we would be confused. However, if a Spanish speaker refers to "una noche oscura" [literally "a night dark"], Spanish speakers would know exactly what the speaker was saying. It was a dark night. Perhaps the moon was obscured by thick clouds.

Grasped and practiced from the beginning of our years, these patterns become the scaffold on which we build all our written and oral communications in a variety of settings. Just as we inherently understand that we do not talk to our friends the way we talk to our grandparents, we naturally realize that the language conventions we use when we jot down a note to ourselves are quite different from the conventions we use in a formal letter. We know implicitly that being grammatically correct is a relative term, depending on time/place, audience, and purpose.

Think about your students. They arrive in your classroom with years of experience in crafting communication in patterns accepted within a variety of societal situations. They operate successfully in many cultural and familial contexts and know how to be heard correctly by the various members of each group. Dr. Rebecca Wheeler speaks of these contexts as codes, and asserts that, by privileging these codes, teachers can most successfully help students understand the complexities of the conventions of standard English expected of members of the communities they encounter in schools. To explore this philosophy and practice as she describes it, go online to the *Developing Writers* Web site at <http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop>. Select Workshop 5: Things To Consider.

Thoughts To Consider When Developing Rubrics

1. Keep rubrics simple. An odd number of rating categories (e.g., 1-5 with 5 being the highest score) matches common A-F grading and allows you a clear pivot point between successful papers and those that fail to meet minimum passing criteria.
2. Think about the purpose of a particular rubric. When will it be used? During the writing process as a check-point? During peer response? Is it for assessment or evaluation? A rubric used for evaluation might be more detailed than a rubric used for assessment.
3. Reuse rubrics for similar writing tasks. This helps students internalize the standards set for a particular kind of writing (narrative, poetry, analysis, argument).
4. Tie the rubric to specific instruction. If you have been teaching ways to write interesting introductions, foreground that value in a rubric.
5. After they have had experience with teacher-developed rubrics, have students work together to develop and apply a rubric for a particular writing task.
6. Try to make your rubric points descriptive. It is more useful to say *Uses dialogue and sensory detail to give readers a vivid sense of character and setting* than it is to say *Gives readers a vivid sense of character and setting*. It is more useful to say *Includes facts, statistics, historical details, and anecdotes to support arguments* than to say *Provides support for opinions*.

Suggestions for Peer Response Groups

1. If students have no experience with peer response, model a response first, perhaps using an anonymous student paper from an earlier year or a different class.
2. Train students to use the 3-1 rule: Identify three positive things to say about a piece and one thing that they think would benefit from improvement or development.
3. Experiment with having students read their pieces aloud to the group. This helps them hear their own inner voice. Teach the group to identify passages that “bothered their ears” as a way of identifying nonconventional uses of language.
4. Having the same students in the same groups over time helps them develop trust in the responses from each other. However, you may wish to allow students to form their own response groups now and then for the sake of variety.
5. When students are first learning how to give effective feedback, a handout with specific items to notice provides support. These sheets can be filled out and given to the writer after each member of the group has spoken about what he or she noticed.
6. When training students in group response, ask them to write a brief response to the group process at the end of each session. Collect these as a way of monitoring emerging difficulties in groups. Alternately, use them as the basis for a class discussion on what works in response groups and what needs improvement.

Using Portfolios

1. Remember that a portfolio is most productively a *selection* of student work, not a *collection* of all completed work.
2. The purpose of the portfolio will determine its contents. Is this a learning tool for the student? A demonstration of growth for the purpose of evaluation? An example of student work to share with next year's teachers?
3. Should all the work be chosen by the teacher? By the student and the teacher? By the student? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
4. What kinds of commentary and reflection should the student write to accompany each selection? Again, this is shaped by the purpose of the portfolio as a whole.
5. Think about asking students to include a piece with which they are dissatisfied and write a comment that explains their dissatisfaction and what they learned from their analysis of the piece.
6. Think about asking students to write a summary of the contents of their portfolio to develop a guide they can use to help them grow as writers.
7. Consider having students complete a portfolio quarterly rather than at the end of the year, reflecting on the progress that they are making and how well they are meeting their goals.

What Works?: Reading Like a Writer

Ask each student to choose one or two passages that they find particularly interesting or effective from a story, essay, or novel they are reading in class. In groups, ask them to discuss their chosen passages and explain why they found them interesting or effective. These are some factors they should consider in their analysis:

- Sentence length,
- Sentence variety,
- Transitions,
- Paragraph structure,
- Language choices (active verbs, precise nouns, etc.),
- Metaphor and other examples of figurative language,
- Audience,
- Purpose,
- Voice,
- Style,
- Genre, and
- Originality and creativity.

Have each group present one passage to the class and explain their reasons for selecting it.

Just the Beginnings

Reproduce four or five copies of five or six opening passages from different essays (you may wish to do this early in the school year using passages from essays your students will read later). Pass them out randomly to your students and ask them to spend five minutes responding to the following prompts:

1. How does this writer begin the piece? With a brief narrative? Description? A startling statement? Interesting facts? A question? Something else? What is the effect this beginning has on you as a reader?
2. Identify two or three words or phrases that you find interesting or appealing. Explain your choices.
3. What do you think the writer will write about in the next paragraph? What makes you think so?

Have students with the same passage form groups and discuss their responses. Ask each group to prepare a brief presentation in which they talk about what they learned as writers from this particular beginning.

Form and Meaning in Poetry

While many applaud having young writers imitate the styles and voices of published authors, most realize that young writers have to move beyond imitation to invention in order to write well. One way of encouraging young writers to move from imitation toward invention is to encourage them to experiment in several forms of poetry that have standard line lengths, rhythm, and rhyme schemes.

These are some forms in which your students may wish to experiment:

- Cinquain: a five-line poem or stanza. Lines 1 and 5 have two syllables. Line 2 has four syllables. Line 3 has six syllables, and line 4 has eight.
- Clerihew: a four-line light verse, usually about a person. The subject's name is usually the first line of the poem. It has an *aabb* rhyme scheme.
- Haiku: a poetic form that includes three lines, usually devoted to a description of nature.
- Lines 1 and 3 have five syllables. Line 2 has seven syllables.
- Nonet: a nine-line poem. Line 1 includes nine syllables. Each succeeding line has one less syllable, with Line 9 including only one syllable.
- Rondeau: a three-stanza, 15-line poem that includes a refrain using words from the first stanza to end the second and third stanzas. Each line has between eight and 10 syllables. A rondeau generally follows this rhyme scheme: *aabba aabR aabbaR*. The poem "In Flanders Fields" by Lt. Col. John McCrae is an example of a rondeau.
- Sestina: a fixed (and usually unrhymed) poetic form consisting of six six-line stanzas in which the words that end each line of the first stanza recur in a repeating pattern as end words in the lines of the remaining stanzas.
- Sonnet: a 14-line fixed poetic form. Presented in iambic pentameter, each line contains 10 syllables. The Italian sonnet consists of an octave followed by a sestet, while the Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. Rhyme schemes vary between the two forms.
- Triolet: a fixed poetic form of eight lines. Line 1 is repeated as Lines 4 and 7. Line 2 is repeated as Line 8. It follows an *ab* rhyme scheme.
- Villanelle: a 19-line poem, with a line that repeats throughout the poem. Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" is a villanelle.

Creating a Class Web Site

Why?

A class Web site can help you make information instantly accessible to students and their families. By building a virtual space that your class members and their families can access, you can help nurture a community where everyone knows about classroom events, planned projects, assignments, goals, and successes. In inclement weather, assignment deadlines can be adjusted and alternate plans can be posted. Most importantly, you can be assured that the information you need to get out goes directly into the hands of those who need it most. Messages don't get lost in the lockers or backpacks. And you will save yourself time spent at the copy machine.

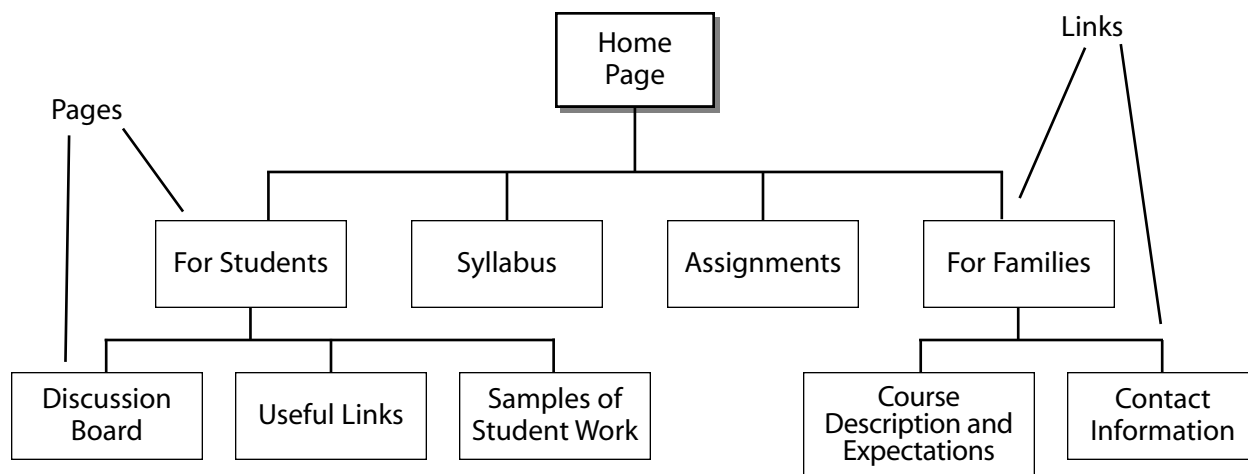
Where?

The first task you face in setting up a Web site is finding "real estate" on which to post your site. Your school or district technology coordinator can probably help you find space on a host server (electronic "real estate" on the Internet) they maintain. Commercial space can also be leased for a fee, but school and district Web sites most often offer this space free of charge.

How?

Many people don't know how to program (use coded language to set up) a Web site. But, with a little investigation, most people can find someone who does have this expertise. Survey your classes to find members who will help you. Many of them have had experience in creating sites of their own. Your school or district technology coordinator can also help, either by programming the site for you or by identifying a colleague who can help you do this.

Your main task in setting up the site is deciding what kinds of information you want it to contain. This diagram suggests some topics. You may also have others in mind. Think of them as file cabinets or kiosks where certain kinds of information can be found.



Teacher Tool: Workshop 8

1. Check out other classes' Web sites. Analyze the kind of information you find there, the way it is arranged, and the language used in the explanation. Is it easy for you to understand? Is it simple to get what you need?
2. Plan, plan, plan. Be certain you have a clear idea of purpose (what you want your Web site to accomplish) and audience (your students? their families? both?) before you begin. Draw a site map like the one above to organize your ideas. This will help the person who programs your site see how the pages and information on the site fit together.
3. Enlist the help of your students. Many of them spend a great deal of time on the Internet. Ask them what kind of things they would expect/want to find on their class's Web site.
4. Consider these design issues:
 - a. Keep things simple. Don't mix too many fonts or a lot of different colors and graphics. Make sure the fonts you use are ones that are commonly available such as Verdana, Arial, or Times.
 - b. Think carefully about adding animations. Do they help? Or will they slow down the loading process for visitors with dial-up access (using a modem and phone lines to connect to the Internet)?
 - c. Keep the navigation consistent throughout the site. Many sites have clearly labeled navigation buttons across the top or down one side.
 - d. Keep the text on each page short and to the point so visitors don't have to do a lot of scrolling to find the information they need.
 - e. People read about 25 percent more slowly on the Web. Make it easier for them to navigate the site by using simple sentences, bulleted lists, boxes of text, and the like.

Learning To Evaluate Web Sites

There are many valuable resources on the Internet. At the same time, there are a number of unreliable, untrustworthy sources, and a great deal of just plain junk. If your students are going to use the Internet for research, they probably need some help learning to discriminate the wheat from the chaff. Teach them to ask the following questions, and they will be less likely to use information from questionable sources.

1. Whose site is it? Can I contact the authors through email or other means? Many teachers and university professors develop sites that are useful for students. Unhappily, their continued presence is never certain. Some excellent materials can disappear almost overnight.
2. How rich is the content? Does the site simply provide a quick overview of a topic? If so, it may be useful at the very beginning of a research project but not have much to offer for an in-depth study.
3. Is it credible? Information from local, state, and national governments can usually be assumed trustworthy, as can information from official college and university sources. Professional organizations such as the American Library Association and groups such as the American Cancer Society are probably reliable. Often links from such sites can be assumed to present accurate information as well.
4. Does the site have a bias? Are they trying to sell a commodity or an idea? Many authors and their publishers have sites providing useful information, but students should remember that they are trying to sell books as well. Organizations such as the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association have clear political agendas, and information presented on their sites should be received with those agendas in mind.
5. Is the site appropriate? Sites designed for elementary students may not provide the nuanced analysis needed by high school or college students. Similarly, information on a site targeted to researchers in microbiology may be presented in such complexity as to be unintelligible to others.
6. Is the site timely? How often is it updated? While these questions are not so central when researching historical information, they certainly come into play when looking into topics that change often.
7. Is the site well designed? Does it work well? Some sites are rife with broken links or so overloaded with flash pages and animations that getting to the information becomes an exercise in frustration. If a site doesn't work well, find one that does.

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